

Dharma Blogs

2015 Winter



by Michael Erlewine

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INTRODUCTION

This is not intended to be a finely produced book, but rather a readable document for those who are interested in my particular take on dharma training and a few other topics. My thanks to Patti Singleton Williams for helping me to gather this all together. These blogs were from the Winter of 2015, posted on Facebook and Google+.

Michael@Erlewine.net

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NOT JUST AN EMPTY GESTURE

January 19, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I have written on this before, but apparently I am not done with the topic, which has to do with the dharma and its trappings. Let me give you an example.

It is traditional when greeting a Tibetan rinpoche or monk to offer a white scarf, called a khata. Generally the khata is draped over our two hands, palms up, and the hands are slightly extended to the rinpoche, who receives the khata and either keeps it or, more often, puts it around our neck as a blessing. American students do this, well, religiously.

So it came as a bit of a surprise for me when many years ago a close Tibetan friend of mine, a translator for great rinpoches (including H.H. the 17th Karmapa) told me that we westerners had it all wrong. And he explained that to the Tibetans the white scarf is like what here in America we would call an empty envelope. It is supposed to have something on top of it, like an offering, usually some money or a flower, etc. It was embarrassing for him to see us endlessly offering these great teachers empty envelopes. Americans obviously didn't know any better.

He also pointed out that when Tibetans have a white scarf placed around their neck by a rinpoche, they immediately take it off, fold it, and put it away. It is considered arrogant to leave it on, as if we are giving added importance to ourselves. And, of course, we

have rooms full of Americans with blessed scarves on standing around, some wearing them all day long. Culture kind of stumbles forward as best it can.

My point here is not to make fun of Americans, but to show how easily traditions are misunderstood or altered, yet blithely passed on as if they were authentic, when actually something has been lost, and, as the bard wrote, "... you don't know what it is, do you Mister Jones?" We don't. Our intention is good, but something has been lost in the translation of the transaction. Another friend of mine, a swami, would call this the "soup of the soup of the soup," meaning the original soup is cut with water, and successively cut again, etc., until it approaches a homeopathic state.

I find this equally true of the dharma itself. In a word, the "dharma" is the method that the historical Buddha used to enlighten himself, how he did it. It is also how we can enlighten ourselves. I have had some problems in the past myself (and still do) confusing the authentic dharma (the method) with the Tibetan trappings it comes wrapped in.

The teachings point out that we should respect all sentient beings equally. However, if a sentient being also carries the dharma within him or herself in a realized form, that being (perhaps a rinpoche or a monk) is to be accorded even greater respect. It is not that a monk or a rinpoche physically is more respectable than any of the rest of us, but it is the dharma that we respect as realized in them, to whatever degree that may be, i.e. think the message and not the messenger.

The fact that Buddha Nature is within each one of us kinds of thickens the plot a bit, which is perhaps why Buddhists feel that all sentient beings should be accorded respect. We all carry within us the precious nature of our own mind.

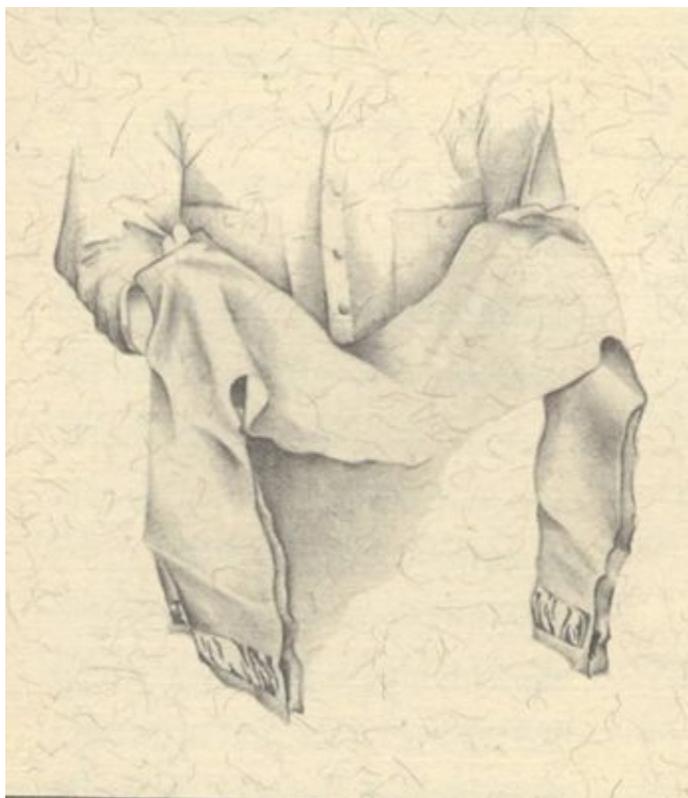
My point here is to remind myself not to confuse the wrapper with the wrapped, to the degree that they are different. In the case of the Khata, the traditional white scarf of the Tibetans, it is only the wrapper and nothing else. In day to day life, things are not so cut and dried. It is easy to confuse the sacred with the profane. Of course, perhaps we should consider everything sacred, in which case I have no point here at all.

"Keep your eye on the prize" as the old folk song says. Remember what is important. It is the dharma that is the prize; that is what is important. Offering an empty white scarf with sincere intent is more important than misunderstanding a traditional Tibetan ritual.

And I have pointed out before that, as more Americans realize the dharma and discover the nature of their own mind, so will they lay aside the Tibetan wrapping in which it so carefully came and emerge just as they are, realized American Buddhists. Then it will be American Buddhism with all its trappings.

"Keep Your Eye on the Prize."

[Drawing done by my brother Tom Erlewine for a dharma catalog we produced years ago.]



NATURE PHOTOGRAPHY VS PHOTOGRAPHING NATURE

January 30, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

As a photographer I started out pretty young, the year my dad loaned me his Kodak Retina IIa (plus a light meter) and sent me on a 6,000 mile trip around the U.S. and across Canada, with a dip into Mexico. The year was 1956 and I was all of fourteen years old. Back then I definitely was a nature photographer. I had been studying nature since I was six-years old and it was nature I was photographing.

Fast-forward to today and somehow I have morphed into a photographer who photographs nature. The difference may be subtle, yet still distinct enough to merit my pointing it out. As a nature photographer (think field guides) I was trying to catch nature through the camera lens. Nature was out there and I was recording it. There was very much a "me" and a "them" or "it."

Today I happen to photograph nature, but I am very much aware that the photos I take show more about me than about my subjects, which usually are plants and flowers. I am not interested in chasing moving critters around anymore, and am very much a photographer of the "found."

And I know by now that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" and "It takes one to know one."

Photography has become one more mirror of the mind, reflecting not so much the subject that I am photographing, but rather where I am at, showing me something of the nature of my own mind. That distinction is, to me, a big deal, a real difference.

I started out seeing nature through and with a lens and now, so it seems, I am seeing something of the nature of my own mind through a camera lens, and recording it. I am now seeing with the mind. Perhaps it is a small thing, but it is the signature or sign of an enormous inner change. It reminds me of some of those old Zen images, you know, where before there was a mountain and afterward there was a mountain, but somewhere in there also was a change of view. Before I was seeing the mountain out there, but after I was seeing myself reflected in the image of the mountain -- something like that.

"Actions speak louder than words" and "An image is worth a thousand words." Those old adages carry wisdom and seem true. God knows I have spent enough words blogging here, when a few photos might more easily sum up what I am talking of. After all, imagination comes from the word "image," and most of us see our way through life from the light of our imaginations. Everywhere we turn our own image is reflected back for us to consider. No wonder seeing through the back of the mirror is at the top of the list for every would-be esotericist. We are all narcissists until we can see through our own self reflection.

Anyway, here I sit sorting through hundreds of thousands of photos; quite a lot of imagination I have captured. And on a more personal note, as I sit here I try very hard not to move and there is a reason.

