

Dharma Blogs

2015 Spring



by Michael Erlewine

Dharma Blogs

2015 Spring

By Michael Erlewine

Copyright 2017 © by Michael Erlewine

*You are free to share these blogs
provided no money is charged.*

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 Spring of 2015, posted on Facebook and Google+.

Michael@Erlewine.net

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

Main Browsing Site:
<http://SpiritGrooves.net/>

Organized Article Archive:
<http://MichaelErlewine.com/>

YouTube Videos
<https://www.youtube.com/user/merlewine>

Spirit Grooves / Dharma Grooves
(join the group)

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/126511571262266/?ref=mentions>

A LITTLE BIT OF AWARENESS CAN MEAN A LOT.7	
RECOGNIZING “RECOGNITION”	10
MOUTH-TO-EAR INSTRUCTIONS.....	18
CYBERNETICS: THE ART OF COHERENCE.....	22
A LONG ROW TO HOE	26
TERRIFIC!.....	30
HAPPY FATHER’S DAY	33
THE NOBLE SAVAGE	38
AMERICAN DHARMA.....	42
AND SO IT BEGINS.....	47
BOREDOM AS A GIFT	51
DRAWING ON WATER.....	55
EXERCISE AS YOU LIKE IT “Eight Pieces of Brocade”.....	58
EXPERIENCING REALIZATION.....	63
FACE TO FACE	66
GENERATION NIGHTMARES.....	70
“I’M LOOKING THROUGH YOU”	75
IN MY OWN SKIN	79
INCREDIBLE SONGSTER: MARC SILBER	84
INTERDEPENDENCY.....	90
JOYFUL	94
LINEAGE.....	99

LIVING WITH MYSELF	105
MENTORING: THE TEACHER/STUDENT RELATIONSHIP	108
MENTORS AND WHAT THEY CAN MEAN	116
MIDSUMMER NIGHT.....	123
MOVING THE MIND: INSIGHT MEDITATION	128
ON A CLEAR DAY YOU CAN SEE FOREVER	132
ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL	135
PRACTICE IS NOT PERFECT	142
RECOGNIZING DANIEL P. BROWN	146
REIFY.....	152
REIFYING THE HOLOGRAM	159
REMEDIAL PRACTICES: WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT.....	164
SIX DEGREES OF CONTACT WITH THE KARMAPA	173
SLOW LEARNER.....	179
STEPPING IN TABOO	182
STIRRING THE POT.....	185
TAKING IT TO THE PATH	188
TAKING OUR MENTAL TEMPERATURE	192
THE BLESSINGS OF THE GURU	198
THE BODY PARTY	202
THE INTERVIEW WITH RINPOCHE	206
THE MAGNITUDE OF SAMBARA	209

THE NATURE OF CONCENTRATION	213
THE POLYMATH	220
THE POWER OF PERSONS	225
URGENCY: SUMMARY	232
URGENCY IN DHARMA PRACTICE AND WHY ...	239
VICTIMIZATION	247
WHAT IT IS	252
WHISTLING IN THE DARK.....	255

A LITTLE BIT OF AWARENESS CAN MEAN A LOT

May 16, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

In our dharma or spiritual practice, whatever that is for each of us, we are hoping to develop awareness. After all, basically that is what the Sanskrit word “Buddha” means, “to awaken,” to become aware or enlightened. And sure, we look for some avalanche or downpour of awareness, but I want to point out here how even a small increase in awareness can have a great effect, just a little bit more awareness than we now have.

For many of us, what is missing is that extra bit of awareness. This is what keeps us hurtling along on whatever train of thoughts we are following. We don't even have to have a plan on how to approach dharma, as in a “dharma path.” All we need is that bit of awareness, just basic awareness, of our thoughts as they arise during the day.

Given that, we can then choose whether to just follow our thoughts as we are used to doing, enhance them, attach ourselves to them, or whatever we normally do. This is a choice we can make from moment to moment. Or, we can choose to use our increase in awareness to recognize each thought that captivates us as it arises, and just look at it. Not look at the content of it (what it is about), which may be what traditionally captivates or fascinates us, but rather look at the nature of the thought. All this is the product of awareness, just a modicum of awareness greater than we are normally used to.

Awareness of a thought does not mean denying the thought, condemning it, banishing it, or suppressing the thought in any way. Instead, in our awareness we can recognize the thought for what it is, not be attached to it, and just learn to look at its nature, in which case it is recognized and vanishes. If we follow or entertain the thought, we naturally stir the pot, so to speak, for whatever emotional or interesting content it holds for us. This, of course, simply extends our karma.

If we chose to entertain the thought, further it, follow it, then, of course, we extend our karma for that content however far we follow it. It all adds up. However, if we can be aware enough to recognize the thought as it arises as just a thought, and instead of even unwrapping the content and following it (much less entertain it), we leave it alone and look at its very nature, we are not extending our karma in this particular area. We cease to accumulate karma, at least in that instance. This non-accumulation of karma for each thought that is recognized stops the accumulation of karma, a thought at a time.

We don't even have to fully examine the content of emotional thoughts, kleshas, but can just feel them coming, feel their weight, and just look at the nature of the particular thought or klesha. No matter what their content is, we can just learn to look at their nature, regardless of their content. Like basic Shamata meditation, this technique I am describing has a little muscle-memory learning curve, which is well worth learning and practicing.

And we don't even have to prioritize our thoughts, but just naturally be aware of them as they arise, to use

this ugly term correctly, what we can call the “low-hanging fruit,” the thoughts that naturally capture our attention. We all have them. And we can go from thought to thought throughout our day, whatever we can manage to be aware of. These thoughts present themselves to us, one by one. We may not grasp the more subtle thoughts, but we ought to be able to recognize some of the whoppers when they pass through. What an efficient way of practicing!

This practice puts the onus on us, not on anyone or anything else. Given some awareness, we can choose to follow a thought in the traditional manner of Samsara or to, instead, look at the nature of the thought, which causes it to vanish, leaving us resting in the gap or nature of the mind we just looked at. This is karma zapping.

RECOGNIZING “RECOGNITION”

May 27, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

There are many kinds of dharma practice other than basic sitting meditation, but they all have one thing in common. They exist only to help point out to us what the Tibetans call “Recognition,” meaning recognition of the true nature of the mind. That is the sole purpose of any and all dharma teachings. I am surprised about how many people have never heard of “recognition,” yet it is the one unavoidable doorway to enlightenment every Buddha, Bodhisattva, and person must cross.

Once that is done, once we recognize the actual nature of our own mind for ourselves (which is nothing like enlightenment), the teacher’s job is mostly over. From that point forward we become responsible for our own dharma practice. Like a newborn baby when it takes its first breath, with recognition we respond and are finally able to take responsibility (dharmically) for our own eventual enlightenment. At that point we know intuitively what to do and pretty much how to do it. IMO this is kind of a big deal, so let’s talk about it.

As mentioned, sitting meditation such as Tranquility Meditation (Shamata), not to mention ngondro, Vipassana Meditation, deity practice, mantras, offerings, and the myriad of other Buddhist practices exist for only one reason, to help us recognize the true nature of our own mind, the very same mind we have always had with us but have never seen up this

very minute. Yet in all this time (some say for lifetimes) we have managed to successfully ignore and avoid recognizing the true nature of that mind even though it is right here. Of the “Three Poisons” in Buddhist literature, the number one poison is “ignorance.” We live in a perpetual state of ignorance as to our own mind’s true nature, seemingly forever distracted from recognizing it. We ignore it.

Once we have recognized the actual nature of the mind (or have even a glimpse of recognition), our dharma practice changes dramatically. For one, dharma practice is no longer just a “practice” that requires effort (as in something we are trying to learn), but rather it becomes something we have now learned and, at that point, enjoy doing more than anything else we can think of. Instead of waiting for some spiritual experience to happen in our practice, we now have that, and settle down to systematically making progress toward our future enlightenment. We are no longer looking outside for some kind of a spiritual rescue. We finally know that we have to (and can) rescue ourselves. And we know how.

I am not talking here about enlightenment either, something I personally know nothing about. I am speaking of something much more mundane and simply practical, which is what the Tibetan Buddhists call “Recognition,” recognizing for our own self the actual nature of the mind and how it works. In Zen Buddhism, recognition is termed “Kensho.”

What is remarkable about Recognition (a glimpse of the mind's nature) is that from that moment onward we are no longer on a blind Odyssey to reach something called enlightenment, whatever we might

have imagined that to be. Instead, recognition is a turning point that perhaps we never expected, a point where we begin actually (and naturally) to respond to our own dharma practice joyfully instead of out of some sense of obligation. Let's just call it responsibility.

To our surprise, we find that suddenly we have the ability to respond and in that response we own or fully embrace our practice for the first time. We transcend it and are, in a way, no longer practicing through sheer effort. As for meditating, we finally see exactly how to do it, why we are doing it, and we assume that responsibility gladly and with joy. And that is news indeed, joyful practice at last!

With recognition, feeling our way through our endless expectations and the comparison of dharma results with our actual practice is over. At the point of recognition, we can clearly see what needs to be done in the way of dharma and, more important, we see how to do it, and that we can do it, just as we are. We see that we already have everything we need to move forward toward enlightenment, realization, or whatever name you want to call it. We have at least some recognition our own mind's actual nature. It changes us.

Perhaps most important, we are no longer simply "practicing" meditation, but we begin to actually meditate at this point. I don't want to paint this change as too rosy, but it's pretty rosy. Now, how do we get to the point of "recognition?" What is involved? I will try to give you at least the general idea, as best I understand it.

“Recognition” is described in all the traditional textbooks as “beyond elaboration,” meaning that no words can describe this realization. That would include my words, but still, to give you perhaps some vague idea, recognition is often described as like recognizing a familiar face in a crowd. Recognition comes from inside, not from the outside. It is recognition of something we already know well.

I have my own analogy, which is that recognition is like those figure-ground paintings we used to see, where there is a painting hidden inside a painting. If someone points out the hidden image, we can instantly see that image hidden within the larger image. It pops out and is seen. From then on, we can always see the hidden image embedded within the painting’s image. Recognition is something like that, but what you are recognizing here as the embedded image is the actual or true nature of your own mind. How can we get there?

The first step is that we have to actually learn and master Tranquility Meditation (Shamata). If that proves too difficult (and it can), then take time out (a few years) and do a round of ngondro practice, what are called the extraordinary preliminary practices. These remedial practices purify and help clear away obscurations. This will actually save time in the long run, which is the run we are on.

Once we learn Tranquility Meditation properly, we are ready to be introduced to Insight Meditation (Vipassana). And by Insight meditation, I am talking about insight meditation as practiced by Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhists. I can't speak to any other forms of insight meditation because I don't know them.

Learning Vipassana (Insight Meditation) will involve you finding a teacher, one that you respect who actually has mastered Insight Meditation, and train with them. What you eventually want from that teacher is called the "Pointing-Out Instructions," as in pointing out the true nature of the mind. Usually, there is considerable preparation necessary before the pointing-out instructions can be grasped. Your mind has to be right.

The pointing-out instructions are in my understanding something quite personal to you and to whomever is teaching you. As mentioned, a dharma instructor's sole job is to point out the nature of the mind and have you actually get it for the first time. This takes real cooperation between instructor and student and it does not always work the first time. This particular teacher becomes what is called your root lama or root guru, because in the entire world only they were permitted to introduce you to your own mind's nature. That is a special connection.

In my case, I had a very high lama take me into a room with him, sit me down on a chair, and attempt to point out the nature of the mind to me personally and I did not get it. That was kind of embarrassing. And on another occasion I have had my own dharma teacher give the pointing-out instructions and I still did not get it. I tried, but I did not know how to correctly receive the instructions, so nothing much happened. There was no recognition. How disappointing!

And you can't fake recognition because you would only be fooling yourself and, without the results (actually getting it), you cannot proceed. It is as simple as that. Recognition has no wiggle room. It is

hard-wired like a switch. If you pretend to have it, you know you are pretending. You either have it or you do not. If there is any doubt, it hasn't happened.

On the third time I had the pointing-out instructions, I got at least a glimpse of how the mind works, and that was for me a breakthrough. Now, please don't mistake the glimpse I am referring to here for enlightenment. I have had no enlightenment experiences. Nada. However, I have had a glimpse of how the mind works and that, followed by three years of fairly intense work on my part, resulted in the stabilization of what I glimpsed. From there it has been a gradual working toward ever greater stabilization, and with some signs of actual progress.

Of course, for me it is a long and personal story and I have told that story in a couple of books, so it is out there for those who want more detail. My intention here is only to give you some general idea of how the flow of dharma practice can go. There are such things as key or pivotal points in practice that you might want to be aware of. "Recognition" is one of those. I am sure there are other scenarios just as useful as the one I know, but I don't know them. This is all I know, so I hope it can be helpful. To recap:

Tranquility meditation is our ante-in, the place to begin. If we are too obscured for that (can't learn to simply meditate), then do some heavy lifting by undertaking the ngondro practices. That's what I did and they really helped, but they are no walk in the park.

Once you actually learn Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) so that you have some stabilization, you

are ready to consider being introduced to Insight Meditation (Vipassana) by itself or as part of learning Mahamudra meditation. Of course, there is the theoretical approach of reading and hearing about it, the intellectual understanding of Insight Meditation. That may be a place to begin, but even more important, there is the direct approach of actually looking at the mind itself.

Actually looking directly at the mind itself is the path I would suggest. We can read and study books literally for lifetimes, but learning to directly look at the mind itself will actually work much sooner. Anyway, in the end we finally have to someday stop reading and just go look at the mind for ourselves. It truth, it is easier than what we have been doing up to now.

There is one caveat and I mentioned it earlier. After we can actually meditate using Tranquility Meditation, to properly learn Insight Meditation, we need an instructor, i.e. a live teacher. Don't imagine that you can do this by yourself. The traditional texts (and great Mahasiddhas) say it cannot be done without an instructor, so don't imagine that you will somehow luck out and just do it. This is where you have to find an Insight Meditation teacher with whom you have synergy and follow their directions. That may not be easy, but that is what it takes.

As mentioned, according to the teachings, trying to learn Insight meditation on your own is a fool's errand. Don't waste your time even trying. Get off your duff, find a real master (and they exist), and get some actual training in Insight Meditation. The great Tibetan translator Marpa went on foot from Tibet to India (and back) some three times to get the instructions he

needed, so if we cannot make a real effort to locate a teacher, we are not ready for this.

IMO, learning Insight meditation is more valuable than any other single act I can imagine. It is the magic wand that can open the doors to Mahamudra meditation and the path to eventual enlightenment.

MOUTH-TO-EAR INSTRUCTIONS

May 28, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

In 1997, at the request of my Tibetan dharma teacher, Margaret and I (and three of our kids!) escorted a young monk from Nepal to America. His first comment when getting off the plane at the San Francisco airport was, "No monks!" All of his life he had been surrounded by monks, not just in the monastery but in the Tibetan communities as well. Suddenly he was in a society where monks are almost as rare as hen's teeth. Today that monk is now a lama, having done two 3-year closed retreats back-to-back, none other than Lama Karma, one of the main teachers at KTD Monastery, who today travels all over the world giving (and receiving) teachings and empowerments.

My point in mentioning this is that monks (and especially lamas) in America are few and far between, so finding one to work closely with is not easy but with some effort is still doable. With the scarcity of lamas in this country, I am often asked what can we do on our own and do we need and have to have a teacher. Why can't we learn on our own from books and teachings?

It is clear in the texts that to be introduced properly to Vipassana Meditation, at least as it is done in Vajrayana Buddhism, we need a qualified teacher. Period. But with something like Tranquility Meditation (Shamata), there are no hard and fast rules as regards having a teacher.

There have been various studies done about the quality of meditation training in large monasteries. The gist of the research is that the larger the groups being trained together in meditation, the more questions and problems with learning it arise. In other words, as the teaching of basic meditation moved to larger and larger groups of students, the amount of articles and books on the “problems” of learning meditation proliferated. The cause is thought to be the lack of one-to-one teacher-student relationships that used to be ubiquitous. As training morphed to larger and larger groups, something got lost. It is thought to be the pointing out of this and that by the teacher to the student on a one-to-one basis as they went along.

The traditional form of Vajrayana training is that of the “secret mantra,” the tradition whispered from mouth to ear over the generations. It appears that what was whispered was not so secret, but what appears to be special is the mouth-to-ear tradition itself. A teacher working closely with a student makes it practical for the teacher to point out to the student when the student veers off-course, and this kind of personal feedback not only speeds up the training, but may be even necessary for really fine-tuning.

The classic case of “Pointing-Out Instructions” traditionally is concerned with “Recognition,” the pointing out of the true nature of the mind by the teacher to the student, so that the student gets it. However, all through the tradition this pointing out (in Tibetan, “ngo trö pa”) is an ongoing adjustment process so each student gets personalized instruction.

With larger groups and monasteries it seems like some (or much) of this mouth-to-ear approach is not practical and has been abandoned. Certainly in this country there are not enough lamas or rinpoches to go around, so we definitely suffer from this problem here.

It is perhaps like learning to drive a car. We don't just hand a kid a book and a car and tell them to go learn to drive. Instead, we drive with them. I have done it with all of my kids. We ride with them, pointing out how to stay in the center of the road, how to park, etc. In other words, we micro-manage them until they get the hang of it and manage things themselves.

Learning meditation is similar. While it may be physically possible to learn basic Tranquility Meditation all by ourselves, it is not recommended and is definitely the long way around. Like driving the car, with meditation we need feedback each step of the way, so that we can know when we go a little too far to the right or left, and can get help getting back on track -- that kind of thing. I can personally testify that without one-to-one feedback, one can get stuck on a small problem for months, years, and decades.

And, at least in these early days of the dharma in America, if the mountain does not come to Muhammad, then Muhammad has to come to the mountain. Margaret and I have driven to our monastery in New York for instruction enough times to go around the Earth's circumference twice. That's a lot of miles, but it shows what may be necessary to get proper instruction.

The situation I have been describing here is changing as the dharma becomes more known and popular in this country. In the years to come, as we have more Americans who realize enough to teach others, it will get easier. Eventually, we may have enough qualified American teachers for everyone who wants one to have one.

Until then, learning authentic meditation may be limited to those who want it badly enough to go that extra mile. Like the analogy I use above about learning to drive, meditation is no different so far as learning to meditate is concerned. It is trial and error, and struggling to get the idea. Or consider the fact that learning to swim is quite different from finally just swimming. I don't know of an easy way to do it, but having an instructor you can ask questions to, and talking with friends who are in the same place you are helps.

For myself, what has kept me inspired all these years are the qualities of my dharma teacher, the look in his eyes, the kindness that he showed to me and to everyone. These were undeniable. I find this mouth-to-ear tradition not just desirable, but a necessity. If I am devoted to my dharma teacher, it is because he has blessed me with his presence and has bothered to point out to me how to walk the path.

CYBERNETICS: THE ART OF COHERENCE

June 7, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Cybernetics has to do with how systems of any size cohere, i.e. remain coherent, as opposed to disintegrating and ceasing to be integral. Cybernetics comes from a Greek word that means “the art of piloting,” as in the regulatory communications within a system. My focus in this brief article is the communication between ourselves and the world system to which we belong, in particular the idea of lineage as typified between a guru and a student.

What follows here is, as the English say, a bit of a sticky wicket, what we here in America might call a touchy subject, so you have been warned. A few of you have commented (and continue to comment) about the spiritual residue of the 1970s and all that is considered “New Age.” In particular, some of you have put the kibosh on the whole idea of teachers and gurus, in general. Having lived through that whole decade in my prime, I totally understand how you might feel that way. There were a lot of bad apples in the spiritual barrel. At the same time, however, having had some very incredible teachers and “gurus,” I feel responsible to at least gently point out something about what having a teacher can mean and how it comes about. Let’s begin with the concept of meeting a life-teacher or guru.

For starters, who among us can even afford a living teacher? Apparently not everyone, and I note that the old adage “When the student is ready, the teacher will appear” has truth to it. It is only at a certain stage in our own development that it is possible for another being to appear outside ourselves in life, and then connect with and personally teach us. Think about it!

Such a live appearance (apparition?) is a sign of growing confidence within ourselves and the outside world surrounding us, a sign of the thinning of the veil of duality we are shrouded in, and the rise of a sense of non-duality for us. It is somewhat rare (a real-life event) when a teacher is permitted to emanate for us and recognize us directly, so that we can see our self clearly reflected in their long-gone mirror. Of course, a lot of imposter-spiritual teachers try to emulate the real deal. However, please don’t doubt for one second that such real-life gurus exist, just perhaps not for you in this life or at least not right now, but they are there.

And those of you who “hate” the idea of having a guru under any circumstance need not worry. A life teacher certainly will never appear in your life unless you specifically ask for or require them. Those of you who don’t trust gurus are free to continue teaching yourselves as best you can, undisturbed by outside influences. However, there will also be those very few of you that reach a point of such confidence in life that an emanation will spontaneously arise outside of yourself in the form of a teacher. It is a sign of strength, not weakness. Interdependency is the modern equivalent of what used to be called self-dependency. It is not a curse, but a blessing, yet one that not everyone can afford.

Just what such a teacher-emanation actually is may be debatable. Is it part of our inner self that arises from within the external world of “others” to guide us? Is a teacher a wormhole into another dimension of us? A teacher certainly can be seen as a porthole or clear window in an otherwise opaque outside world, and at the very least a reflector in which we can actually see ourselves, not unlike a rear-view mirror through which we can kind of back our way into the future.

After all, what is identification with another being to the point of real spiritual exchange (and awareness) all about? What is such an exchange? Is this not the heart of what lineage is, a mixing of the minds until spiritual equilibrium is reached? What passes between a teacher and a student, if not necessary information? Information necessary for what? Perhaps the answer is information necessary for the coherence of the greater good. What is it that a lineage preserves?

The Tibetan Buddhists are, above all, about pointing out, recognizing (or seeing) the true nature of the mind, and they declare that it is always a teacher who appears in our life that succeeds in pointing this out to us. They state that one cannot do it alone. To their way of thinking, in the darkness of the world’s obscurations, a guru is a beacon of light, an open window through which we can gaze at the luminosity and clarity of the mind itself.

In cybernetics, communication of essential information throughout an entire organism is mandatory, as mentioned, to maintain coherence -- life. Certainly the initiation of a student by a guru,

what passes between a teacher and a student, and what constitutes lineage, is a prime candidate for any study of spiritual cybernetics.

If “life is but a dream” as the children’s song “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” suggests, then within this dream called life we can also dream. Manifesting a teacher in the flesh, in the “real World,” is itself a powerful statement as to where we are at, and perhaps even who we are. In my case, as someone who was particularly hard to teach in the first place, and who resisted “other’s” attempts to personally instruct me, the externalization of my inner need to be found, recognized, and trained that finally appeared in the form of a teacher was something of a climatic life event, in that it changed my life. It did.

In my opinion, a living teacher is a portal into the mind itself, a window through which we may occasionally peer through the mask of our self at the true nature of the mind beyond. Just as a son or daughter seeks to have their parent’s blessing, we seek to have the blessing of our teacher or guru. And what is this blessing? Just as a mother helps her infant find the nipple, the blessing of a guru is to point out and help us recognize the true nature of our mind, which has always been with us, after which we can then feed ourselves.

A LONG ROW TO HOE

June 17, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

We all have quirks. One of my quirks is that I like to look at a long view until it vanishes in the distance. It could be a sidewalk, row of trees, back-country road, or my favorite, a two-track in the woods that creates an almost infinite tunnel into the distance. I don't feel the same way about underground or railroad tunnels. I like, as Pharrell Williams put it in one of my favorite songs, "Happy," a "room without a roof."

I know. It could be the onset of tunnel vision, but I don't care. I like it anyway. This fondness for straight lines flies in the face of all my studies of cycles, circles, and non-linear dynamics, not to mention my interest in process more than results, but there it is. One of my favorite morning walks is down an alley where I can see straight-ahead for almost half a mile. Best of all, most of that walk is gravel and sand as opposed to concrete or tarmac. I like the feel of a dirt road under feet, and just walking on it.

I do some of my best thinking walking down that alley. Sometimes I am at its end without knowing how I got there, but not that often. Mostly I savor each part of the alley, each back yard, garage, barking dog (not always) – and what have you. And I have a real thing for alleys, especially like they used to make them when I was a kid.

Lucky for me, I live in a small town where the alleys are still wild and undisciplined. They rule! Up here in northern Michigan, we still fight to tame our alleys. When I visit Ann Arbor, where I grew up, I see that their alleys have all been sanitized, even manicured. What once they struggled to subdue (the wild growth of vegetation) is gone or perhaps only featured a little bit here and there. That makes me sad. What a great loss!

Here in Big Rapids, Michigan, where I live, the alleys are still rude and unruly. Vegetation pours forth from the backyards, surrounds and climbs all over some of the garages and out buildings, and has an almost infinite amount of hiding places and bushes. All kinds of abandoned flowers and plants have taken root, and you never know what you will find.

I am not so crazy about all the trash and unwanted things that folks here put out for pickup, but in this town there are whole tribes of folks who stalk the alleys with trucks and take away almost anything of value before the sanitation trucks get it. We not only have recycling, the townsfolk do it on their own, sometimes myself included. More than once I have been seen to hurry home and get my car to rescue some orphaned table or chair.

Walking on the sidewalks in front of all the houses is OK too, but not nearly as fun as walking those back alleys, hidden from sight by the overgrowth, with little puddles from recent rain, stealthy cats slinking along in the underbrush, and lots of wild rabbits. Every once in a while, if I am out early enough, I have met a skunk, and regularly the odorous remains of skunks.

This battle against the underbrush that lines the alleys in Big Rapids is still in full swing. I hope we never win that war as Ann Arbor apparently has. A manicured alley is basically an oxymoron.

[Photo of part of our “rails to trails” pathway that stretches for something like fifty miles, from near Grand Rapids, through our town, and on out of town I don’t know how far, I believe, all the way to Cadillac Michigan.]



TERRIFIC!

June 18, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Some years ago, a friend remarked how nature was so peaceful. My response was something like, "... not the nature I know."

IMO, nature is not simply "peaceful." I would agree that it is awesome, but more often I find it terrific – inspiring a mild form of terror in me, and certainly not what I would call tranquil. Mother Nature is indeed a harsh mistress. She has great beauty but the other side of that coin, closer than close, is the sheer tragedy of the circumstances of most critters, large and small, which spend much of their time looking for another critter to kill and eat, while trying very hard at the same time not to be eaten. Of course, most of us lumbering human beings choose to just ignore the "terrific" in our own life.

Yet it is out into nature that I choose to go when my own life bottoms out, when my particular circumstances approach what most smaller sentient beings are always going through. Then I feel right at home in the terror of the moment that nature so gratuitously provides. As one Tibetan lama pointed out to me at a very auspicious time in my life, Mother Nature is herself the very "Lama of Appearances," containing the complete dharma in an unabridged and easy-to-read format for all to see and learn from. All we have to do is look!

As I am aging, and I am, it is ever clearer to me that the incessant shocks that, like waves, keep out-breaking in our lives are not about to simply go away soon. Instead, it is I, me, that will go away, as the waves continue to beat upon the shore and edge of life. Correct?

I keep waiting for the shocks inherent in life to die down and reach a tranquil state, like the calm surface of a lake or perhaps the ocean, but that is not going to happen, is it? No, it is me that has to reach that tranquil state. I posted this before, but a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins really does say it all for me.

HEAVEN -- HAVEN

I HAVE desired to go
Where springs not fail,
To fields where flies no sharp and sided hail
And a few lilies blow.

And I have asked to be
Where no storms come,
Where the green swell is in the havens dumb,
And out of the swing of the sea.

[Photo I took some time ago that is a “terrific” picture.]



Copyright (c) Michael Ertwine

HAPPY FATHER'S DAY

June 20, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I have a joke around our house (which I made up) that Mother's Day lasts the full 24-hours, but Father's Day only lasts a few minutes. It comes out of my realizing how hard mothers work taking care of children and family, while fathers stand by and, of course, we do whatever fathers do, in my case make a living. In my opinion, the work it takes a mom to raise a child from an infant until they can be on their own is infinite compared to any other kind of work I have ever done. Not even close.

With three daughters and a wife, I have been surrounded by women in my life, which is fine by me. I have never been a "Man's Man." I don't hunt and would not kill an animal. I like cars, but not enough to work on them. I like tools and can do (and have done) handyman stuff, but don't seek it out. I like sports, but not enough to watch them, except for the Olympics, which I do have a passion for. Anyway, I was never good at sports, except for swimming, where I did win some small award, and so on. I do love movies about sports. Go figure!

In general, I don't hang out with guys unless it involves deep discussions on spiritual and life-passage topics, which I do like very much. I have, literally, a handful of male friends, most of whom I do

not see often. I spend the majority of my time with my wife and family.

I have one son, whom I love very much, and he and I share photography and videography, and things like that. He is a world-class video game player, and I love to hear about that from him. Of course I am always glad to see him, but he, like me, seems not as interested in the men-stuff, aside from video games as I mentioned earlier. In high school and junior high I hung around with guys, mostly because we didn't have girlfriends often enough yet back then. We would smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, and spend hours going through drive-ins at night looking for girls. This was in the 1950s. The movie "American Graffiti" is exactly how it was for me.

I am the oldest of five boys, with no sisters. Our dad was into all kinds of things. He was a very fine photographer (both stills and movies), an actor, a stamp collector, and a well-known magician, and more. As a kid I was in the company of many great magicians, but never took to it myself. It was, well, too "tricky." Dad was very social and we had all kinds of folks around our house. All of his sons loved and respected him. Dad made his living as a comptroller, handling financial and money stuff.

However, for reasons I don't understand, I never had a single "personal" conversation with my father about what was important to me, like my worries, philosophy, or whatever. Outwardly he was a great entertainer, but when he came to emotions or "deeper" things, he was a closed book. Since I never had a grandfather on either side (they both had died), I had no male guidance, and practically speaking,

absolutely no father figure. Thank goodness my mom was everything to all five of her sons. I could talk with mom about anything at all, and she was always right there for me and for my brothers.

I feel that every child always seeks to have the blessing of his or her parents. As a son I wanted my dad to be proud of me, but since it seems I always took the “road less travelled by,” I am afraid I was a big disappointment to him. He was a business man and into finances, and here I was being a musician and then an astrologer, etc. You get the point. It was not until I founded Matrix Software and later AMG (the All-Music Guide, All-Guide, where I began to make some real money) that dad came around.

Toward the end of his life, my father ‘literally’ came around, like to my house. He set up a desk in my tiny home office and would come over and work on my books several times a week. There we were, two feet apart, but we still never spoke about anything I cared about. However, in his own way, now that I was making money, he gave me that longed-for blessing, even if it was unspoken. He seemed to enjoy helping me run my business. Yet, all of the content that my Facebook readers know me for was lost on dad. He didn’t want to hear a word of it. Therefore we didn’t talk much.

The long and the short of it is that, as the oldest child, I was always on my own. I had no one to look up to and no hand-me-downs of any kind and from an early age had to entertain myself, which I have learned to do very well. As a father to my four kids, I was very wrapped up in making a living for many years, which was not easy because I chose not to finish school or

go to college, but rather to find my way in life only doing things I loved. My hobbies became my professions, for the most part.

My dear wife Margaret was a wonderful mother and, although I helped as I could, taking care of the kids was never a 50/50 proposition with us. She did most of the work, while I tried to make a living. One saving grace is that I chose to work in my home, even when I had a large company and hundreds of employees. At least I was always right there to help out with the kids all those years, although I was preoccupied with building a successful business. There are some great home movies with the kids doing fantastic things, while in the background you can hear me in my office talking on the phone. That is sad.

