

DO-IT-YOURSELF DHARMA (Part 1)

May 29, 2013

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

This series of short blogs is a little more direct than some of my writings. You can always just pass over it. For one thing, it has more than a few "Do this" and "Don't do this" suggestions. It is designed for those of you who have found that the mind can at times be quite obscured and is not just naturally clear all the time. If you know this already, then you may be more willing to just get down to learning to work with the mind. What follows are some suggestions and a method of practice to deal with our emotional reactions.

The Tibetan teachings are always about pointing out how we can (and in fact must) eventually enlighten ourselves. No one else can do it for us. Even the Buddha himself could not just touch our forehead and zap us into enlightenment. The whole idea is that, sooner or later, each of us must undertake the dharma practice necessary to become aware enough to wake up to the true nature of our mind and how it works. In other words, Buddhism is not your typical religious belief system, but rather just a simple path and practical method. It has no cosmology, no beginning, and no suggested end-time. It is a method for developing awareness, pure and simple, just waking up. Period.

There are many recipes, therapies, concepts, and remedies for healing ourselves mentally and we can try them all. Some may help for a time. For myself, what I have found is that I need a practical method, not just a concept if I am going to keep at it, some way to do it. Tibetan Buddhism is all about practical methods. The proof of any treatment or therapy turns on the likelihood of our keeping up a practice after trying it for a week or so. Most fad-techniques fall by the wayside for one good reason or another. It seems that my "self" does not much like practice (the rote learning of new habits), even if they are supposed to be good for me, so at times I have had to use some reverse-psychology. The self can be fickle.

NO CHURCH ON SUNDAY

There is really no church-on-Sunday equivalent in Buddhism, no once-a-week convocation aside from celebrating natural events like the New and Full Moons, eclipses, and so on. Buddhist practice is pretty much meant to be "on" in one form or another 24x7. So, don't look for a Sunday one-hour injection of Buddhism.

Another point that surprised me early on is that Buddhism is not evangelical. We are not urged to go out and teach others what we are learning. In fact, it is just the opposite. I was told to work on enlightening myself first, and then (perhaps) I would be fit to be of use to others. In fact, until we are relatively free and clear ourselves, we mostly cause others harm by ministering unto them as long as we have our obscurations pretty much still intact. Work on yourself first. In the

lineage that I belong to, we have to be given permission directly from our teacher before we can share our knowledge with others in a formal way.

AND IT TAKES TIME

And here is an important point. What if a student sincerely told you that they wanted to learn to play the guitar or to sing really well, and not just dabble in it once in a while. Of course you might tell them to practice some each day, when they could fit it into their schedule. But we all know that fifteen minutes or even a half hour a day, while perhaps very helpful, is not what it takes to become a really good player. For most of us it would take a lot more than that. Anyone who is at all expert at anything knows this. It is the same with dharma.

If we have fulltime problems, we need a full-time solution, just as we would if our body needed healing. We don't just apply medicine to our body once a week on Sunday. In a similar way, dharma practice is not a sometimes-thing, not a part-time job or just an option. It becomes a necessity and we can't afford to just dabble in it. Therefore, we have to find a way to enjoy dharma practice more of the time. That is what this blog is about.

[Note: The entire series of this blog can be found in a single PDF file here:

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PIE IN THE SKY
DO-IT-YOURSELF DHARMA (Part 2)

May 30, 2013

[Yesterday was the first really hot and muggy day. I thought we had one of these earlier-on, but this is really it. And it rained some too. It felt like New Orleans. Of course I didn't notice too much because I spent a good part of the day cooking. My daughter May and her husband Seth Bernard came by and we spent some time together. I made them a home-cooked meal of Mexican food, which included:

Cheese Enchiladas Verde
Brothy Black Beans
Spanish Rice
Pico de Gallo (made fresh)
Guacamole (my special variety)
And for desert, fresh fruit with a little whipped-cream

And the food was good. I would never make it just for myself. But the real tickler was a little

appetizer I presented, an Italian submarine sandwich like I used to get as a teen in Boston. Now this was not a "grinder," which is a hot sandwich, but rather a cold sandwich on a baguette, piled high with cheeses and good stuff, with sliced tomato, finely chopped onions and lettuce, then drizzled with olive oil and red-wine vinegar. Of course, fresh-ground black pepper, mayonnaise, and butter.