I slipped on the ice Thursday morning, something I have been trying very hard this winter not to do. But the ice had melted and refrozen as smooth as glass. It had a light covering of dry snow and I thought it was the same as what was on the steps. Big mistake. While taking the recycle out, I stepped on this slick ice and my legs flew out from under me. It was just that fast. Bam! I landed hitting my right side into the cement steps at just above ground level. I cracked or broke or bruised my ribs and part of my lower right back. Lucky I did not hit my head, because it was a very hard fall. The pain keeps me at attention.

So... it hurts to move anywhere or even laugh and especially to sneeze. I am hoping this will heal, so here I sit, as mentioned, trying not to move a muscle, because when I do, ouch!! At best, it is interesting.

THE POINT OF WALKING

January 31, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I am fascinated with the phrase "walking point," as in the soldier who walks point, leads the way, who goes first. Yet it took me a very long time to admit to myself that if I am actually doing something new, no one else will recognize it or me either. That is what "new" means – unknown, no friendly face or welcoming committee.

That old refrain, "Can I get a witness?" takes on new meaning when no one knows you, why you are here, or what you are communicating. It is hard to get a witness to what is unknown or who is unknown. This is true, I suppose, by definition. If you have ever heard the phrase, "being alone in a crowd," you know what I am talking about. The funny thing is that we are forever always alone, even when we are with others. It is just the nature of the universe. The Greek philosopher Parmenides said it long ago: "Being alone is." However, we can learn to be alone together.

For sure, there is a certain aloneness to life itself, which is best taken to mean that we each are on our own. It can be hard to communicate to others, especially about something you know that is unknown to them. If we fall into the habit of mistaking our innate aloneness as loneliness and crying about it, that does not help. What I find humorous is that (as I understand it) "being" has been alone forever. Being

just is alone, that's all. As the great jazz singer Les McCann said it in the title of the song written by Eugene McDaniels, "Compared to What?" Good question!

In other words, our being is beyond "compare" because there is nothing to compare it to, except maybe "not-being," and we can't even do that. Shakespeare said, "To be or not to be," but the Buddhists say that we can't even "be" to the exclusion of "not being" or vice versa. Both are true and neither exclusively. So someone like me is not about to figure this out because there is nothing to figure out. "Nothing" also does not exist to the exclusion of "something." Talk about having it both ways, this is just nature's way of saying "Not the door on the right or the door on the left. How about trying the door in the middle, newbie?"

As for me, I am a hard case. It seems I always insist on trying every avenue other than the one suggested by society, which usually is the classic intelligent choice. But it seems I seldom use my mind for thinking along obvious lines. When I exhaust all possible alternate possibilities, I may deign to pass through the door everyone was telling me about in the first place, with nary a nod. Then again, I may not.

It is this stubbornness that has kept me functioning as an outsider or outrider rather than being more central to society. However, rather than being labeled a "reject," I prefer to be thought of as having an alternative view, much like that of a shaman. I have seen things society has not and lived to tell about it.

Being beyond the normal conventions of society does not equate to reaching the edge of a town and stepping into the meadow beyond the welcome sign. Let me put it this way: time is a convention defined by the majority. Not everyone runs on clock time.

Beyond the warp and woof of conventional time are worlds of psychological time society has never dreamed of. Heaven help those who fall through the cracks of clock-time and expand into one of the infinite worlds of alternative time. You are on your own, temporarily (hopefully) lost in a psychological twilight zone where no one will find you. You must find yourself. If you don't, you go crazy and remain there. If you do stabilize and manage to rejoin society, you are forever changed -- different.

Just as every society has conventions, so every society has an edge over which one can slip, where we are lost to being found. As mentioned, if we can find ourselves and come back from that point-of-no-return, then we are what has been called a "shaman," one who has known the unknown or part of it.

WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT YOU GET

February 3, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

"What you see is what you get" is a familiar refrain, but here it's quoted with a bit of a twist. Usually this phrase means "look at me; I am as I appear to be." And the twist that I am pointing out is that what we each see out there in the world through the filter of our mind is what we get. Moreover, much of what we see externally comes from inside us and is not even really out there at all. Our ignorance of this fact hermetically seals us from any way out of this closed-loop situation. This is the case for almost everyone.

In other words, our own biases, prejudices, and assumptions not only color what we see (like rose-tinted glasses), they actively create "what" we see, and all of this takes place right before our very eyes. Realizing this fact represents a major breakthrough in mind-training discipline, the fact that (in many ways) we not only project our own biases on the screen of the world around us, but we then proceed to watch our own projections with rapt attention as if seeing them somehow confirms that they are true. Thus the phrase "What you SEE is what you get," and the take-away is that we create much of what we see.

It is one thing to read about and understand intellectually what I am pointing out here, but quite another thing entirely to experience our internal projecting first hand and realize (once and for all time) what is going on, i.e. that we are playing both parts, the part of the subject and also the object we gaze

upon. The realization is that a lot of what we see of the external world is not external at all, but just part of our own inner projections. This insight, realized, is the first step of any internal work.

The realization is that the subject (me) and the object (the external world) are not fixed-in-stone opposites, but rather they are in cahoots with one another. In other words, the objective world (the "there" and the "them") that we see out there is to a great measure actually created by the subject, ourselves.. The objects we see are a product of our own subjectivity. What I see outside myself as the external world is a set-up, much of which I create through my own warped mental filter.

All real inner work begins when we start to see through this vicious cycle, i.e. that we are projecting many of our own problems unto the world around us, and then taking them for granted. We are watching our own movie. Until we wake up to this fact, we are caught and hurtling through the night of time asleep in our own dream.

I am speaking here of the subject/object dichotomy we all subscribe to. So the problem becomes, how do we break the subject/object syndrome? How can we wake up in this dream of life we are having?

In my own case, back in the 1950s and early 1960s, the subject and the object dichotomy was particularly polarized and distinct. It never occurred to me (as far as I know) or to any of my friends that there was any osmosis going on between our mind and the world around of us. My self was anaerobically signed-and-sealed like the proverbial boy in the bubble. Nothing

was leaked, not even a clue. This was the world I lived in, with me on the inside and everyone and everything else on the outside; the two worlds were inviolably separate from one another.

And the sad thing is that my own inner projections were scaring the hell out of me. As far as I could tell, I was a victim in a world hard-edged against me. There was seemingly no alternative, no differential. Try as I might, I could never find the end of the thread to begin to disentangle that ball of string that we call our relation to the outside world. And this is where the concept of a "gap" comes in.

The 1950s mentality in which I came up in was seamless and gapless – not a crack. In order to begin any kind of real internal change we first have to find a gap, a chink in the armor of the self's airtight seal, in other words, a way out or at least a peek. And here the strict dichotomy was the "me" of the self and the "them" or "it" of the outside world, and never the twain shall meet. And so we come to one of the great initiation gateways, a ring-pass-not, as the occultists say.