I see that I am kind of rambling here, so what's my point? If I had to speculate, it seems that since I had (in one sense) no father figure I could relate to (and no grandfathers either), I really sought out father figures who had what I would call real-life wisdom. I needed some male figures to look up to that actually responded to me for what I was. I first found this in the great blues players, many of whom I got to meet and interview, and then later with a series of life teachers, and finally with the great Tibetan lamas, with whom I am still working. Thank goodness for them!

I don't feel I was a very good dad; I was too wrapped up in doing exactly what I wanted to do and still make a living. I feel I am a better grandfather than I was a father, but I do love each of my kids more than I can express. And grandkids? I have learned more about

being a father from having grandkids than I ever knew as a father.

Anyway: Happy Father's Day dads!

[Photo of dad and mom at our wedding in July of 1971.]



THE NOBLE SAVAGE

June 22, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The concept of the Noble Savage, often associated with the writer and philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, is a literary stereotype of an individual who lives in harmony with nature and has not been corrupted by civilization and the various mental obscurations we all seem to fall heir to. This term is frequently used to symbolize our innate goodness.

To me the Noble Savage has many similarities with what the Tibetan Buddhists call “Buddha Nature,” our innately pure luminous mind which right now is adventitiously obscured by various defilements. According to the Buddhists, we all have Buddha Nature, but are not aware of it because of all the mental plaque we are encrusted with. Tibetan Buddhists recommend meditation and mind-training methods to remove those obscurations so that we can realize our own essential nature.

These Buddhists are very careful to make clear that, unlike the philosopher Plato’s idea that we once knew our own inner nature (but have since sinned or lost that awareness), we have never known our Buddha Nature and have yet to realize it for the first time. Keep in mind that in Buddhist eschatology there is no end to the universe of Samsara we are caught up in, just as there never was a beginning. It is a closed loop or infinite cycle or circle.

By that same token, from time immemorial, those of us who are unenlightened (and that means most of us) have never yet managed to wake up and realize the true nature of our own mind. As my teacher points out, we are the stragglers, what he calls the “hard cases.” We need remedial help, and that means some kind of mind-training, be it meditation or something else.

It seems that in the confusion of simply living with all our obscurations we find it hard to concentrate on learning to meditate and can't seem to wake up from our deer-in-the-headlights stare. We continue to imagine that somehow we can game the system and will eventually manage to sort it all out. Of course that never will happen. It is a logical impossibility. In fact, until we realize for ourselves that, practically speaking, physically, we have no hope or recourse (i.e. we will all eventually die), we will probably never get serious enough to do anything about our situation, but will, as they say, continue to rearrange the deck chairs on the Titanic. Physically we are all going down, regardless of what we think to the contrary.

So, it is an extremely elaborate and vicious Catch-22 that we are caught up in. Unless we can get serious enough to wake up to the reality we each face, we will not be able to muster the will and energy to do something about it, and we will, as we apparently have for millennia, continue to slumber on in a self-created myopia.

This is perhaps why the first thing most of us encounter when we look into Buddhism as a life path are what are called the “Common Preliminaries,” common because they are the first thing we learn and

which are, by their essential intuitive-obviousness, designed to wake us up enough from our lethargy to get serious about doing something about our situation in Samsara. Otherwise, we just can't seem to raise ourselves to action.

These Common Preliminaries, which are also called the Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind toward the Dharma (or just "The Four Thoughts") I have written about often here, and they are all over the Internet if you will search for them.

The Four Thoughts are (in a word) that: (1) our human life is precious and can be used to good purpose, (2) that life is fragile and above all impermanent, (3) that our every action dictates our future, and, as mentioned earlier, (4) we never (not ever) will get our ducks all in a row and keep them there. Basically, those are the four thoughts that can turn the mind away from our habitual distraction if we can keep them in mind. Keeping those four thoughts in mind, vividly, can give us the strength, energy, and will to turn ourselves around enough to wake up to our own inner nature. However, to do this we have to have a plan, a method, which is exactly what dharma training is all about.

The bottom line for me is that I learn meditation not to fulfill some New Age approach to life, but rather to actively begin to remove the obscurations that prevent me from seeing the actual nature of my own mind. I am tired of running in circles. However, it is a slow process, but one with ever-increasing incremental returns, i.e. each day is a little brighter.

I do my best to share what information I have with those of you interested, but would appreciate some company. Each of us is alone in that we have to enlighten ourselves, but we could be alone together more than we are now. Aloneness, by definition, wants company.

Make any sense?

AMERICAN DHARMA

May 13, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

As the sea of change in America that we call the 1960s passed away, various exotic offerings washed up on the shore of the 1970s. Keep in mind that it was in the 1970s that the concept of “New Age” branded itself in our brains. If the 1960s was an experience we can’t quite remember (but will never forget), then it is fair to say that we went to school on that experience in the 1970s and tried to sort it all out. I don’t even want to begin to try and remember all of the scores of teachers, mostly on Asian-wisdom, that I personally met and/or tried to learn from.

After years of trying to squeeze blood from a stone via various so-called gurus and esoteric teachings, falling in with the Tibetan rinpoches was like going to dharma heaven. Here was what I most needed, authenticity and an intact lineage. Best of all, for me the dharma worked!

As the dust settles, now many decades later, and the wheat separates from the chaff, it is clear that chief among my influences were the Tibetan lamas and rinpoches. It was in early 1974 that I personally met Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, got to be his chauffeur for a time, and that was when he personally introduced me to meditating. I had been trying to meditate before that, but I really didn’t know how. And later that same year I met His Holiness the 16th

Gyalwa Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, and it went from there.

But it was the 1980s and on into the 1990s that the great rinpoches who came to America were most available and they traveled to us. Today that is pure history and such proximity is no longer possible to anywhere near the same degree it once was. These same lamas are now either boxed up in one country or another, too busy to travel much, or already getting infirm. Yet back then, we didn't think anything of having a long procession of lamas through our center, rinpoche after rinpoche, some many times.

His Eminence Tai Situ Rinpoche visited our center twice. Aside from studying Mahamudra for two years with Tai Situ Rinpoche, I feel I received a feng-shui transmission spontaneously as he took us on a tour through our own house. His Eminence was as friendly as a next-door neighbor.

Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche stayed at our center for something like a month while we worked with him to develop a curriculum for Kagyu dharma studies. Traleg Rinpoche and his wife came, and Thrangu Rinpoche, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso, Lama Namse, Lama Dudjom Dorje, Bardor Rinpoche, and of course our own teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche – so many times. The great retreat master Drupon Khenpo Lodro Namgyal lived at our center for I don't remember how long, many months, while he learned English. And there were also the western teachers, like Ken McLeod, John Reynolds, Lama Yeshe Gyamtso, and so on. Before the split, His Eminence Shamar Rinpoche stayed with us for a week and gave Mahamudra transmission to an entire group, some

just off the street. In that transmission, it was like all the walls turned white-transparent. I could kind of see right through them. You get the idea.

Of course we didn't realize then that these visits would not go on forever, much less that this time period would never return. All this is now a piece of history that has only begun to be told. Know it or not at the time, we were steeped in the dharma, the effects of which are only now gradually emerging.

For myself, I was forever changed by exposure to these great lamas and to authentic dharma. And the dharma did not just push me farther or higher along some path I was already on. It transformed my view from me looking outward at the world, to looking inward at the mind itself.

Exposure to authentic dharma turned me around 180-degrees. Until then, all my life I had been busy watching my own inner biases and fears projected on the outside world and was terrified by what I saw. The dharma intercepted my deer-in-the-headlight gaze and redirected it inward to examine the projector itself, my own mind. All that time I was just scaring myself. Once I looked inward, subject and object began to become interchangeable or one. The dharma gradually dissolved the "me" and the "them," once and for all. With that, the dewdrop that was me began to slip into the shining sea.

On top of that, after years of practice, my dharma teacher managed to point out to me something of the true nature of the mind, at least enough so that I had some small bit of recognition. That event shattered the suffocating veil that covered everything in my

world and empowered me beyond the possibility of falling back into complete ignorance, this by helping me to realize the basic nature of my own mind to the degree that I at least know what I have to do and how to do it.

In Tibetan Buddhism “Recognition” is a form of realization and not an experience that comes and goes, but rather, as they say, is like recognizing the face of a friend in a crowd. It is a recognition of something familiar, part of us, not anything “other” from the outside.

Those of us who did not have the time or diligence to double-down and learn Tibetan when we could are today, to some degree, dharma orphans trying to fill in the missing pieces. Luckily, the dharma is not just Tibetan or Indian or American. The synapses that connect those missing dharma pieces, one to another, are living flames that, sooner or later, will burn through whatever obscures them, even our dense American version of attachment.

And luckily, dharma practice is measured by what each of us does, not just on how well-connected we are in the dharma community. We can't get inside our teacher's skin, and closeness to the guru is not measured by physical proximity. The one and only important factor is that the teacher be realized enough to be able to point out to a student the nature of the mind so that they actually get it. Once that is done, everything else is gravy, extra.

The endless Tibetan Buddhist practices, much like the ubiquitous Zen koan, exist but to prepare the student

to recognize the actual nature of their own mind, no matter how long that takes.

As for me, the secret of dharma practice is becoming responsible for our own enlightenment, however far away in time that enlightenment might be. Instead of waiting for it to be conferred on us from outside or from above, we confer it on ourselves by every thought, word, and action we have. We must turn the wheel of our own dharma. Ultimately, it's all up to us.

AND SO IT BEGINS

April 18, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

His Holiness the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, arrived at KTD (Karma Triyana Dharmachakra) Monastery in the mountains above Woodstock, New York about 5:00 PM yesterday. All that day (and for many days earlier) a small host of people worked feverishly preparing for his visit. This photo by Robert Hansen-Sturm gives you some idea as to what the arrival looked like. Here is the Karmapa walking through the Gampopa Gateway to the monastery, surrounded by people crowding to see, led by the sound of gyalings (the high-pitched oboe-like instruments) and followed by an entourage of parasols, monks, and lamas.

There was a camera crew present from the most popular TV station in Asia, plus the Karmapa's own traveling video team of which I am a part of. I was not able to see the procession myself because I was waiting inside the large monastery shrine room (with its eleven-foot golden Buddha) to film his arrival there. My camera was set up right at the foot of the Karmapa's throne, ready to film the entrance of the procession and then what is called the "Tea and Rice Ceremony," a traditional event where Tibetan butter-tea and sweet rice are offered to everyone present, after which His Holiness spoke for a short time.

It was obvious to me that I could not be in all the places I would have liked to witness the arrival, much less be present at many of the events that must of have happened later on. I am relatively low on the totem-pole hierarchy of the many folks present, which is at times painful, not to be included in all of the events I would like to be. Of course I am not alone in this. Everyone there wants to be close to the Karmapa and physically it is just not possible.

And this brings up the specter of organized religion to mind, a topic I have struggled with for decades. The visit of His Holiness is the perfect example. Without organizing, such a visit would be sheer chaos. Yet the organization process (pretty-much by definition) involves a pyramid-type hierarchy of authority and responsibility, with the inevitable side-effect that some folks have more privileged positions and others do not. I find it sad to note that I don't seem to mind it when I get the privileges, yet at the same time I am disappointed when I am excluded. How human is that?

Over the years I have found that any kind of business transaction is (karmically-speaking) flawed, and this by definition. Business of any kind most often has advantages for one side at the expense of the other. We all know this. The word "disadvantaged" says it all. I feel this is true of any organization, including religion, and probably civilization in general. And I don't have a solution to this, but tend to lump it under the category of Samsara – the sufferings involved in life and living.

I guess it is particularly painful for me when it involves spirituality or what passes for religion. As an example,

I have been involved in various groups and organizations, including spiritual as well as other types, sometimes serving on their board of directors and what-not. Early on I was naïve enough to imagine that serving on religious boards would be inherently less political and somehow more “pure.” However, this was just wishful thinking on my part and did not turn out to be the case.

There seem to be just as much politics, push and shove, and so on within spiritual organizations as in those that are more mundane, the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” as Shakespeare put it. Religious groups are no exception. Human nature is just what it is. And, as I mentioned, I am guilty of enjoying privilege, just as I am of complaining when I don’t make the cut.

The privileged events are soon over, while the effects of those where I am left out tend to linger. This lingering of resentment and feeling sorry for myself I have to get over. In the midst of filming His Holiness in the shrine-room yesterday, I looked out and there was my dharma teacher of 30-some years, the Venerable Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche (now in his nineties), sitting before the Karmapa, and smiling at me. He knows me and how I am. Earlier that day he had reminded me in his broken-English to just tend to my business and practice, his hand making the gesture of counting beads. Just so.

I am most grateful for his presence in my life. Much of my other worries are, as they say, “sounding brass and tinkling cymbal.”

[Photo by Robert Hansen-Sturm]



BOREDOM AS A GIFT

May 20, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

We are so used to entertaining ourselves most of the time that boredom is usually not considered a good sign. Our dance card is full and we like it like that. Empty moments or being bored can be just plain scary. We would rather just ignore all that and stay busy, you know, keep on keepin' on.

But every once in a while, no matter how hard I try to keep things moving along, I find myself at a standstill, and there I am, staring out into the void again. In other words, even my airtight routines have gaps and without notice I may find myself face-to-face with some dead-space. It's unavoidable. What is boredom anyway and why do we avoid it?

I have to confess that I have dealt with all this years ago and find these boring moments in life not only fascinating, but also very useful. This is no truer than when I am waiting for something. By nature I am impatient, always in a hurry to get to the next thing scheduled in my life. As an astrologer, I am very conscious of time, like I always arrive at events early. This has been a real problem for my wife, who would rather get to places on time or perhaps a little later. Not me. I like to get somewhere early and wait. How crazy is that?

I used to hate waiting, but have gradually warmed to it over the years. There is a quality to waiting that I

need to know more about, to become accustomed to it, and I have. Some say we are all just waiting to die, but that is pushing it IMO. I link waiting, boredom, and those empty moments when things go void all together in my mind. There is a message there for me and I am slowly getting it.

And I link all of the above to meditation and learning to meditate. If I think about it, those gaps or moments of boredom are a respite from the cloying distractions that most of the time I entertain myself with. At least these empty moments are different and can represent windows of opportunity into the mind itself, not something to try and shut out -- keep closed. Boring moments may make me anxious, but if I relax and rest in them, they can be a welcome relief from the train of back-to-back thoughts I usually follow. These void-like moments are a time-out and it is OK for me to step out of line for a moment now and again to just rest in my own boredom. It's inescapable anyway.

Learning basic meditation is a combination of mindfulness (awareness) and resting. We learn to rest in awareness or rest mindfully. However, as being bored can be uncomfortable, just being there alone in the moment can feel awkward and very new to us. "Nothing" is going on and we are used to something always going on. However, "nothing" also goes on. It is like someone switched off the white-noise of life and suddenly we can hear the endless blast of nature living that we call "silence."

Anyway, over time I have found the uncomfortableness that boredom and its silence brings comforting, that is, if I can allow myself to just let go in the moment and rest in it. What's the

difference between full and empty? Perhaps we have never known true rest. Coming to grips with boredom is certainly a part of learning meditation, so they are close cousins. Perhaps meditation is active boredom, boredom with awareness, or awareness of what boredom really is, which has to be nothing other than the true nature of the mind itself.

I believe that boredom is very close to something important that I need, perhaps just a breath away from some kind of realization I yearn for. So, I tell myself to give boredom a chance and to just rest in it when it comes along, instead of struggling to make something happen all the time.

At any rate, I have found that resting in my boredom is a sure way to turn nothing into something. Here are a couple of poems I wrote about nothing.

TIME FOR NOTHING

Excuse me for the moment,
No matter the reasons why,
I just need more time to do nothing,
But gaze into clear empty sky.

MEDITATION IS NOTHING

The books say:
Seek a place of solitude,
And meditate,
But it's just the other way round.

When meditation,
Naturally occurs,
There is no place in the world,

That you feel comfortable,
Try as you might.

Not here or there,
Not doing this or doing that.
Only nothing feels right.

You just want to hold real still,
Let the mind rest,
And then park yourself,
Somewhere out of the way,
Like on a cushion,
Or
In a place of solitude,
Because:

Nothing is going on.

DRAWING ON WATER

May 16, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

“Nowhere in the worlds,
Can a Buddha be found somewhere else.
The mind is the perfect Buddha.”

From “The Fundamental Treatise on the Middle Way,
Called Wisdom”

That mind we are talking about here is your mind and my mind, plain and simple. The Tibetans often call the mind the “Wish-Fulfilling Gem,” which is also what they call His Holiness the Dalai Lama and His Holiness the Karmapa, which in Tibetan is: Yeshe Norbu. I have heard His Holiness the 17th Karmapa addressed this way.

All ideas and inventions known to humankind originated in the mind, every last thought. Recently I had a fever for a couple of days and it was immediately clear to me that the mind is our most valuable asset, bar none. In the fog of fever, with all the endless recursive thoughts tagging my mind, I understood once again why we can lose a finger or a toe and still remain intact mentally, but that if we lose our mind, we have lost everything.

This is why I no longer entertain myself by staining my mind with this or that obscuration, like alcohol, caffeine, nicotine, drugs, and on down the line. It was fun once upon a time, but these days I prefer clarity.

Either way, the mind remains pristine regardless of these obscurations, but my view of it certainly does not. It is amazing that the mind is invulnerable, despite our attempts to ignore and obscure it. We are so lucky for that.

Not only do I not want to stain the mind, I want to further clarify it, which is what dharma practice is all about. It seems that so much of what I do in a day is just more distraction, ignorance, my continual ignoring of the authentic mind, adding up to next to nothing. No wonder impermanence is our hallmark.

In Buddhist teachings, the image of drawing or writing on the surface of air or water illustrates impermanence. That's kind of what most of my day-to-day activity accomplishes: nothing. I am reminded of the lyrics to the song "Oklahoma," "... and watch the hawk making lazy circles in the sky." What I do most of the time does not have lasting permanence but the resulting karma from it apparently does. If I am to engrave the ether, I prefer it this way:

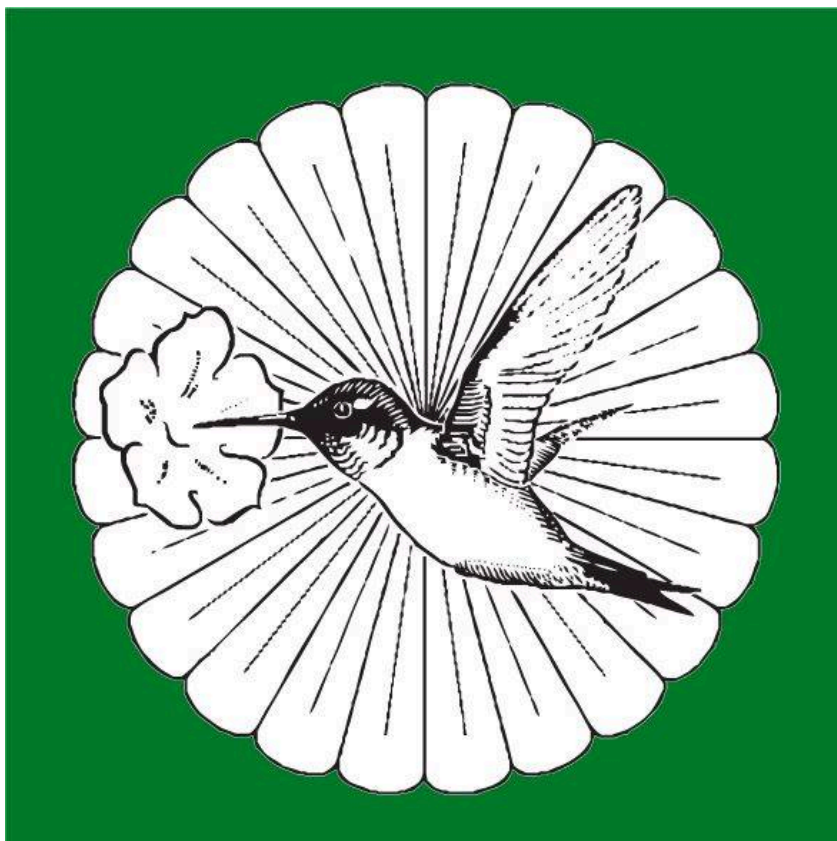
"Thought activity in a yogi's mind is like writing on the surface of water. The thought arises, the essence is recognized, the thought dissolves. At this point, thoughts are liberated upon recognition, like the vanishing of a drawing on water."

Quote from "Rainbow Painting" by Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche

And a little poem from me today:

"In order to stay the same,
Everything must change."

[For many years this image, about four-feet square, graced our meditation center, both high up near the roof and next to the entrance door. I suppose it looks a little dated now, but it still speaks for itself.]



EXERCISE AS YOU LIKE IT “Eight Pieces of Brocade”

May 25, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1awboVs-FqM>

Recently, while I was at our monastery, KTD (Karma Triyana Dharmachakra), in the mountains above Woodstock, New York this April for the visit of His Holiness the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa (Ogyen Trinley Dorje), I had a chance to meet with Lama Wuu Fang Jang, who is Margaret's and my doctor of Chinese medicine, and the doctor of our dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. It was Lama Wuu Fang whose medicine enabled Rinpoche to walk freely once again, when everyone feared he would be in a wheelchair from then on.

In 2004 I travelled with Lama Wuu Fang (and with Rinpoche) to Tibet and China along with a group of lamas and students, so I got to know him a bit at that time. Lama Wuu Fang completed the 3-year closed retreat with Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, which is why he carries the title “Lama.” Lama Wuu Fang is a very gentle and quiet man, who instantly commands my respect just by walking into a room.

Anyway, recently at KTD I spoke with Lama Wuu Fang about my need for exercise. I like to walk, but have trouble following any standard exercise regime. So it was wonderful when Lama Wuu Fang walked

Margaret and me down the hall to a room with lots of space and spontaneously showed us some exercises that he thought we might like to do.

What he demonstrated is a part of QiGong called the “Eight Pieces of Brocade,” which is a centuries-old series of short exercises designed to maintain your health. Although it is technically not Tai Chi, it looks and feels a lot like it, but is easier to learn. Tai Chi is also part of QiGong.

What got my attention immediately was how Lama Wuu Fang immersed himself in the exercise one-hundred percent. It was amazing how perfectly and exquisitely he demonstrated the form, almost like he became a different person. You can see it in the video but it was mesmerizing in person. At once, I knew that this is something I could learn, wanted to learn, and would follow through on.

The room in the video has a lot of echo, so you may have to listen-up as Lama Wuu Fang demonstrates and describes eight different exercises, along with some comments about what organs of the body they affect. You can find many different versions of the “Eight Pieces of Brocade” on YouTube for reference, but IMO none that are as alive as these. It was as if Lama Wuu Fang gave us an actual transmission right on the spot. We felt it.

Lama Wuu Fang sent along the following text to better make clear what each exercise does medically.

Ba Duan Jin

The Baduanjin as a whole is broken down into eight separate exercises, each focusing on a different physical area and qi meridian. The Baduanjin traditionally contains both a standing and seated set of eight postures each. In the modern era, the standing version is by far the most widely practiced. The particular order in which the eight pieces are executed sometimes varies, with the following order being the most common.

1. Holding the Heaven with both hands to regulate San Jiao (Triple Burner)

This move is said to stimulate the "Triple Warmer" meridian (Sanjiao). It consists of an upward movement of the hands, which are loosely joined and travel up the center of the body.

2. Drawing the Bow Like Shooting the Vulture

While in a lower horse stance, the practitioner imitates the action of drawing a bow to either side. It is said to exercise the waist area, focusing on the kidneys and spleen.

3. Raise single hand to regulate the Spleen & Stomach functions (Separate Heaven and Earth)

This resembles a version of the first piece with the hands pressing in opposite directions, one up and one down. A smooth motion in which the hands switch positions is the main action, and it is said to especially stimulate the stomach.

4. Looking backward to help prevent diseases and injuries

This is a stretch of the hand meridians in an alternating fashion.

5. Sway the Head and Shake the Tail to help getting rid of the "Heart fire" Symptoms

This is said to regulate the function of the heart and lungs. Its primary aim is to remove excess heat (or fire) (xin huo) from the heart. Xin huo is also associated with heart fire in traditional Chinese medicine. In performing this piece, the practitioner squats in a low horse stance, places the hands on thighs with the elbows facing out and twists to glance backwards on each side.

6. Two Hands Holding the Feet to Strengthen the Kidneys and Waist

This involves a stretch upwards followed by a forward bend and a holding of the toes.

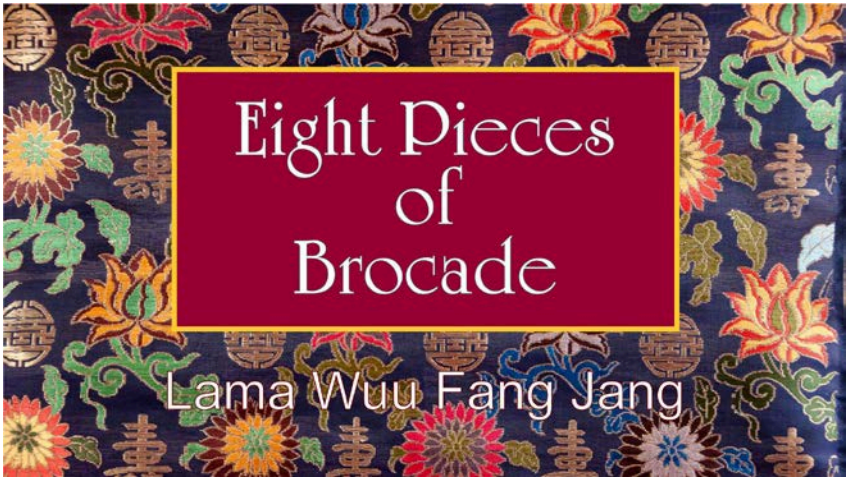
7. Clench the Fists and Glare Fiercely (or Angrily) to Improve Strength and Qi

This resembles the second piece, and is largely a punching movement either to the sides or forward while in horse stance. It is aimed at increasing general vitality and muscular strength.

8. Bouncing on the Toes to expel Disease

This is a push upward from the toes with a small rocking motion on landing. The gentle shaking vibrations of this piece is said to "smooth out" the qi after practice of the preceding seven pieces.

Lama Wu Fang Jang, who lives in New Jersey, can be reached at jangwfj@gmail.com



EXPERIENCING REALIZATION

May 1, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The great Lama Shang (1122-1193 AD) said:

“Realization arises from the middle of experiences”

What this says to me is that we are caught in the whirl of endless experiences, endless ups and down, until such time as we realize what is taking place. The Tibetans point out at least three distinct levels, that of understanding something, experiencing it, and realization.

We all know what it is to understand something intellectually, to grasp it with the mind. Yet it is another thing entirely to actually experience it for ourselves in real-time -- live it. And any of us who are open to our internal life have experiences, whether they are dreams, visions, feelings, or whatever. They can be precious to us, but also detrimental to any spiritual progress.

And I have had such experiences. I can well remember, years ago now, when I couldn't wait to see Rinpoche to relate to him my latest DREAM, vision, or powerful experience. Yet, in every case he would gently say to me “That is just an experience. Think nothing of it. Keep practicing.” It took me a while to grasp that the key factor with experiences is that they come and go. We have them and may be filled with

light, but two weeks later we can barely remember them, much less recreate them. I am reminded of this story than a good friend and trance-medium told me.

There was this little boy who was tired of taking milk in a bottle, so he ran to the end of his porch and threw the bottle into the bushes, only later to be out there crawling around on the ground under them crying and trying to find his bottle. This reminds me of experiences. In other words, they come and go, but don't remain. We try to find them again, but like snow falling on a warm rock, they just melt away.

The idea Rinpoche was pointing out to me is that while understanding and a ticket will get you a ride on the bus, experiencing is not a whole lot better because it is transitory. We have an experience, ride high for a moment, and then fall back into our daily routine. Psychics call this "out-of-the-body experience." We go out, but we end up going back into our old habits. Essentially, this is little more than what has been termed the "vicious cycles of Samsara."

And the danger of spiritual-experiences is that they prevent us from moving beyond themselves. I find the following analogy useful. Having a strong spiritual experience is like inhaling a breath of fresh air for the first time. We love it. Our tendency is to hold it, to hold onto it, and not let it go. We hold our breath and (spiritually speaking) stop breathing. And we continue to hold our breath until the cycles of life manage to knock the wind out of us and get us breathing again. This is like when the midwife slaps the newborn baby who won't breathe on the butt to get it breathing.

Experiences, like our train of thought, are endless, rising and falling with the waves of life, going up, but coming back down, and on around. Then there is “realization.”

Realization is what the Tibetan Buddhists point out as required. Experience comes and goes, but realization, once realized, remains with us always, luminous and clear. Sometimes the experience of seeing a snake in the dim light of a backroom is used. Once we realize it is just an old piece of rope, the experience vanishes. We have the realization.

Spiritual realization is similar to the rope and the snake analogy, but apparently more difficult.

Lama Shang Rinpoche:

To nurture stillness,
To nurture spiritual experiences,
To nurture samadhi and other spiritual states—
These are common.

But by the strength of your devotion,
For realization to arise from within
Due to the lama’s blessings—
This is rare.

FACE TO FACE

April 24, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I was up at 2 AM yesterday, as I often am, working on my blog and other stuff. I once again filled the car with video equipment, grabbed some day-old sandwiches, and left KTD by 7 AM. We were on our way to KTD's three-year retreat center, Karmé Ling, located in Delhi, New York, right near the Pennsylvania border. It is about a one and one-half hour drive.

Karmé Ling is where lamas are made, a 3-year/3 month closed retreat, where special training takes place. The retreatants never even lie down in all that time, but sleep sitting up in meditation position in a kind of little wooden box. Anyway, the retreat has always been special for me because Margaret and I (along with the Chinese Buddhist community) were the main fundraisers for the place. We watched our dharma brothers and sisters enter the retreat and come out lamas.

When we arrived at Karmé Ling, everyone was whirling around getting ready for the arrival of His Holiness the 17th Karmapa. We unloaded our equipment and I set about assembling the camera, lights, microphones, etc. They had a professional camera crew coming, but Margaret and I had been asked to come along and film a more private meeting between His Holiness and our teacher for 33 years,

the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, and some of his senior lamas.

Anyway, before I knew it the entire lama house was filled with people, and I mean literally packed in there back-to-back like sardines. To get from one room to another was a wiggle-journey as I squeezed through the crowd.

As the hours passed by and it was time for His Holiness to arrive, everyone went outside and lined up to receive him. Did I mention it was snowing, blowing, and very cold? It was. Many had little outer clothing on. As for me, I had a winter coat, hat, and kept my camera lens jammed in my coat pocket to keep it warm. At long last the motorcade of black Chevy Suburbans swung into view and began to drive down the driveway to the lama house. The monks, lamas, and everyone held out white Khatas, the Tibetan scarf offering, while the shrill oboe-like horns (gyalings) filled the air with music.

Snow was swirling around as His Holiness got out of the car, surrounded by his security team, and headed for the house, followed by the lamas, and then everyone else. I was one of two still photographers authorized to be present inside of the small shrine room. One of my duties was to photograph the hair cutting ceremony, where novice monks had a little piece of their hair cut by His Holiness.

To do that, I had to be way up front, where I felt more than a little self-conscious. But there I was, sitting on the floor, keeping a low profile, and kind of huddled next to one of the video cameras in the room. The rest of the room was filled with lamas, monks, and as

many people as could cram in there until they refused to let any more people in. Let's just say it was full.

Well, hair was cut, various traditional offerings were made, and His Holiness left to tour the Karmé Ling grounds. This included planting a small tree, visiting the new complex (almost done) of retreat houses, and then going into the closed retreat to bless the retreatants that were in there, first the men's retreat and then the Karmapa had lunch with the women retreatants.