We each had a little piece. The kids loved it. When I was in my early teens my family lived in Swampscott Massachusetts on the north shore of Boston for a few years. As a Catholic who was half Irish, we hung out with the other Catholics, many whom were Italian, and they had these little sandwich shops and subs like you wouldn't believe. I have spent some time researching this and trying to recreate those incredible sandwiches. I am getting close.

Anyway, here is the second part of a series, a simple dharma practice that helps deal with our emotional reactions.]

And let's not idealize the dharma overmuch. Of course, treat the dharma with respect, but know what in it is worthy of your respect. Don't make a religious trip out of what is just rote practice. Being respectful for no reason other than respect's sake is not honoring the dharma, but just another way to keep it at arm's length. Don't mix the Christian (or other religion's) tradition of keeping God on a high altar with practicing the dharma.

Dharma practice involves working with yourself in your day-to-day situation and your "self" is something that you are already familiar with. In fact, if we look we will find that there is probably very little we hold sacred in our self, except perhaps not having our feelings hurt. The self hates that. Dharma practice is like making pottery; you have to get your hands right down into the clay.

So, it is important to separate out any residual or inherited sense of the holy or "religiousness" from our practice until we can acquire our own reverence. In other words, don't mix your religious upbringing with the dharma. The carry-over is often not helpful. The dharma itself is not mysterious, secret, or especially private, but rather it is wide open, so let the air in. And the same goes for our dharma teachers. Of course, we should respect the Buddha nature in all beings, including animals and bugs. That's not my point.

The dharma is as precious as our attitude toward it. In dharma we respect our teachers because only they have managed to get our attention and can point out the methods to free ourselves from our obscurations. The dharma is sacred as a method only if and because it works for us, and not for any other reason. Don't gild the lily.

The great Zen teacher Lin Chi once said "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him." This does not refer to actually killing someone, but rather it recommends that we not worship (sacred-ize) or idealize Buddhism, but rather just apply these dharma techniques to working with our own life and self.

Buddha is not suddenly going to appear and enlighten us. Waiting for that is mistaking the teachings. Our buddha nature is already inside waiting FOR US to become aware of IT. We can wait forever, and apparently we have done so up to this point in time. So, figuratively speaking, kill off that hope and idealization in favor of actually enlightening yourself a day at a time through your own actions and practice. Don't expect it to come from above. But what practice is appropriate for that?

The wheel of the dharma has to be turned, and there are many quotes in the texts that Buddha turned the wheel of the dharma. And so he did, but we have to as well. Turning the wheel of the dharma for ourselves is also our job. That wheel will just sit there and watch us stare at it. It will never turn by itself. We each have to turn the wheel of our own dharma. That's what the Buddha did and that is what he points out we have to do. Dharma is very much a do-it-yourself project.

As mentioned, don't just place the Buddha on a high altar and consider yourself as separate from him. Be bold. He was an ordinary human being just as we are. His main teaching is that ALL sentient beings have Buddha nature, and we each will have to (sooner or later) learn to enlighten ourselves and do just that. Treating the Buddhist practices as something beyond us, as somehow too holy (or in any way separate from our ordinary self) is a costly mistake. Buddha nature is much closer than that.

As the dharma states, we each have to enlighten ourselves, warts and all, starting just where and as we are now. Don't put off practicing dharma because you feel obscured or unworthy in your own mind. Don't distance yourself from the practice by making it anything other than an integral part of your immediate world. The only requirement is that you learn how to practice and it can be awkward at first, like any first practice. Here and now is where and when to practice.

In summary, the dharma is already a part of us (obscurations and all), so don't perfume the dharma into something separate from you and your particular situation. You are not an exception. There are no exceptions with dharma. We all need it and will someday have to do it.

No matter how stained or depressed you may feel, don't use that as an excuse to give up or get down on yourself. Just drop all that and start again fresh in each instant. No apologies to our self are needed. The self works for us and not vice-versa. And don't waste time on the past. Just walk on. The Buddhist phrase is "Don't Prolong the Past." Make a better past (and future) in the present is suggested.