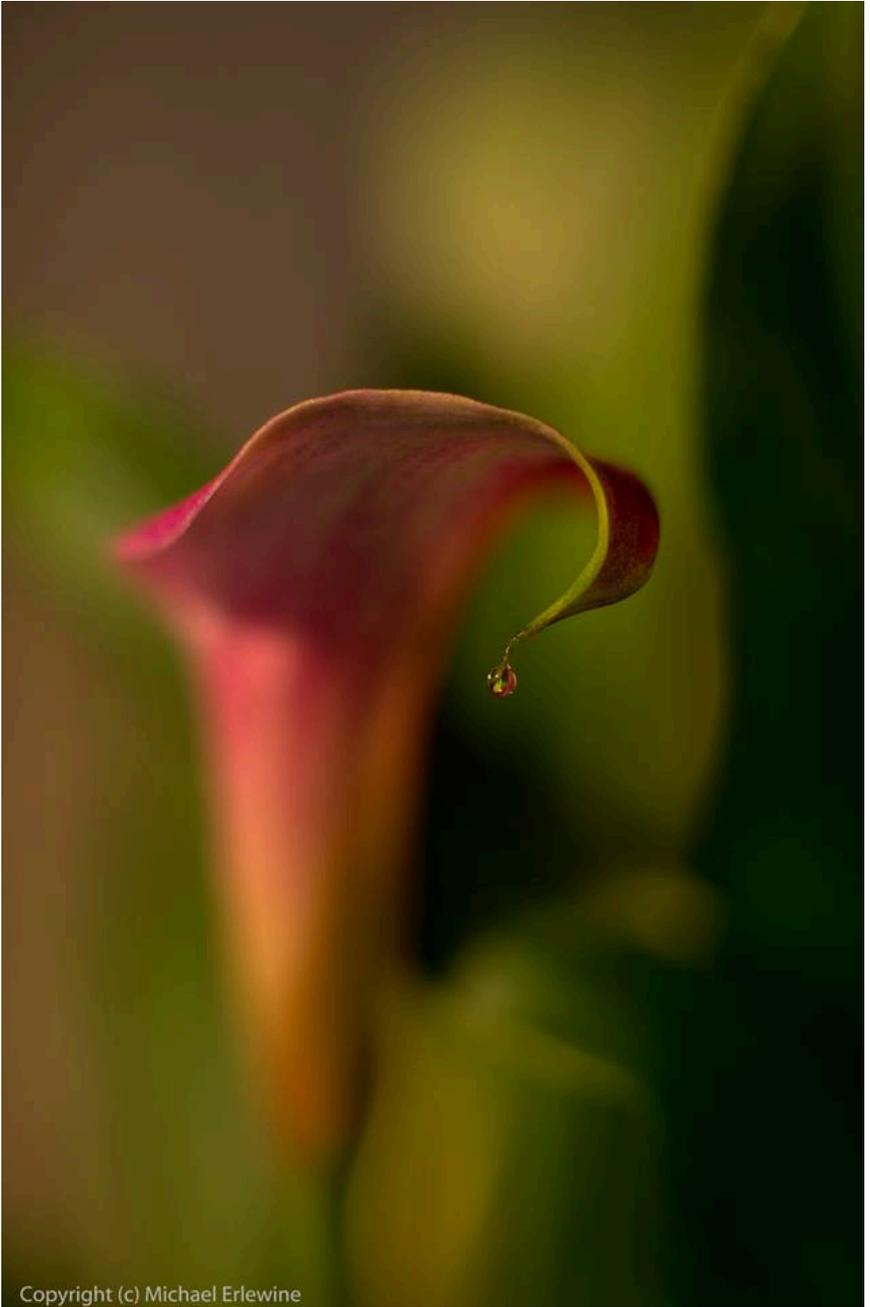
This is where the concept of a "gap" becomes imperative, and the Tibetans are all about finding these gaps or openings in our subject/object dominated view. Before we can begin unraveling our mental straitjackets, we have to find some gap, a loose thread or two. We must catch our self in the act of misdirection (ignorance = ignoring), and in the beginning, this is not easy.

Once we experience consciously that we are creating the external world with our own projections, once we

realize we are doing this ourselves, we have what is called a "gap," a differential or thread that we can begin to work with to deconstruct this ingrained dichotomy of subject-object separation. This concept of "me" having no relation to "you" and to the external world (that is so confining) can be deconstructed a bit at a time, but there has to be some initial glimpse or gap in the armor of the self before this can happen.

Over the centuries, there have been many ways this traditionally has been done. Of course there are the various botanicals, in particular hallucinogens like peyote, mushrooms, and so on. And there are less invasive methods as taught by the Tibetan Buddhists, which I may go into in another blog.

I can tell you that much of what we see in the outside world comes from our own internal biases, prejudices, and upbringing. You probably understand what I am saying, intellectually, but perhaps you have not experienced this in real time, much less realized it fully. That's the threshold we must cross, "realization."



PRECIOUS TIME

March 21, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I have my Grandpa hat on today because Grandma and I are babysitting our one-year-old granddaughter Iris, while her mom and pop perform at a music festival. I have not seen Iris in person for a few weeks, although I get regular updates on her activities though iPhone photos. Of course, it's not the same.

Iris is about to learn to walk, but she is taking her time, especially in Grandpa's house. There is so much to see and do that the little girl is just busy all the time. If she is not crawling, she is pulling herself up on things and then, standing up, moving around the periphery of the room as much as she can. Today I have read Iris many books, given her a bottle, joked with her while the two of us ate, and together we watched as our dog Molotov had some food. When she finally woke up to her tiredness, Grandma took over and put her to bed, an art I know little of.

Before I talk about how precious time is, I have to say that as I grow older I continue to realize how absolutely dedicated women are to their children, IMO way more than men are with their careers or whatever we think we are doing. There is no comparison, or the comparison is absolutely humbling.

After all, at my age I can't help but realize one thing or another. If there is no realization now from day to day,

I have a problem. Not all realizations are fun, but they are enlightening. Take for example this concept of how precious time is.

For years, probably most of my life, I have been very conscious of how precious time is in terms of getting things done. I had so much to do (at least I thought I did) that I did not want to waste any time. The result of this approach is that anything but important stuff was simply not entertained. I literally didn't take time for it.

This is not quite as bad as I am describing it here. Another way to put this is that I was dedicated to whatever I was interested in, and there is always the fact that I had to work hard to make a living to support my family. I can assure you that making a living as an astrologer is not an easy thing to do.

Well, the bottom line here is that I did not take much time to, as they say, smell the flowers. As an entrepreneur, I loved what I was doing, which was nothing more than following my heart and my passions. This was enough for me. In the throes of all that, I missed a lot of what I imagine others did not.

Now, very late in life, I am discovering the preciousness of time I no longer have, the preciousness of the ordinary time that for all these years I just passed-on in favor of whatever current passion it was that I considered important. I am not saying this was wrong or that good things did not come out of how I spent my time. I did a lot to archive, preserve, and return to people the popular culture from which we all emerged, like popular music, movies and film, games, poster art, and, of course,

astrology. And my non-career activities extend to photography and Buddhist mind training. That's to my credit and I don't regret it.

However, I am realizing that it is hard to turn off that drone of doing "important things" and just spiral down to earth to rest in my ordinary life and mind. Of course, my years of Buddhist training refer to little else than sampling and resting in ordinary mind. Funny I didn't put the two together in all that time, although practicing meditation gradually led me there.

And now, as I begin to husk off that sense of "importance" (much like a snake sheds its skin), it dawns on me (once-and-for-all) that there is nothing important that I still have to do (or am doing) other than have thoughts like these. And with that, my previously forbidden ordinary-life begins to intrude on my rigid sense of forward motion. I am slowing down.

Whether I will get off my endless train of thought and wander through the fields smelling the flowers, I can't say. At least I can at last see the flowers!

It is ironic that what I considered the "preciousness of time," those "important" things that I was doing all those years, was not it. Instead, precious time is exactly what I refused to entertain all that time, what I passed over in favor of work. In other words, I did everything else but smell the roses.

Now that the work-switch has been turned off and a great silence is setting in, I can hear the crickets sing, and perhaps still have enough time left to get off at the next station and go sit in a field of flowers with my family.

A NOTE ON COMPASSION

January 4, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

On this cold and snowy morning here in Northern Michigan, some considerations on compassion.

Compassion may start out for many of us as simply sadness at the hopelessness in the world. For me, it began when as a young kid I observed the pathos of nature. It is everywhere. Even today, walking along a country road as the hot summer sun comes up, and observing the countless earthworms trying to cross the road, I see that they are doomed by their decision to cross at this particular time. I can only pick up so many and carry them across. I feel compassion for them. And, as for the worms crawling in the direction the road runs, well...

The etymology of the English word "compassion" comes from an Old French word that means to "suffer with," sometimes translated as "to love together with." I am told that the French came from the original Latin "passus," and before that I imagine the Greek "pathos," and so on. I get the idea.