Meanwhile Margaret and I were getting ready to do our video filming. It was to take place in my teacher's bedroom, not a lot of room, but a wondrous place to see, with all of its lovely statues. After all, this is where our beloved teacher spent much of his time. So there we were, setting up the camera, microphones, and lighting, while we waited for quite a while. There I stood in my stocking feet on the maroon-red rug, staring out the window at the bright morning light and the snow swirling around, waiting. It was a little surreal.

After quite a while, the security team cleared the outer rooms, the curtain hanging in the doorway opened and in stepped His Holiness and our teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, plus a few of his closest lamas. His Holiness sat on a brocade-covered chair in one end of the room, and the rest of us sat where we could in the other. After some fiddling around with microphones and lighting, we filmed the event, which involved the presenting of some gifts to His Holiness, and then he said a few words, all in Tibetan. And that was it, well, almost.

As the Karmapa got up to leave he turned to Margaret and me and asked if we would like to have our picture taken with him. Well this was totally unexpected, but we would and here you have one of the photos. His Holiness then kidded me a bit and was off again, vanishing through that hanging curtain. Margaret and I then proceeded to pack up our equipment while our teacher, Khenpo Rinpoche, looked on.

I was in the zone as we packed up and slowly wound our way back along the New York roads to the KTD Monastery above Woodstock, NY. Quite a day it was.



GENERATION NIGHTMARES

May 27, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I imagine each generation has its trials, situations, and nightmares that they are bound to go through, like it or not. For me, being raised in the 1950s with the threat of nuclear holocaust from the Soviet Union at any moment was one of them. For years, as kids, we had adults, our teachers, standing over us and putting us through air-raid drills (sirens going off, etc.) where we had to crawl under our tiny desks and cower, as we would do if a nuclear attack were to actually take place. For all we knew it could happen at any time; we were just kids.

More subtle during that time, but also more insidious, was the heyday of modern psychology's bent to replace all the traditional ways of referring to character (noble, charitable, prudent, etc.) with psychological jargon like we were: paranoid, schizophrenic, manic-depressive, bi-polar, etc. Instead of being labeled with the finest of human traits, everyone was characterized by a host of negative psychological labels. Those labels were really hard to shake. Where were the positive psychological labels? There were none or, if they existed, they were never used. But all those negative labels remained (and still remain) in our minds.

We might like to think those days are gone and that modern life is more enlightened, but just beneath the surface of society lurk other persisting nightmares,

chief among them perhaps, to use the slogan from a popular beer commercial is, "You Only Go around Once in Life." Raised as a Catholic, certainly I knew that I had only one life, after which I would be measured by my behavior and sent to either heaven or hell. However, over the years, the idea of heaven or hell was kind of put on the back burner in favor of the idea expressed above, that you only go around once. In other words, this is it! Heaven and hell gradually seemed increasingly unreal, more like someone's bad joke.

It's no matter that the great majority of the world's population believe in rebirth, i.e. that rather than just go around once, we come back again and again. Somehow America missed that boat and we wear out our adrenal glands agonizing over our impermanence – our one chance at life and we are probably blowing it. Talk about overcoming ignorance; getting around the American ingrained concept of a one-time-life, followed by the big nothing is a hard row to hoe, as they say.

The elephant in the room (you only live once) and its sense of panic overpowers the more subtle intuitions that might inform us of the alternative, that rebirth is something we should seriously consider. After all, most of the world already does! The bad news is that we can't easily interpret the subtle while the coarser white-noise of fear is blowing through our minds. So we have a Catch-22. As long as our mind is coarsely obscured, we have no easy way to feel anything finer. Yet removing the coarse obscurations takes dharma training, patience and practice, which few are willing/able to undertake on spec, thus the vicious circle.

It's true that with age, the relentless onslaught of change tends to naturally wear away some of our coarser obscurations, but that does not leave us with time to do much about preparing to die in a dharmic way, i.e. get ready for rebirth. Persistent people like me try to get your attention, so that you might undertake to learn meditation (and other remedial mind training), but such training takes real time and actual dedication. Worse, you have to take my or some others' word for its value, because you have no guarantee or even more than a glimpse of what it would actually be like if your obscurations were removed. That, as I see it, is a major problem.

In America at this time, the Tibetan Buddhist mind-training practices are just getting, at best, a tiny toehold. Until they become more popular and everyone testifies to their authenticity and value, who are you going to believe? How do we signal a new idea such as the merits of learning meditation and mind-training, when it is relatively unknown? This predicament is not unusual, but is how, by definition, anything new is introduced to us, slowly and mostly unrecognized. Society literally does not know what you are talking about... yet.

In places like Tibet, every child is immersed in dharma from the day they are born. The rinpoches are the most respected members in the community. The word "rinpoche" means "precious one." That ought to tell us something.

And here in this country people like myself are trying to share the good news about what our mind is capable of, given a little effort, and of course this message lands on mostly deaf ears. Who ever heard

of such a thing? The closest pigeonhole we have for “meditation” harkens from the 1970s and the crazy New-Age stuff from way back then; the cover on that book was closed long ago. So, it’s an uphill climb folks.

I have seen this all before with the advent of home computers. The first 4-function pocket calculators did not appear until around 1972. By 1977 I knew most of what there was to be known about home computers. But today, I am lucky to know even a tiny part of what needs to be known about computers in 2015. It is like one of those Google maps, where you start with a tiny spot, and scroll out until you are looking at the whole world. Dharma in America is like that. I can remember when, pretty much, I was in touch with mostly everything that was happening dharma-wise in this country. Since then it has spread like wildfire, but yet still is mostly ignored.

The dharma is already blossoming, and we are still at the beginning of the beginning. They say it takes at least 300 years for the dharma to come into a country. Theoretically speaking, we are maybe 100 years in, but more like 45 years practically, if we measure from Trungpa Rinpoche, who as far as I know put an end to Buddhism being largely understood as an intellectual philosophy that kids like me stayed up late night talking about while we smoked cigarettes and drank too much instant coffee. No Cafe Lattes back then.

And we are still gleaning all that we can from the Tibetan sources, and this will go on. Yet what we are looking for are some Americans to digest all of this and reconstitute it as American realization and

enlightenment. The future belongs not just to Tibetan Buddhists, but to American Buddhists teaching and writing from their own realization.

“I’M LOOKING THROUGH YOU”

June 1, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

“I’m looking through you,
Where did you go?
I thought I knew you,
What did I know?” – The Beatles

It is ironic that these days so many folks tell me that they have lost faith or belief in one thing or another, when it is obvious that we, almost all of us, have complete and unshakable faith and belief in our own reality. Reification is that strong.

Reification – To regard or treat an abstraction as if it has concrete or material existence. The word “reify” is not that much used these days. Reify, might better be termed “realify,” but that is not a word, and it probably should be. “Realification” would be more intuitive as to what we are pointing at here – making things real when they are not.

Yesterday, I used the analogy of the two different types of viewfinders that we find on modern cameras, the traditional optical viewfinder (OVF), which is a simple mirror reflection of the outside world, and the newer electronic viewfinder (EVF), where we are basically looking at a photo of the subject, and not just a mirror-reflection. However, both are fabrications. Even though the optical viewfinder produces a reflected, but also unreal, image, the electronic

viewfinder is much easier for us to accept as a constructed or fabricated image.

With all things digital (CDs, DVDs, digital images, etc.), we sample fine enough until our mind/eye cannot tell the difference between the digital and the original analog, at least consciously. In other words, we have a constructed, but seemingly real, sound image on a CD, a film image on a DVD, and so on. The Buddhists point out that even the analog image (reality as we perceive it) is just another constructed image. However, we have reified it until we now take it for reality. Seamless.

The ultimate paradigm of sampling has to be our own consciousness and the image of reality taken from the outer impression of our senses, a raw image, that our mind then overlays with our own projections (biases, prejudice, fears, etc.), which amount to mental cataracts that obstruct a clear vision of the nature of the mind itself. In other words, we see life filtered through our own obscurations, mental cataracts and, to widen the analogy, mental glaucoma -- the pressures of life. Our mind is naturally like an EVF, an electronic fabrication, so to speak.

Obscurations not only obscure our vision (like dirty glasses), but we then proceed to project these obscurations onto our outer sense world, mix them all together, and further reify them; we believe what are obscurations to be real. This reification is pretty-much seamless and totally habitual to the point that we have never known anything else. Seemingly, there are no gaps.

Therefore, even a simple intellectual examination (and understanding), such as we are doing here, may eventually help point out to us that what we see out there in the world is very much our own construct. It consists of our raw sense impressions, upon which we have projected the sum total of our obscurations (biases, fears, likes, dislikes, attachments, etc.), and then proceeded to reify the whole thing – take it as real fact, as the way things actually are, when all of this is nothing more than just another construct.

Reifying our own projections may be how things habitually appear to us, but they are not the way things actually are (i.e. the true nature of our mind), because, through practice, we can remove those obscurations one-by-one, like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, which will then gradually reveal to us how the mind actually is.

Once we grasp this concept (even intellectually) of our habitual reification of everything, we can begin to actually experience it consciously until we reach the point that we ‘realize’ this is all a grand construct, an electronic viewfinder. It is at that point that it all becomes more transparent and true deconstruction can begin. We stop looking at our obscurations and start looking through them to what is beyond. We begin to see into the actual nature of our mind. This is the goal of dharma practice.

I am sorry to go on and on about this, but until we start to loosen our habitual death-grip on fabricated reality (and see through it), we will have no actual inner rest and clarity, something we sorely need, at least I do.

Comments and discussion is why I write these blogs.

IN MY OWN SKIN

April 22, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I am still here at KTD, the 17th Karmapa's seat in North America, and he is here with us! The Karmapa had a day off yesterday and the crowds of people were gone, so we all are recovering, respectfully. I have a lot on my mind, but mostly things I either can't or am not ready to talk about here.

So many people want to get near or have an audience with the young Karmapa, myself included. Certainly in the Buddhist community he is a rock star. And he deserves his fine reputation. As a cameraman, I am sometimes close to him, either with video or occasionally I am asked to come up into an interview room and photograph him with a group of visitors, etc. Yet I have not been invited for a personal audience or even to visit as part of a group. I almost was invited as part of a group of the directors of the Karmapa's centers around the country, but at the very last minute (literally) they decided that centers like ours were too small, and we were excluded. How disappointing!

This problem with trying to get into the skin of a celebrity is probably universal. And to be in his presence is inspiring indeed. But more than that, what can we expect? The Karmapa or even if the Buddha himself was present, he could not just tap us on the

forehead and we would wake up and be enlightened.
Wishful thinking.

The whole idea of Buddhism is about waking up -- awareness. And it always revolves around "our" waking up, about me, myself, and I becoming more aware. The best any great Buddhist teacher can do is to point out to us how we can enlighten ourselves. That is what the Buddha's teachings are all about, doing it ourselves. There would be no point otherwise. We each have to do it.

It is painful to see folks pushing and trying every way they can to get near the Karmapa. In some of the earlier venues in Queens at which His Holiness taught, the crowds were intense, even pushing and shoving to get in, and racing to get the best seat possible. It was scary. Of course, I too would like a good seat, but there are only so many such seats, only one front row, etc.

Even if we could get close to the Karmapa, perhaps be his personal attendant, travel with him day by day, we can't be him. Even then, all he could do is to point out how we could develop our own awareness. He would explain to us that everything we see in him, like Buddha Nature, is also in us. We already have Buddha Nature just as much as he does, but we have habitually ignored it all these years or lifetimes. What to do about that?

We are infinitely close to what we most need and intuitively seek. It is already inside us, but it might as well be worlds away because we are as yet unable to access it. We have it now, but know it not. How tragic. And this is the source of compassion for the more

compassionate beings, watching us suffer for no good reason. We try to find outside ourselves, like in struggling to be near the Karmapa, what is already our own nature. How ironic. There is no free lunch.

Many of us here at the monastery are exhausted from all of the work and activity. It all came home to me late yesterday afternoon when the word spread that the Karmapa himself would perhaps be attending the daily practice of Mahakala, the fierce protector of the dharma and the lineage. This ritual is usually practiced around 5 PM each day. Perhaps we all could attend.

But then I saw them setting up a throne in the very small Mahakala shrine room. It might hold ten people at most, not to mention the huge throne. Well, most of us knew we would not be among those ten people because any number of ordained sangha would be offered that opportunity first. Oh well.

Then, suddenly they were carrying the throne pieces and all kinds of other ornaments back out of the tiny shrine and into the great hall of the big shrine room. I have no idea why they switched. Perhaps not enough of the ordained sangha could fit it. LOL. Now it looked like we all could be there with His Holiness.

And sure enough, with no fanfare, His Holiness the Karmapa walked into the shrine room and climbed to his throne. And my teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche also appeared, and then rows of ordained sangha. Margaret and I sat toward the back, but with a clear view of both the Karmapa and our own teacher. The practice of Mahakala is special.

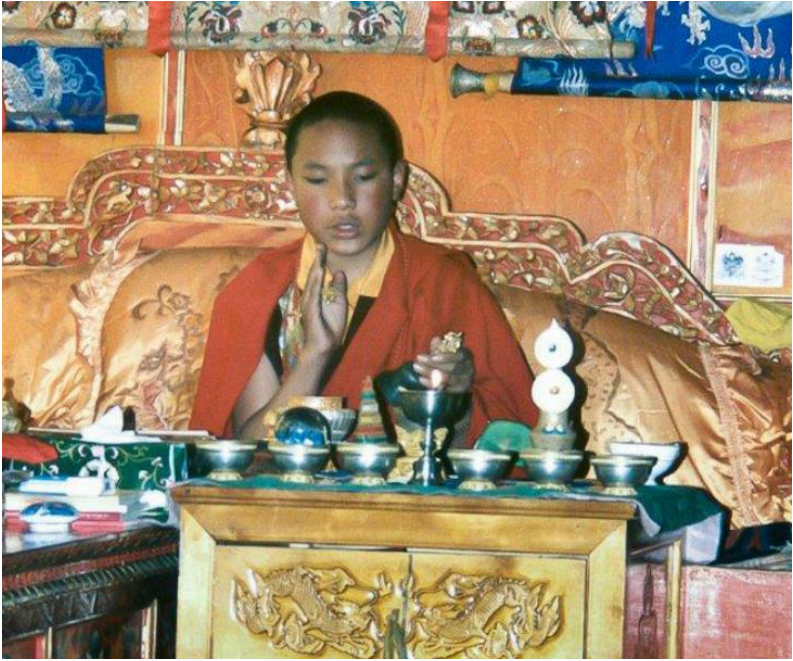
I was reminded of our first trip to Tibet in 1997 when, with our kids, Margaret and I went to see His Holiness. As students of our teacher Khenpo Rinpoche, we were summoned to attend a special version of Mahakala for “insiders,” just for us, at least this is what we were told. And there we sat, only a few feet from the young Karmapa, while he performed the Mahakala ritual.

And yesterday I sat once again in front of His Holiness, now grown up, while he performed the very same practice. Here in 2015 we had not been able to have an audience with His Holiness as we had in 1997 when we spent three days with him. I don't have that kind of clout. Yet what was incomplete?

Here I sat before my two main teachers, Khenpo Rinpoche and the Karmapa. As my gaze moved from one to another I realized that there was no difference between them and how fortunate I was in this life to have such teachers. I had to fight back the tears that came over me, which came anyway.

I couldn't get into either of their skins. I was already in my own skin and their common message to me is and has always been to find what they found within my own skin and not just in theirs. I have all the opportunities they do. I only have to take advantage of them. Better than chasing after them, trying to get closer, their every message to me is to enlighten myself and become like them. Only that will ever satisfy me or anyone, for that matter.

[Photo taken by me in 1997 of His Holiness the 17th Karmapa performing Mahakala for my family and myself. He was 12-years old.]



INCREDIBLE SONGSTER: MARC SILBER

June 11, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I just returned from a trip to Detroit, Birmingham, actually, to see an old friend, someone I have not seen since 1960, some 55 years or so. His name is Marc Silber and he is a real live folk-music hero in my book.

I was on the road by 5 AM because I was hoping to get to Ann Arbor in time to see my granddaughter Emma, who goes to daycare a little after 8 AM. But back-to-back traffic on U.S. 23, just south of Brighton, Michigan, brought the cars to a crawl and several dead stops. As it was, I made it Emma's house, where my daughter Anne lives with her partner Michael Lee, with barely five minutes to spare. Then her mom, Emma, and I drove across town to take her to daycare. Once there, a strange thing happened.

We were standing just outside the door to the center and we noticed a tiny, tiny, very faint rain falling just on us. It did not seem to fall elsewhere and the street did not get wet. We could barely feel it, more like a mist than anything else. Then we looked up and a tiny rainbow appeared just over our heads. It did not arch the sky or anything like that, but was more like the middle of a rainbow, without the ends. It was kind of a magic moment.

Then I had brunch with Emma's mom, took a nap at their house, and was off to Birmingham, Michigan,

just north of Detroit where “songster” Marc Silber was giving a rare house concert, the first he has played in Michigan since 1960. A few special folks were there.

Marc and I go back to the late 1950s and to Ann Arbor, where we both belonged to the then just-forming University of Michigan Folklore Society. Silber was part of a small group of people that I knew, including the legendary guitar finger-picking virtuoso Perry Lederman, and a young Bob Dylan who came through Ann Arbor infrequently. We all hung out.

One of the first things Silber and I talked about was how Perry Lederman was the greatest finger-picker either of us had seen, from back then until now. He could run rings around Chet Atkins, and ever so tastefully at that. Lederman was also a great buyer and seller of guitars, particular old Martin Guitars. He inspired both Silber and me. Marc Silber went on to become an expert in the repair and maintenance of rare guitars. Silber has a personal collection (like a museum) of over 300 rare instruments.

But what is the rarest thing of all, and this is why I drove 200 miles, was Silber’s gift of music. I believe that most of my readers know I am strongly connected to music, and started out in folk-music in the later 1950s. I also founded the All-Music Guide, still the largest collection of discographies, biographies, tracks, and everything else musical on the planet. Although my main interested eventually became the great African-American blues players, I was very much present back in the days of the folk-music revival of those early times. I travelled with a young Bob Dylan; we hitchhiked together in 1961, and all of that.

Anyway, what got me on the road (on what turned out to be a 90-degree day) along the highways of Detroit was Marc Silber. He was such an important figure back in the folk scene, and he was giving a concert. What was his music like after 55 years? I had to see.

I was not disappointed. In fact my mind was totally blown by what I heard. I have heard a lot of folk music in the last 50 or so years, but nothing as pure and unadulterated as what Silber laid down yesterday. He did what I have never seen done until now. Using his own arrangements, but fueled by his very deep respect for the music, I heard guitar renderings that were, to my ears, perfect, ever so subtle, and absolutely so true to the tradition. It was never even this good back in the day!

Silber is a just a perfect fingerpicker, with the lightest touch, the most delicate chords, just impeccable playing, and all of this right before my ears. He added nothing that shouldn't be there to the music, and took nothing away that should not be taken away. It was perfect. I never expected to hear anything this good. Not ever!

Silber has kept a low profile, and was very humble for someone who knows many, many rich and famous musicians on a one-to-one basis. He never brought his connections up, unless we just kind of stumbled into them while conversing.

Silber has repaired and preserved many rare instruments, but more important than instruments, he has flawlessly preserved the folk music of the times I remember, and even restored it to something more

pristine that I can recall. Each tune, for me, was like perfectly transparent and clear.

In the last 50 or so years I have heard every kind of re-enactment, attempt to present, bastardization, etc. our folk heritage, almost never without too-much ego added on where it should not be, etc.

But yesterday, I heard none of that, only music when, as Silber played it, came rushing back to me. He played to most exquisite Blind Lemon Jefferson tunes, or Rev. Gary Davis, and the others right-on-down-the-line. It was mesmerizing.

I am working on bringing Marc Silber to Michigan this fall to play for the hundreds of musicians that come to the Harvest Gathering put on by my son-in-law Seth Bernard and my daughter May. Silber should meet them, and they should hear him. They have never heard anything like this. Here is a little blurb I am writing for Marc to use.

ABOUT MARC SILBER

I started out with the folk-music revival back in the later 1950s and early 1960s, and I have been around the block a bit on this scene. I met songster Marc Silber over 55 years ago, when we both knew a young Bob Dylan, and we all traveled around together.

I had not heard Silber play since back in the day, so I was amazed when at a recent house concert, he rendered song after song from those early folk days,

flawlessly, humbly, and profoundly! I know of no modern player, aside from Marc Silber, (none!) who has mastered finger-picking so elegantly, with such incredible taste, and with no trace of ego.

Silber has taken the old traditional folk tunes into the 21st Century and has so perfectly arranged them, that their original meaning and tonality are rendered as if new, without anything being added on or taken away. The music lives again! This is what music revival is supposed to be like.

Where perhaps other players have worked to be better known as performers, Marc Silber (to my ears) has worked just as hard to honor the purity of the music itself, rather than the performer. This is an astounding achievement, one that is very, very rare in these times.

Michael Erlewine,
Founder of the All-Music Guide



INTERDEPENDENCY

April 17, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Interdependency in Buddhism is a key concept, one that, while perhaps obvious, can also be not-intuitive for many people. We depend on each other and everything around us, but just how and how far?

For me, interdependency simply means teamwork. For all the singularity and aloneness we may feel in life, most of that is something we just made up or fell into. As the Greek philosopher said, "Being Alone Is!" We have never been anything else but alone, but of course the Wisdom tradition often spells that word "All One." So feeling anything but unity is just a habit or neurosis we picked up. Sooner or later we have to abandon feeling sorry for ourselves, feeling like the Lone Ranger, and get on with it.

It we don't get the unity, the all-oneness realization that we read about, second best is to understand, experience, and eventually realize interdependency, the fact that we are seamlessly intertwined and dependent not only on one another, but on everything there is. Of course it includes the fact that, as the old song goes, "... the foot bone connected to the heel bone, the heel bone connected to the ankle bone ...," etc. but there is more to it than simple connectivity. There is interdependency, and the accent here is on

that word “dependency.” To help bring this home, I will offer an analogy based on my own experience.

As an entrepreneur I have started a number of businesses and hired people to work for me. Of course, in the beginning I was alone, with my wife Margaret helping me. Then I had one outside employee and so it went, until at one time I had about 750 employees of one kind or another on payroll. For me, that’s was a lot of payroll. And I am coming to my point.

Trying to coordinate that many employees from the top down is difficult to impossible. It is like herding ducks. Trying to impose my will on those who worked for me was frustrating, to say the least. That dog won’t hunt, as they say. It was me against them and, like any polarity, it precipitated more of a lock-down standoff than a smoothly-running machine. Enter the idea of teamwork.

This sense of a team did not exactly come naturally for me. In fact, like so many things in my life, for me it was a kind of last resort, rather than an obvious solution. I kind of came across it after trying everything else, which unfortunately is the way I tend to learn anything, which brings me to my point.

Trying to be the “boss” and exert my will on my employees, even with the best intentions, was kind of an exercise in futility. It left me feeling alone and isolated, and certainly no one’s favorite anything.

As time went on, I gradually realized that my business depended on my employees, the old master/slave concept where the boss becomes dependent on his

employees, thus the idea of interdependency dawned, however late in coming. And with that the appreciation for a team and teamwork.

Toward the end of my working life, the team I had built was worth more than my business! I gradually realized that the best thing I could do to help the business was to serve my employees as best I could, make their lives as comfortable and easy as possible. And that's my analogy.

How does this relate to Buddhism and interdependency should, I hope, be kind of obvious. Imagining that we are only an island in the stream of life invites resistance and an eventual washout. Realizing that by serving others, caring for their well-being, not only benefits them but also makes our own life possible. That is the concept of the Bodhisattva. This view puts altruism in a different light.

The Self cries like a baby to be cared for and served. Serving only ourselves at the expense of others is only further isolating. Caring for others as we would ourselves oils the machine of life for everybody. In fact, there is no better way for our self to be happy than to end the isolation that ignorance of the needs of others brings upon us.

This idea that the Bodhisattva somehow sacrifices him or herself for others at great personal expense is in my opinion not correct. It is simply the obvious intelligent approach to ease the isolation that the self tends to feel and it benefits everyone we contact at the same time.

This may sound too didactic for some of you, for which I apologize, but I want to lay it out so it is understandable. Interdependency demands that we serve others to serve ourselves.

Your thoughts?

[Photo: Some of the Tibetan monks and lamas in the Karmapa's retinue here are drawing the Eight Auspicious Symbols on the pavement and in the gateway for the preparation of the arrival of His Holiness the 17th Karmapa.]



JOYFUL

May 15, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Something that I don't often talk about is your meditation, but perhaps we should. For years I was told to never share what happens in my meditation practice with anyone else. Keep it to yourself was the motto, and so it was. In fact, I believe a whole generation here in American did just that, and what a mistake it turned out to be.

And trust me; we kept ourselves in the dark. My dharma brothers and sisters back in the 1960s and 1970s and 1980s and even onward never talked with one another about how we were doing, even with basic Shamata meditation; we just kept a stiff upper lip and assumed everyone was doing well. As for myself, I had very little idea of how I was doing. I had no roadmap or landmarks to measure meditation by. I just plugged along as best I could and imagined that my dharma sisters and brothers were doing the same, probably doing better than I was.

Then one year I finally asked a Tibetan Khenpo (abbot) if monks learning basic meditation in Tibet ever discussed it with one another, and he laughed. On course they do, he said. They totally talk about it, question each other, work together, debate, and so on. Basic meditation is not a secret, yet all these years with the folks I knew, we had kept each other in the dark, especially ourselves. It turns out this whole

idea of keeping your meditation private is reserved for more advanced meditation work, later on, when you are working one-on-one with a Rinpoche or teacher, usually after whatever preliminary meditation practices are long over. So that itself was enlightening to me.

With that in mind, please allow me to mention one simple way you can gauge how you are doing with your meditation, that is, if you ever even wonder. Now, this may appear negative, but that's not the intention. One of the more serious problems with learning to meditate is that much of it can be very vague at first, especially if you are in a group of folks who don't talk about their meditation with one another. So, it is a good thing that there are at least a few questions that we can answer for ourselves, and one of these is how joyful is our daily meditation? In other words, are you "loving it" or are you just doing it? If we answer this truthfully, we can learn something.

If you are not "loving it," then it is not meditation that you are doing. Try that one on. There is no such thing as boring or unhappy meditation. Period. Meditation is joyful by nature, so if you are not joyful, you are not yet really meditating, but perhaps "practicing" or still learning meditation. Nothing wrong with learning, but it can be important to label it that. The conditions around us may be "boring" or drab, but the meditation itself is always joyful, and this by definition. IMO it is not helpful to pretend we are meditating when we are not. Many don't even know the difference!

And no, I am not trying to discourage you or talk you out of "trying" to meditate. Quite the contrary. I am suggesting that if you are not joyful in your meditation,

you might want to look around and find out if you are doing it right. And here is another point.

Many spiritual disciplines, particular Asian meditative ones, involve a lot of tedious practices until that one fine day when something inside us clicks and we just get it. By tedious practice, I mean whatever muscle-memory training we have to go through until it just becomes automatic. Of course, this is no different from the tedious part of learning anything, like guitar, piano, fly-tying, you-name-it. This tedium often is the ring-pass-not or pain-threshold that stands in the way of successfully learning the technique.

Some people actually learn to play the piano and go on to play music, but many piano students (like myself) fall by the wayside, never to return to the keys. This is as true for spiritual disciplines as for musical instruments, but there is one exception between music and spiritual discipline, and it is a big one.

With music, you can always listen to how your teacher plays music or, more likely, you can put your favorite piano player on the stereo and be inspired to keep practicing. With meditation training, this is not possible. There is no CD or DVD we can play that will show us what greater awareness, much less actual enlightenment, is like. Sure, our favorite Rinpoche can smile on us and we can perhaps see the twinkle in their eye, but we are not one whit closer to experiencing what true meditation is like.

Unfortunately, when it comes to our knowledge of meditation (like when we have none), what we hold in mind is what we have read, heard teachers say,

talked with friends about, etc. We literally make it up and then believe what we have made up. We don't yet know from experience and all that idea as to what meditation is that we have put together becomes the greatest block to actually meditation. We first have to know we don't know to make progress.

This very simple difference in muscle-memory training between learning music and meditation amounts to a huge impasse for those trying to learn to meditate. Not that many of us can cross that desert of tedious practice and manage to get to the other side. Most fall by the wayside or just think they know how to meditate when actually they still don't know.

My message here is not to give up, but to begin to be aware of where you are at with your meditation practice. If you have any doubt whatsoever that you are meditating, you are not meditating yet, but practicing, still learning to meditate. This realization alone can be a huge help; it was for me. When I finally realized that what I was doing was still practicing meditation, I stopped imagining I was actually meditating, and this opened the door for meditation to eventually happen. Believe me, when you actually meditate, you will know it. There can be no doubt.

Meditation (Samadhi) is joyful or blissful. Practice is not necessarily so. Like the training wheels on a kid's bike, when we actually start meditating, off go the training wheels. No need to try to practice. We just meditate. For me, it is like a bobsled or luge at the top of a hill. We have to practice or push the bobsled until we can jump on it and ride, after which we don't try or

push any more. Only you can know if you are still pushing.

LINEAGE

May 2, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The great Lama Shang Rinpoche (1122-1192 AD) wrote”

“A guru, who has the quintessence of realization, directly introduces his students to the wisdom they already have, as if it were a treasure in their own hands.”

To my mind, the above concept points directly at what for me is a key dharma truth, that we already have everything we need to become enlightened close at hand and just don't know it. At least for me, this rule of thumb is how I navigate the sea of learning dharma, how I can take from one teacher, but not from another. We all know by now that capitalism is driven by self-interest. Witness that after all these years the big companies are finally getting around to producing organic foods because it is in their self-interest. Learning dharma is really no different. Our self-interest continues to be the money-changer in the temple of the mind.

As I have written many times here, my first dharma teacher, Andrew Gunn McIver, flagged me down in the sea of the personal resistance I was lost in (my resistance to any person) by demonstrating to me that he cared more for me than I actually knew how to care for myself, which is a tall order. I cared a lot for myself at the time.

And in the relationship between that old man and me, a lifetime of suffering at the hands of other persons vanished in the exchange, just like the classic dharma saying “The darkness of a thousand eons is ended by the light of even a single match.” Andrew caused me to realize that I could only learn from teachers who introduced me to myself. That remains true today.

This is not so much a reflection on those life teachers I could not learn from as it is on my requirements for learning. For me learning has to be local, something I can use in the here and now, and in a language I can understand, like the language of myself. It has to be practical in my terms.

I have a haunting theory that each of us is secretly waiting to be found, discovered, and cherished. That this is a logical impossibility does not deter us from that wish. Like turning the proverbial wheel of the dharma, we each must turn our own dharma wheel by our self. Like the historical Buddha did, we too must enlighten ourselves. No one else can do it for us. Otherwise it would have been done long ago.

In other words, too many of us are waiting for enlightenment to dawn on us, for it or someone to discover and find us out. How passive is that? The dharma teachers that have worked for me are those who fed to me the royal-jelly of myself and thus shown me how to enlighten myself. And when I tried what they pointed out, it actually worked. These are the teachers that I cherish for obvious reasons.

Some of my Facebook friends keep insisting that we are all equal, etc., and no one should be placed on a higher seat than others. I am sorry for feeling this

way, but this is just a joke. My teachers were, of course, equally human, but spiritually much more enlightened and capable than myself in my current state. This reverence for our guru or teacher is essential, just as it is considered essential to gain the blessing of our parents.

As I keep explaining, when I first met His Holiness the 17th Karmapa, I was not aware in his presence of how powerful he was, but rather of the great compassionate nature within me. He enabled that, which, my friends, is how true dharma teaching works IMO. That is how we know when we have found a teacher, when we learn, not something more about them, but rather something more about ourselves. Life teachers are mirrors. They reflect not their essence back at us, but our own. We will never know them until we know ourselves, at which time it won't matter.