The dharma is perfectly at home in the most nitty-gritty of our situations, those that we are most embarrassed by or ashamed of. It is a "come as you are" dharma. There is nothing "holier than thou" about dharma techniques. They are perfect for "thou," and they work just as we are, in whatever mess we happen to find ourselves. There is no one watching other than our self, and the self is our own dummy, because we are the ventriloquist. As the Beatles put it "No one will be watching us. Why don't we do it in the road."

So, unless you need them as a comfort blanket, put aside your lava lamps, candles, incense,

and whatever for a spell. Don't create a mood. The dharma is not mysterious. We don't have to set the scene in any way, but just start right where we are and practice developing awareness.

I repeat: it is adding insult to injury to be cowed by your own actions, even if they happened only a second ago. If you make a mistake, acknowledge it, try not to do it again, and just drop it. Move on. Don't waste time being ashamed or apologizing. Just begin again. Start over. Don't apologize to yourself. It's no one you know.

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TACKLING EMOTIONAL STORMS DO-IT-YOURSELF DHARMA (Part 3)

June 1, 2013

The Sanskrit word "Buddha" just means awakened or aware and a Buddha is one who is aware and points out awareness and the path to achieving it. That's it.

There are all kinds of medicines and therapies. Some really help, but most all of them are what the Buddhists call relative truths. They can help us on our journey get from here to there, but most therapies address the symptoms (and removing them), rather than the cause. Buddhist teachings address the cause and offer a method for removing the cause. And the cause is always our ignorance (what we ignore), and our lack of awareness. Removing the cause means waking up to our innate awareness.

Buddhism is not a religion like most Americans are raised in. In Christianity there is a separation between mankind and god, a gap that is addressed by Christ, "God's son." But there is a gap between Christ and mankind, as well. As a young man, I researched this very carefully with the Jesuits, Catholicism's scholars and they very clearly stated: Christ is not us. He is god; we are human. It has become a habit to "believe" in this way. Don't bring that to your dharma. It does not help. We don't believe in the dharma, we test and use it.

Buddha was not a god, and there is no gap between you and the Buddha, as to our essential nature. They are identical. So "holy" to Christians is not necessarily "holy" to Buddhists. There is no separation (other than to practice) between you and the Buddha. This is an important point.

Let's not separate the Buddha from ourselves by putting him on a pedestal. Respect his methods because they work. That is all that makes the dharma (and him) sacred to us. We need to keep the dharma close to us. It is our dharma, the key to awareness, a method designed specifically to work for us.

SLOW OR FAST PATH

There are said to be 84,000 dharmas or individual ways or paths to become enlightened, and perhaps just as many teachers. And there are short paths and longer paths, paths that can be traversed in this lifetime and paths that take many lifetimes. Slow and steady wins the race, so most folks are introduced to a path (like learning to meditate) that will take most of us a long time.

If, for whatever reasons, we need to take a faster path, it usually requires more (or at least different) practices on our part. In Tibet, in general, simple meditation is not even taught in the beginning as it is here in the west. Before meditation is attempted, most Tibetans undertake what amounts to a dharma boot camp called ngondro. In other words, basic meditation is a

more advanced practice rather than one for beginners.

KLESHAS: CONFLICTING EMOTIONS

The ngondo practice (which I will only mention here) is designed to clear away some of the more gross obscurations so that meditation can be more successful. Perhaps chief among these obstacles are the large emotional obscurations called Kleshas, emotions like anger, jealousy, hatred, desire, ignorance, and so on.

Kleshas are nothing to be ashamed of, but they do require our awareness and attention unless we want them to continue to rule us. It is considered very difficult to make much progress in living a happy life if the kleshas constantly interrupt the life and set us back. It is like two steps forward and one step back, or, at times, one step forward and two steps back.

Once a klesha (like anger) gets out of our control, it can take over our whole mind and we wake up later having kind of wrecked our mental state... once again. Unlike simple "bad" thoughts that can be dealt with through the dharma practice tonglen, a full-blown klesha is beyond our ability to root out, without additional practices.

Kleshas tend to come over us somewhat suddenly, and they usually get out of control before we are fully aware they are present. We end up being carried away with them and are helpless until they eventually savage our mindstream and blow themselves out.