Sympathy can beget empathy, which can give way to compassion. "Pity" seems to be just a selfish form of compassion. "Selfish" means it's the "Self's idea of compassion.

Even though I am writing about compassion here with words, true compassion, essentially, is beyond words. Like everything else, it has to be an experience that we define for ourselves by living.

Growing up, I was told to be compassionate and to practice compassion. I had no idea what they were talking about. To me, "practicing compassion" is just another oxymoronic phrase, because the two words, "practice" and "compassion" don't go together. "Trying to be compassionate" is just trying, another trial. Discovering that we are by nature compassionate is what has to happen.

Compassion is said to be the antidote (and opposite) of the self-chosen poison of "anger." It is reportedly said by the Buddha himself that we can search the entire world for someone more worthy of compassion than ourselves and never find them. That is worth considering. Compassion starts at home.

Having compassion for ourselves in my experience is synonymous with discovering that we each are, at heart, deeply compassionate. We just have not yet admitted it, unless we have. In my experience, the admission of compassion within myself is where my true dharma practice began. And there is a story.

I first learned this (at the heart level) from His Holiness the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, when I first met him high in the mountains of Tibet at his ancestral home at some 15,000 feet of altitude or so.

I had met renowned yogis and "spiritual" beings before and was often in awe of their power, even

intimidated, so I was prepared to be tremendously impressed by the young Karmapa. But it wasn't like that at all. Instead, when I first met the Karmapa, it never occurred to me how powerful he was, because in his presence I only realized one thing, and that was that at heart, I mean at the very deepest level, I was a deeply compassionate being. Who would have guessed that? Certainly not me.

Yes, beneath all that crusty hard-edged Michael was this profoundly compassionate being. The Karmapa's power was something beyond drawing my attention to him or how powerful he was; quite the opposite. Instead, in his presence he caused me to realize my own essential nature, that at the core I was in fact compassionate beyond my imagination.

In other words, in the presence of the Karmapa, I did not realize who he was, but only who I was, and that was something I never expected. And that is how we find a life teacher, someone through whom we discover our own true nature, not theirs.

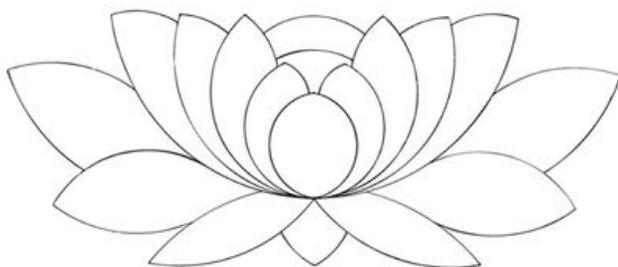
At the time the young Karmapa was 12 years old.

[Here is a drawing by my very dear friend Sange Wangchug, who lived with us at our center for a number of years and taught me Tibetan astrology. He is now the cultural minister of Bhutan. Aside from being an incredible artist, he speaks seven languages. Sange is also known for his singing of the songs of the great Tibetan yogi Milarepa, which reminds me of this story.

When it came time for Sange and his wife Tseten to leave us and return to their country, we had a

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

To our amazement Tseten sang a song in Tibetan that struck to the heart and soon had all of us crying. This just goes to prove that "Ya' never know."]



[Michael Erlewine](#) Here is a photo I took of His Holiness the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, in 2008 at Karma Triyana Monastery, his seat in North

America. For those interested, here is a photo book on that visit that Margaret and I made back then.

http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/KarmapaKTD_2008.pdf



A QUESTION SPELLED BACKWARD IS AN ANSWER

February 25, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

When I ask questions of myself, I sometimes get an answer. I am reminded of the quote I heard years ago, I can't remember when. Perhaps one of you can tell me where it came from: "When you said 'wait', you meant a long time." – something like that.

I have been asking the ether for some time about the difference between The Dharma and Buddhism, also the difference between Dharma and the things touched by the dharma or that "hold" the dharma. For example, how much dharma is in an image? Does the dharma somehow rub off on things, like the photo of the Buddha shown here that I just took? What makes it dharmic and not just a hunk of metal?

Perhaps answers are like echoes of our questions reflected back to us after gestation in the mind itself, the idea that an answer, like a palindrome, is just a question spelled backward. I don't know. As for me, I have been waiting for an answer, an echo of this particular question, for some time. And today I got an insight. It has been a dry spell.

And the answer, obvious-enough, is that meaning is a simple product of my intent reflected back (and in reverse), just like a mirror image. It is at best funny (perhaps more ironic) that (just like Narcissus) I can't

escape that image of myself reflected in the waters of life.

And try as I might, as mentioned, I can't wash away (or avoid) the image of myself emblazoned in my particular sphere of life – just like one of those mirror-balls from the days of disco. Attempts to disassociate myself from, well, “myself” are futile. It is the old tar-baby syndrome: the harder I struggle, the deeper I sink. The ego or self is just like that. I can't escape it, but I can learn to see through it.

So, while I can parse a sentence or two about separating the dharma from the “Buddhism,” it is like the old saying “You can take the boy out of the country, but you can never take the country out of the boy.” That old adage is relevant here.

The bottom line of this blog is that, aside from understanding the difference abstractly, there is no point to trying (or way to) leave anything that “is,” anywhere behind. We take it with us. We “are” it. I used to have an image in my head of being stuck (arms and feet extended) in an immense ball of cotton. No amount of struggle on my part made it any heavier than light. This is just “it,” the way things are.

When I get to the farthest edge of the edge of life (far out) and, peering out, think to go beyond, I end up (eventually wake up and find myself) already on the way back, i.e. having turned back without even realizing it. It is like how a very thin glove turns inside out when we take it off or a snake sheds its skin. It is all palindromes.

And the reason for this is because there is nothing out there and never was. Everything is in here, where it always has been. Every “out” ends up “in.” I’m sorry (so I tell myself), but that is just the way it is.

As my beloved first teacher would always say, “Question.... Quest-I-On. So true. I should perhaps wait until tomorrow to post this, because I already posted one today, but someone might want to hear from me sooner than later.

COMING EVENTS CAST THEIR SHADOWS

March 12, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Every bit of change that we ingest, like pushing toothpaste out of a tube, extends us farther in time – attenuates. For some of us, our dreams become real, and for others, our dreams become unrealistic, and then every once in a while we simply fall over a cliff of change into a different reality entirely – down the rabbit hole. In other words, it would seem that the steady process of change gives way to quantum leaps that actually result in enough accumulation of change to alter our reality drastically, causing us to pivot. I am talking about change inside.

Like an iceberg breaking up, a whole block of myself falls away and slides into the cold waters of Lethe to be forgotten. Suddenly I can't remember it or it doesn't really matter anymore. What's the difference?

When change reaches a certain critical mass, I lose the ability to monitor that change and begin to realize that "I" myself am changing. The train is leaving the station and suddenly I find myself on it. I am in play. Like an earthquake in slow motion, the very ground on which I stand (my point of view) itself is moving -- changing.

No longer just an observer, I lose any comfortable perspective and, like the proverbial "stranger in a strange land," am thrust naked into a new world, with

its own rules to learn. The experience, totally disorienting, is also so very fresh, like a snake shedding its skin or a phoenix arising from the flames.

**“COMPASSION IS NOT HAVING ANY
HESITATION TO REFLECT YOUR LIGHT ON
THINGS”**

February 27, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The above quote is by Chögyam Trungpa, a teacher of mine, who first taught me to meditate in the early 1970s. I came across this piece on the Internet, but I could not find out where it came from, obviously a teaching. The following are his words, not mine. There is a lot in here.

CRAZY WISDOM

I would like to continue from last night's talk. We have discussed the three levels of the teacher relationship in terms of the student's development. Tonight I would like to talk about whom we're relating to in the sadhana. We have a sense of relating with somewhat ideal, ethereal beings, who are known as Dorje Trolö or Karma Pakshi, people who have already existed, who have lived and died in the past. How can we relate those people to the present situation? And how is that different from worshipping Jesus Christ, for that matter?