I love and respect my teachers because they show me how to cherish myself and others. It is obvious that some readers of my blogs don't like the deference and respect that disciples show to their spiritual teachers. They don't even seem to like the idea of gurus, disciples, students, etc., i.e. that there exist those who can empower and enable us to know ourselves. Really?

Obviously, this is mostly a western opinion, and a rather narrow-minded one at that. Freedom of religion is one of our inalienable constitutional rights, a law, not an option. I blame myself for not being able to communicate better what happens between a student and a dharma teacher. I am reminded of the car

mechanic who was fixing my car, when he said “I will do my very best. More than that I cannot do.”

Just like the planets and stars line up, the guru and his student align themselves along dharmic lines and something magical happens. The floodgates of the guru’s blessing open and that blessing flows between the two. This is what is called “transmission.” As the lineage master and student come into alignment, a perfect site-line is formed through which the light of the mind shines. These are just words. Poetry might be better. Here is a simple poem I wrote some years ago which might help.

LINEAGE

There “is” nothing,
Transmitted,
And,
Nothing,
Ever flows.

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

And then:
Mixing of minds ...

Extension,
By recognition ...

Transmission,
Through,
Identification

In other words:
Empowerment ...

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

No less than,
The same,
Is certain.

This is lineage.

October 11, 2010

For those who would like a higher-res copy of this
booklet for Web Viewing:

<http://spiritgrooves.libsyn.com/karma-kagyu-lineage-in-web-order>

For those who would like a higher-res printed copy of
this booklet. Take it to Staples and explain to them
that each page is front and back. Think how it goes
and then explain to the copy clerk.

<http://spiritgrooves.libsyn.com/the-kagyu-lineage-in-pecha-format-for-duplication>

The Karma Kagyu Lineage



Vajradhara

Tilopa



Mahasiddha

Naropa



Mahasiddha

Marpa Lotsawa



Siddha

Jetsun Milarepa



Siddha

Gampopa



Siddha

Dusum Khyenpa



1st Karmapa

Drogon Rechun



1st Tai Situ

Pondrakpa



Lineage Transmission

Karma Pakshi



2nd Karmapa

Drubtob Urgyenpa



Mahasiddha

Rangjung Dorje



3rd Karmapa

Gyalwa Jungtonpa



Siddha

Rolpe Dorje



4th Karmapa

Kacho Wangpo



2nd Shamarpa

Dezhin Shegpa



5th Karmapa

Rinchen Zangpo



Ratnabhadra

Thongwa Donden



6th Karmapa

Bengar Jampal Zangpo



Lineage Transmission

Pailor Dondrup



1st Gyaltsap

Chodrak Gyatso



7th Karmapa

Tashi Paljar



1st Sangye Nyenpa

Mikyo Dorje



8th Karmapa

Kunchog Yenlag



5th Shamarpa

Wangchuk Dorje



9th Karmapa

Chokyi Wangchuk



6th Shamarpa

Choying Dorje



10th Karmapa

Yeshe Nyingpo



7th Shamarpa

Yeshe Dorje



11th Karmapa

Chokyi Dondrub



8th Shamarpa

Changchub Dorje



12th Karmapa

Chokyi Junghe



8th Tai Situ

Dudul Dorje



13th Karmapa

Chodrub Gyamso



10th Shamarpa

Pema Nyingche Wangpo



9th Tai Situ

Thegchog Dorje



14th Karmapa

Lodro Thaye



1st Jamgon Kongtrul

Khakhyab Dorje



Pema Wangchuk



Palden Khyentse Özer



Rolpe Dorje



Orgyen Trinley Dorje



LIVING WITH MYSELF

May 7, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

As if I had a choice would be my response to the above blog title. My recent, almost-month-long, exposure to His Holiness the 17th Karmapa was much like exposing raw film to daylight. Anyway, aside from getting sick, I kind of got overexposed in the process and the resulting negative needs developing, and not just a little, but like: a lot of development on my part. I try to look at the glass as half full, instead of half empty, but I am not always successful. Like most of us, I too am, as they say, “a piece of work.”

And the simple truth is that the development-of-the-negative process takes place, ready or not, whether I like it or not. Yes, exposure to the Karmapa was overwhelmingly positive, and that’s where the development-part comes in. As time passes since being with the Karmapa, my situation, like a Polaroid print, also continues to develop. Yes, there is a positive image of light to be found, but that image is surrounded and featured by, well, quite a lot of darkness. Maybe that’s the negative part of positives. I know. Analogies can only get us half the way there, but hopefully you get the idea.

So, here I sit, confirmed by my positive experience with His Holiness (and the greater awareness it brings), but also finding that very increase in awareness is a double-edged sword. It also makes me much more “aware” of all the negativity I am

responsible for, as in: I am more aware and, because of that, thereby now automatically responding more to my own liabilities and faults. I guess one brings out the other. Greater awareness makes it easier to see the work I still have to do, and that work is not like polishing the patina on a mirror, but more like filling really deep potholes in my road forward.

Greater awareness brings greater ability to respond – responsibility. And responsibility makes us responsible for what we respond too. Right now I am responding to a lot in me that I don't like (nobody else would either), and at the same time trying not to be overwhelmed by it so that nothing at all gets done. My "To Do" list is already running off the table, and about my only salvation here is that along with all this "exposure," the beacon of my determination (confirmed by seeing His Holiness) to "set this square" is stronger than ever. However, as mentioned, my perceived workload is also greater than ever. This must conform to some dharma law of maintaining equilibrium. A shot of awareness causes an equal shot of increased responsibility, and so ad infinitum. My universe remains in a steady-state of dharmic equilibrium.

Anyway folks, right now I am stair-stepping, like a spider, across what seems to be an infinitely finite web of karmic cause and response. And like the tightrope walker who walked between the Twin Towers, I don't dare (or care to) look down, not even a glance just now please.

Years ago I really studied the art and history of rock-concert posters. In fact I created what is said to be the largest database of concert poster art ever put

together. And the reason I did this was simply that the art was so fantastic. Here is an image by the great rock-poster artist Bob Fried, who has never received all of the credit he is due, for his mind-altering work. This poster Fried did for the "Grateful Dead" expresses very much of the mental state I currently find myself embedded in.

And, to put the icing on the cake, we had a huge X-rate solar flare Tuesday night.

MENTORING: THE TEACHER/STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

June 2, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

This is a bit of a ramble, because I have more to say on this topic than I have space. This also relates to how difficult it seems to be for folks to get started in dharma practice and keep going, and how mentoring figures into that. Like all things that require practice, meditation takes an initial effort and then persevering effort to get anywhere. This of course is true of learning guitar, fly-tying, and many other things. What is different with meditation from other forms of practice, as I keep telling folks, is that, going in, we have no real idea of what the result of meditation is actually like, only what we have read, been taught, and our own imagination, etc. When it comes to the expected results of meditation, we are more or less in the dark. As Chögyam Trungpa used to say, “Your guess is as good as mine.” Forgive me, but this not knowing what the results of meditation are really has to be thought through.

This is perhaps why, in the long history of dharma training, it has been customary for a student to work closely with a teacher, one-to-one, so that needed adjustments can be made as questions come up. Setting ourselves on autopilot and trying to do it all alone or just plowing straight-on till morning with effort

will not get us where we want to be. It seems that many micro-adjustments are required to stay on course, and an experienced teacher who can interact with us as we move along makes progress much easier.

When I hear people trashing the whole concept of working with a teacher or guru, as some have done in comments to my blogs, I am sorry they are so quick to throw the baby out with the bathwater. They have obviously not met a real teacher. Yes, there have been abusive spiritual teachers, but not any different from many other disciplines. Perhaps it is more reprehensible when it happens in spiritual training or, as Shakespeare said, “Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.”

The modern practice of teaching meditation in large groups, with no follow-up meetings between teacher and student, no one-to-one training, have not done well, and this is according to various studies comparing some of the larger group models with the more traditional teacher-student mentoring tradition. It seems that close interaction between teacher and student is more effective. The problem in this country is that we don't have enough good meditation teachers to go around, so close work on a one-to-one basis is not always readily available.

As far as I am concerned, personal interaction between teacher and student is like the feeding of

royal jelly among honeybees. It can be transformative. Spiritual education in my experience is not just a cookie-cutter affair, stamping out identities, where one mold fits all. And it is not just the micro-adjustments that teacher/student interaction can provide the student. The very fact of the exchange itself and the attention of the teacher to the student are themselves confirmational. This exchange is very precious.

The American propensity to rub off all the offending corners of students through large class sizes, with little one-to-one student/teacher interaction, is not supported in the traditional Tibetan meditation system. In fact, it is just the opposite. In Tibet, it was customary for beginning students to mentor with those of more experience, and mentors were the rule rather than the exception. Further, all beginning meditation instructions were not a secret, but openly discussed, and constantly debated. There is nothing secret about learning to meditate.

If all sentient beings have Buddha Nature, then it would be natural for teachers to focus on and bring out that nature in each student they encounter. However, although Buddha Nature is common to us all, the dharma paths for individuals may differ greatly. It is said there are 84,000 dharmas, thus 84,000 different dharma paths and the same number of teachers or ways to teach.

One very important result of finding a dharma teacher,

at least in my case, was deconstructing the duality in the student, the habit of distinguishing oneself from the “There” and the “Them” of other people. And this is not just a minor point. Keep in mind that the eventual result of meeting your root guru (main teacher) is the mixing of the minds in what is generally called “Guru Yoga.”

In my case, before I met my first true dharma teacher, Andrew Gunn McIver, I was very wary of “others,” anyone who was out there and thus “other” than me. I tried very hard not to be contaminated by what I felt was “other” than myself, in particular the personal traits and foibles of other people. I had no idea if the personal faults of others, which I was very aware of, were contagious by contact or what. If so, I didn’t want to get any of that in or on me, much less follow the lead or be influenced by other people who clearly had obvious personal faults. Like our body is contained by skin, I had a psychological or sociological skin that I did not want penetrated by the debris of other persons, and I kept a tight ship. This is pretty normal.

So, when I encountered my first true dharma teacher Andrew McIver, all of this changed. The light of this teacher shined on me, and like a flower, I just opened up to him and grew, for I could see (and for the first time in my life) that this particular teacher cared more about me than I knew how to care about myself. He did not penetrate or infect my rather-thin skin, as I

feared “others” might do: I voluntarily came out to meet him. This was my first real contact with another person outside of my family, and the beginning of the deconstruction of the duality within me of other persons, in general.

We can tell when we meet a life teacher, not by how they personally appear or act, not whether we “like” them or not, but from their effect on us -- in particular, the fact that we learn about ourselves from them, often through the process of identification. “Identity” and identification, what a mysterious process that is. This is how lineage is sustained, by identification and its confirmation, what the Tibetans call “mixing,” whereby they mean the mixing of the minds. The student goes through a process of mixing their mind with that of their teacher by way of a practice called “Guru Yoga.” Indeed, this is a profound practice, but one that does require an actual teacher.

“Mixing” is kind of the reverse of the common amoeba, which reproduces by binary fission. In mixing, the process is more one of fusion, where two apparently separate minds mix together until an equilibrium is reached and whatever once separated them is no longer detectable. They are of one mind, so to speak, or they each have realized the true nature of the mind itself, at least as much as their personalities will allow.

This can perhaps appear from the outside as if the

mind of the teacher is transferred into (or takes over) the mind of the student, but that is an incorrect view. Instead, the mind of the teacher and the mind of the student mix until the student also realizes the nature of the mind itself, which the teacher has already realized. Or, as the poet Sir Edwin Arnold put it, "The dewdrop slips into the shining sea," and we have two persons, each of whom has realized the true nature of the mind. That is lineage.

This sense of duality, with me on one side and you (and all others) outside and separate is what fades in the teacher/student relationship. With the mixing of the minds, duality is gradually deconstructed and the natural non-duality (the way things are) arises in its place. I can remember one significant solar eclipse I witnessed, sitting under a tree. The small interstices in the tree's leaves, like a million "camera obscuras," produced countless tiny images of the solar eclipse on the ground, each a perfect replica.

Perhaps it is just me, but when I look back on my childhood schooling, such as it was, the only time that I responded in school was when a teacher actually interacted with me personally. This happened once in the 4th grade when Mrs. Althouse took an interest in me. I had a glorious year, but next year, when mean Mrs. Ryder took over, I was flat-lined again. And perhaps there was one year (or part of a year) in my junior year in high school when I got all A's, but that was when one teacher was interested in my writing,

another was teaching me Russian (I loved Dostoevsky), and I took an astronomy class in the school planetarium. Otherwise, for me, it was wait for the bell to ring each day, so I could go home. I was so bored that I never even finished high school, but just walked out one day and hitchhiked to Venice West, California to become a Beatnik, but that is another story.

For the most part I became very good at teaching myself whatever I was interested in, but I still was happiest when I had a human mentor, at least when it came to spiritual practices. For a number of years I learned from interviewing and hanging out with some of the great Black blues players, in particular the Chicago players. I have interviewed scores of blues players both with audio and later with video, mostly at the 1969 and 1970 Ann Arbor Blues Festivals, and later at the 1972 and 1973 Ann Arbor Blues and Jazz Festivals.

Aside from their music, the great blues players had a lot of life wisdom, and that is what I wanted to learn. However, most of them had some very bad habits, like alcohol and/or drugs, and that I didn't need to learn. I would say my study of Black music and musicians lasted from late 1965 until the early 1970s. Then, in early 1974, I met Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and found in him everything (and more) that I found in the Black blues players, minus most of the bad habits. It was in these Tibetan Buddhist lamas

that I finally found what I would consider to be the perfect teachers, gurus in fact.

I have gone on too long here, and I am barely started discussing the value of the (seemingly) lost art of mentoring, and the very great need for it now.

Let's talk and discuss. Perhaps I will write some more on this topic.

MENTORS AND WHAT THEY CAN MEAN

June 4, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

To me, personal life-teachers or mentors have been of crucial importance in my life. I would say “gurus,” but that sends some of my readers into a rant. To me, this is an unfortunate attitude on their part; they can’t stand the thought that there are others that we can look up to and feel devotion for, which is little more than a vain attempt to deny the fact of interdependency. Their rant is that everyone is created equal, with the subtext that there should never be those who we put on a higher seat than we sit. How American! Of course, the Tibetans are all about higher and lower seats, so there is an obvious disconnect here.

The truth is more like that we are all equally created, rather than we are created equal. Of course we all have Buddha Nature. Even an ant has that. However, when it comes to clarity of mind and obscurations, not to mention innate wisdom, while we all have the potential, in fact we are not created all the same. Some of us are naturally clearer and less obscured than others; Of course we are created equal in that we all are human, but we certainly are not created equal when it comes to the spiritual department.

The ranters, who are quick to state that “You are no better than me,” which sounds like high school all over again to me, are somehow at war with

themselves. They feel it is demeaning to learn from others, unless it is understood that both are peers. In truth, they never feel equal. It reminds me of the powder-blue parakeet I had as kid, who use to fight with his own image in a tiny mirror, while cussing himself out. This seems to be an extreme form of narcissism. Their idea of a teacher is someone you hang out with as a friend, a buddy, i.e. someone just like you – a mirror reflection. For these folks I have nothing but compassion, but not a lot of sympathy.

As for me, I have had a number of spiritual teachers in my life and have spent considerable time with them, but not as an equal, and certainly they were never my buddies. And yes, I have treated my spiritual mentors with great respect, not out of protocol or obligatory manners, but because of the kindness they have shown and the guidance they have offered is indeed precious beyond words. I can never thank them enough for taking an interest in me and my welfare.

I could go on and on about this topic, but let me just say something about one of my mentors, my first dharma teacher. And speaking of words, I am a pretty wordy guy, as you all must know by now. But with my first true dharma teacher, Andrew Gunn McIver (a traveling Rosicrucian initiator), I seldom ever spoke, but I would listen, sometimes for eight or more hours at a time. Some days I would stagger home to my room exhausted, but overflowing with meaning. There was nothing to say, and my speaking would only interrupt the connection through which all this wisdom flowed. Andrew was totally aware of what was happening and frequently would say “Michael, I am tuning you like an instrument. Someday, years from

now, you will respond.” I had little idea what he was talking about, but I was learning at a deep level.

Andrew McIver had other students, and I even knew a few of them. But for some reason I was the one who perhaps spent the most time with him; I was tuned in to what he was pointing out. He would even make me memorize certain phrases and recite them back to him or sometimes in front of others. And later, when he passed on, I saw to his burial, designed his tombstone, and took care of what few things he had in the world. Certainly I mixed my mind with his and, in some small way, carry on a part of his lineage; I came to see something of what he saw.

What he taught me was where in life the great rites of passage occur, and how to prepare for them. In particular, what is called the first Saturn Return at around 30 years of age was key. That is when we cross over and begin to leave the body, not at the live-long end of life as most people think, but right in the prime and middle of life. The Christians call it being born again, but it goes back way before that. I have tried to pass these precious teachings on, and wrote a whole book about it called “The Astrology of the Heart: Astro-Shamanism,” which is located here.

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../e-boo.../Astrology-of-the-Heart.pdf>

Here is a description I wrote way back then of our first meeting. It changed my life.

“The old man’s eyes (like crystalline stalks) burned bright, staring straight inside the young man. Then both their eyes, intensive, and meeting no resistance

in the transparency, shot out and into the other. The old man let his secret start between them and he was understood - known. The impulse from within each shot out and into the other at the same moment. Eyes eyed other's eyeing. "

"Their words, mostly the old man's, resounded in that great silence and then wore off, consonants crackling, as their voices sputtered out in the silence. Silently speaking, this conversation became like endless static on a radio. There was no reason, no need to say more. Sight itself was seen seeing."

I believe that we instinctively know when we meet someone with whom we will have a spiritual exchange. It is like the whole world becomes blurry, but in all of that haze our eyes meet another's whose eyes are also clear, and they see us too. It is the function of a shaman (or a rinpoche) to see consciousness emerging and to, as a spiritual midwife, assist at the birth, help us out.

Andrew was an initiator, and wasted no time with me on small talk. He was one of a couple people I have met in my life that had no shadow. When I think of appearances as a hologram, Andrew comes to mind. He was so totally there that, in a way, he was not there at all, but just a dream I had that came true. In some very vivid way, it was, like I mentioned, as if he was never there at all. I had to shake my head, to see if this was all real. Like the old song:

Row, row, row your boat,
Gently down the stream,
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,
Life is but a dream.

That's it. And as I wrote back then, "And in my sleep, awake am I, so clear a bell is ringing." As I used to tell myself, it was permitted that we meet. It was as if I had reached a point where I could afford to externalize an internal dialog, have it appear in the flesh, and teach me. This was how non-duality first came into my life.

Andrew McIver was not a famous "guru." Aside from being a traveling initiator for a Rosicrucian order, he had served in World War I as a recorder of the dead, and later in Canada as a lumberjack. I met him on the campus of the University of Michigan, after his retirement, where he would spend time sitting on one of the many cement benches along what is called the campus "Diagonal," usually in the sun. He was about five-foot two-inches high, and had been a redhead, with very light skin. He loved the sun and would sit in it until his skin literally peeled away. He was 82 years old when he died.

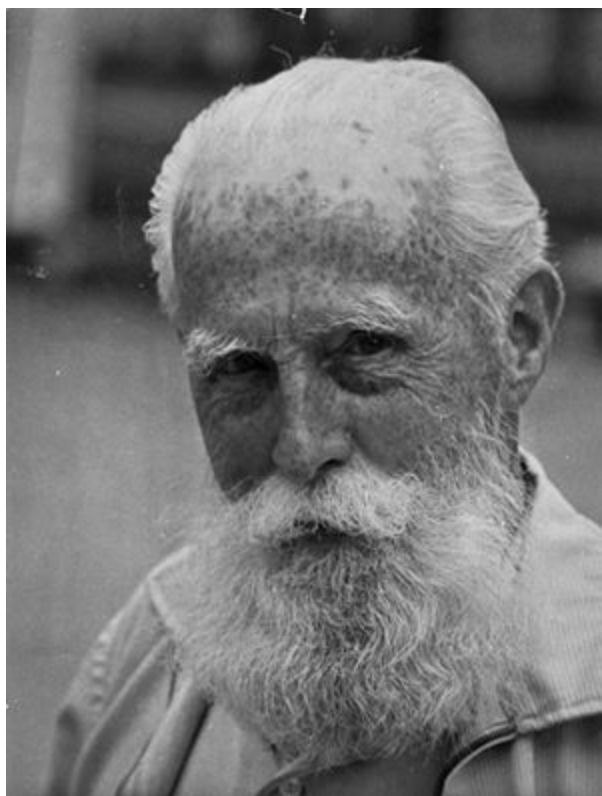
Andrew knew Buddhism well, and some astrology too. He knew more about me and who I was than I did. Just to give one little illustration, Andrew would frequently say to me. "Imagine yourself standing in the center of the Sun," at which time he would growl deeply and then add, "That's hot stuff!" I just took it in and barely knew what to think of what he said sometimes.

Yet, years later I became best known as a heliocentric astrologer; there were few to none back then. Without consciously knowing it, I had imagined I was standing at the center of the Sun.

Andrew McIver was so attuned to the world, that national or international news would be enacted in some small way in his personal life. And he was all about words, especially palindromes, words or phrases that read the same way forward and backward. He would take words apart, which he referred to as his gospel, which meant to him “Go Spell.” Words like “painful,” he would rephrase as “Pay In Full,” and so on. When, after his death April, 9th, 1969, as I went through his things, on his desk was a sheet of paper with the word “Michael” on it, and under it every possible combination of words that meant anything using those letters. Anyway, there is a brief introduction to one of my mentors.

Discussion is welcome.

[Photo of Andrew Gunn McIver.]



MIDSUMMER NIGHT

June 22, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I find myself a bit in reverie on this solstice, so this is a bit of a ramble, a little midsummer-night daydreaming. You are warned. Perhaps this is somewhat due to the huge full-halo CME (Coronal Mass Ejection) from the sun directly aimed at Earth that will begin to engulf us today, June 22nd.

Midsummer traditionally has been centered around the Summer Solstice and here it is, the longest day (and shortest night) of the year. The Summer Solstice is my favorite holy day or holiday of the year, but it also always brings forth a sigh from me as it marks the beginning of the decline of the sun. From here on out we are heading toward winter.

For me, this particular solstice has been a time for reflection and what I find myself reflecting on a bit today is the course of my life, some comments before it runs out. I realize that what I am (and have always been) is a phenomenologist, someone who studies the nature of consciousness from the point of view of the first-person, being the only person I know. As they say, that would be me. I asked myself: where and how did that begin?

And the answer to that question took me all the way back to when I was about six-years old and living in a house my parents had built for themselves just outside of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, the only house

around. On either side of us were two large farms and virtually nothing else. This was before television, so aside from a few radio shows, plus the fact that I was the oldest child, I had to entertain myself. The only thing around me was nature, so I studied natural history, and did so until I was in my late teens.

It did not take me too long as a kid to realize that the laws of nature differed in many respects from the laws of society. Obviously you can break civil law (which is why we have prisons), but you can't break natural laws. They break us. As the years passed, I found that I trusted natural law (like the law of gravity!) more than I did the rules and laws of humankind and society. I embraced them.

From an early age I did not like school and tuned out as much of it as I possibly could. Instead, I would spend my school-time planning just what I would do when school was out for the day, once the school bus deposited me at my home out on 101 West Roseville Road in Lancaster, PA. And, as mentioned, these plans mostly focused on my interest in and study of nature. Everything else was kind of a big blur. I guess the takeaway here is that from an early age I became used to having huge blocks of time for myself to just kind of spend as I wished. It was for me more valuable than money.

And, if I fast-forward to high-school (which I never finished) and the time after that when most folks go to college, that time in my late teens was the first completely free time (free of school) that I ever had and I loved it. As it turns out, it seems that I need a vast amount of time to do nothing other than just follow my own consciousness through its changes. I

find it fascinating. For me this was like a full-time occupation.

This habit I had acquired of reserving large amounts of my time for doing just whatever I wanted to do made it inconvenient for me to do what other folks in my generation were doing, like going to college, getting a degree, and starting a career. Somehow I didn't have time for that, and I certainly wasn't interested in more schooling of the traditional kind. I had done that, and didn't like it at all. Like the old fable "The Ant and the Grasshopper," I was like the grasshopper, and wiled away my time doing whatever I pleased, when I was supposed to be carving out a career. Nearly everyone pointed this out to me as often as they dared.

As mentioned, I had by that time an ingrained habit of following my heart, not necessarily my reason. I did what I felt like doing and avoided doing things just because somebody told me I had to or should. I was like "The Fool" card in the tarot deck (designed by Pamela Colman Smith), who blithely steps over the edge of a cliff into empty space or the void, and so on. This heartfelt approach was not without its pressures.

However, I felt I knew very well how to spend my time, and I arranged my life so that I could have as much time as humanly possible and still survive. For some years I worked a job that I could complete each day in one-half hour of intensive work, leaving 23-1/2 hours to do whatever I want, and I wanted. So, I certainly studied very intensely, but just not in any formal way. Mostly I taught myself, something I have done all my life and I was already good at it by that time. I became the archetype of what an amateur

should be. I loved what I was doing and, as I mentioned, developed a habit of following my heart. That is a hard habit to break, not that I ever wanted to.

And this has never changed. My hobbies (what I naturally love) became my careers, although it took many years to bear any monetary fruit. My wife and I lived on next to nothing and were happy to do that. When kids came along, I had to find ways of directing my interests so that some societal need was filled, i.e. I was paid. This took some ingenuity and I consider myself lucky to have some of the breaks I have had.

As to what a lifetime of monitoring my own inner changes has done for me, it is hard to say. In a way, it is like peeling back the layers of an onion until there is nothing at all left. I haven't reached the "nothing at all left" point, but what we might call "The Self" within me is more transparent than it once was. I can sort of see through it a bit and have even developed a sense of humor as to taking my "Self" so seriously.

What started as my own learning curve, known only to me, gradually has merged with the mind-training techniques of Tibetan Buddhism. I had managed to become fairly perceptive on my own, but my homemade "site map" of consciousness had huge gaps in it. I had some things right, but other obvious truths had never dawned on me. The Tibetan meditation and other mind-training techniques helped to fill in the missing blanks in my mental education until I had what amounts to a road-map to a more aware consciousness. After all, the Buddhists have been at this for 2500 years.

And it was not like the Tibetan teachings overpowered my own homegrown insights. It was more like they confirmed what I already knew and went on to point out what I had been missing or had managed to ignore for various reasons. Anyway, what I have been realizing on this midsummer night's musing is that part of me has been in a kind of isolation or solitude (on my own) almost my entire life. I invested my faith in nature's laws at an early age, as to the way this world works, and that was a good bet.

This has led to keeping my own council as regards the veneer and conventions of society and, instead of minding the rules, I chose to follow my heart, as selfish as that may seem. And the result of all this time is what I bring to conversations like this, an edge or perspective just different enough to hopefully be useful. It is difficult to get outside convention and see ourselves.

That's my midsummer night dreaming.

MOVING THE MIND: INSIGHT MEDITATION

May 23, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Something not strictly secret, but for the most part very much unknown by most people involved in dharma practice is that the mind can also be moved like a muscle. No, the mind does not lift weights, but something similar is possible and necessary for progress in meditation.

In other words, we have to learn to move the mind, and not just intellectually either. Intellectual understanding is indirect experience and, as we know, quite abstract. We need also to have direct experience of the mind itself. This is part of learning Insight Meditation (Vipassana), and instruction for that meditation typically has two main components, although the two are in reality the same.

One component is called the “Analytical Meditation of the Pandita” and it involves what at appears to be intellectual analysis, while the second is called “Meditation of a Kusulu,” which is direct non-analytical meditation, looking directly at the mind itself. Actually, these two components work very closely together.

Beginning instruction in Insight Meditation often has what appears like a purely intellectual component. This is the analytical meditation referred to above. For example, we may be asked to examine the mind abstractly, with questions like where is the mind located or what color is the mind? Let's take an example.

We may be asked to find out if the mind, our mind, is the color red. When I first encountered this, I intellectually understood instantly that the mind is not the color red. Forget about finding anything out. I instinctively knew this to be true and dismissed the inquiry out of hand: the mind is not the color red.

So, I was mostly bored by this approach and did my best to ignore this part of the instructions and waited until something juicier (and less abstract) was taught. I kind of zoned out into a kind of mental hibernation during that abstract stuff. Years passed and whenever this (IMO) intellectual approach to the mind was presented, even by my beloved teacher, I kind of just ignored it and waited it out. This was, I must say (in hindsight), a big mistake. And here is where I explain why this apparent analysis was never meant as a purely intellectual exercise.

It was some years later, when Rinpoche was teaching the same material from a different text that I finally woke up to what was happening. Is the mind the color red? I had been through that, as mentioned earlier. However, this year I was struck by Rinpoche's statement that in Tibet, the brightest monks would spend some three months on this kind of questioning. I knew that these monks were sharp, not dull. So I wondered what was going on here?

I figured I better stop editing Rinpoche's teachings in my mind, listen up, and just start following his instructions verbatim, which were: look in your mind (search it) and tell me if the mind is the color red? In Tibet, they would send the monks off with that question for three days and three nights of looking at

their mind to see if it was red, and then have them report what they found to their rinpoche.

After that they would be sent off for another three days and three nights to determine if the mind was blue, and so on, color after color. I finally realized that I was missing something here, due to my ignorance, my ignoring of what Rinpoche was asking.

Well thought I, although I believed I knew the answer (that the mind was not red or any color), I could at least do Rinpoche the honor of looking, and so I gave it a try. I looked, and I mean I actually looked around in my mind for the answer, rather than just intellectualizing it and forgetting it. And I soon found out that the physical act of looking was not the same as making an intellectual judgment without looking. And it was the actual “looking” that Rinpoche had been asking me to do all this time, but I had never actually looked in my mind. Instead, I just skipped over that part with an intellectual answer that of course the mind was not red. Now I was looking in my mind physically, i.e. by actually looking. In other words, I began to look at the mind with the mind.

And what I realized through the looking is that, if I really looked hard, I felt something move in there, and for the first time, like slightly moving a muscle that had never been moved before. I finally saw that Rinpoche was asking us to begin to exercise the mind itself just as we would exercise one of our muscles. Only this was not just any other muscle, but something within the mind itself that could be moved.

I am going to spare you the entire story, and I am not teaching this anyway. My point is that learning to work

the mind is not simply an intellectual exercise but something most physical as well. And we are not used to exercising our mind as we would a muscle but it can be exercised. It moves.

We can not only look in our mind to see its color and location but if you really want to see the mind move yourself, just try looking at who is reading this sentence. Right now, look at the looker! If you really do, you can feel the mind move. That kind of exercise is what Insight meditation is all about.

Now I am just scratching the surface here, so you can perhaps get the idea. There is a whole lot more information on this topic that you would have to get exposed to and that is what Insight Meditation (Vipassana) is all about.

There ought to be questions here.

ON A CLEAR DAY YOU CAN SEE FOREVER

June 13, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

In the study and practice of meditation as taught by Tibetan Buddhists, Tranquility Meditation (Shamata), learning to concentrate and rest the mind, mindfully, is a first step, what most of us start out learning. Yet, like playing the piano, meditation is not learned overnight, but gradually and only with practice. It takes time to develop the necessary muscle-memory and meditation technique, just as it does to learn to master notes, chords, and the keyboard on a piano.

The stability of a tranquil mind is not the end-goal of meditation, but actually just sets the stage for what is called Insight Meditation (Vipassana). Vipassana is why we learn Tranquility Meditation. I am not sure this is generally understood. And while Tranquility Meditation is not difficult to describe, Insight Meditation is harder, if not impossible, to put into words.