The remedy for this is to become more aware of our emotions when they are still at arm's length, before they get hold of us. Unfortunately, this kind of awareness training has to be learned and practiced, and we don't just start out practicing on kleshas like anger and jealousy. They are too ingrained, too powerful. We have to start with smaller reactions and work up to the big obscurations. In the next blog in this series we will look at a special practice for handling kleshas.

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REACTION TONGLEN DO-IT-YOURSELF DHARMA (Part 4)

June 2, 2013

Practicing something like traditional tonglen, while very good, can be too abstract for beginners, with ideas like taking on the sufferings of the world or those of another individual and sending back our love and energy. There is a more immediate kind of tonglen that is designed for reactions, and it is much closer to us than the sufferings of the world or those of another person. I call it "Reaction Tonglen." To begin with, it deals with our own reactions and only eventually extends outside of us to others. There is plenty of "other" right within ourselves.

This specialized form of tonglen requires that we first at least examine ourselves enough to determine that it is we (ourselves) that are reacting to the world around us. Even if the world sends us a personal attack, how we react to it is up to us. And we don't start, as mentioned earlier, working with big reactions like anger or jealousy, but rather with the constant rain of tiny reactions that impact us every day.

Someone looks at us in the wrong way, or says something to us in a sarcastic or snappy tone. How do we react? That person may not intend to impact us or they may actually intend to. Who knows what their state of mind is. We can't control that. If they hurt us, it is our fault if we let it

get to us, but we don't have to add insult to injury by underscoring that perceived hurt or insult and spend half the day going over and over in our mind what they said, thereby inscribing multiple layers of karma in the groove of the original hurt.

In fact, unless another person actually physically harms us, we don't have to record hurt at all. We can understand that they are in a bad way and not take it personally. We don't know why they did what they did and just let it go. This would be an example of reactive tonglen, responding to a reaction that we are capable of dealing with, one that does not have to carry us away into the full-blown klesha-storms of anger and so on.

Emotional klesha-storms destroy hours, days, or months of practice in a single moment and send us back to the stone age of our development, at least for the moment. It is very harmful to have to constantly recover mentally every time a blast of anger blows our mind, and it is harmful to our health.

Sadly, doing this kind of reactive tonglen sitting on a cushion for a few minutes or even an hour a day, at least in my experience, while helpful, is not enough practice-time to actually make much progress, at least in the timeframe of a single lifetime.

The solution for this is to make it a general habit to do reactive-tonglen all day long. It is not that hard to do. I have done it. All it requires is that we begin to become more aware of our reactions. And we can tailor our practice to those reactions that we can be aware of and not worry yet about the big kleshas (like anger) until later, farther down the road. In the beginning, those big kleshas will continue to carry us away as they always have.

It is up to us to not make observing our reactions a chore. Of course, we can ruin it for ourselves, which is just our way of sending our effort to the recycle bin, but we don't have to do that. Our reactions themselves actually are fresh and self-fueling. That's what reactions are. They touch the quick. If we can stay with the freshness, then this kind of reactive-tonglen can be, well, enlightening, and enlightening all the way down the road of facing them. I know this from experience.

And when we are aware of a reaction, we can either just recognize and drop it, or we can examine it. In the beginning it pays to examine our reactions because they show us our own bias and how our mind is programmed to respond without our thinking. I was amazed at how I react to almost everything with a like or dislike, as if my opinion in these cases was useful to me. Not really. All my reactions did was color my view until I could not see clearly through the fog of it all.

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NEW FREE E-BOOK plus...
DO-IT-YOURSELF DHARMA (Part 5)

June 3, 2013

[This is the last section in this series. At the end of this post is a link to a new free e-book called "Change and the Self, and other Writing," which contains some fifty recent blogs and essay in a convenient form, including this series.]

Buddhism is all about awareness, becoming aware. It is about nothing else, and waiting for that big "Aha" in the sky (enlightenment) is not the only kind of awareness. By becoming aware of our reactions, one at a time as they appear through the day, we can gradually develop much greater awareness. Anyway, no enlightenment will come unless we bring it on ourselves. The world does not owe us a living.