That is an interesting question. Dorje Trolö or Karma Pakshi represent the notion of the embodiment of the siddhas. Siddha is a Sanskrit word which refers to those who are able to overpower the phenomenal world in their own enlightened way. A siddha is a

crazy wisdom person. Crazy wisdom in Tibetan is yeshe chölwa. Yeshe means "wisdom," and chölwa, literally, is "gone wild." The closest translation for chölwa that we could come up with is "crazy," which creates some further understanding. In this case "crazy" goes along with "wisdom"; the two words work together well. So it is craziness gone wise rather than wisdom gone crazy. So from that point of view, craziness is related with wisdom.

The notion of wisdom here is very touchy, and we will have to get into the technical aspect of the whole thing. Wisdom is jnana in Sanskrit and yeshe in Tibetan. Yeshe refers to perception or to enlightenment, which exists eternally. Ye means "primordial"; she means "knowing," knowing primordially, knowing already. The idea is that you haven't suddenly acquired knowledge. It isn't that somebody has just told you something. Knowledge already exists; it is here and we are beginning to tune into that situation. Such a thing actually does exist already. Wisdom isn't purely manufactured by scholars and scientists and books.

The notion of "crazy" is connected with individual situations. When wisdom has been completely and thoroughly achieved, then it has to relate with something. It has to relate with its own radiation, its own light. When light begins to shine, it reflects on things. That is how we know whether it is bright or dim. Therefore, when light is very brilliant, when it reflects on things properly and fully, we know that there is some kind of communication taking place. That communication is expressed by the intensity of that wisdom light shining through. That

communication is traditionally known as buddha-activity or compassion.

Compassion is not so much feeling sorry for somebody, feeling that you are in a better place and somebody is in a worse place. Compassion is not having any hesitation to reflect your light on things. That reflection is an automatic and natural process, an organic process. Since light has no hesitation, no inhibition about reflecting on things, it does not discriminate whether to reflect on a pile of shit or on a pile of rock or on a pile of diamonds. It reflects on everything it faces.

So that non-hesitating light reflects choicelessly all the time; it shines brilliantly and constantly on things. Crazy means not discriminating and being without cowardice and paranoia.

It isn't our duty to go around the corner and convert someone. This is a different approach. Whatever needs to be reflected on is reflected on, and whatever needs to be done is done-on the spot.

Maybe that idea doesn't seem to be particularly crazy from your point of view. You might think that if somebody is crazy, he won't leave you any space at all. He will just roll all over you and vomit all over you and make diarrhea all over you. He will make you terribly crazy, too; he will extend his own craziness. But this craziness is not so neurotic; it's just basic craziness, which is fearlessness and not giving up anything. Not giving up anything is the basic point. At the same time, you are willing to work with what is there on the basis of its primordial wakeful quality. So

that is the definition of crazy wisdom, which is sometimes known as wisdom gone wild.

Crazy wisdom is connected not only with reflecting on things, it is also connected with the space around things. The crazy wisdom person provides immense space or environment around things. That environment is completely thronged with the energy of its own fearless wisdom. When a crazy wisdom person decides to work with you, when he decides to liberate you, you become his victim. You have no way to run away from him. If you try to run backward, that space has been already covered; if you try to run forward, that space has also been covered. You have a feeling of choicelessness in regard to the particular teacher that you relate with, so your relationship becomes very natural and open. So the crazy wisdom teacher is somewhat dictatorial. The space he creates is thronged, filled with a strong charge of heavy enlightenment, heavy primordial sanity.

That is usually our problem. We can't handle too much sanity; we would like to have a little corner somewhere for neurosis, a little pocket, just a little puff here and there. If we run into too much sanity, we say, "Boy, it was heavy!"

- Chogyam Trungpa

DESIRES

January 6, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I am not feeling very philosophical lately; too busy! Nevertheless, some little pondering manages to get past my firewall. Here is one.

The outer signs (what we all can see) of my inner self (call it my persona, mask, face, or cloak) is what I draw around myself and think of as "important," that is, important at least for the moment. Even a year ago, much less two years, it was all so different. I am talking about what I consider important to me right now, but then again, just who am I? It is more convenient for me to see much of what I surround myself with as something my "Self" likes, my particular self, of course. Otherwise, it is a little embarrassing, actually.

Items that I own and have collected, so crucial to my identity even a few short years ago that I would never think of parting with them, I am now willing to sell, almost eager to, in fact. What does that tell me?

For one thing it tells me a lot about the self "itself," that the self is not "me," at least I pray not all of me. I hope I am something beyond just the things I am attached to, since these things change over time, but am I something different from the attachment itself? That is a scary thought. Perhaps I am nothing but my

"self," someone who changes his mental wardrobe with the seasons of time, the fickleness itself.

Obviously there is an emptiness there that can never be filled, a vacuum around which the vortex of things I am attached to whirl and disappear as they are discarded. As they say, there is nothing wrong with the things I am attached to, per se. They are just "things," but it is the attachment itself, and the need on my part to attach, that all this is pointing out.

The best spin I can put on it is that I am attached to the tools that I need for whatever I am doing at the moment and, as I change my mind toward another project, what I need changes too. But the rub is that what I am attached to changes, but like the spider that takes different handholds on the same old web, my need for attachment never changes.

And, as mentioned, it is OK to need and use tools. That's my excuse. They are useful. What is a little worrisome is how attached to them I am when I need them, how I can't imagine never having them, and intend to keep them forever. That is little crazy, because all I have to do is look back even a little ways (not far) to see a trail of things I was attached to that I no longer consider essential. Or are they breadcrumbs?

So here I am again, back in a closed loop, in that I "need" these things for what I am doing right now. Of course, but it is time I started acknowledging that although I need them now, they are just tools. I won't need them somewhere down the road, and probably sooner than I imagine. I suppose our bodies are not much different.

I can see how easy it is to begin to think of our Self as a soul, something that will outlive our bodies, but the Buddhists say it will not, and they also say that something in us certainly will move on, our karma, and our needs -- attachments. I am reminded of the verse in the Bhagavad-Gita, translated by Sir. Edwin Arnold, where it is said:

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

That seems like a Hindu approach, kind of equating our personality to an eternal soul. The Buddhists are a little more hard-nosed than that. I wish I were an expert in all of this, but unfortunately I am not. Like all of us, I too am waiting (not impatiently!) to find out, and when I do, I probably won't remember it any more than I do now!

My understanding is that we will be propelled forward by our karma and various unfulfilled desires, which in each life form a vortex that will attract around us a new self, based exactly on our desires and attachments. And we will go on like that until we have blown out our desire for attachments, at which time we will be free to realize and realize we are free -- enlightenment. However, I am not enlightened, so I really don't know what that is like. Once again, I am imagining – just star gazing.

DHARMA IS AS DHARMA DOES

January 20, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The following began as a comment to yesterday's discussion, but it perhaps warrants more discussion, so here it is again, with its own comments.

To me "The Dharma" is natural law, just as in Mother Nature's laws, yet "dharma" insight is more encompassing than modern science's understanding of natural law, which stops at physical things like the Law of Gravity. Dharma seems to be a superset of natural law in that it also addresses emotional, psychological, and spiritual issues, which modern science continues to ignore or remains shy of. However, Hard Science is slowly softening and coming around to the Soft Sciences. Sharing discussions like this hastens that process.

What I understand is that all of these cultural uses and Buddhist rituals that we are discussing here are what are called "relative truths." They are relatively true because they help us to get from here to there on the surface of life, but are to be distinguished from those truths that are absolutely true, regardless of what sect, culture, or trappings we are embedded in. These are called, of course, "absolute truths." The dharma represents absolute truth in this analogy, but we have to be careful not to get too absolute about it, either.