The above blog title is a reference to the clarity of mind, illumination, or what is typically called “insight,” as in “insight meditation.” Insight is defined in the dictionary as the power of seeing into a situation “intuitively,” the act of apprehending the inner nature of things. And “intuition” is defined as the ability to understand something immediately, without the need for conscious reasoning. So insight is seeing directly. This is a pretty good definition of Insight Meditation, but what is it that is seen directly?

The Tibetans might say that what is directly seen is the actual nature of the mind itself, not just once, but repeatedly, in every moment. An analogy might help. Just as we might agree that the goal of any journey is not only the place where we end up, but also the process of how we get there, the traveling itself – i.e. how or in what manner and style we travel. In other words, the “way we go” through life is as important as where we end up, which for any one of us is just the end of our life. Another way to say this is “don’t forget to smell the roses” as you go along, that is: live a little. Make sure to have enough experience for realization to take place.

And the analogy here to Insight Meditation is that in this hustle-bustle life we are living, seeing the true nature of the mind in each moment, what we could call the “seeing” itself, is as important as what passes for time. Insight meditation is this seeing “seeing” itself, so to speak, a looking beyond the traffic of time into the actual nature of the mind itself, which is much more interesting than our following a simple train of thought. We might say that this direct seeing in Insight Meditation is a “time out” or is somehow outside of time.

So, if we want to push language over the edge of sense and into emptiness, we might say that Insight Meditation is seeing “seeing” itself seeing. It is definitely a time-stopper, in that it erects a tent or makes an aura of empty space right in the thicket of time in which we can then dwell and rest a little, proving to us in its immediacy that there is no place we are going to other than the seeing itself. As the Bard said:

“Hey! Mr. Tambourine Man,
Play a song for me.
I’m not sleepy and,
There is no place I’m going to.”

If you followed the above analogy, then perhaps you caught a glimpse of the value of Insight Meditation in its ability to vaporize time and insert the clarity of insight in its stead. And in that clarity we can see beyond time and into forever, like the old musical:

“On a Clear Day You Can See Forever.”

ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL

May 22, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I realize I am writing much of this for the very few who are interested, way less than 1% of my Facebook friends. Again: I wish there was more discussion, but it is what it is. Continuing....

The simple truth, as I know it, is that meditation is not all that easy to learn, at least for many people, including me. Yes, of course, nowadays all manner of relaxation therapies exist under the name of meditation and they are probably fine for what they are, but let's not confuse them with the traditional meditation techniques from Tibet and Asia, which are powerful disciplines that have proved their worth for many centuries.

Shamata meditation is one of two main forms of meditation originally identified by Shakyamuni Buddha some 2500 years ago. The other is Vipassana or insight meditation. Although the two are sometimes taught together, it is more common to learn Shamata first and Vipassana second. Shamata, then, is the fundamental basis upon which most other forms of meditation depend. I find it helpful to learn Shamata first, and I will explain why.

An analogy I often use is that of trying to thread a small needle with shaky hands. It is very difficult. Shamata meditation removes the shakiness from the hands, so that more advanced forms of meditation

(like Vipassana) can then be learned. Vipassana is the actual threading of the needle. Both forms of meditation are required. Shamata is the place to start (steady those hands) and is the basis on which further meditation practices like Vipassana (threading the needle) depend. In some lineages these two techniques are eventually combined into a more advanced form of meditation called Mahamudra. Mahamudra Meditation practice is my main interest these years.

It is not a goal of any Tibetan Buddhist lineage I am aware of to just learn Shamata meditation and leave it go at that. In fact, it is endlessly pointed out in the meditation textbooks that Shamata, by itself, will never result in enlightenment. By itself, Shamata meditation, except as a base for learning Vipassana, is considered a spiritual dead-end. However, when Shamata is combined with Vipassana meditation, it becomes the basis for Mahamudra meditation, said to be the quintessential key to enlightenment in the Kagyu Lineage. Mahamudra, Dzogchen, and Maha-Ati meditation are all different names for the same final recognition and eventual enlightenment, although their approaches may differ slightly. However, the end results are identical.

A lot of what I write here in relation to meditation has to do with how to help folks master the techniques necessary to get to the point of learning Mahamudra meditation. There is nothing particularly spiritual about learning the basic muscle-memory training and habits necessary to master Shamata and then Vipassana meditation. The spiritual stuff comes after we learn the techniques and actually can meditate, not before or even while we “practice” the techniques. Practice is

practice, no matter what discipline we are considering. It can be tedious and boring, and often is.

What frustrates me can be summed up in a simple analogy. Imagine you are dying of thirst and crawling across the desert looking for water. After a long while you come to the outer edge of an oasis. In the early morning there is dew that has formed on the leaves of plants and you lick that, thereby somehow eking out an existence on those few drops of dew each morning. However, if you would just crawl a little farther, there are deep pools of water to drink or even swim in, the oasis.

In this analogy, the licking of the dew drops is equivalent to meditation “practice,” where we are trying to learn the basic technique of meditating, but have not mastered it yet. A great many people get stuck in a closed-loop of practicing meditation. They never quite learn to meditate. And the deep pool of water in this analogy refers to actually meditating once we have finally mastered the rote technique through proper instructions and dedicated practice.

I am particularly sensitive to what I am describing here because I became stuck for years in learning the basic technique of meditation, rather than mastering it and then moving on to simply meditating. In my case, this basically went on for over thirty years, until some fortuitous events pushed me over the edge into actually being able to meditate. Believe me; I have paid my dues in this respect.

When I consider the enormous waste of time I went through, it makes me sick to think about it. It was not

necessary, and I am tired of hearing folks respond that all of my fumbling around with trying to meditate was just what I needed, the “no wine before its time” rant. IMO, that is just a tautology, trying to justify the status quo because it went down that way. There are alternatives.

At this point in time I have the experience and enough realization to know that I could have been instructed and learned all of this very much sooner in my life had I not made some simple mistakes or if someone had been able to see me floundering and just given me the proper instructions. I was stuck at the edge of the oasis, so to speak, for decades. In retrospect, what a waste!

So part of my mission (and I feel very strongly about this) is to get the attention of any of you interested (those of who might be stuck on the edge of that oasis as I was) and point out as best I can how to successfully stop just endlessly practicing meditation and move on to actually meditating. It is like a stuck record. We have to un-stick it.

If you sit on the cushion for a thousand years doing it incorrectly, you will always get the wrong result. It is simple physics. And two (or a thousand) wrongs will not make it go right. Instead, if we want results, we have to learn to do it correctly in the first place. Otherwise we will just sit there treading water and spinning our wheels. Without the proper instructions we are doomed to “practice” meditation forever and never actually learn to meditate. More folks are caught in this than will admit it.

In my various free articles and booklets I have described in great detail the problems involved and what to do about them, and here is the link.

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

As for those important ingredients for successfully meditating, I have room here to just consider a few points briefly:

JOY

Actual meditation is joyful. Forcing ourselves to practice is seldom if ever joyful. In that case, we have to practice with something we already love to do in order to build the concentration and muscle memory we need. If you are stuck in just practicing meditation and not joyful, try finding something you do love and concentrate on that as the object of practice instead of on the breath or a twig or pebble.

PUT TIME-IN

Most of us need more than ten minutes, an hour, or even two hours a day of practice to progress. It is like the old adage that going to church once a week on Sunday for an hour or so will never get a sinner like me to heaven. It is the same with dharma practice. We somehow must find a way to use our post-meditation time (time off-the-cushion) as practice time, you know, like most of our day. I have given a number of specific practices that have worked well for me in various articles.

PROPER INSTRUCTIONS

As mentioned, we learn basic Shamata meditation in order to begin to learn Vipassana meditation and not as an end in itself. It is the combination of Shamata

and Vipassana that bring successful meditation. To learn Vipassana (insight) meditation, we need a qualified instructor, someone capable of pointing out to us the essential nature of the mind so that we can get it.

I have to credit myself for practicing for decades with almost no result. That is how much faith I had in the dharma and particularly in my instructor. And I know that all of this meditation stuff is new in America and that it will take a while to get it right. As for me, I was 800 miles from my teacher and saw him perhaps once a year for a 15-minute interview. That might have worked had I not been told by other students that I should not discuss my basic meditation practice with anyone. Period.

Whoever told me that was just plain wrong. While learning Shamata (and even basic Vipassana) we need to talk about it with anyone who knows more or less than we do. That's exactly what they do in Tibet, go to school together on these preliminary techniques, and they are not secretive about it. These are openly discussed techniques.

If you have the wrong instructions for your particular situation, even "practicing" meditation for an entire lifetime will not bring the desired results. Meditation instructions are not carved in stone, but have to be adjusted to fit you individually. We have to make it work if it does not fit us right off.

My guess is that my writing style probably won't fit all of you, but there might be a few of you that connect with it. I don't care if you get it from me, but please get

it from somewhere and move on from practicing meditation to actually meditating.

PRACTICE IS NOT PERFECT

May 22, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

If you ask most Buddhist practitioners what they do as regards meditation, they will say they are doing their daily practice. The accent should be on the word “practice,” because in the beginning (and for a long time) we are practicing meditation, not actually meditating. Meditation comes later, often much later.

It took me years to understand this. I don’t know what I was thinking, but I guess I seriously thought I was meditating all that time, when in fact I had never really learned how. What I was doing is “practicing meditation,” but hadn’t understood THAT was what I was doing, just “practicing,” i.e. learning to meditate.

Shamata meditation requires that we develop some basic mental muscle-memory, you know, the habit of the technique itself, something that up to that time we have never had. Learning how to meditate takes time and, to use that word again, “practice.” This often is not understood by those setting out to meditate, i.e. that we don’t just instantly meditate when we sit down on a cushion. The truth is that we first have to learn how.

The technique of meditation (as opposed to actually meditating) is like the scaffolding used to build a house. When the house is done, we take down the scaffolding. In this analogy, meditation is the house or goal and the techniques of meditation, learning

mindfulness as a habit, etc. is the scaffolding. Here is a good analogy.

If we want to learn to play a musical instrument such as a guitar, we have to first learn to tune the guitar, the various ways to play chords, and of course musical scales, etc. This is not the same as just playing music. We must practice scales and tuning, etc. before we can play music. This is what I mean here by practice. When we have practiced enough, then we can gradually let go and just play music. As many of us know all too well, we may never get that far. I never learned to play the piano worth beans, for example.

Well, meditation is like this, but with one big difference. When you learn to play the guitar, you know beforehand what the end result, “music,” sounds like. You can go and listen to your favorite musicians play music. However, with meditation, this is not true.

Meditation requires the same kind of practice, building muscle memory (albeit mentally) as learning the guitar, but with meditation we have no idea (and no experience yet) of what the end result we are working toward is like. We can’t play the music of awareness whenever we want. In fact, we have little to no experience with enlightenment, awareness, and so forth personally. That is why we are studying it. We are going only on what we have read and heard. And this is a huge difference.

In fact, the expectations and assumptions we make about what the result of meditating is supposed to be like often becomes the greatest obstacle to actual

meditation. We think we know what it is supposed to be like when, by definition and lack of experience, we do not. We compare our actual experience in practicing meditation to the idea we have built up about it, and usually come up short. That disappointment can impinge on our practice and chances of successful meditation.

I feel it is important for beginning meditators to admit to themselves that they have no real idea what enlightenment, realization, or even much-greater awareness is like, because in fact they don't know and have not yet experienced it. After all, that's why we are learning to meditate in the first place, but unlike music, we can't just put on a CD and hear the music of awareness. We have to have trust as in the movie "Field of Dreams" if we practice, awareness will come. And it will, but not if our unrealistic expectations overpower it first and cause us to throw in the towel. It can be a vicious form of Catch-22, not actually meditating, but imagining we already are.

In summary, meditation-practice is just that, "practice", and not the goal of our practice, which is actual meditation and the awareness meditating brings. Our meditation "practice" is like the training wheels on a kid's bike. Once we learn to actually meditate, we take the training wheels off and just meditate. But until that time, keep in mind that practicing takes effort and effort is not part of natural meditation, but only a way to build the muscle-memory and mental-habits we need to meditate. So please don't confuse the efforts to meditate (practicing) with actual meditation. Most of us are still practicing meditation (you know: it "sounds like this") and not yet meditating.

When I first realized (and admitted this to myself), it was very disappointing, but that disappointment led to my eventually abandoning the preconceived ideas I had that I was already meditating and actually go on to learn to meditate. Hint: actual meditation is joyful; learning to meditate, like learning anything, may not be.

A series of free e-books on meditation and dharma practice can be found here, for those who would like to read more:

RECOGNIZING DANIEL P. BROWN

May 29, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

You have not heard me recognize and celebrate many western Buddhists for their realization, so this is a first. Daniel P. Brown, PhD is an Associate Clinical Professor of Psychology at Harvard Medical School, on the faculty for 24 years, but don't let that scare you. More important to me, he has actually mastered Tibetan meditation, translates from Tibetan and Sanskrit, and in my opinion is one of the most dharmically 'realized' Americans I have yet encountered. And he speaks our language idiomatically. From me that is high praise. I have never met him in person, but I will provide links to some video interviews of Brown (below), so that you can see for yourself. He comes through loud and clear on the interviews; they are incredibly good. But, for starters, here are a couple of ideas that Daniel Pointed out to me that I feel are terrific.

In Buddhism, one of the classic teachings of the Buddha is:

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

- 1) The Truth of Suffering
- 2) The Truth of the Cause of Suffering
- 3) The Truth of the End of Suffering
- 4) The Truth of the Path that Frees Us from Suffering

So it caught my attention big-time when Daniel Brown pointed out that the Sanskrit word “dukkha” used in the original Four Noble Truths, and usually translated (shown above) as “suffering,” might more accurately be translated as “reactivity, which would cause the Four Truths to read:

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

- 1) The Truth of Reactivity.
- 2) The Truth of the Cause of Reactivity,
- 3) The Truth of the End of Reactivity.
- 4) The Truth of the Path that Frees Us from Reactivity.

A typical refrain I have heard since the 1950s from folks who question Buddhism is “Where’s the suffering?” Of course we can point to the endless wars, inequalities, racism, unfairness, lack of justice, and on and on, but those who question in this way are usually pointing more to their personal lives, where they are not exposed much to the sufferings described above. From their point of view, they tell me they are doing just fine. Life is good.

Brown’s point, as I understand it, is that our own reactions, day in and day out, are perhaps the major form of our suffering. We are suffering (and have been) virtually forever from our own biases, labeling, prejudice, projections, and so on. It’s that our constant reaction to almost everything causes us to be perpetually wincing, as if we are pinching ourselves. What Brown points out makes perfect sense to me. I agree 100% and have been writing about this “reactivity” for some time as well as how to remove it from our lives. I call the remedial practices I suggest by a number of names, including Reaction Tong-Len,

Response Ability, Reaction Toning, and so on, and have written a book “Tong-Len: The Alchemy of Reaction,” which is a free read here:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../e-b.../REACTION%20TONGLEN%20fin.pdf>

Our habitual reactivity reminds me of those “sensitive plants,” and that if you touch them, they recoil and shrink back. That is exactly what most of us do all day long: reacting to almost everything we encounter, both large and small. Of course we have a major reaction when someone calls us out or challenges us, but we react minute-by-minute and second-by-second to almost everything that appears. The whole art of feng-shui is built upon our intuitive reactions to space. We react to colors, smells, sounds, touch, and on and on constantly, and I am not talking about the reactions needed to sensually navigate life.

I am talking about the myriad of minute reactions we have all day long, and the unending thoughts we generate like: “She has a big nose,” “I don’t like that color,” “I don’t like that look she just gave me,” etc. It is truly endless, and each reaction records a tiny karmic trace or track in our mindstream. Indeed, we have here karma accumulation in action and this micro-karma adds up to a lot more than what we imagine as sins. This kind of suffering may go under our radar most of the time and we are not aware of it, but recorded it is and, as mentioned, it all adds up to real karma.

Certainly this reactivity is suffering, plain and simple. Worse, it keeps us totally occupied, obscuring almost

everything else. These are not rose-colored glasses we are peering through, but blinders.

And Daniel P. Brown points out something else that I too first realized back in 1964 on my first acid trip, that much, if not most, of what we see out in the world are our own projections, a movie or hologram that we create, project, and then sit spellbound watching. If anything can interrupt the reification that we constantly project, it is the realization that it is just a projection, a movie, and a rerun at that.

It was this realization back in 1964 that started me on the long journey of deconstructing my own holograms. That was many years ago. Once I realized that what I saw out in the world were just my own fears, prejudice, and biases projected outward, it somehow popped the bubble of reification and dualism I had been trapped in literally forever. When I realized that what I saw outside was not an actual “There” and a “Them,” but just another part of my own projection, just me all over again, the suffocating hologram began to break up, and I have been deconstructing it ever since. I began to see through it rather than continue to reify it each moment. Once gaps in my projections appeared, the writing was on the wall. Instead of riveting my attention, I began to see through my own projections. They became increasingly transparent and eventually non-duality began to set in. I was realizing Heisenberg’s “Uncertainty Principle” on a personal level.

Those of you who want a real dharma treat, here is a six-part interview of Professor Daniel P. Brown by Iain McNay, which I find absolutely riveting. I can clearly

see his realization speaking to me. Can you?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=grBkn9fWD6Y>

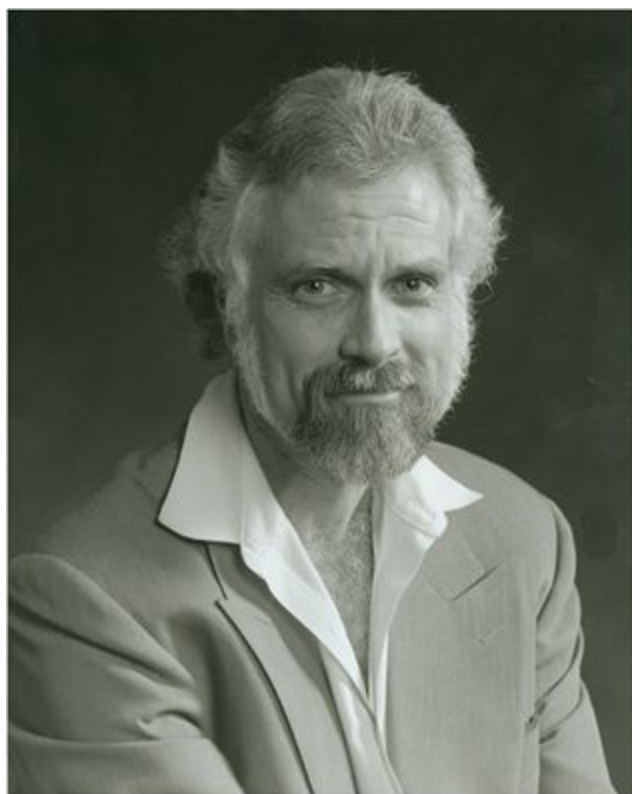
Professor Brown's book "Pointing Out the Great Way" is perhaps the only book on Mahamudra written by a westerner that I find illuminating. It is on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). Here is a review that I wrote of it:

http://www.amazon.com/re.../R2R808RFCFCSNU/ref=cm_cr_dp_title...

And last, here is Brown's website, how to reach him, and his teaching schedule. Enjoy.

<http://www.pointingoutway.org/index.html>

[Don't know who took the photo of Daniel Brown, but thanks for doing that.]



REIFY

June 27, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

This is a bit of a ramble as, because of time constraints, I wrote it in bits and pieces. It is about this reification thing.

Reification is not a word we hear used that often, yet it is essential to understand in learning dharma. I like to call it “Realification,” but then that’s not a word... yet. The dictionary says that “Reification” generally refers to trying to “make” something real, bringing something into being, or making something concrete.” When used in dharma talk, reification is when we attribute independent existence, when we label or mark something as solid that is in fact fluid and always changing, like our mind. I will give a simple example from doing meditation practice.

Sometimes, every once in a while, we might have a good moment in our meditation. It stands out from whatever came before, and too often from what comes afterward. That’s why we call things memorable. Certainly we notice it, and not only do we notice it, we immediately recognize it as “special.” Moreover, we label or mark it as somehow ‘outstanding’. However, the moment we label or use it as a standard to measure other moments by, we have reified it, underlined it, “tried” to make it somehow more real.

However, that labeling or “reification” immediately makes what was a special moment an obscuration in our path. Instead of lightening our mind, we have dimmed it down. We can spend hours, days, months, and years using that moment as what we measure all subsequent moments against, trying to repeat it. That will never happen. Either succeeding moments will fall short of it or surpass it, usually the former.

We can make this even more complicated if we add a few bystanders who witness our special moment, and then we want to show them that same moment again the next time we see them. And we may not feel so special that time, so we really have to conjure something out of whole-cloth or lose face. Phrases like “You can’t go home again” or “You can’t step in the same river twice” come to mind.

This is why rinpoches, when they hear of these “special” moments, always say to us that it is not important, but just an experience that came and left. Don’t think anything of it. Of course, that is harder for us because we want to endlessly refer to that moment as something we want to identify with as ourselves. So you see how it goes, a very slippery slope indeed.

Every special moment that we hang on to becomes a potential obstacle to our future practice, to it ever happening again. If we become attached to it and use it as a measuring stick for anything, we rapidly devolve away from spontaneously having such moments again, and instead find ourselves stuck trying to endlessly reify that one special moment that now is not so special anymore. It is now history, and no longer part of our present. We have used it up.

It is a little like taking a single frame out of a movie and trying to keep it in mind while the movie plays on. That effort is futile. This is why reification can be termed labeling, trying to put a label on things. In the incessant sweep of time, we vainly try to repeat or hold a moment or an experience. It is exactly like attempting to hold a breath we find especially fresh or inspiring. We eventually stop breathing. In a similar way, we can't stop time. Just try it.

We label this or that moment 'special' and want to repeat it or have it again. It is like a person clinging to a raft on the white-water river of time. We are simply swept away, rather than letting time pass as we usually do. As the Christian Bible says, this came to pass, that came to pass. Everything comes not to stay, but to pass. Time is naturally meant to pass. You and I can't stop it.

We seldom can even slow time down or expand time. It simply passes. When we become attached to something, like a particular moment we like, we want to hold on to it, to keep it as a memory, or make it come again, happen again. This is equivalent of attempting to stop or freeze-frame time. It does not work.

The more we are attached, the more we cling, the more we try to restrict the flow of time, the more we become the narrows through which time flows until we (like a raft) are swept away in time, a piece of flotsam in a torrent. This is the essence of conservatism personified. We can't stop things from changing. In the world of Samsara, change is the only constant.

One of my teachers used to say that we can only stay awake (go without sleep) for something like three days, after which, try as we might, we will fall asleep and let go. No matter how hard we try to hang onto a moment, we will finally be forced to let go, to release, and to fall back to sleep in the rush of time. Of course, we eventually wake back up and start again. In other words, when we try to hang onto anything, we become part of the forces of time (we cross over) and are swept away into distraction.

My first dharma teacher used to play with words. With the word “time,” he would always break it into two parts, “Tie Me,” like tie me down. Samsara is all about time. We each find ourselves in time; we exist in time. Time is going on, flowing on, and we usually flow with it. As the old saying goes “Time stops for no man,” which means we cannot stop time. As mentioned, perhaps we can expand or stretch time a little, but it does not stop and we can’t stop it.

If we become attached to some moment in time, a “good” moment, and try to hang onto it, to hold onto it or bring it back, etc., it is like throwing up a sail in a windstorm. We don’t pull it back; it pulls us forward until we are caught in the winds of time. And this is what happens when we label something and declare “you are this; you are that.” Just one label might be like putting up a kite in the wind, perhaps kind of fun. Yet, when we label things all day long, we don’t just have one kite, but a hundred, a thousand – endless kites – each catching the winds of time. It pulls us down.

Unfortunately, as more and more of our labeling catches the wind, we are no longer watching time

pass or gently flowing with it, but rather we become caught in the winds of time and literally are carried away. As they say, we get carried away. This is what is called “distraction.”

Anyway, that’s an analogy for you to consider. The less we label, the less we are attached to moments and things, the more time passes through us and we witness it. The more we label and get caught up in the winds of time, the more we are carried away by time.

So, reification is trying to make something more real than it is, declaring its importance as more than it is, grabbing for handholds in the rushing sea of time. Such action is futile and will eventually be lost and forgotten in the wash of time. What to do?

Our only dharmic recourse to all of this is called “realization,” to realize what is, the way things are, and to work with that. One “good” or eternal passing moment will not save the day. We want to live IN the eternal moment and have it always, not just as a keepsake. Trying to grasp and grab moments on the fly is not the way. It doesn’t work.

We can realize this and stop grasping at moments. We have to let time go, let it go on without stopping it, without labeling it, without being partial to this or that moment, without fixing on this special moment or looking to repeat or remember it.

This is very difficult in the beginning, when we have so few special moments. And when we have a special moment, of course, we want to remember it. After all, for us this is a memorable moment. Trying to repeat

or match that memorable moment is the main cause of not having it reoccur, repeat itself, or come again.

Grasping at moments, getting attached to moments, only stops the process of inner recreation and gums up the works. These “special” moments are just drops of rain before a deluge. If we stop there, there will be no more rain.

It is best to let the process of time run on as it naturally does. Grasping at moments, trying to make time stand still or fixing on a special moment only slows the process to a standstill. It is letting go that is required, as in... letting things go on as they naturally want to do. After all, things are already going on, right? We can't stop time from going on anyway, so relax and let time go on. I mentioned earlier that the Bible says, “This came to pass, that came to pass.” Nothing comes to stay; everything comes to pass. So let it pass. That is impermanency.

This process of reification (labeling) on our part is important to understand, our need to make things real, more real than they are, and to put our stamp or mark on it, like a dog marks his territory. This is simply not helpful.

We have to let it flow, let the flow of time run on. The word is “realization,” to realize the nature of time, that time will run on, and our trying to promote or re-live one experience of moment of time or another is a distraction to any realization.

We lose the possibility of realization by becoming attached to this or that moment or memory, by constantly reifying or labeling everything. Remember,

reification is the attempt to concretize or make something more real than it actually is, to memorialize a moment, create a monument to a moment, and somehow stop time in order to worship that moment.

This is why, as mentioned, every time I would have a special experience and could not wait to tell Khenpo Rinpoche about it, his only answer ever was: “That’s just an experience. Experiences come and go. Don’t think any more about it. Just keep practicing.” This was, of course, was disappointing because I wanted to dwell on my experience, to somehow further memorialize it.

Don’t bring a memory of an experience to a rinpoche. Bring him realization, which is always present and never a memory. There is no mistaking it.

REIFYING THE HOLOGRAM

May 30, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

This reification thing is major, the fact that we continue to reify and pump-up outward appearances into something, while the Buddhists tell us they are empty. My favorite line about appearances being empty is “Watch the emptiness appearing!,” which helps to bring home the concept that appearances are not empty like an empty bowl, but rather appearances are themselves the emptiness itself appearing. In other words, appearances and emptiness are exactly the same thing.

My comment on that would be that these are nice words, true words, but words just the same, and not the realization of what the words point at. How do we bring these words home? One lama told me to begin considering what I see out there, my outer world, as a movie I am watching. That was helpful, but did not take it far enough.

What I have to realize is that not only are appearances a movie I am watching, but I am the producer of that movie, the actor in the movie (by proxy), and the movie is, for the most part, made up of my own obscurations (biases, prejudice, likes, dislikes, etc.) projected on the sense world and then blindly watched by me. Riveting, of course, this is a movie most familiar just to me. Again, these are words that are easily said, but let me tell you how I

actually first “realized” these words as a reality. It is a little embarrassing.

It was in 1964 and I had just taken LSD, my first acid trip. And “trip” is a good word to describe what happened, but I won’t go into much detail here (I have written it all out elsewhere, of course), but it was a doozy, deeply imprinting and unforgettable even to this day.

Anyway, at one point I was walking down the streets in the wee hours of late-night Berkeley, California, lost in a phantasmagoria of LSD images, and a little paranoid at that. As I walked by (in what seemed like slow motion) an open alleyway, I heard voices, laughter, coming out of the dark alley. It was too dim in there to see anything.

Then, from the depths of the alley, there gradually appeared a Black couple who had obviously been drinking. It was a guy with his arms around a girl, who was kind of leaning into him, and they lurched their way along the alley and into view. Since at that time I was not all that comfortable around Blacks, I tensed up. All kinds of thoughts raced through my mind. Then, as the couple reached the end of the alley where I was, it turned out that they were just a White college couple, not even drunk or anything, just walking together. So, aside from some latent racism, what was that all about?

In the slow motion of that acid trip (where everything seemed to take forever), I was watching my own prejudice painted on my sense world for me to see and react to. I realized that my outer world was not just something separate and reified as I had always

thought, but rather my basic sense impressions were totally overwritten by a montage of my own projections. The takeaway was that for the first time, I realized (as in: “realization”) that my “in here” and private world was also perfectly present “out there” in what I had assumed up until that point was an independent and separate “real” world. Obviously, the two were not only related, they were always already one, as in non-dual.

And that is just one glaring experience taken from an entire night packed with realizing that what until that point I assumed were two separate worlds, me and them, were not a duality, but rather always a unity – non-dual. These experiences on acid broke through the train of absolute reification I had been lost in since birth and from that moment on I began to slowly deconstruct my dualistic world, meaning I realized it was never actually dualistic in the first place.

Of course this took years, decades, but each day and step of the way, that duality became more transparent as I became more and more certain that the movie I had been watching out there in the world was mostly produced by, projected by, and starred me. It became increasingly transparent that this outer movie was like a vast hologram, empty of what we might call external reality, yet filled with my own projections and obscurations. And there was I, riveted, taking it all in.

This was a life-changing experience for me, not because it happened on drugs, but because the airtight boy-in-a-bubble world I had been locked into since birth, the world of me in-here and the you-and-them-out-there, was realized (in the flesh) to be a mistake. I had simply gotten it wrong all my life.

However, in that night in Berkeley there began to appear gaps in my reification, as my inner and outer worlds collided and were seen as one – non-dual. And everything else began to change from that point onward!

This is an example of “realization,” which is not some pie-in-the-sky idea of spiritual enlightenment that swept over me, but an actual realization as to how things actually are. This is what is meant by “realization.” We realize.

As for the projected holographic movie, it is still being shown, but I visit that theater less and less of the time these days. And like a movie critic, I am now able to recognize some of my own projections and pop them like balloons. The value of not further reifying the hologram but allowing it to become transparent is that as it increasingly becomes transparent, I can begin to see through to the actual nature of the mind itself. Yes, the movie is still running, but there is less and less that gets my attention all the time. I have already seen that movie.

What begins to happen, as we see that what we thought was the outside world is populated and peopled by our own likes and dislikes, is that just as a thought is a construct, a concept that we can acknowledge as abstract, so is the entire world we see out there -- only a much more elaborate construct, mostly created by our own projections and obscurations.

I am reminded how in the newer cameras, in particular the large DSLRs that I use, the optical viewfinder (OVF), which is assumed to be a direct

mirror-reflection of reality, is gradually being replaced by an electronic viewfinder (EVF) in which it is crystal clear that what we are seeing is an electronically created image, yet fine enough to fool us into thinking we see reality. Yet we know that the EVF is just an electronic construct, not a mirror-reflection of anything.

In a similar way, with dharma training we realize that our entire view of the outside world is just another construct or hologram, albeit a very fine one, and that it is not a reflection of anything other than our own obscurations – biases, prejudices, likes, dislikes, etc. As we increasingly see that it is simply a construct, this makes the deconstruction process easier.

REMEDIAL PRACTICES: WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT

June 9, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

After yesterday's fire & brimstone blog, some might want to know some remedial training for all of that. Where do we begin our dharma training? We do have some tools available to us, in particular the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma" (also called the "Four Reversals"), and they traditionally have been called the Common Preliminaries, the place to start and the very first step and foundation for what comes after in our dharma practice. Many practices have us review these four thoughts before we begin anything else that day. All Buddhists know them and we can learn from these four thoughts. If we will review them each day, they get our mind right for serious practice.