Most awareness techniques require practice, at least enough to develop the muscle-memory needed to make them habitual and effective. Monitoring our mindstream for its constant flow of reactions is an easy way to acquire a lot of dharma practice, and the rewards that constant practice brings. This very simple technique adds up to real and lasting awareness. I have done this myself and know from experience.

We can work on the small reactions at a level we can maintain until we get the hang of it, and then tackle the larger ones, one at a time. Let's go over the process.

We see ourselves reacting. It could be to something someone said or it could just be a reaction we have to something in the world. We don't like this person's nose or that color of sweater or the way that woman or man flaunts his or herself. There are seeming endless opportunities to react and normally we do react, "all day and all of the night" as the old Kinks song says.

So, we catch ourselves in a reaction. The first step is that we own that it is we who are reacting, and not something outside ourselves. If we acknowledge that, we can note that and drop it. Or, as I tell my dog when he shows up with a decaying animal in his mouth, "Just leave it!"

Often a simple recognition (awareness) of the reaction is enough for it to just vanish. We zap it. For those stubborn stains, you may want to do a little regular tonglen with them or, if you are a more advanced meditator and know Vipassana meditation, you can just look at the nature of the reaction and stop following its content.

Start small and work upward. Like the old joke "vote early and vote often," we can catch reactions all day long as the day unfolds. It really does not take any extra time and we are already in the moment anyway. But the good thing is that this is true dharma practice and we soon find ourselves practicing all the time.

It takes this level of practice to make good progress, at least in my experience. And the result of this particular practice is increased awareness of our own reactions, becoming aware of them, owning them, and ceasing to react to them. And by not reacting we cease to record karma we otherwise would accumulate by going over and over our various hurts and reactions. And we eventually stop staining our own mindstream by reacting to everything.

Sure, it takes some time (and practice) to acquire the habit, but not "time" time. Once I heard of this practice, it took maybe three years of practicing this, as often as I could remember to do it, before I had some real kind of control. That may sound like a long time, but not compared to a lifetime of being subjected to our own emotional storms.

And you can easily mix this with standard Shamata sitting meditation and progress even faster. Then the sequence would be: be aware of a reaction, own it, drop it, and bring the mind gently back to whatever we were working with before the interruption. Continue on.

Each time we are interrupted by a reaction, we do the whole thing again. But the process is very organic and healing because we only do it when something interrupts us and we react. This is a marvelous and most efficient way to mix dharma practice with our day-to-day work.

This is different from the way normal tonglen is usually taught, which is much slower (no hurry) and traditional tonglen will probably take lifetimes to perfect. However, if we need to get a hold

on our emotions because they are damaging our life right now, then a little bit of sitting practice each day (or week) may not be enough to change things for us. We need stronger medicine, which is where reaction-tonglen can be useful. It is portable, not difficult to do, constant, and it really works well. I have done it for years.

Through this practice we become more and more aware of just how much of our self is pure reaction, judgment, bias, etc., either good or bad. And we don't discriminate between negative or positive reactions, either. We catch them both and learn from each. Our positive reactions can be just as useless as our negative ones.

And one last but very important thing, motivation. The Buddhists are absolutely clear about examining our motivation for any practice. And even though we may learn this practice to help manage our own emotions, we should not do this only for ourselves.

This has never been a problem for me, because it is very clear that any progress I make in managing my emotions and outbursts very directly benefits others, in particularly my family. They benefit. So my motivation has been to clean up my act so that others don't have to suffer from my lack of control, etc.

And Buddhists are also very direct about the need to always dedicate the merit of our practice. You can do this at the end of the day or with each reaction. Probably end of the day is what most will do. And it is very simple.

We just say a short dedication that any merit or goodness (however small) that accumulates from our practice that day may benefit others and help lead to their (and our own) awakening. Dedicating merit is like taking money to the bank. Once you dedicate the merit, it is deposited and cannot be lost. However, and this is a big "however," if we don't dedicate our merit, we lose it the next time we blow our cool and destroy our own mindstream with an outburst of anger or whatever.

I know that this aspiration and dedication thing may be a new concept for many of you, as it was to me in the beginning, but hold your fire. According to every rinpoche I have met and taken teachings from (and that is many), dedicating the merit is an essential key to any real progress in awareness.

This long blog is a short introduction to working with our reactions on a full-time basis. I hope it has been helpful.

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