I first learned this from my teacher (a Tibetan rinpoche) when I asked him about astrology, which all Tibetans seem to use. He said that astrology was one of the limbs of the yoga, but not the root itself. The Dharma is the root of the yoga. Astrology, as a relative truth, can help us get from here to there on the surface of our life-sphere, but it will not take us toward the center. Only the dharma, so he said, can do that, and that is why it is an absolute truth. It will absolutely take us toward the center of the sphere.

My take is that the absolute is embedded in the relative, just as the center of a sphere is embedded within its entire periphery. Every point on the surface of a sphere is relative (can be related) to any other point, and relative ease or relative insight has great value, but it is temporary. However, all points on that surface of a sphere have a single and absolute relation to the center – identical in nature.

There is nothing wrong with relative truths like astrology. They can help us to get comfortable in life, and relatively improve our position. As an astrologer for fifty years, astrology (and all the other oracles) can be a great help in adjusting our direction or situation, and even in locating our particular dharma, so they are not to be belittled. Relative truth has real value, just not absolute value.

In my opinion, the problem many people appear to have is thinking that the dharma is something beyond this world of samsara that we live in, something separate, and somehow better. They discriminate the dharma from what they consider non-dharma. As the Zen Buddhists might say, "Big mistake!"

The dharma is not a thing, not an end to reach, but rather a process. It is not something to find and someday get to, but rather our way of going anywhere. It is not which rituals we practice, but how we practice them or do anything. That is why we have the term "realization," because somewhere in time, some fine day, we realize that there is nowhere to get to, because we are already there. We realize. Or, as Chuck Berry sang, "No particular place to go."

Anyway, that's how I see it.

DIY

February 6, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

To me, one of the most surprising experiences relating to the process of trying to get enlightened is the point when I realized that I had to do it myself. No one can do it for me. I was raised in the Catholic Church, where there were stories of various miracles, like Jesus touching a blind man and he is healed -- that sort of thing. Originally I thought that perhaps I might get lucky, somehow meet the Buddha and he would touch my forehead, and that would be it -- enlightenment.

It was a little discouraging to have the various rinpoches and teachers tell me that this was not the way it works and that I had best get busy enlightening myself. Rinpoches and other dharma teachers can but point out how we can enlighten ourselves. And they went on to explain that the dharma is nothing other than the method the Buddha himself used to reach enlightenment, and that would have to be magic enough for me. After all, Buddha had to do it by himself too.

This idea of working for my enlightenment was new to me. In the Catholic Church, all I had to do was to mind my Ps & Qs and pray. Then, hopefully, something heavenly would come to me, sooner or later. But Buddhism, as it turns out, is very much a do-it-yourself project. I like to humor myself with the

thought that the Buddha is said to have turned the wheel of the dharma, and that each of us have to turn the wheel of our own dharma, just as he did.

Well, the turning of the wheel, my particular dharma wheel, was harder than I thought, as in: hard to get it started moving. I suppose I had the typical attitude, that many young folks have today, that somehow the world owes me a living. I just have to be receptive and all would come to me.

Well, that did not work well either. I waited for what, for me, is a very long time, and nothing much happened. And I certainly did my best to work with the various dharma practices that I undertook, but even then I was kind of just going through the motions. Part of me was still watching from the sidelines. After all, I didn't really know what I was doing and it was even a little embarrassing for my own self to witnessing my efforts. More of me was watching than doing.

It took me many years to come to the conclusion that getting results from dharma practice required like 100% of my attention, as in: I actually had to practice all-out, lock, stock, and barrel. And that included putting my head down and my heart into it, full tilt.

My point here is that I felt kind of sheepish sitting on a cushion in the corner of a room, perhaps burning a candle, and reciting prayers in Tibetan, a language I did not know, hoping to invoke some kind of greater awareness. Remember, I had no idea what enlightenment was like (and neither does anyone, for that matter), so I was just taking a shot in the dark, and hoping something would come of it.

In other words, I was going through the motions, doing my practice, but a lot of me was just hovering around, watching myself and hoping I did not look too foolish. I remember something my dad did with us, his sons -- five boys. He had us recite these mystical words after him, "Owa Tagoo Siam." And there we boys would be, reciting that over and over again, while he laughed. Only slowly did we realize we were saying "Oh What a Goose I am." I hoped I was not doing something similar as I recited all those Tibetan practices.

So there you have the general idea, that practicing dharma is not something we do with one hand tied behind our back or just by offering a "sounds like this" gesture. The short version of this long story is that a timid or half-hearted approach to dharma practice will not garner much by way of return. We have to put our heart and soul into it to the exclusion of our self-consciousness and as if our life depended on it. And perhaps our future lives do depend on it.

“ELIGHTENMENT IS THE EGO’S ULTIMATE DISAPPOINTMENT”

February 26, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The above quote by Chögyam Trungpa is worth noting, not that I am enlightened or close to it. In the Christian New Testament it says “Unless a seed falls to the ground and dies, it is alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.” True growth involves flat-lining; no one can hold our hand when the thread runs out. This is just existential truth.

I wait for the next thread, the in-breath, if there is to be one. Patience is so difficult, waiting, not knowing. It is much easier for me to just do something to death, which is what the word “execute” is all about. However, lately, as I start to do something, I am realizing it does not really have to be done or that I have already mastered whatever there is to be learned from it. It is just another exercise in futility, as they say. Doing “nothing” is much more difficult, about as next to impossible as it gets.

It is not that there is something to be done, but rather it’s about the mindfulness itself to do anything, including exactly what I am now doing this moment, which may be close to nothing at all. As they say, “Close, but no cigar.”

It seems that, more of the time, I am struggling with the concept of “purpose.” It is much more comfortable

for me to be doing something that has great “purpose,” not that I have not done more than enough already. But I am finding that “purpose” is just another way that I clock-out and snooze on. It is so comforting, like settling back on an all-night train and letting it rock me asleep. I would rather make some huge effort to lose myself in than to wake up and just be present.

And I find it is so hard to be present, just exhausting, yet I know that ultimately it is easier than anything else. However, everything conspires to keep me from getting in the groove, but I also know that someday this same “everything” is what will keep me in the groove. LOL.

It reminds me of this poem I wrote some years ago:

SAMSARA

The same world,
That early on,
Makes it difficult,
To meditate,
Later,
Makes it difficult,
Not to.

October 12, 2010

HAPPY TIBETAN NEW YEAR

February 19, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Today is Losar, the first day of the Tibetan Buddhist New Year, the year of the Female Wood Sheep. Losar is always the day after a particular New Moon, which was yesterday evening.

Religion and worship is one area where we agree to differ and where people find their differences. "Freedom of religion" to me means that what is sacred to you is sacred to me, i.e. not "what" you consider as sacred (not your particular religion and rituals), but the fact that you consider these sacred. The actual religion, rituals, and objects that you consider sacred are not necessarily the same religion, rituals, and objects that I consider sacred, but the fact that you consider them sacred, "that" fact is sacred to me, provided that it does not harm others.

I feel the same about the many different forms of Buddhism. Not all forms of Buddhism are identical; far from it, but they are mostly the same. What is exactly the same in all forms of Buddhism is "The Dharma" upon which they are based. So we might ask, what is the difference between Dharma and Buddhism?

Well, the simple answer is that there is a big difference. There is one Dharma and many forms of Buddhism. In other words, there are many views or

takes on the Dharma (just what it is), which accounts for the many types of Buddhism.

The Dharma is based on natural law itself, from which the historical Buddha developed a method to use or work with natural law to enlighten ourselves. Your or my take on “The Dharma” (or this or that form of Buddhism’s take) is, well, just that, hopefully a clear take. Yet there will always be some subjective component to what we are calling a “take.” We each (and it is the same with the different sects of Buddhism) put the Dharma into words that make the most sense to us. Thus there are differences.