I was introduced to the real meaning of these four thoughts by the great siddha Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who, when I showed him a poster I designed (shown below) of a Tibetan dragon holding four pearls, one in each hand, Trungpa turned to me and asked "Do you know what this means?" I did not, so he went on to explain to me that the dragon is holding the Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind. He said that as long as the dragon holds all four, he can fly, but if he drops any one of them, he falls to the earth.

Trungpa's words to me would suggest that we keep these four reminders... in mind. It's where I started, and they are as important today to me as they were decades ago, so here they are:

THE FOUR THOUGHTS THAT TURN THE MIND TOWARD THE DHARMA

(1) This Precious Human Life

Life is precious! We all know that and from time to time our own life, of course, may seem most precious to us, but the same goes for all sentient beings, even that of the smallest insect or creature. All beings want to be happy and not to suffer. There are no known exceptions.

And while that is true, the main point here is not just that all life is precious, although of course it is to each being. The main point is that this human life that you and I have is most precious, and it is precious not just because it is our life. The human life is precious, so the Buddhists explain, because it is perhaps the only opportunity to find and practice the dharma, and thereby somehow awaken and move toward enlightenment. This opportunity of having a human life to learn dharma is what is most precious.

It is written that of all the six realms of existence, from low to high, only the human lifetime offers the exact combination we need to meet and learn the dharma, and so that is why it is often called the "precious human birth." In every other realm, we are either suffering too much to practice dharma or we are too high on one thing or another (and not down-to-earth enough) to practice dharma. The human birth is the

one happy medium. Yet, we act like we are going to live forever, etc. Even as a kid, I wanted my life to be put to some good purpose, and not be wasted.

The traditional verse says:

“First Thought:
A precious human birth,
So favorable for dharma practice,
Is hard to obtain and easily lost.
I must make this meaningful.”

(2) Impermanence

“Impermanence” simply means that we have a limited opportunity here, one that like the dew on the morning grass soon will be gone. Of the Four Thoughts, “impermanence” is the most obvious to us all, if only because life jogs our memory every once in a while and reminds us that we ARE impermanent. We all get a whiff of impermanence from time to time, perhaps as those close to us die or when we momentarily realize that we too are impermanent. I like to call ‘impermanence’ the smelling salts of the dharma. It wakes us up.

And Mother Nature has impermanence on display all the time. The laws of nature are also clearly working all around us, not just in the fields and streams, but in the cities, homes – wherever we are. And there seem to be at least several aspects to impermanence.

Witnessing the heartbreaking impermanence nature displays is one way we are affected, often bringing out compassion within us for the suffering that most animals and beings experience. This helps to keep us

sober. Then there is the recollection of our own impermanence, the fact that we will for sure die. This is harder for us to look at, so we tend to push it out of our consciousness most of the time and ignore it. This is why ignorance is said to be the strongest of the three poisons, the other two being desire and anger. We tend to ignore what we don't want to face.

Impermanence can also urge us to not waste time, because our own life will expire one day soon, and for all we know, it could be today. As the great siddha Chögyam Trungpa once said to an audience as he began a talk, "Some of us will die soon, the rest a little later." Or, as the Ven. Bokar Rinpoche said to me years ago when I left his monastery in West Bengal, India, "Michael, tomorrow or the next life, whichever comes first."

Always somewhere in the back of our mind, rolling around in there, is the sense of our own mortality. Perhaps still more distracting and energy-consuming is the fact that we know (have been taught) it would be best if we were not wasting time on what is ultimately unimportant, but rather were busy with our dharma practice or at least preparing our mind in some way for the bardo passage, the confrontation that will decide what our next rebirth will be, human or some other realm.

And, meanwhile, we all have the pressures of making a living, keeping this body alive, having food to eat, and a roof over our head. These concerns are not trivial for most of us.

In the last blog I differentiated (for my own clarity) the urgency we have in general to use this human life we

have efficiently (while we have it) and the fear or pressure that is sometimes connected with our upcoming bardo passage, the determination if we do or do not get another human rebirth.

As mentioned in the previous blog, to me it seems that there are two kinds of worries here, one the urgency of impermanence in general and the second, the urgency whether we will or won't have another chance at a human life in the near future, and of course they are related.

In my own life, I add still a third worry, which is that the worry about whether getting ready for the bardo decision (next human life or not) is so strong that it will seriously detract from the ongoing process of finding a dharma practice that will move us directly toward enlightenment.

I try to keep in mind that it is only our dharma practice that will work for us that (if successful) will sway the outcome of the bardo passage in the favor of another precious human life or even enlightenment. We need to be as calm and careful as we can be in dharma practice, have our mind as clear and relaxed as possible, and hopefully not be too distracted by the urgency of the intra-bardo decision. Do you understand?

The traditional verse says:

“Second Thought:

The world and all its inhabitants are impermanent. In particular, the life of each being is like a water bubble.

It is uncertain when I will die and become a corpse.

At that time only dharma can help, I must practice now with diligence.”

(3) Karma – Cause and Effect

Understanding karma is like tasting some fine cheese or food where there is an aftertaste, a taste and then a little later, an after-taste. In this analogy, the taste is pretty obvious: action and result. You do something in life and it provokes a reaction or result.

The aftertaste (with understanding karma in my experience) is that as you get more into looking at karma, you begin to realize that not just the big decisions or actions bring results, but that ALL actions (everything we do) brings some reaction, lays down its own track or casts some fine shadow on our mindstream. And if we repeat that action, good or bad for us, the track only deepens.

It took me a while for this to really sink in. In other words, we would be best served if we were very, very careful in everything we do, careful in every action, no matter how trivial it might appear on the surface. It reminds me of one of the most common images used to illustrate chaos theory in modern physics, the image of the flapping of a butterfly’s wing in South America serving to modify the weather in Iceland – something like that. Little things can mean a lot.

Karma is not only about committing bad deeds and paying for them, but also about shaping our lives almost invisibly by every small action we do. This is perhaps best celebrated in the methodical care and gentleness shown by some of the great Zen masters in every move they make, like the traditional tea

ceremony. The more we work our way into the practice of dharma, the more careful we become in our every thought, word, and deed. We are, so to speak, on tiptoe.

The traditional verse says:

“Third Thought:

When death comes there is no freedom,
And karma takes its course.

Since I create my own karma,
I should abandon all unwholesome actions,
And always devote my time to wholesome actions.
With this in mind, I must observe my mind-stream
each day.

(4) The Defects of Samsara – This World

The fourth of the “Four Thoughts” is the consistent undependability of this world, also sometimes called “the revulsion of Samsara,” Samsara being this world that you and I live in. We live in a state of change that itself is changing or, as I like to say it: I will never be able to quite get all of my ducks in a row. I always believe I will, but I never have yet, and the teachings suggest it is mathematically impossible.

Like the gambling casinos, it is only our own gullibility that keeps us betting on permanency, thinking we can actually game the system. Others can’t, but given enough time, we think we are different; we can do it. This is the same attitude or carrot that has led us from life to life through beginning-less time.

Only when we are severely struck by impermanence do we actually sicken and become nauseas with life

as we know it; only then does it turn empty of meaning for us. Otherwise, we keep things hopping at all times.

The traditional verse says:

“Fourth Thought:

Just like a feast before the execution leads me to my death,

Home, friends, pleasures, and possessions of samsara

Cause me continual torment by means of the three sufferings.

I must cut through all attachment and strive to attain enlightenment.”

These four thoughts: the precious human life, impermanence, karma, and the sheer undependability of life have been said to be the four friends that help to keep us awake, keep us from utterly abandoning ourselves to the deep sleep of distractions, bewilderment, and confusion.

[Graphic: part of a poster I did for Trungpa Rinpoche in 1974.]

CHÖGYAM TRUNGPA



Speaking on: **Meditation and Intellect**

SIX DEGREES OF CONTACT WITH THE KARMAPA

April 29, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

We are home, safe and sound. That ribbon of highway actually led back to where we live. How amazing! We stayed on an extra couple of days at the monastery because His Holiness was very tired and needed rest from his relentless schedule of travel and having audiences back-to-back almost all the time. Margaret and I were part of the local security team, so we spent many hours standing watch over the complex. The Karmapa also had professional security and police.

I hesitate to tell this next story for reasons that should be obvious once you read it, like it reflects poorly on little-old me, but then I tell myself that I should just tell it like it is, the good, the bad, and the whatever... It has to do with my meeting His Holiness the 17th Karmapa and our interaction. Yes, I said "interaction." It was a total surprise to me.

We had been following His Holiness through his venues in Queens, NY and on up to his main seat in North America, Karma Triyana Monastery (KTD) in the mountains above Woodstock, NY. In many of the venues, we could not even (physically) see His Holiness, although he was somewhere in the room. We had to watch him in a large washed-out jumbo screen. And so on.

Then I recounted (previous blog) Margaret and my videoing a special event up on the Karmé Ling retreat property that His Holiness wanted to put together, but I did not tell you the whole story then because I was still putting it all together, making sense of it as you will now see. It begins when out-of-the-blue His Holiness asks if Margaret and I would like to have our picture taken with him. Of course we would, and did.

Margaret was right up and standing next to His Holiness, but I was fiddling with the camera and trying to show our friend Lama Karma how to use it. Finally, I joined His Holiness and Margaret. His Holiness then said something to me like “here is the ‘bad man,’” which of course caught my attention 100%. And then he said “Maybe bad, maybe good.”

Well, those were not the words I would have expected or wanted to hear from the highest personage in our lineage. I had not expected to interact with him at all, for that matter. We were told not to. Anyway, I was kind of struck dumb by the remark, floored would be what I was, like down to the floor, at least mentally. Pictures were taken, not only of me and Margaret with the Karmapa, but of my teacher the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche and Lama Karma with him.

In the meantime I was in a kind of mild shock. As His Holiness started to leave I stammered out something very unoriginal like “... I hope I am not a bad man.” His Holiness turned, looked me dead in the eye and began to make deep frowning faces at me, enlarging his eyes (which are big to begin with), and trying on different scowls or frowns. His head would pull back and then push forward. He would turn away and then suddenly turn around and move near me frowning.

And then he vanished through the door hanging and was gone.

Some of my oldest dharma-friends, a couple of retreat lamas, were in the room as well, and also took it all in. Well, if you have read all the Zen stories of different would-be holy persons suddenly startled out of their equilibrium, imagine how I felt, and I am not even a lama or any kind of ordained person. My world just got turned upside down.

There I stood feeling very alone, almost as if I had been shunned. Later I asked my lama friends, and they really were not very encouraging, pointing out that perhaps I had to seriously look at myself, etc., as if I was not already doing this like: full-time. Let me just cut to the chase and say that, for me, it was a kind of rough night. The only person who did feel sorry for me was my wife Margaret, and she, of all people, probably could affirm whatever “bad” qualities I have.

Anyway, you get the idea. But the story is not over. The next interaction with His Holiness came when as part of a group of dharma folks who helped with security with the Karmapa, we got to have an audience with him and offer him a khata – the ubiquitous Tibetan white scarf. When my turn in the line came, as I stood right before His Holiness and offered a khata, he began all over again to make those scowling faces again, pulling his head way back, furrowing his brow, and making those deep frowning looks. But this time he ended all of that with a great wide smile as he handed me a little statue of Manjushri that he had blessed.

Well, that was some bit of a reprieve, like a condemned man might get from his executioners. I went away from that interaction feeling a little better, but still reeling just a bit.

The next interaction came in the evening, when suddenly His Holiness appeared in the dining room surrounded by his professional security team. He walked by all of us, peered (or went) into the kitchen, and then came back out and walked back the way he came. However, when he got to where I was standing, he stopped, turned to me, and once again eyeballed me and gave me a very penetrating look. Then he smiled and said something like “look sad” and walked away. He was not saying I looked sad, but rather telling me to look sad.

The next interaction came when I was standing security along a long hall through which His Holiness and his security would pass. His Holiness was dressed for a brief night walk, wearing a hoodie with the drawstring tightly pulled so all I could see were his nose, mouth, and eyes. When he got to where I was, he stopped in the hallway, turned to me, pushed his head forward until all I saw were these great big eyes. He then reached out with his hand and tickled my beard and chin, then he smiled and moved on. It goes on.

The next interaction came when His Holiness came down a stairwell on the way to consecrate a small shrine room dedicated to the dharma protectors. He was going to do the regular Mahakala ritual to kind of christen the room. This time I was guarding the doorway through which he had to pass. Before and behind were his security guards. As he went past me,

he reached out with his left hand, grabbed my arm, and gave it a squeeze, and was gone.

By this time I was feeling much better about all of this, in particular since a couple of old-timers (who knew him pretty well) told me that this kind of teasing was a sign that he liked me, at least well enough to stop and interact with me. So, that's pretty much my story.

The last time I saw His Holiness I was opening the outside door for him, from which he was to emerge to the sound of the shrill music of the oboe-like Gyaling horns, with all the folks lined up there to see him enter one of the two black Chevy Suburbans that were waiting outside. As he passed through the door he again looked me in the eyes and simply said "Goodbye!" And this time he was gone for good, at least for this trip.

So, there you have my roller-coaster-ride contact with the His Holiness the 17th Karmapa.

[Photo taken by me of His Holiness the 17th Karmapa arriving at Karmé Ling, KTD's 3-year closed-retreat property, in the middle of a mild snowstorm.]



SLOW LEARNER

May 21, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

To have a conversation with me, you might think I am quick on the uptake, definitely alive. But on the inside, especially when it comes to learning dharma or life-lessons I am a real slow-hand. I don't learn easily. For me it takes time and much repetition.

Just thinking something through and understanding the principle or idea, no problem. I can do that off the top of my head, but putting that understanding into experience and practice is another matter. It typically takes me a long time to digest and act on what just makes good common-sense to most folks. I probably am a bit of a contrarian, but that is just the tip of the iceberg.

For those older folks reading this, fans of sci-fi Robert A. Heinlein's "Stranger in a Strange Land," the correct term for what I do is "grok," which means something like to intuitively understand and absorb a concept at the root or bodily level before accepting it. It takes me a long time to incorporate a new idea in the flesh, you know, down where the rubber meets the road. I have to grok it first.

And even though I have intellectually understood a concept and found it sound, I will still watch it in my mind, as it were, from afar for a long time before I will act on that understanding and incorporate it. In other words, I will keep doing the wrong thing even though I

intellectually know better, because it has not sunk in yet enough for me to fully act on. This is a kind of stupidity, I know, but I still do it.

I guess the word for what I am missing here is “realization.” I have understood something, but have not yet realized it in actual life. It remains somehow loosely attached to me, a floater in the mind. In some cases, this Limbo state can go on for years and I seem powerless to do anything about it. I just watch it happening. One day I suddenly realize it to the degree of making it part of me. Then I act on it and don’t think any more about it. From then on I just do it.

Perhaps I am waiting to really “feel” it, to know it physically, and not just as something else I understand intellectually. One thing I can say is that, for me, this usually takes a long time, a very long time. For example, I know I should not be eating this particular food, yet here I am watching myself eating it. And it’s not like I will suddenly understand I should not eat it (that it is not good for me) and put it down. No, I just keep on eating it and ignoring whatever my intellect is telling me. Just what that behavior is I don’t know, but it does not make good sense, right?

And it gets worse with “kleshas,” emotional upsets. I know I should just stop or let whatever is moving me to anger or attachment go and climb back out of it, as in: walk it back. But I don’t move a muscle in that direction. Like the deer in the headlights, I am frozen in time and continue making bad-karma right in front of my own eyes. What am I waiting for? Intellectually I know better, but emotionally I am paralyzed.

As mentioned, I guess I am waiting to be deeply moved enough to break free of just doing it or entertaining whatever it is. Or, I am still just feeling it and seeing how far I will go, how carried away by it I will become before I am moved to let it go. I have dozens, perhaps hundreds, of bad habits just floating out there, loosely attached, but still very much intact. I won't move a finger to let them go until I have some sort of life revelation, at which time an avalanche or two of my bad habits may be lost. But those revelations are few and far between.

There is a still deeper area I have of "not-knowing" that involves concepts like future lives, past lives, and my belief system. This sub-marine level of my mind is very murky indeed, a kind of phantom zone. I have spent decades trying to confirm or verify this or that concept as reality, and still have no confirmation one way or the other. Perhaps I will discuss this in another blog.

I can't believe I am alone in all this, but I don't hear people talking about this kind of thing. How about you? Do you know what I am talking about? I write these columns to discuss ideas, so let's do it.

STEPPING IN TABOO

June 19, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

In these last couple of blogs I realize that I'm treading on what are essentially taboo topics in our society, like the fact of our personal impermanence and the results of karma, which might not be popular or too entertaining, but we all do think about these things, questions like:

Is the "eat and/or be eaten" quality of Mother Nature connected to the dharma, and how? The answer is that you better believe it's connected and directly. In nature, you are looking right at what the dharma is designed to respond to so, as the saying goes, "Read it and weep!"

This is what we are up against folks. The Buddhists call it "Samsara," this cyclic world of existence we all live in that goes round and round forever. And we find ourselves smack dab in the middle of it, caught on the inside looking out, so we might want to reserve a little time to actually consider what all of this means rather than just continue to ignore the obvious.

This is why, what the Buddhists call the "Three Poisons" (ignorance, attachment/desire, and aversion/anger), that the principal poison is said to be Ignorance as in: what we so willingly ignore. In other words, it is right there in front of us, but we ignore it or, as I like to say, we agree to forget what we find so hard to remember. We would prefer to continue on in our life of distraction rather than come to terms with

what is for each of us in fact is a reality. Or, we don't know how to come to terms, which is more likely.

I hate to be turned into a preacher, but when I look at how things are with us, I do get the image of lemmings running off cliffs and wonder how we got the way we are. My best guess is that we just can't deal with the harsh facts of reality, things like impermanence, karma, and so on. To keep our sanity, we have to ignore a lot of what is deeply troubling and prefer to just keep whistling in the dark as we are used to. Ideas about our own inevitable death, much less the incredible amount of karma we have accumulated through simply living, and on and on... we ignore these thoughts in order to just keep on keepin' on, as they say. Otherwise we might have to just sit down, put our head in our hands, and do nothing.

What brings all this up is my concern how to respond to these raw qualities of life in a more useful way than I have. As I keep pointing out, when I was younger I easily fell into the assumption that sooner or later I could get the best of the "worst" of life and somehow stabilize my situation. But, with age, I now see that this is not possible, not ever. Sooner or later we each physically begin to fade, but the waves of life just keep on rolling in, as strong as they ever were. That is how sand is made. The motion of the ocean will eventually wear each and every one of us out of existence. In other words, we have no physical options.

What remains are mental options, doing something about all of this with our mind. After all, "If the mountain won't come to Muhammad, then

Muhammad must go to the mountain." The sheer persistence of Samsara requires that our only option is one of attitude, to change our mind or view of the mind differently, since we cannot change the fact that we suffer impermanence and are subject to karma. Of course, that is what meditation and mind training is all about.

So, if you ask me why I study and practice meditation, that is why. As far as I can see, I have no alternative other than to do, as I had been doing, which was little to nothing.

STIRRING THE POT

May 1, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I am still reorienting from our 21-day trip. On top of that I have come down with a bit of a chest cold, so that is not helpful. Inside I feel good, although I will have to find my approach to this blog all over again. Here is one topic I have on my mind lately.

This blog touches upon some tender areas, so please note that. It has mostly to do with what are called the kleshas, the emotional hot-spot buttons that most of us have. Like certain diseases (dis-ease), my emotions can flare up at a moment's notice and, depending on my response to the flare-up, grow to extreme proportions.

My dharma teacher tells this story as a way of introducing the topic. There is a garden, surrounded by a white picket fence. Inside are all manner of delicious vegetables. On the outside of that picket fence is one hungry pig who wants in. According to Rinpoche, the time to deal with the pig is when he first pokes his snout between the pickets of the fence. That's when a little smack on the nose may be effective.

Once he gets inside the picket fence, he will trample all over (and so will you) as you try to catch and evict him. Much of your garden will be destroyed. Our

emotional kleshas react much the same way, thus the above title about stirring the pot. Try not to stir the pot.

As for what kleshas (emotional hot-spots) are vulnerable, take your pick from greed, hatred, anger, conceit, mistaken views, torpor, agitation, shamelessness, recklessness, etc. The above types kind of boil down to what are called the Three Poisons, Ignorance, Attachment, and Aversion, with ignorance being the prime culprit, and ignorance is defined as “ignoring” reality, as in: the true nature of the mind, etc. The Three Poisons are sometimes divided into the Five Poisons: Ignorance, Attachment, Aversion, Pride, and Jealousy.

Not to be too formal, we are talking here about emotional upsets like anger or sexuality, whatever we have that lies dormant until our buttons are pressed. Then, the more we stir the pot, the wilder the fire grows. The fire that is relatively easy to out when it is small is very hard to put out when it rages.

If we can learn to just let our kleshas lie fallow, as in: let them alone, they can sleep on or eventually even atrophy. However, the least little attention we give them activates them. Even checking to see if they are still there is enough to raise them, and deliberately entertaining or encouraging them, well, we all know exactly what the result of that is.

And this is not just a momentary thing. Klesha stimulation is cumulative. Peek at it today, check tomorrow to see if it is still there, and so on. Every interaction only stirs the pot until we have a little forest fire on our hands. With awareness, perhaps we can

keep it down to a gentle roar, but any and all stimulation or attention only enflames the situation.

Our life then becomes like a walk through the cow pasture, where we have to watch our every step. This is not a comfortable way to live. What can be done?

Ideally, through some kind of mind-training practices, we can learn to realize the nature of our kleshas, at which time I am told they will begin to dry up and blow away. However, until then, we each stand inside that white picket fence looking at our pig(s), and trying not to start any new fires.

I guess my message here, also to myself, is to let sleeping dogs (or pigs) lie and that if we stir the pot, even a little, it is cumulative and increasingly easier to fall into the next time, starting a recursive process that feeds on itself. Kleshas are like emotional abscesses. Before we know it, our kleshas are beyond control. Just take a look at your own kleshas; check them out. Until we can develop some realization relative to our kleshas, it is probably best (and most kind) to just stop the pig from getting in the garden in the first place. I know. It is not the most elegant solution, but I am anything but elegant when it comes to the kleshas.

TAKING IT TO THE PATH

May 19, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

A familiar dharma refrain is “take whatever is happening to the path.” In other words, aside from whatever on-the-cushion dharma practice we do in the course of a day, take whatever else is going on in our day (off-the-cushion) to the path as well. And it is actually pretty easy to do and we can log many dharma-practice hours (extra credit) while we move through our day in what is called post-meditation – off-the-cushion time.

I could never get enough practice done just with on-the-cushion time. I tried, but about two hours a day was the best I could manage and still run a business and have a family. I did morning and evening ngondro (dharma boot camp), and I did ngondro twice, plus two years of Mahamudra training with H.E. Tai Situ Rinpoche, which involved a two-hour daily commitment.

If I wanted to be a concert pianist, two hours of training a day would not do it, and that was the best I could do. Often I did much less. It was like going to church just on Sunday. That would never get me to heaven, so for me it has been off-the-cushion post-meditation time that has made all the difference, which is what I am talking about here.

And we can start right where we are this minute. All that is needed is a little awareness, not much. I will

outline two simple techniques that anyone can use (I do this every day, all day if I can be mindful) and you take it from there if you wish. First, a classic Tibetan motto that is profound:

“Whatever is a cause that binds,
Is the path that liberates.
Here there is no bondage whatsoever;
Whatever binds liberates.”

This quote points to the simple fact that all day long, as we live it, various problems come to our attention. Sure, perhaps we habitually ignore them or slough them off, but that is a choice we make. Instead of turning away from what we find is unnerving or upsetting (problematic), recognize these moment for just what they are. In other words, look right at them!

This is not to say we should think the whole thing out all over again or spend precious time digging into them every time they come to mind. We have been there, done that, as they say. All that is required here is to acknowledge the existence of the thought or problem, recognize it, own it as your problem (one that you have), and let it go at that. No need to follow it or feel guilty because we don't thoroughly revisit its every nook and cranny each time it crops up.

Instead, just recognize it for what it is (there it is again!) and drop it. Move on. In general, the Buddhists don't favor endlessly examining the past (therapy) to figure out what went wrong or how to rejigger it to make it right. What they do suggest is that we work to have a clear present moment and let that moment be the start of a new past. I am not saying here that we should not sincerely regret our

own past wrongdoing, whatever that may be. We should, but the cure for our wrong-past is not endlessly poking into the abscess of it.

Just create a new past, moment by moment, and let that new clear-past accumulate enough to form a new personal history, at least to the point that our previous past does not overshadow it and is gradually forgotten. We just walk out of our past into the present. To be clear, let me repeat this technique:

Observe throughout your day whatever problems or hard thoughts emerge or present themselves to you as you go along, and they will. When such a thought arises, instead of avoiding it or ignoring it, look right at it. Recognize it, acknowledge it as your problem (no one else's), and then move on. And, as mentioned, there is no need to look further into it or analyze anything. Just allow your normal stream of thoughts to arise and at least look right at the most troubling of your thoughts as they come to mind. Life will literally present what is bothering you, a thought at a time. Let life bring it to you, thought by thought. How easy is that?

All we have to do is to recognize and accept these thoughts as our own and let them go. The advantage here is that instead of avoiding the hard thoughts, which allows them to further dig a deeper track in our mindstream, we nip them in the bud, recognize them, own them, and let them go. It does not add more karma to that track. Our mind is clearer for it. That is one of the two approaches that I suggest.

A second, and similar, practice is what I call "Reaction Tong-len." In this practice we learn to monitor our

reactions to anything at all, especially negative reactions like: “I don’t like his tie” or “She has a big nose,” and so on. This happens thousands of times each day and most such reactions just manage to accumulate more micro-karma and dig grooves or tracks that further obscure our mind. And there is a simple rule.

If it is a reaction, it is “our” reaction, regardless of what caused it. We can’t control what comes at us from the outside, whether a taunt is accidental or designed to annoy us. It does not so much matter the cause. What we can control is how we react to whatever is thrown at us. So the main rule is to recognize a reaction as ours and to own it. No one else made us react in the way we just did.

By intercepting our reactions and acknowledging them as none other than our own, we cease recording them as micro-karma or at least begin to tone them down. Here again, we gradually stop accumulating the karma of our own reactions, stop engraving their tracks indelibly in our mindstream, thus reducing our overall karmic accumulation each day. This stuff adds up!

We react all day long, so there is no scarcity of something to work with. We simply bring it to the path and make it part of our immediate practice, over and over and over, all day long. It soon becomes almost automatic.

So there you have two quite simple approaches to putting in extra hours of dharma practice time without varying your schedule even one second. Eventually we are practicing all of the time.

TAKING OUR MENTAL TEMPERATURE

June 6, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

A question that comes up a lot with sitting meditation is how long to sit and why. I have a few things to say about that, so here goes. First some words about using meditation to take our mental temperature, the state of our mind. If we meditate daily, like around the same time each day, that is a great opportunity to take our mental temperature and see just how busy or not our mind is. I don't do it much anymore because now I tend to take my mental temperature all the time, as I go along, but back when I was first learning to meditate, it was very helpful to meditate each morning at a regular time. It gave me a quick glimpse how my day would go.

It was especially useful when I was still running a business. By sitting, even for a minute or two, I could immediately see whether that morning I was cool, calm, and collected or beset by mental mosquitoes. This allowed me to decide how social I felt like being that day. If, upon sitting for a bit on the cushion, I saw that my mind was upset, etc., then I would perhaps postpone important meetings or any activity where I might be unstable, say things I didn't mean, or just not be very useful.

As mentioned, I found it best to meditate each day. And some days, when I was going to sleep (and would remember that I had forgotten to meditate), I

would sit up in bed and practice for a minute or two (more like a minute), and then plop down to sleep. I am not sure how helpful that was, except to keep my commitment to meditate alive.

In the very beginning I tried to meditate regularly, once or even twice a day, usually starting as early as I could upon awakening, like right after I brushed my teeth (and all that), but before I launched into my daily schedule. I found out that if I did not meditate early, then quite often I would get involved in one activity or another and never get around to meditating at all that day. “I will feel more like it tomorrow ...,” ran through my head, but that is a poor excuse.

And I came into meditation back in the heyday of Chögyam Trungpa and the Zen sesshin, both of which advocated very long sitting sessions. A sesshin could mean sitting all day, and I tried that too. Trungpa students were also asked to sit for long periods of time, and it was not presented as an option, but more as an obligation. You were a “woos” if you did not tough it out on the cushion. This approach did not sit well with me, pun intended.

It was only later, much later, that I found out that many (if not most) of the great Mahasiddhas suggest several short sessions rather than one long “tour de force” effort. My own teacher would say that such a brief practice could be as long as it takes to take a sip of tea and set the cup back down. So, there seem to be two different approaches here.

In the push-yourself style, the idea was to push on through the physical uncomfortableness of sitting a long time, through the boredom and mental tedium

involved, etc. The idea must have been to get to know your own mind in a brute-force sort of way, through thick and thin, for better and for worse. I can't say, because I never took to extended sitting very well. The longest time I ever sat regularly was a daily two-hour practice commitment that I took with H.E. Tai Situ Rinpoche for two years of Mahamudra training. For someone raising a family and running a company, that was a lot of time each day. But even that kind of degenerated into (as least some days) just kind of waiting it out for those two hours to expire. That's not a useful attitude and accomplished very little.

And looking back on my years of practice, all the effort of forcing my practice left more scars than it did light. While I can see it both ways, sitting one long or sitting many short sessions, when I finally began to experience what meditation actually is, it was clear to me that effort-full meditation is an oxymoron. They don't mix well.

Actual meditation is effortless, but getting there, learning to meditate, takes effort and practice. The best analogy I can come up with is that of the bobsled or luge. We push the bobsled until it gets going, then jump on and ride. Meditation is more like that. We are not meant to push or practice forever, but just until we learn to meditate, at which time we jump on and do that: meditate. Actual meditation is self-energizing.

Because of my own experience, I am very cautious about suggesting that folks push themselves to practice meditation to the point where they begin to resent it and find themselves avoiding it altogether. This happens. The old image of holding a raw egg in your hand is appropriate. If you squeeze too hard, you

break the egg, and if you are too loose with it, the egg falls and breaks. What is needed is mindfulness and constant monitoring to maintain just the right amount of pressure, not too tight and not too loose. That's it.

I found that it was best if I kept clearly in mind that all effort to practice was like the scaffolding used to put up a building. It is temporary and, like pushing the bobsled, is used just long enough to get us started, at which time it is abandoned. The scaffolding is taken down once the building is finished. It is the same with meditation and its practice.

Because effort and meditation are essentially opposites, we have to be very careful not to scar or stain our intent by forcing ourselves to practice against our will. And it is like eating some of the very hottest chili peppers. It is the after-burn we have to watch out for. The effect of pushing too hard may not be apparent as it goes down, but it seems to be cumulative, and we find out later that we should have eased off earlier. So, ease off early with effort, just enough, but not too much.

I find it best to keep in mind that the sole purpose of effort and practice is to enable true meditation. Too much effort acts like just another obscuration that we have to remove before we actually can meditate. "Once burned, twice shy," so burning our mindstream by a scorched-earth approach to practice can take a long time to recover from, and is responsible for many folks giving up meditation altogether.

Actual meditation is totally pleasurable, once we have learned how. However, learning how to meditate, like any other practice, is not always that much fun. It

takes effort and time, and we run the danger of pushing too hard and stalling our practice to the point that we begin to avoid it. This happens a lot, so be aware. Learning to meditate takes a very delicate balance of effort and relaxation. In other words, as we can't just hurry up and relax, we can't hurry up and meditate.

As for sitting on the cushion, I can tell you from experience that you can sit for decades, virtually forever, and get nowhere with meditation. Sure, you can get a little relaxation therapy and time out from your busy day (some peace and quiet), but don't imagine meditation will just creep up on you. It's not going to happen. Sitting on the cushion does not cause meditating, but rather what you do with your mind when you sit there causes meditation to kick in. While we sit, we must practice, practice, practice the meditation technique, and forcing ourselves to practice will maybe get us half the way there, but what about the other half? Let me review the process of learning to meditate.

First we have to find a quiet place and sit there. Then, while sitting there, we have to learn and practice the technique of actually meditating. And we can't just practice by rote, while we are idly thinking of something else or what we will have for lunch. We have to use our COMPLETE attention and, through that process, get to know our own mind, not by thinking thoughts or contemplating something, but by actively examining the mind itself, moment by moment, which is something we have never done before. For most, it is not easy.

In the beginning, it takes effort to find the time to sit, and then more effort to just sit there, and then a real effort not to daydream and remain distracted by thoughts, and finally a great effort to learn mindfulness, which, as mentioned, is something completely new to us.

That is a lot of effort, and effort itself has nothing to do with meditation. In fact, effort is counter-meditative. In other words, we can't meditate and try to meditate at the same time. We eventually have to give up trying to meditate in order to actually meditate.

And to top it off, at least in my opinion, meditation has to be loved into happening. Of course we all love meditating once we really learn it. The trick is how to love practicing enough to ever learn to meditate. I apologize if this sounds discouraging, which is not my intention. I am just being realistic so that you will know something about the landscape you will be passing through and not be discouraged by it. As my dharma teacher used to say to me:

“Michael, if you spend all your time in the sideshow, the main tent will be gone.

THE BLESSINGS OF THE GURU

May 18, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Something we encounter in all lineages of Tibetan Buddhism is the phrase “blessings of the guru.” And it is not just an expression said in passing or an adjunct phrase, but more often the main point itself. Dharma teachers go to great lengths to point out that dharma progress does not depend on our perseverance, diligence, qualities of mind, etc. Dharma progress depends on the blessings of the guru alone. Such an extreme statement ought to raise some eyebrows or at least get our attention. It does mine. What does this mean?

It is often written that the blessings of the guru descend or arise when we please the guru. Here is a quote I picked up online from a Lama Zopa Rinpoche”

“Even if we can recite by heart all the sutras and tantras or have studied them at university and can explain them all intellectually, it doesn’t mean much in terms of realization, because generating within our mind the paths revealed by the teachings has to depend on receiving the blessings of the guru.

“Receiving the nectar of the guru’s blessings depends on our having the devotion that sees the guru as a Buddha. Without the blessings of the guru, there is no way we can have realizations, no way we can actualize the three principal paths and the two stages of tantra. ... We need a guru for a special reason, to

receive the blessings that enable us to develop our mind in the path to enlightenment.

“The ultimate request is, recalling the qualities of the guru, praying for our own body, speech and mind to become one with the guru’s holy body, holy speech and holy mind. The main way to receive blessings is to request to receive all the qualities that the guru has.”

For those readers that don’t like the idea of a guru to begin with, this must be a showstopper. There is no subtlety here, no beating around the bush. This is obviously a ring-pass-not requirement, and not an option. I can find no way to rationalize such a statement, so that I might dismiss or ignore it. It reminds me of the “Straight is the gate and narrow is the way” from the New Testament. In other words, there is no back door.

“Grant Your Blessings” is often translated as “Engulfment by splendor,” which is even more dramatic. So how are we to understand all of this? On the one hand we are told that our enlightenment totally depends on our efforts and practice. On the other, we are told that any progress will only come from the blessings of the guru. Which is it or is it both?

I can’t claim to be an expert in all of this, so what you are getting is just my opinion. First, these kinds of statements seem to be connected only to Vajrayana Buddhism, where a student works very closely with a guru, so of course the guru sits at the tip of the top of authority. And this is not just any guru, one of perhaps many teachers we may have, but is reserved for one

particular guru, called the “Tsawi Lama” or root guru, which is the one teacher among all teachers we may have had who first successfully points out to us the actual or true nature of the mind. This is key.

So, when we talk about being engulfed by the guru’s blessing or splendor, we are already talking about a very, very special relationship, that between a student and the one lama or teacher in our life who actually precipitates what is called “recognition” of the mind’s true nature in the student’s mind. This is the same teacher that the student does what is called “Guru Yoga” practice with, where the student’s mind mixes with that of the guru, again: very special.

So it should not come as any surprise that the development of the student depends on receiving the blessing of the guru. Some say this comes from pleasing the guru, having the guru smile on our efforts in some way. While trickle-down economics may not work, trickle-down blessings from the guru seem to.

Ultimately the student mixes his or her mind with that of the guru until they are mixed, at which time the need to be in close proximity to the guru is no longer needed, if it ever was.

In my own experience, the blessings of the guru have very much been present. And there is a gratuitous quality to those blessings. They do seem to roll downhill and engulf one without warning. And the effect is to suddenly have greater awareness, which enables the turning of our personal dharma wheel, and our dharma does progress.

What does it boil down to? There seems to be a general raising of consciousness or increased awareness long enough to make substantial changes in direction or method. As for me, I seem to always be getting bound up in whatever efforts I am making in the way of dharma practice to where I seem to have no more wiggle room. Everything is flat out and seems locked down.

The blessings from the guru seem to give me a shot of awareness that does seem gratuitous. Nothing I have done seems to have precipitated or deserve it. It just rolls in, I kind of wake up a bit, and make some real progress.

Since this blog is meant to encourage conversation about the topics, what are your experiences or comments about this?

THE BODY PARTY

May 10, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

There is no doubt that my body has had a life-long party, with and without my permission. In this blog I will be talking about food, but the same idea also extends to other areas of life. Oddly enough, unlike my spirit, the body acts as if it is not going to live forever, so its slogan is party-hearty while you can.

To make it worse, I grew up as a kid through the 1950s, probably this country's worst health scare, food-wise. The current sugar craze was born during those times, witness the endless kinds of candy and sweets, many of which are still with us today. Basically, I grew up in a candy store which, if you add to that the Hostess products like Twinkies, cupcakes, and all of those sugar-glazed mini fruit-pies, dominated our diet. We ate sweet things everywhere and all the time, whenever we wanted or could get away with it.

So, for me it was kind of a full-stop when in the late 1960s and early 1970s this idea of whole and organic foods arose. And I was very much a part of that movement. As a well-known astrologer in Ann Arbor, Michigan at the time, I was asked to pick the date for the opening of Eden Foods, today the last major company from that time that is still in private hands.

The others now belong to various conglomerates. And not only did I pick the date for Eden's Grand Opening (November 4, 1969), I also designed the graphic logo for that company, which is still used today. After all, these folks were also my personal friends and contemporaries.

Eden Foods was preceded (or coincident) in Ann Arbor with the advent of Macrobiotics, with teachers like Michio Kushi, Noburu Muramoto, Herman and Cornelia Aihara, and many others. This was in the early 1970s. Before we knew it, our basement was filled with wooden kegs containing Mugi Miso, Hatcho Miso, Tamari, Umeboshi plums, bran pickles, and so on. All those wooden casks and kegs are lovely even today to remember.

At the same time, we learned to make our own tofu, sweet mochi rice, bran pickles, tekka, gomasio, and all kinds of other stuff. And we learned to cook all of these foods from scratch. Often we did this as a group, by gathering at one person's house and all making a meal together. Of course, there was teaching, courses, not to mention all of the macrobiotic literature, which not only is condensed, but also didactic and a little far out. The works of George Osawa marked the high-water mark of theory in the world of Macrobiotics, at least at that time.

All of this amounted to a first-wave assault on the sugar craze we were born from and now found

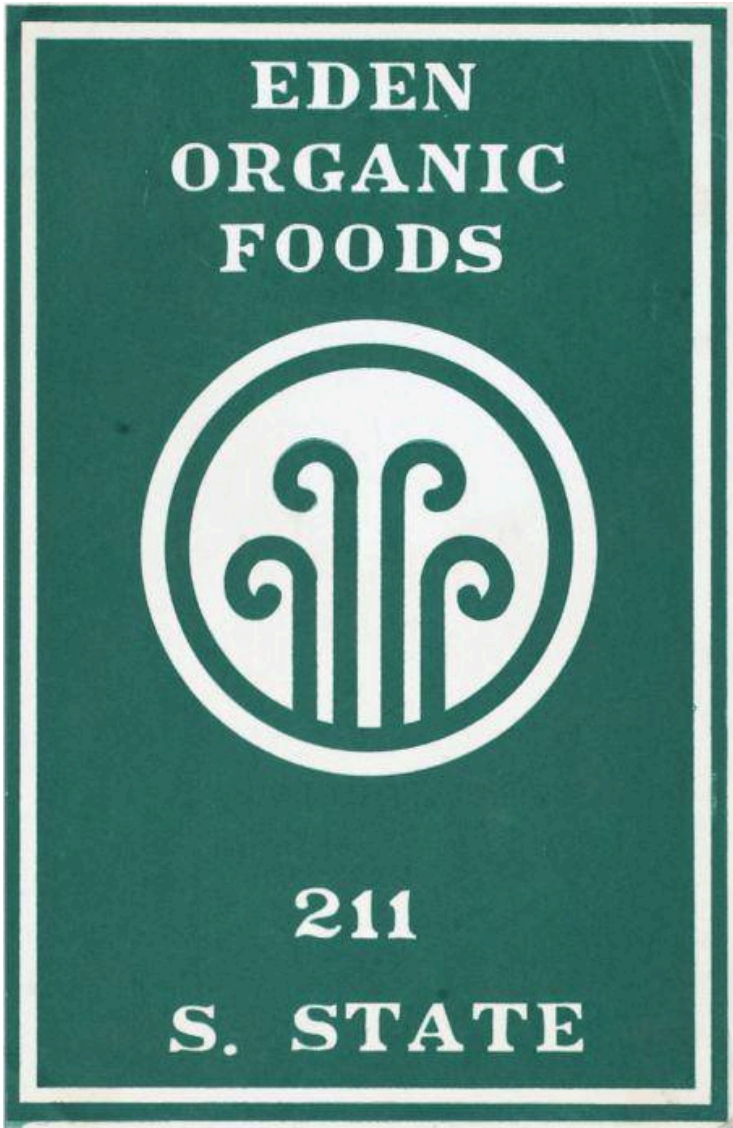
ourselves arising out of. Since I am a true child of the 1960s, I am often asked what benefit all of the Sixties hoopla amounts to. I won't try to go into that here, but I will mention that we can thank the Sixties era for flagging our sugar-train down and pointing out to us how damaging it is to our lives, not to mention the advent of natural and organic foods.

To mention this historically today, some 40+ years later, is one thing, very cut and dried, but to have all of this happen fresh back then, in real-time, was very disruptive to the food habits of that time. We could even say that it was radically different, this idea of macrobiotics, which basically breaks down to balancing foods and health, as in: treating food like the medicine it is.

This is old news, but for many (if not most) people it is as new today as it was for us back then. The rise of companies like Whole Foods make natural food available to us, but at an extravagant prices. At least it is there. Yet, keep in mind that not that many decades ago, the same simple organic food that is now offered to us at premium prices by these large companies was the food that almost everyone naturally ate, and it cost next to nothing. Go figure.

I believe I have more to say on this topic and, as they say, "If the good god is willing and the creek don't rise," I will try to continue with this food theme.

[Here is one of the original posters I designed for Eden Foods back in the late 1960s.]



THE INTERVIEW WITH RINPOCHE

June 30, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I know that some of you might like a report on how our 10-day meditation intensive here at KTD Monastery in the mountains above Woodstock New York is going and I have been trying to get you that. After all, this is the 27th year that Margaret and I have traveled to the monastery to hear the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche teach on Mahamudra Meditation and its preliminaries. In a word, it is going well.

I have been very busy doing all kinds of things including, hopefully, learning more about that nature of the mind and how to rest in that. That must be some kind of oxymoron, being busy resting. One important event each year is a short interview with our teacher Khenpo Rinpoche, when we can obtain one. Rinpoche is also very busy and it can be hard to schedule an interview.

Interviews are typically 15-minutes each and Margaret and I share ours, so that we have a full thirty minutes together with Rinpoche to ask whatever questions we might have about our practice (and lives) and to catch him up with the goings on of each of our four kids (and now the grandkids) whom he has known since they were very young. Rinpoche likes to know about each one of them. Before our kids were old enough to be on their own, we (of course) brought all of them

each year to the monastery, which was a bit of a juggling act.

Of course I shared with Rinpoche exactly what I am doing in my personal dharma practice; I always do because I want him to know and to point out to me where I might be drifting off-course or could improve. That is the beauty of working closely with a teacher who has taken responsibility to guide us in learning meditation. They actually know more than we do! LOL.

One thing that was discussed is the kind of work I do here, like writing about dharma to folks on Facebook (and elsewhere), which is perhaps in a little different format than the traditional sharing of this type of material. Rinpoche expressed confidence in what I am doing and said that he has trust in me to choose the right methods of presentation, etc., like what I am doing here in these blogs. It was good for me to have his blessing and an acknowledgement or confirmation that I have correctly learned this material and can share it with others. That is my most sincere wish, to myself learn the authentic dharma and to be able to share that with anyone interested.

We did discuss my working one-to-one with students, and I explained that mostly I am writing to a group of folks like those of you reading blogs like this. However I did communicate to him that I am aware that it would be better if everyone had some meditation instructor whom they trust to work with them one-to-one. Obviously, that is what I have been doing with Rinpoche for the last 30+ years.

As to that, earlier-on I invited any Facebook friends who want to learn meditation (and don't have an

instructor) to contact me personally and perhaps I could be of help, just as I try to be useful in these blogs. And some of you did, but there was very little follow-up aside from an initial expression of interest. So I repeat my offer. I don't have unlimited time, but if a few of you have a sincere desire to learn to meditate and need some suggestions and guidance personally, I am open to working with you. Yet there is little use unless you are willing to follow through with some practice. You can private-message me here on Facebook and provide me with your regular email if interested.

So that's a quick review of what happened in my interview with Rinpoche. The teachings are stellar of course. This year Rinpoche is teaching what is called Lojong "The Seven Points of Mind Training," which is the classic text in developing a heartfelt approach to mind-training, what is called Bodhicitta. In a word, "Bodhicitta" is what keeps us going on our dharma path, an aerodynamically-sound attitude that, like fusion, gives us an endless supply of clean energy and enthusiasm for the dharma.

Anyway, that's my update. I am on-the-case out here at the monastery, learning what I can.

THE MAGNITUDE OF SAMBARA

June 4, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

What is there to know about Samsara, aside from that it is the opposite of Nirvana? It is also frequently described as the vicious cycles of cause and effect that we find ourselves embedded in. The main point about Samsara that needs to be realized is its persistence. It literally wears us out of existence and into essence. The old phrase “The hits just keep on coming” originally referred to the Top Forty, but they have kind of come to mean the shockwaves of life these days. And they do just keep on coming.

When we are young enough, perhaps we can even surf the waves of Samsara for a while, but as age takes its toll, there has never been any living sentient being that has not succumbed to Samsara (as far as death goes), so good luck!

Of the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma,” it is that Fourth Thought, often translated as the “revulsion of Samsara,” that for me is the kicker. If we don’t feel revulsion at Samsara, it is because we have not yet lived quite long enough. Shakespeare’s Hamlet kind of sets the stage:

“For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely
The pang of despised love, the law's delay,

The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of th' unworthy takes,

Samsara is the accumulated karma not just of ourselves, but the karma of everyone else and the entire world. It amounts to an onrushing mass of karma that, like a freight train, will shed any particular being as time tells, just as a snake sheds its skin.

As I like to tell myself about the Fourth Thought, we will never get all our ducks in a row, much less have a snowball's chance in hell of gaming the system. All of this frightening imagery I am using is not meant to discourage us from living, but rather to send a shot across our bow as to the eventual outcome of any hope of permanent success. Just like Samsara, we too also tend to be very persistent. We keep trying. A popular definition of insanity is to keep repeating the same action and expect a different outcome. That would be how most of us persist in Samsara, persistently reifying it.

Let's call that enough fire & brimstone for now. Let's cut to the chase and take a look at what is causing us to remain in Samsara eon after eon. Aside from whatever circumstances I am embedded in my life situation, the culprit is none other than me, myself, and I. And here is how (IMO) this all works:

It is very simply all about cycles, and of course that is how Samsara is often described, as cyclic – vicious cycles. Cycles go up and down, as do our moods. When we are “up,” and in what is termed an upswing or out-of-the-body state, life is grand. It is in those “up” moments that we affirm life and desire it to go on. We “up” our subscription to life and wish it would go

on (like this) forever. We literally specifically ask or wish for it.

Then, a few days, weeks, or months later, when we are in the “down” part of the cycle, the in-the-body (and suffering) time, we decry our former wish to live forever, and wish we could escape our fate, the same fate we just asked for a while before. And that is how it goes, up, down, and around again – forever. If you are still following me, it is in those “up” times that of course we should enjoy, but at the same time not keep desiring to live forever. As far as desire goes, we should let our subscription finally run out by training our mind to see beyond our own obscurations.

I know, this may sound simplistic to you, but sit with it awhile, think it through clearly, and you will find our own desires and attachments are what bind us to the wheel of the cycles of life and death. We do it to ourselves consciously and with a will.

I could go on and on, but I have learned through writing these blogs that for most people this will go in one ear and out the other. Yet, for a few of you, those who actually take the time to digest this concept and think it through, it might be helpful -- maybe so, maybe not.

As for the takeaway from this, there are a couple of points. First, it will take us a very, very, very long time to ‘realize” that we are endlessly busy creating Samsara, and perhaps even more time to have had enough of it, much less actually be repelled by it. Where to you think every grain of sand comes from?

If we can manage to finally realize the nature of Samsara, then we can, literally, stop pinching ourselves by endlessly desiring more and more and more. If we let our desires and attachments lapse, we will gradually stop recording karma and our inner vision, like a bad complexion, will begin to clear up. As our mind clears, we will cease being blindsided by obscurations and actual start to realize the true nature of our mind (including Samsara) and the whole enchilada.

The Mahasiddhas tell us that, once we realize it, Samsara and Nirvana are two sides of the same coin, but for now, to us, those are just words.

THE NATURE OF CONCENTRATION

June 1, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Concentration is a natural function of the mind; we all do it and “concentratedly” at that, but perhaps not on demand. We concentrate when something interests us to the exclusion of everything else, and it happens fairly often. This type of concentration (that we all have) is only a hop, skip, and a jump from concentration as used in Tranquility meditation (Shamata). We only need to add a little mindfulness, if even that. Since we can all already concentrate, what’s the problem?

Just waiting for something ‘that’ interesting to come along may be too infrequent for most of us. We need to be able to concentrate like that more often, for example, on demand. That notion, however, brings up the whole specter of practice and learning the discipline of concentration, and that is a whole other ordeal for many of us. It is like going to school on concentration.

We don’t have any problem concentrating during a riveting movie, when reading the last chapter of our favorite mystery, in an emergency traffic situation, or with anything that we are really, really interested in. That should tell us that we all have the ability to concentrate when properly motivated. So, if we fall asleep meditating, are bored, or find ourselves avoiding it, something is wrong, because we all find

that true concentration occurs naturally when we have the interest and motivation.

Basic Tranquility meditation is simply concentrating mindfully and, as needed, but, as mentioned, many find this kind of meditation tedious and difficult to learn. So, in meditation we need to be able to concentrate basically, at will, not just when the conditions are right. If we are already practicing and learning meditation, then we already know one approach, that of rote practice -- irrespective of conditions. If that works for us, great. However, if it is not working so well, we might want to supplement the traditional "practicing" approach with something more enjoyable.

Since we know that we can already concentrate when we have a perfect-storm of interest, like an exciting movie, or whatever intrigues us, finding what we naturally love to concentrate on may be the first step to a supplemental approach to learning Tranquility meditation.

We can do this by looking around in our life (and reviewing our past skills) to find something that required great concentration on our part, but that we have mastered and already love (or at least know how) to do. Once we find that "something," we can simply incorporate it into our meditation practice, i.e. learn to meditate while doing that.

What I mean is that, with something we love to do, half the work is already done, joyfully concentrating. We just need to do it mindfully, consciously, and at will. We can bring these two worlds together, that of rote practicing and that of concentrating on something

we love to do. This particular approach saved the day for me, and herein is a story.

It is a long story, and I have told it thoroughly elsewhere, so let me just cherry-pick through the main points. I had been practicing Tranquility meditation for over thirty years, and quite regularly. If you had asked me at the time, I would have said I was meditating, although today I realize I was still just “practicing” meditation. And then there came a life situation.

I had just lost the job I had working as a senior consultant for NBC, when they laid off a huge number of people. I was one of them. We all hear about layoffs, but it is very different when you are the one laid off. Well, I was laid off and was 67 years old, with no income.

I was tired of always doing what I had to do (I had just been doing that), so I did just nothing for a while, like for maybe six months. I did worse than nothing; I did something totally and unexpectedly different. I just went out into nature and simply lost myself. Goodbye cruel world!

I had been trained since early childhood as a naturalist, but had wandered away from it through the busy years of trying to support a growing family -- a wife, four kids, and a dog or two. And the directness of nature was often too brutal for me to see, at least not that often.

But, with the mood I was in that year, I really didn't care. I needed some direct one-to-one time with nature, and so I just went out in the fields and streams each day and stayed there for many hours. And

perhaps to have a reason to be out in nature, were I to be seen, I took along my camera and began to do close-up and macro photography. I loved the pristine tiny worlds that I could see through the camera lens, compared to the whirlwind of fear and darkness swirling around me in my outer life at the time.

I believe I was out at dawn almost every day it did not rain from late May until the frost came, sometime in October. Think about that. When was the last time you watched the sun come up, much less every day for like half a year? I am sure my neighbors and the folk in the small town I live in wondered what I was doing out there, crawling around in the wet grass at dawn, if they were even up. I could feel them looking at me as they drove by. And I am sure my family worried about what was happening to me. But I didn't care.

So there you have it; the stage is set. You know what I was doing and perhaps something about the reason I was doing it. And now I am getting to the point of why I am telling you all of this. I had already lost my job, so from my view I had nothing to lose, so I threw myself into peering through these close-up lenses at the miniature worlds that I could see through them, and with a passion. If nothing else, it was a diversion from all the other stuff I had to think about.

And of course, I loved nature (and had since childhood), but had pushed it out of my life because the harshness of nature was just too painful for me to look at too often. But that year it was like smelling salts for me. It woke me up. Nature was just how I felt, and in it I was at home with the harsh realities of life. I was very much reviewing and living through the "Four

Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma.”
After all, these same four thoughts were what got me started identifying with Buddhism many years before:

THE FOUR THOUGHTS THAT TURN THE MIND

- (1) This human life is precious. Use it for a good purpose.
- (2) Life is impermanent, as fragile as a soap bubble.
- (3) Karma is certain. Every cause has an effect.
- (4) This cyclic existence is inherently undependable. We will never game the system, or get all our ducks in a row.

With these four thoughts firmly in mind, there I was, out in nature each day witnessing the four thoughts acted out in excruciating detail. And the moral of this story, so to speak, is that I really threw myself into nature, looking through these very fine lenses at plants and little critters with all my heart. And I really, really concentrated on waiting for the Michigan wind to die down, on focusing ever so clearly, and sometimes taking many shots at different focal length of the same flower, etc. and combining them into a single photo. Again, great concentration required.

And so it was that during this time that I, without expecting it, just naturally fell into true meditation. I was out there, crawling on my belly in the cold dew of the wet grass just as the sun came up, and all soaking wet. And I did this day after day and month after month. At some point along the way I realized I was actually meditating, and understood that what I had done up to that point (for the last 30+ years) was learning to meditate, “practicing,” but not actually just meditating.

And what had done it, aside from being thrown by life out of my habitual routine, was the joyful concentration and mindfulness that I had never managed to bring to bear while sitting on the cushion, but that came easily with the joy I felt in peering at tiny critters through fine lenses, plus the compassion that I spontaneously felt for all these tiny sentient beings whose fragile lives were spent trying to find something to eat, while not themselves being eaten. It was this kind of concentration and joy in being out there in nature that I had not ever been able to bring to my on-the-cushion meditation practice. After a while, the only way I could meditate was out in nature, with camera in hand. How's that for a reversal? If I wanted my mind to be clear, I had to go out and photograph!

I am not suggesting that you give up your on-the-cushion practice. That would be mistaking my point. What I do suggest is that you might look around for something you love to do (and take joy in) that involves concentration, and try to mix your practice with that. Think of it as supplemental insurance.

Years ago, my dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, pointed out to me (and to others) that those who spend a lot of time on the computer in concentration might have a leg-up on the rest of us, since many of the necessary ingredients for meditation could be found there. That comment struck me to the heart, because, as a systems programmer, I typically spent 12 hours (sometimes more) concentrating on programming, often seven days a week. Why not mix that concentration with my dharma practice? In that summer, I finally did.

I should note that for three years prior to the above story, I had been doing just that, using my computer time and concentration dharmically. I have written about that, as well. So, there you have it, a suggestion that you might look through your life to where you naturally concentrate joyfully, and bring that to your dharma path.

THE POLYMATH

June 15, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Some time ago someone referred to me as a “polymath,” and I had to run and look that word up in a dictionary. For all I knew it might be like a sociopath or something. All it means is that you have a wide-range of interests. A polymath is someone who knows something about a lot of different subjects. OK, I might be that, but then it occurred to me that folks could get the wrong idea about how I know about different subjects, so I want to set that straight.

I am not what we might call a serial polymath, meaning that first I learn this until I master it, then a learn this, and so on, like people get a degree in this subject, then add another degree, and so on -- ad-infinitum. Not that. My point is that I am not an individual who goes and serially masters field after field, but rather I am an individual who has tried to master the mind itself to some degree and then shine the light of the mind into several areas -- a big difference. I don't look “out there” and then “over there,” etc.

Instead of studying everything “out there,” I have, with the help of some great teachers, learned to look “in-here,” and study the mind itself. Turning the mind on itself and sharpening it is (for me) preferable to trying to get sharp in one field after another. It is like one of those Swiss Army knives, one knife can do many things. And the chief training I have undertaken in this

regard is to learn Insight Meditation (Vipassana). Someone trained in insight meditation can go into any field and sort it out, make some sense of it. There is that old parable of the king who attempted to cover his kingdom with leather so that he could walk anywhere, when if he covered his feet with a single pair of shoes, he would achieve that.

So, instead of learning one thing after another in serial fashion, I learned one thing only, which is something about how the mind works and, armed with that, I look at whatever fields out there that interest me. I shine my inner light out there in the world and illuminate things that way. As mentioned, the main training I use for this is what is called Insight Meditation (Vipassana), which reminds me a little bit of how a gun works: wherever you point it and press the trigger, it goes off in that direction.

In plain English, this means that the insight in “insight meditation” is secular as well as spiritual. It does not care where it looks, and is more like a natural law -- sheer physics. The “insight” referred to here is not just “spiritual” insight, but insight into anything you concentrate on, which is a little bit disconcerting, because just about everything in the world is fascinating when looked at in the light of insight, as in: insight into what it is.

Or, in still other words, the dividing line (if there ever was one) between the sacred and the profane, between nirvana and samsara, dissolves so that wherever you shine the light of insight, some kind of realization takes place. You realize something. Anywhere you look, you see. While we like to consider insight “spiritual” and look at things

“dharmically,” everything is dharma on insight. That too is a realization. It’s like having a kind of X-ray vision.

Although insight meditation (Vipassana) is sometimes taught at the same time as tranquility meditation (Shamata), usually we first learn tranquility meditation, which gives us the stability and concentration needed to undertake learning insight meditation. The image of these two kinds of meditation that I like is that of threading a very small needle with shaky hands. Learning tranquility meditation helps steady the hands, so that we can thread the needle, which is insight meditation. Our goal is threading the needle, so in this scenario, tranquility meditation is a means to enable that, as opposed to an end in itself.

Yet, in very advanced meditation, like Mahamudra Meditation, tranquility and insight meditation are taught together and the interaction of both are necessary to achieve success in Mahamudra Meditation.

What are these two types of meditation like?

Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) involves learning to let your mind rest “concentratedly,” and with mindfulness. It is not a technique of exclusion, like blocking out or stopping thoughts, but just the opposite. Tranquility Meditation involves letting everything in, but not being distracted by it. An analogy I use: this type of meditation is like when we work on a computer, we take the mouse and place the cursor somewhere on the screen. When we take our hand off the mouse, the cursor stays where we

left it until we decide otherwise. Tranquility Meditation is like that, placing the mind, and having it stay naturally focused and at rest until further notice.

On the other hand, Insight Meditation (Vipassana) is more difficult to describe, perhaps because the texts all point out that it cannot be described properly with words. You have to experience it for yourself. That being said:

In truth, at least as I understand it, Insight Meditation cannot be done until we achieve what is called “recognition,” catching at least a glimpse of the true nature of the mind itself. Recognition requires a teacher that we can work closely enough with for the instructions on recognition to be understood and actual recognition to take place. Recognition is another one of those events that cannot be put into words. After “Recognition” takes place, then actual Insight Meditation can begin.

I know. There are other definitions and approaches to Insight Meditation, but this is the only one I actually know and understand. In Insight Meditation, we stop following thoughts and learn, instead, to look at their nature rather than their content (what they are about). And the nature of thoughts is identical to the nature of the mind itself. About all I can say is that Insight Meditation is perhaps the most fascinating and illuminating practice I have ever experienced. Although it is not “enlightenment,” or anything close, it is, indeed, life changing.

So any approximation to being a polymath on my part comes from learning a simple tool (Insight Meditation), and then using it to look at the world,

here and there. It is like having a lamp in an otherwise dark room.

THE POWER OF PERSONS

April 30, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I can't think of anyone I have ever met who is more careful about taking from other persons than I am. In grade and high school I was pretty much unteachable, and this continued as I became a young adult. This is especially true when it comes to any kind of spiritual teaching, where I am even more cautious.

It is clear from yesterday's post about personal interaction and contacts with His Holiness the 17th Karmapa that some of you found my story uncomfortable to say the least. And it is clear to me that others felt the same way, but did not say so. I am sorry if I offended you.

I am reminded of the Nina Simone lyrics (later made popular by the "Animals"):

"I'm just a soul whose intentions are good,
Oh Lord,
Please don't let me be misunderstood."

We each make ourselves known through what we might agree is a limited personality, the visible means by which our soul or individuality communicates our inner essence to the outside world through our person. And let's not forget just what any personality is, a combination of the worldly circumstances (this body, our looks, these gifts, etc.) in which we happen

to find ourselves as expressed through whatever persona, the various attachments we have gathered around us that masks our soul. We may not even be that aware of how we appear, although others usually are.

We may do our best to make-up the appearance of our personality but, as mentioned, it finally is a montage of what we think is attractive (our attachments) and what we were given at birth. Some people are better make-up artists than others, with personalities so attractive that these persons become celebrated, like rock stars. The rest of us have, simply put, less attractive personalities, conventionally speaking. Due to my own rather limited personality, my motto has always been “Don’t judge a book by its cover.” Hopefully I am not just what I appear, as in: what I look like. I am sure that many of you feel this same way.

On the one hand we are completely used to celebrating movie-star personalities, which is what Hollywood is all about, while at the same time not feeling that same way about the personalities of our spiritual leaders. With spiritual gifts, it is what is inside that counts, not just the window-dressing.