My particular Buddhist lineage is a Tibetan view, and one of several Tibetan Buddhist lineages at that. And there are differences. Otherwise there would be no different lineages, but just one. This is not to deprecate any form of Buddhist worship (or any lineage of Buddhism), but only to point out not to confuse the Dharma itself with any of the many views or representations of it. I won’t say the “baby with the bathwater,” because your or my take on the Dharma deserves more respect than that.

Make no mistake. It is the Dharma itself that all forms of Buddhism respect. Separating the Dharma from the particular form of Buddhism that holds the Dharma as true can be a slippery slope (or a touchy subject), but all types of Buddhism agree on the Dharma more than (perhaps) they agree on any one particular view (or way of worship) of the sacred dharma.

We can relatively respect others views, but we absolutely respect our particular group’s view. See

what I am getting at here? To repeat: it is confusing to try to make something that is relative to us, absolute.

For example, I have been taught that any image of the Buddha, no matter how crude, must be treated with respect. And all respect for the Buddha is respect for the Dharma. The Dharma is based on the natural laws (the way things are) that the Buddha himself discovered and treated with respect, and those laws existed long before the historical Buddha. All lineages, all forms of Buddhism, are based on the Dharma and nothing else. If they differ, it is not the dharma that differs, but the different views each form of Buddhism takes of the Dharma.

Organized religion is just that, an attempt to organize what is essentially unorganized by nature, usually with mixed results. We may not agree with the different rules, takes, sects, or the practices of various Buddhist groups (or with those who run them), but all forms of Buddhism are based on one thing only, The Dharma.

The Dharma is how the historical Buddha used natural law (the way things are) to enlighten himself and he shared that method with us. That method is what we call The Dharma, and the Dharma takes into account natural law.

I was taught that we don't break nature's laws. They break us. It is no wonder that the Dharma, which is a method of enlightenment based on pure natural law, is respected. To not do so is a form of suicide.

It is the Dharma that is inviolate (absolute), not necessarily all the many versions and trappings it

comes with. Those are relative. I find it helpful to keep this difference in mind

IGNORANCE OF THE LAW IS NO EXCUSE

March 1, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I can't help but be struck by the differences in approach we each have to what is called "The Dharma." While at root the Dharma is one inviolable truth, just like the law of gravity is one law for all of us, the views of it can be as different as there are people in the world, innumerable filters obscuring or interpreting the same essential reality.

However, unlike the law of gravity, to which we as individuals tend to respond similarly, the dharma is much more than just the physics. It also includes psychology and whatever passes for spirituality for each of us, and who knows what else. I find it helpful to keep in mind that my particular "dharma" will be whatever method or path it will take for me personally to realize the true nature of the mind and go on from there to enlightenment. I imagine these personal dharma-paths are as individually different as we as people are. And yet, at heart, like the law of gravity, we all have Buddha Nature in common. In other words, while we each have everything within us that Buddha had to enlighten himself, our particular personal path to enlightenment will vary, thus the 84,000 dharmas or paths that are said to exist..

However, I believe we are mistaken if we assume that we will just happen upon our particular dharma path. This idea of waiting to be enlightened, you know,

assuming that one day Prince Dharma will come along and rescue us does not seem to be true. Of course eventually something may happen one day, but probably not just by our waiting. We might have to do something to deserve it.

If there is one message from the Buddha that I did not get for a very long time, it is that enlightenment is very much a do-it-yourself project. It doesn't just passively happen to us by accident. We have to help make it happen, as in enlighten ourselves step-by-step, just as the Buddha did. Otherwise we will, as the teachings point out, continue to wait for innumerable lives, as we have been -- forever if need be. When I talk to myself about this, I call it the "Go to meet your maker" issue, as in: we must ourselves make an effort, go at least halfway.

The point is that the Buddha laid out a very clear path (The Dharma) to enlightenment that we can follow, but at some point we have to follow it, to actually do it, and do it all by ourselves. Fallowness is not a virtue here. And, obviously, ignorance of the dharma is no excuse. In fact, the teachings bend over backward to point out that, of the traditional three main poisons (attachment, aversion, and ignorance), ignorance is the root poison – the main one. From ignorance (habitually ignoring the true nature of our mind), attachment and aversion are said to arise.

My point here is that ignorance is certainly not bliss; just the opposite. It is what the Buddhists call "Samsara." If we ignore the law of gravity, it is at our own peril. Unfortunately, this is also true of the laws of dharma, their being for all practical purposes the same as nature's laws. As the great siddha Chögyam

Trungpa pointed out as a definition of non-theism, no one will ever rescue us from on high. No one exists to do that for us. We have to personally turn the wheel of our own dharma just as the Buddha did. Otherwise it will just sit there, unturned – unmoved. In other words, Buddhism is, above all, proactive, a DIY project.

And while Buddha Nature (and the Dharma) may be the absolute truth for each of us, relatively, our truths (the way we individually see the truth of the Dharma) differ as much as we do from one another in thought, word, and deed, and that can be a lot. While the dharma is absolutely the one bright light for each of us, relatively we each are right now feeling our way along through the darkness of our various filters or personal obscurations like a blind person. So there ARE differences that matter.

Buddha discovered the Dharma for himself through the help of his teachers and was compassionate enough to share his method with us. It is the same “Dharma” that all previous Buddhas have found, the method to complete enlightenment. And while today for most people the Buddha and The Dharma are mostly synonymous terms, there is (or used to be) a difference. For each of us, that difference still very much is a fact, because we have not yet found our particular dharma to the point of becoming fully enlightened. We have yet to become our own Buddha and do what he did, enlighten ourselves, so the differences between Buddha, the Dharma, and enlightenment are for us very much to the point.

Something that I perhaps want to discuss in more detail is what is called “The Lama of Appearances,” a Buddhist teaching (that I did not know existed) that

points out that Mother Nature is a perfect reflection of the dharma and can be just as perfect a teacher as what Buddhists call “The Lama of the Lineage” that we are all aware of.

In other words, this image of a tulip bud that I took yesterday, in its own way, is just as dharmically profound in what it points at as the dharma images (Buddha, Gampopa) I have been posting in my last several blogs. Any comments about that thought?

IN PRAISE OF SPECIALIZED LENSES

March 13, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I am a Nikon user, which was just the luck of the draw. Of course I have the requisite lenses, like the triumvirate, Nikon 14-24mm, 24-70mm, and 70-200mm lenses, but I seldom use them. Why is not hard to explain. While they are remarkable lenses in their own way, none of them are highly corrected. Somewhere along my journey of photography, I began to see the difference in lenses and ceased to find satisfaction in the ordinary degree of lens correction. Too bad for my pocketbook!

In the process of searching for what I originally called ultimate “sharpness” in lenses, which of course I initially assumed (falsely) was a just matter of better resolution, I gradually realized that resolution alone was not the answer. So I then fell into deciding that acutance (micro-contrast) made all the difference in what I was searching for. That held my attention for a while. Micro-contrast is very satisfying (and important) indeed.

But then, very gradually, like the sun coming up, it dawned on me that the icing on the cake, the tip of the top, so to speak, was not just resolution and not just acutance, but lens correction, you know, all the hideous fringing we try to ignore or do away with. Somehow, perhaps almost subliminally, I could see

the difference just by looking at photographs taken with highly-corrected (APO) lenses.

And that discovery started me on my journey of finding highly-corrected lenses. I have written extensively about the virtues of apochromatic (APO) lenses, those lenses that have been corrected for the various aberrations, etc.

Unfortunately, Nikon does not have many highly-corrected lenses in their current offerings. So I found myself wandering off-campus into other brands, lenses from Leica, Voigtlander, Zeiss, and so on. Of course, many of these lenses did not fit the Nikon mount, so in my search for APO lenses I found myself (with help from experts) rigging various mounts, searching for helicoids, and converting lenses to the Nikon F-mount standard.