As an American, I was particularly sensitive when I first began to seriously encounter spiritual persons from Asia. This was mostly back in the later 1950s and early 1960s, when all kinds of swamis, yogis, Baba-This-and-That, Zen masters, and what-not began to pop up all over. Sampling this exotic cuisine propelled me into just what I pointed out above, trying to sort out their personalities from the inner souls or spiritual individualities. I particularly disliked pictures

of Asians sitting on a throne, wearing turbans, or in any way elevating themselves above the rest of us. After all, we Americans don't do that. We believe in a level playing field for everyone, while at the same time jockeying for position ourselves.

And, for the most part, I was justified in resenting spiritual figures that drew attention to their power or importance, but there is a conundrum here that puzzles the mind. While most of the spiritual gurus from the East, to my mind, seemed to be just drawing attention to themselves, there was another type that did just the reverse. The more I got to meet these types, the more their presence empowered me. In other words, their effect was to help me realize the true nature of my own worth and not just theirs. And that, my friends, is a big difference.

It started with my first real-life teacher, the Rosicrucian initiator Andrew Gunn McIver. It was clear to me (and for the first time in my life) that here was someone who cared more about me than I knew how to care for myself and this was an anomaly in my experience. It stopped me on the spot because it reversed the usual cult of the personality, where we are invited to sit at the feet of the master, so to speak. Every time I sat with Andrew McIver, I came away better understanding myself, not him. His nature remained and remains somewhat of a mystery to me.

With all the swamis and various yogi masters, it was just the reverse. I came away from those encounters being more dependent on their special wisdom, as opposed to my own. And that is how I separate the wheat from the chaff, for me. Let me give an example.

At one point, as an astrologer, I often attended all kinds of New Age conferences, at which I would meet many psychics, mediums, oracles, and you-name-it. I ended up checking out séances, message circles, and the like. What I found out about psychics, at least in my experiences, is that they tend to bind you to their words and premonitions. One such psychic said that I would have an accident on a particular bridge in Ann Arbor. Well, some 45 years or so has passed, and no accident yet. However, every time I get to Ann Arbor and go over that bridge, the onus of the premonition still weighs on me.

Multiply that psychic pronouncement by dozens or hundreds of such utterances and the sheer mental clutter is overpowering, and it all stems from the words of one person. This reminds me of some chiropractors that work on you, and if you want to feel right from then on, you have to go back to them for the rest of your life. No thank you. I want to be liberated, not further bound.

My point here is that some spiritual figures bind you to their person, while others help you to liberate yourself. I prefer the second type, although I can admit that one man's liberator in another man's prison. As they say, there are 84,000 dharma paths. We each have to find the one(s) that work for us.

Another axiom that I tend to support is that the ability of one teacher to point out our path to realization does not depend on their particular personality. They may be a drunk, a bum, or whatever. The only consideration is whether they can point out to me the true nature of my mind so that I can get it. As it turns

out, my main Buddhist teacher has an incredibly gentle personality.

Even great spiritual teachers like the Karmapa have a down-to-earth personality like we do, some way to manifest. Remember the touching-earth gesture of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni. Our personality is where the rubber meets the road, how our inner individuality shines through, and all that glitters is not gold.

I have written many times that my first impression on meeting the 17th Karmapa in 1997 on his home turf in Tibet was not about how powerful he was, but rather an immediate realization of my own inner nature, how compassionate at heart I was. So, for those of you worrying about the cult of the personality of figures like the Karmapa, you are IMO on the wrong track. My respect for His Holiness is based on his ability to help me realize myself, not in elevating his prestige. He doesn't need that.

If you ask me if I would like to sit at the dinner table with His Holiness or on a seat near him so that I could actually see him, the answer is I would, of course. And there is an ironic twist here:

We want to get close to His Holiness, not to crawl into his skin, but so that we can learn to be content in our own. We look outward to him in order to see inwardly our own goodness. Go figure, but that is the case as I see it.

Working security for His Holiness recently, I saw all kinds of ways people tried to insinuate themselves closer to His Holiness. One of my favorites was a

person I know pretending to be in a group from another country just so they could have an audience with the Karmapa, as in: be in the same room. Since I was called on to photograph that group, I have this group picture to prove it, one complete center's sangha, with that one albatross sticking out like a sore thumb.

In summary, what perhaps appears like the cult of the personality of a figure like the Karmapa is not really so, at least as I know it. As mentioned earlier, I don't want to get inside the skin of the Karmapa, but just be more content within my own skin. I know from direct realization that the Karmapa enables such a realization. So don't worry about me gilding the lily or worshiping idols. I suggest you consider examining your own tolerance for what you are unfamiliar with personally. My own teacher used to say to me "Michael, don't say nobody knows; just say I don't know."

As the saying goes "There is no accounting for taste, said the old woman as she kissed the pig."

[Here is a photo I took at a previous visit of His Holiness the 17th Karmapa to KTD Monastery. Behind him is his previous incarnation, the 16th Karmapa, sitting on a throne.]



URGENCY: SUMMARY

June 11, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

This is the third and final part of this series on urgency in dharma practice, so I will give a summary and some closing thoughts.

On the one hand we have the dharma practice we have been given or have discovered works for us. And we may or may not have any great signs that it is working yet. Then, on the other hand, we have to fight against time to get at least to somewhere with our practice that will help us to influence the outcome of our upcoming bardo experience.

As mentioned earlier, these two aspects are not only related but should be working hand in hand. However, it is all too easy for them to get out of phase with one another, so that the urgency of the bardo confrontation distracts us from our dharma practice enough so that we somehow manage not to get that job done well enough with the result that our mind will not be ready to meet the bardo. This vicious cycle is not uncommon.

As mentioned earlier, the proper sequence is that with the help of a qualified teacher, the true nature of the mind is introduced to us, studied, and pointed out, leading to our own recognition and the subsequent steps in dharma practice toward realization. If we can

sustain that, we automatically will be ready for the bardo and will have no need for fear.

However, if due to advancing age or lack of faith in the techniques or a teacher, the urgency to get the mind in order overshadows the calm and steadiness needed to make progress in mind training, we have a problem. The tail is wagging the dog.

As you see, this can be a concern, one well worth being aware of. The point of the 'fire and brimstone' talk was not to imbue you with still more pressure, and not to force you to force yourself to practice harder, but hopefully to encourage you to practice smarter.

When the meditation teachings say to "rest the mind," they actually mean 'rest', not to push or force anything. The eventual outcome of all this (the bardo after death) is of crucial importance to us and yet mindlessly forcing ourselves forward is not restful. Although oxymoronic, we are in somewhat of a hurry to rest the mind, if that makes any sense. And forcing yourself to rest is difficult to do, just as trying to get to sleep when you have insomnia is difficult. "Hurry up and rest!" does not work.

The ancient metaphor of holding a raw egg in your hand comes to mind. Too much pressure and the egg breaks, too little and the egg falls and breaks. If we force ourselves to practice too much, we get nowhere, and if we are so lax we hardly practice, we get nowhere. Like holding the egg, it takes just the right amount of pressure to make progress. So it can be helpful to examine our practice to see if at the present we are forcing it or not doing it enough. Proper

practice is not a switch you can just turn on or off, but something that requires constant attention and vigilance. That is the whole idea of meditation, remaining aware all the time -- learning to do that.

Ultimately, most of our practice is just that, "practice," and not the real thing. We are going through the steps and motions perhaps for years until something clicks and we actually get the idea of what we have been trying to do all that time.

The Function of the Teacher

In both the Zen tradition and the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the role of the teacher is to point out to the student the true nature of the mind and how it works. Everything else is secondary and not essential. Once that job is done, once the teacher has pointed out to the student the true nature of the mind, and the student has recognized it, the teacher's work is done. Period,

Perhaps the most common obstacles to recognizing the actual nature of the mind are the hopes and expectations of the student. Invariably, we build up an idea of what recognition or enlightenment is, based on books, teachings, and our own imagination. We 'think' we know what we are looking for, when by definition we don't or we would already have it.

That is why in some cases the teacher must disappoint those expectations, using whatever means necessary. This is perhaps most clear in the Zen tradition, where the master employs laughter, comedy, force, surprise, etc. to upset the applecart of the student long enough for them to let go of their

fixed expectations and let some natural light and air come in.

It is at that moment of recognition of the mind's nature that the student stops guessing, expecting, and wondering, and instead just gets it, not enlightenment, but we simply understand for the first time the actual nature of mind we have been trying to figure out all this time. And by seeing the problem, we simultaneously see the solution and know how to deal with it.

The Student

In other words, recognizing the true nature of the mind brings its own response, the chief hallmark of which is literally becoming responsible for our own dharma practice. In that instant of recognition, the torch passes from the teacher to the student, not because anything has really been transmitted, but because the student is no longer looking outward to the teacher and world for direction, but suddenly sees how to direct his or her own practice for the first time.

In that moment of recognition, it is obvious to the student what needs to be done and recognition is not an experience that will pass, but a simple "Aha, I get it now!" It is like those figure-ground paintings where you look and look and suddenly you see the image within the image. You recognize what it is and can see it at will from that time forward -- a simple recognition, not an experience that comes and goes.

We no longer need a teacher because we finally see the problem ourselves and instantly know how to deal with it, and it is also clear to us that only we can do it

because we each have to enlighten ourselves. No one else can do it for us, not even a Buddha.

And while this initial recognition of the actual nature of the mind is not enlightenment, it marks a clear turning point on the dharma path and the beginning of really effective practice. In recognizing the true nature of the mind, the student also recognizes that they already have everything needed to practice properly, and that in fact no one else could do it for them.

There is nothing further that we need from that point onward except the time to actually and finally practice properly.

In summary, once we recognize the nature of the mind, that is, the way the mind actually works, we no longer need a teacher, for we finally see that it is completely up to us. Once we see the nature of the mind, we see what it is and it is obvious how to deal with it. We then respond naturally and are eager to practice, because we clearly see what needs to be done. It is not that we have been all of this time obstinate or unwilling to put in the effort. The simple truth is we did not know what to do. Before this recognition, we had no real idea of what the task was or how to do it. We were practicing.

In the last analysis, only we can enlighten ourselves, but we don't know how to do that. A teacher can point out how that is to be done, but it may take some time to find a teacher that we are in synch with enough to actually take direction.

Not even a Buddha can do this for us, because enlightenment by definition is something we each

have to experience for ourselves. After all, that is the whole point, to experience enlightenment. But to be able to get on the path, we have to know how the mind works and that is what all the years of meditation practice and the various sadhanas (practices) are all about, to prepare us to recognize the true nature of the mind.

So, in closing, if any of the above strikes a note, then the very first step, no matter how old you already are, is to seek out proper meditation instructions and get started. And by meditation, I don't mean the guided meditation of losing yourself in some inner dream-like realm, but I meant the sit-up-and-take-notice kind of awareness meditation as taught by the Tibetan and Zen Buddhists, and many other groups.

It is never too late to begin while we have life and breath. And although most beginnings may be a little humiliating, and involve fumbling and not knowing what we are doing for a while, beginnings will soon pass into actual learning something about how the mind works and working with it.

My point here is that an effort will have to be made on our part and that only we can do it. We can wait forever, but no one will ever do it for us. I started very late in life, and almost did not learn to meditate properly at all, because I wanted to place out of Meditation 101 due of all my previous years of spiritual work. I was gently told by my meditation teacher that I would have to start at the beginning, not because I had not involved myself in spiritual work, but because if I was honest with myself, I really didn't know how to meditate. And I didn't, although I sort of thought I did.

I almost turned away and said forget-about-it for this lifetime. I am so glad some little part of me was able to know the truth and agree to start at the beginning with meditation.

A list of centers where you can learn the proper mediation at no charge can be found at www.Kagyuu.org. I am sure there are other centers that are authentic, but these I have actually checked out and worked with.

May this be of some benefit to those who read it.

URGENCY IN DHARMA PRACTICE AND WHY

June 8, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

We may frown at all the fire & brimstone in the Christian Old Testament, but Buddhism has its own version and it too can be a little hard to take without a wince or two. The idea is simple. I am older now, but not enlightened yet, with probably not that many years left, am easily distracted, and not much into forcing myself to practice. So, you tell me:

What are my chances of becoming enlightened before I die and why should I even worry about it?

The very great majority of dharma practitioners (not to mention everyone else) are pretty much in this same boat or WILL BE before they realize it. One thing we do know (if we are honest with ourselves) is that we are not enlightened yet, no matter how we may rationalize it. If we even have to ask ourselves the question, the answer is a big “No, you are not yet enlightened.”

And we are told by the Tibetan Buddhist teachings that in the bardo passage soon after death, we either will or will not get another human birth depending on how we have used our current life. Sounds a little biblical, doesn't it? And while another human rebirth or life is not guaranteed, we can however easily get a lower birth, one in which the dharma practice we have put off doing in this life is impossible, such as being

reborn as a bewildered animal, and so on. What a thought! This is not typical American thinking, right?

On top of whatever our current will-to-practice is (and our hopes for eventual enlightenment), we also have the growing pressure of this forthcoming showdown in the bardo, where (bodiless, and without all the things from this life) we will have to somehow pilot our mind through (so we are told) what is said to be (for the majority) a most terrifying experience. And just how stable are we when terrified?

And at that point we won't even have the steering wheel of the body to guide us. In the bardo, we are anything but grounded. We will have lost our body and literally be senseless! We will have no way to even come to our senses, because we will have completely lost our senses. That last sentence is worth thinking about.

At the time of death we will be alone (as we are today when we dream) with our mind, and even a few moments of reflection should tell us how disciplined that is. Just consider your dharma or spiritual practice and ask yourself: have you achieved the results you expected, were looking for, or that you feel you need? If we are on shaky ground here and now, then just imagine what we will be like in the midst of the bardo passage. It's so bizarre that I have to laugh.

It will be like trying to control the outcome of a dream, for we will be one big mind, with no body and absolutely no common sense. This is why "Dream Yoga" is practiced. Or, it could be like trying to drive a car without a steering wheel. You probably won't be able to point yourself anywhere and just have it go

there or worse, whatever comes to your mind, you WILL go there, including into your worst fears. I'm not making this up; this is what the dharma texts and teachings actually say. Science-fiction has nothing on this. Here is a real case of "Read it and weep."

Keep in mind that the outcome of the bardo experience will determine whether you or I have another human body, another chance to learn and practice the dharma, or whether we will instead fall into lower realms where it will be very difficult to do much of anything at all, certainly nothing like the opportunity we have now in this life.

Forget about the pain of intrauterine life, the trauma of birth, and all the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" that Shakespeare points out. It gets a little Old-Testament-like, does it not? Those of us who have not managed to enlighten ourselves in this life will have no choice but to try and qualify for yet another chance at a human life in the bardo, hoping to somehow keep what we now have, and to at least come out even, but with no guarantee. I am imagining that 99% of us are in roughly the same boat.

We will be angling for and hoping for another human rebirth, another chance at a human life, rather than fall into what are called the "lower realms." If it has been hard for us to get serious in this life, it may be almost impossible to practice dharma in the next. And ninety-nine percent is a good percentage, basically like: all of us.

If you have ever wondered why many of the Asian Buddhists are into the Buddha Amitabha and his "Pure Land" Buddha realm called Sukhavati (Tibetan:

Dewa-Chen), it is because, of all the buddhas, the Buddha Amitabha has promised each of us an easier access to his pure-land realm, an access that for most would take place in the bardo instead of rebirth – at what otherwise is the changing of the bodies, but in this case we would be changing realms. The realm of Sukhavati is said to not only allow us to avoid falling into lower rebirths, but also to avoid our even taking another human rebirth whatsoever. According to the teachings, if we merit it, we go directly to Sukhavati at death and we become enlightened, period, end of births. This is due (as the teaching say) to the compassion of the Buddha Amitabha for sentient beings, in this case we humans.

Obviously, as an unenlightened human, I know nothing about this Sukhavati realm personally, but am only sharing with you what the teachings tell us. This option is very appealing compared to some of the alternatives, which is why it is so intensely popular in Asia.

So, we are pulled two ways, which is why I am writing this. Aside from trying to qualify for Sukhavati, the majority of us are still practicing not only to become enlightened using the traditional methods the Buddha taught, but also to get our minds in good-enough shape before we die so as not to lose our balance in the bardo and fail to obtain at the very least another human birth, complete with all its joys and sorrows. So there is some extra pressure on many of us, and that pressure increases with age, as we actually get closer to that deciding moment. Imagine!

My only point for even writing this is to take a look at how this urgency to qualify for yet another chance at

human life might affect our ongoing ability to become enlightened in the traditional manner, our will and ability to practice right now. Getting another human rebirth after this life amounts to getting our foot in the door to do our life all over again. In itself, a rebirth provides us with nothing more than another chance at life, another opportunity to practice the dharma and to work toward our enlightenment, that is, 'if' we can be born in a time and place where dharma is available to us, which is itself not certain.

Whatever skills or imprint we start out with in our next life will come from our dharma practice in this current life. It is entirely up to us. We set the pace. It all comes down to our actually having to DO something toward awakening ourselves, becoming enlightened. No one will or can (not even a Buddha) do it for us, and we can take all the time in the world to get the job done, lifetime after lifetime if needed, which is just what we have done up until now.

Nothing will ever change for the better, except as we change it. We are not going to stumble on or luck-in to enlightenment. If that were true, we would have done it a long time ago. We are, as one high rinpoche puts it, the "stragglers," the ones who have not managed to get enlightened in all of the time in the world up to now - eons. We are the hard cases.

Fear of the bardo (and attempts to get ready for it) reminds me a little of being distracted and worn out by a low-paying job while all of our hopes or dreams go unattended. How common is that? Our fear and worries about the future may make that future all the more urgent, but these worries also can detract from our concentration on our dharma practice, our

avowed journey toward enlightenment. And I don't mean to be disrespectful.

We are told that the most important thing is to study and practice the dharma and move toward enlightenment, step by step. However, at the same time we have to somehow get ready to pass through the eventual bardo experience after this life, if we don't reach enlightenment before we die, and most of us probably won't. This is not something we can just ignore or endlessly put off, as there is an end to our current life, and then there we will be: in the bardo. Where are you in this process? If you are like me, I hate to ask.

The two should be the same thing, meaning: if we work hard with our dharma practice in becoming more aware, that alone will stand us in good stead when we enter the bardo at death. And if the two are not the same, that is, if our fear of not being ready to get a rebirth overpowers our actual dharma practice, then the amount of actual dharma practice we get done (which may be little in that case) takes priority over the fear of what will happen in the bardo and not vice versa. In other words, our fears can inhibit our actual practice toward enlightenment. That is what this article is about.

At the time we die, nothing we have done (with the exception of dharma practice) will be of any use to us at all. Our money, friends, all our experiences, and any and everything we have accomplished in this mundane life will be totally useless in the bardo realms. We won't even have our familiar body and, as mentioned, absolutely no sense at all. We will be the 'horseless headman', just out there (or in there) alone

with our mind, driven about willy-nilly only by whatever discipline we actually have mastered, not by our intellectual understanding of the dharma. And thinking won't help one whit.

All the dharma talk, hopes, fears, dreams, and what-not part of our dharma practice will also be lost to us, leaving only whatever imprints and dharma skills in directing the mind we have actually acquired up to that point. All of our clever rationalizations will all add up to nothing and make no sense whatsoever. There will be no sense to make -- senseless. We, of course, lose our five senses at death.

And we will have no one to ask, no one to guide us, no teacher, no sangha, etc., other than whatever essence of our teachers we have recognized and internalized through our own practice. And even that essence won't just rub off on us. We have to acquire or master even that for ourselves. Teachers can only point the way; they can't do our practice for us. They can't live our lives for us. In the bardo, we will have to make up our mind on the spot based on how our mind is made up, as in: how we made it up in this life we are living now. We won't suddenly be different than we are now as far as mind training. We will be what we have done and how we have lived -- simple karma.

So, in summary, we seriously have to figure out how to work on becoming enlightened in this life, while at the same time live under the pressure and the age-ticking clock to prepare for the inevitable bardo passage. The growing pressure to meet the demands of the bardo can actually inhibit us from doing the

practice needed to be confident in the bardo, a
“Catch-22” if there ever was one.

Does not this topic deserve even a little discussion or
is this just too abstract?

VICTIMIZATION

June 14, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I have been counseling on and off for something like 47 years, including nine years of doing it full-time professionally. The majority of questions folks have are about their vocation, relationships, or both, with relationships being the primary concern. Here I want to look at one very common factor in relationships and that is victimization, but with a bit of a twist, pointing out the fact that in most victimization, we victimize ourselves. We choose to be a victim, which aside from being kind of masochistic, is just a big mistake.

Now, before some of you get your “undies all in a bundle,” as they say, I am not suggesting that we do not in life sometimes actually get victimized or that others do not suffer in this way. Rather, here I am talking about what we can do when we imagine that “we” are the victim or in fact find ourselves actually victimized.

Basically, the general idea is that sometimes we think that life has dealt us a bad hand, so we play the victim card. Everything and everyone other than ourselves is to blame for our sad state of affairs or, in the case of a marriage, everything is the fault of our partner, and seldom-to-never our fault. In other words, we believe that all that is wrong in our life comes from outside, rather than from within ourselves. In other words, it's not our fault. We don't own any of it. In short, we are just an innocent victim, a casual bystander at our own

demise. Everything and everyone seems to have conspired against us. This attitude is very common.

What I then try to explain to a client, which too often they cannot hear, is that we can't both be a victim and be responsible at the same time. Either we are a victim or we are responsible, but not both at the same time. In my experience, if we are responsible, that is, if we can respond to our situation, we are no longer a victim, but are doing something about it, taking life into our own hands, making lemonade out of the lemons we feel we have been dealt.

Perhaps none of us can do much about what comes at us from the outside in life, but we can do everything about how we take it, how we respond. If we take it as a victim, then we become that, at least in our own mind. If we respond and refuse to be a victim, then we are responsible. How we respond is up to us, and responsibility is actually our only real choice to what life brings us.

This whole choosing-to-be-a-victim thing I have seen hundreds of times in counseling. The client goes into excruciating detail about how in every area of their life they have been victimized. They alone are the victim. This is especially painful to see in relationships, where they claim their partner is responsible for everything bad in their life. It reminds me of the slogan in the Seven Points of Mind Training "Drive All Blames into One," only here, instead of taking the blame on ourselves, they actually believe their partner is the only one standing between themselves and a happy life. Their partner is to blame for everything wrong. They feel that they have done nothing to

deserve this and can give you chapter and verse (and in great detail) about how they have been abused.

And those who are married seem to have it worst of all, perhaps due to what I call the “mirror of marriage,” the simple reflection of our self in the mirroring-eyes of our partner. As I like to point out, marriage is the most common form of yoga (or union) practiced in the world and I am not joking. Nothing can confront us more directly than our own image reflected in the eyes of someone we love, our relationship partner. And when we are upset, we most often don’t like what we see. At heart, of course, we don’t like ourselves.

Our choice then becomes taking on the semblance of the victim (claiming to be victimized) or taking responsibility and responding in an appropriate manner. Pretending to be the victim is just a last-gasp effort to avoid looking at ourselves, owning up, and taking responsibility for our situation, whatever it is. I always wish I could tap these folks gently on the shoulder and whisper in their ear “Do you really, really want to be the victim instead of just owning-up to the situation and taking some responsibility?” We can do something about all this. Most situations can be remedied by simple responsibility.

If we insist we are a victim, we can do very little. However, if we take responsibility for our own situation, we can do everything. Taking responsibility does not mean admitting that we caused it (although often we have), but simply that this situation is ours, like it or not, and only we can do something about it.

I am not saying here that there are no actual victims in life. Of course there are, but most of you reading

this page can probably respond and be responsible, rather than continue to paint yourselves as a victim, if that is what you are doing. We all have probably had some powerful experience where we have indeed been victimized in one way or another. I know I have.

There is no need to go into much detail on my personal loss, but let's just say that at one point in my life I lost over three decades of my life's work and millions of dollars due to an unscrupulous business partner. I literally was the victim. It was not just my imagination. I was faced with a decision as I kind of teetered on the brink of this personal disaster.

I could see that I might easily spend the rest of my life complaining about this very unfair situation, pissing and moaning about my lot, and I had reason. However, after thinking about it for some time, I realized this was just throwing good money after bad. I had been severely injured by this event, but I saw that there was no reason for me to play out the role of the victim from then on. Just because a real part of my life was marred by this event, why should I then throw in my remaining life on top of that by endlessly complaining, etc.? That would very much be adding further insult to injury, and, worse, I would be doing it to myself.

I decided that, instead of playing the victim, I would just drop it, gather myself together, and walk on in life, even though it meant, in many ways, starting all over. I responded to the situation rather than have the situation define me as a victim.

If we find ourselves playing the victim, we are somehow not being responsible, not able to respond

for one reason or another, and perhaps need to take some deep breaths and find our responsibility again. If life knocks the wind out of us, we need to somehow start breathing again.

Some discussion would be nice.

WHAT IT IS

April 4, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The young Karmapa is someone after my own heart. He tells it like it is, which is refreshing. Recently, in a talk about not-eating meat, the Karmapa said he became a strict vegetarian only a few years ago. Before that, and in Tibet, there was not much to eat except meat. I can testify to that myself from my trips there. In the talk, he had the temerity to say that he not only loved eating meat, but even now that he is a vegetarian, meat is still his favorite food, albeit only in memory. That is the kind of honesty that I don't usually see in public figures, and hardly ever in politicians, which the Karmapa is not.

So, with the Karmapa, you don't get a lot of highfalutin abstracts, but rather statements that are grounding. In my experience, he is more honest and ordinary than most of us dare to be. That is almost an oxymoron, a spiritual being that is more ordinary than others. What a breath of fresh air.

I met the Karmapa many years ago at Tsurphu Monastery, his ancestral home high in the mountains of Tibet located at around 15,000 feet, a place wedged at the edge of and between two mountains, and back then only reached by forty-miles of very slow, rocky, bumpity-bump, and driving through streams. I am not a traveler, and only went to Tibet because my Tibetan dharma teacher of over thirty

years (now in his nineties) one fine day, during an interview, told Margaret and me to go to Tibet and see His Holiness. And when I responded that I hoped one day to be able to do that, his response was, no, go this summer, within a month, as soon as you can arrange it. Well, that blew our minds. In Vajrayana Buddhism, you pretty-much do what your lama asks, because of the old saying, “In for a nickel, in for a dime” sort of thing.

And we did go to Tibet, within a month, kids and all. When I entered his presence and sat down on the floor in front of the Karmapa, his eyes zeroed in on me, the irises ratcheting in out and out like a camera racking focus. I had never been seen so thoroughly. And when I looked at him, I saw, not what I expected to see, a powerful being, but instead I saw into own self more clearly than I had ever imagined. That was in 1997.

I know that in a few days I will be driving almost 900 miles to spend some eighteen days with or around the Karmapa, attend several empowerments, and hear many teachings.

For the first part of our trip, Margaret and I will be staying with my dear Facebook friend Elizabeth Mantis, who lives right on the ocean in New York, and then later we go straight to our monastery, Karma Triyana Dharmachakra (KTD), where we will be part of the crew helping to welcome the Karmapa. As I keep posting here, and I have experienced this many times before, coming events have a way of casting their light upon the present moment. When I am with the Karmapa, a glimpse into the future is a glimpse into the nature of my own mind.

The Karmapa is not just a mind-reader, but a revealer of the mind, like my mind, your mind -- The Mind. The first thing I realized when I first met the Karmapa was that I had never known the nature of my own mind up until that moment, had not even looked at it: I didn't know how. The Karmapa just revealed me to myself in the most gentle but authentic way possible. There I was, sitting in his presence and contemplating not his nature (as I had expected), but my own mind's nature. As they say, "Who woulda' thunk it?"

I had expected to meet a great spiritual being and what I found was myself as having, at heart, that same nature. I realized that on the spot! Now that is true power, perfect reflection, the power to enable others to realize their own essential nature.

WHISTLING IN THE DARK

June 5, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

How do we know what we do not know? The answer is, we don't. My first true dharma teacher used to often say "Don't say 'nobody knows'; just say 'I don't know.'"

And this is never more true than when learning basic meditation. I am sure we can agree that we don't know what enlightenment is like, correct? But can we recognize that we don't even know what having more awareness than we now have is like? It's the same thing. We just don't know, but we may like to think we do.

We can be aware that we are unaware of more than we are, but we can't be aware of just what we are unaware of, for, obviously, it is to us an unknown. It's like a law of nature, but one which most folks manage to ignore in favor of making up their own idea of enlightenment or awareness out of whole-cloth and reifying that.

Where this most comes into play is when we are first learning to meditate. It is very easy for us, while practicing meditation, to make the assumption that at some point we are already meditating, when in fact we are still just practicing, learning. Why is this important?

It is important because when we start learning to meditate and practice meditation, it is very easy to fall into the habit of comparing one meditation practice session to another. For example, if we have a more successful practice one day, it is just human to look for that same level of success the next day and the day after. If we don't achieve it, we can experience disappointment or imagine we are making no progress, and so on. The "good" meditation day becomes an obstacle to ever having another. This is a standard dharma problem.

What I am pointing out here is that it is normal to feel and experience meditation differently on different days. The problem begins, as mentioned, when we start comparing one day's meditation experience to another (or to our idea of how we think it should be) and then feel badly if we don't measure up. We mistakenly think that we should experience each successive meditation session as higher (or at least equal) to what we consider our "best" effort. If this is a concern, then you have already missed the boat and need to rectify that.

Meditation is not meant to be measured in an ascending series of levels, rising higher and higher, but rather by our ability to meditate (rest the mind) in whatever state we happen to be in – anywhere and at any time. Think about that, please. The clarity that meditation can bring depends on our meditating in whatever mental weather we are presented with on a given day, and not by trying to climb a staircase of light until there is no darkness. In fact, we will never get away from... anything.

If I want to achieve the level of meditation that I was happy about yesterday, I have to rest at ease today (just as I did yesterday) in whatever state I currently find myself in. In other words, any attainment in meditation in the past that we may like to fixate on as a high point of sorts becomes fuel for our fixation, an albatross around our neck that prevents us from ever having that same experience again, at least soon. That so-called “high point” can only be properly measured by the degree of rest we achieve in whatever our current conditions are. The challenge of each day (and every moment) is not to get beyond this world into some kind of heavenly moment (and manage to stay there), but rather to allow the mind to rest in this very moment, just as it is -- good, bad, or ugly and come rain or shine..

Our habit of creating a log-book of our expectations based on a “good” experience, what we read, are taught, or imagine meditation should be is, for most meditators the single greatest obstacle to successful meditation. If you think about it carefully, if you examine your hopes, expectations, and assumptions about meditation, you will realize they are mostly based not on actual experience (or real knowledge), but rather are just an accumulation of ideas about meditation that we are holding up to our actual meditation experience to measure from. This is not a good idea.

It is these assumptions and preconceptions themselves that are ultimately distracting us from finally being able to meditate. These assumptions need to be discarded, and that usually is not easily accomplished. I find it helps (as I endlessly point out) to realize that we are still just “practicing” meditation,

still learning, and not yet actually meditating. Equally, it is most helpful to acknowledge that we have no real idea of what the result of meditation is and that our ideas about it are mostly manufactured -- something we read, heard, or just made up through our imagination.

If we can realize that our preconceptions as to what meditation “is” are not helpful, we can gradually stop referring to and using these assumptions as a guide or way to measure anything, because they don’t. Our thoughts about meditation are just further white-noise, preventing us from actually meditating. In fact, they obscure meditation.

The point here is that meditation is not a goal, but rather a process, a process that has no end or goal other than itself. To put it another way: the “goal” of meditation is the very process of meditating itself, which involves simply being present rather than rummaging in the past or hoping for the future.

And not to put too fine a point on it, by being “present,” here ‘present’ does not mean this present moment, as in: past, present, future. Rather it means to be present, resting in the true nature of the mind, which has no past, present, or future, but is timeless.

Discussion would be nice.