To recapitulate, I first gravitated to higher-resolution cameras (Nikon D3x), and then to those without AA (low-pass) filters (Nikon D800E, D810), D7100) which improved micro-contrast, and finally to apochromatic (highly-corrected) lenses. These three steps together brought me what I was looking for in my original quest for “sharpness,” in particular that last step, APO lenses.

Pretty soon I wasn't using Nikon lenses for much of anything other than family photos and a few other things. Instead I was using highly-corrected lenses like the Coastal Optics APO 60mm f/4 macro (forensic lens), the Leica Elmarit-R 100mm f/2.8 APO macro, and most of all the Voigtlander 125mm f/2.5 APO-Lanthar lens. This last lens, the Voigtlander 125mm was, for my work, the perfect macro lens. It was fast,

had a focus throw (lens barrel) of a whopping 630 degrees or so, went to 1:1, and was highly corrected.

At that time I knew of no other lens that had all those qualities. Of course I had a pile of Nikon macro lenses (200mm Micro-Nikkor, 70-180mm Zoom Micro-Nikkor, many Micro-Nikkor 105s, etc.), but they all were not well corrected. Then, with the help of a few lens experts, I fell down the rabbit-hole into the world of exotic industrial lenses. Now here Nikon shines!

This group includes lenses specially made to view computer monitors (CRT-Nikkor-O), transfer Hollywood films (Printing Nikkors), reproduce whatever (Repro Nikkor), and grace photo-enlargers (EI Nikkors). And it was not just Nikon, but incredible industrial lenses can be found from Zeiss and many others. In fact, the world of fine enlarger lenses has barely been touched so far. Much research remains to be done, with incredible bargains available to those who do it.

And these industrial lenses really are exotic. Some are very fast, like the Repro-Nikkor, with a wide f/stop of f/1.0 and no focusing mechanism. Another is the 55mm CRT Nikkor-O (oscilloscope) at f/1.2. And the enlarger lens EI Nikkor 105mm APO lens f/5.6, with its marvelous almost 3D qualities. I could go on, pointing out lenses like the classic four lenses for the Nikon Multiphot machine (19mm f/2.8, 35mm f/4.5, 65mm f/4.5, and 120mm f/6.s) or the Zeiss Luminars, the Leitz Photars, etc.

Years ago I learned about many of the lenses from the brilliant lensman Bjørn Rørslett at this site:

http://www.naturfotograf.com/lens_spec.html

Most of these industrial lenses are a major PITA when it comes to mounts. Most are non-standard, so I have a whole box of adaptors, helicoids, and several bellows to help them out. And they are not walk-around lenses either; most don't go to infinity, some only work at one distance, like 1:1, and so on. Why bother?

“Bother,” because within their limited range, they offer some incredible opportunities for photographers. At least I think so. And in the midst of all of these exotic lenses, along comes Zeiss with their Otus line of APO lenses, which opens up another vast doorway to photographers.

I had a number of Zeiss lenses prior to the Otus series, lenses like the Zeiss Macro-Planar macros, the 100mm and 50mm, and others. While the Makro-Planar macros were very sharp, they also were very not color-corrected, so their resulting photos were too “contrasty” and color-fringing for my work.

However, the new Zeiss Otus APO line (55mm, 85mm, and 135mm) are just of incredible quality when it comes to correction. Although they are not made for close-up, I am making them work close because the results are worth it. I use small amounts of extension to bring them close, although as a rule I never use extension.

Anyway, those are some thoughts about the value and beauty of specialized lenses. I would love to hear about some of the special lenses readers use, if you have time.

I have many free articles, books, videos on lenses and close-up photography for those who want to learn more or see examples. You kind of have to dig around a bit on the site. Look under Macro-Stop, but also “Free e-books” and Articles:

MacroStop.com

This image, taken yesterday, was taken with the Nikon D810, a bellows, and the EI Nikkor APO 105mm f/5.6 enlarger lens, one of the Nikkor exotic industrials.

LINEAGE LIVES

February 27, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Here is a photo taken yesterday of a statue from our shrine of the Dharma-Lord Gampopa, whose life marks a great turning point in the Kagyu Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, of which gratefully I am a member.

Gampopa was the principal student of the great Tibetan saint and yogi Milarepa. He in turn then taught the first Karmapa, Düsüm Khyenpa, one of 17 lineage incarnations of the Gyalwang Karmapa. The Karmapa was the first reincarnated lama in Tibet. Like the Dalai Lama, the Karmapa represents an entire lineage. While the current Dalai Lama is the 14th incarnation in the Gelugpa Lineage, the current Karmapa is the 17th incarnation in the Kagyu Lineage.

The whole point of these lineages is to pass on the method for enlightenment of the historical Buddha, which is called “The Dharma.” And passing on does not mean just passing a book with the sacred writings, like a baton is passed in a relay race. The teachings are said to be poured from one Karmapa into the main students in his retinue, who in turn realize them and after the Karmapa passes away, pour the teachings back into the young Karmapa when he is reborn.

In order to pass the dharma on, these precious teachings have not only to be understood, word for word, they have to be realized in their entirety. Someone has to “get it.” That is what has to be communicated, the living fire of the teachings in full realization — no small task. This is what is called an “unbroken lineage,” not the parade of bodies itself, but the living flame that is transmitted, and the subsequent realization required.

This lineage-idea was not so obvious to me in the beginning of my own practice of dharma. As I became more and more involved with the monastery I work with, as I got on more committees, and served on various advisory boards, as a fundraiser, etc., I felt it was my obligation to, of course, raise funds.

There was an ashram just down the road from the monastery that was doing really well financially. People poured in. At that place they apparently spent a lot of time on advertising, and so on. When I would bring up ideas of how to better attract attention to our monastery in board meeting, everyone would nod. However, for some reason there was no real fire in those nods. Not much changed.

And so it took me some years to realize that money, even though we needed it, was not the main thing for these Tibetans. Not even near. They actually were concerned with perfecting the lineage, realizing the dharma in real-time, in living teachers. Not being realized myself, this was for me a hard sell, as in: I just didn’t understand it. I thought we should spend more time raising money, which we did, but very gradually.

After many years I begin to actually understand exactly what I am telling you here, that unless the dharma is realized by someone, there can be no transmission of it. That is a scary thought for a beginner like me! Just as in the Olympics, an actual burning flame of dharma has to be passed from mouth to ear, from generation to generation. That's lineage, at least in the Karma Kagyu lineage that I belong to. All eyes are on the realization.

Raising money? Well, yes. Need to do that too, but not at the expense of not realizing the dharma, one individual at a time. Once I grasped this concept and begin to see it happening around me, I understood that realization isn't just an option. It is essential-- the sine qua non of what lineage is all about. Without it, there is no lineage.

I just thought that some readers here might like to know how essential realizing the dharma, becoming enlightened ourselves, each and every one, is. Shakespeare has a wonderful line in his 13th sonnet:

“You are no longer yours, than you your self here live”

Lineage (and its transmission) is like that; it is either realized or it is no longer a lineage.

And now, a little poem I wrote a few years ago

RESTING

Sitting quietly,
Properly,
With tongue to teeth,
My body invites,

The mind.
To be,
At ease.

October 2, 2011

LOOKING IN THAT NEAREST MIRROR

January 24, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Who is the person closest to you? It could be your husband, wife, or significant partner, your mom, dad, brother or sister – whomever. IMO that relationship (and that alone) is the test of who we are. It is easy to be kind and generous to strangers, someone we may never meet again, only see socially once in a while, or when we feel like it.

However, it is the person that we see every day reflected in the mirror of ourself that is where the rubber meets the road, you know, "up close and personal. That's the test, and not our public persona, not how other people like us. It's "Love the One You're With" THE MOST that counts. Other folks are relatively easy.

We may like to think that if we don't like what we see of ourselves in the mirror of our partner's eyes, obviously this could be their fault. After all, no one else treats us like that. Yeah, sure. Way deep inside, this is true for everyone, but here we are talking about the surface, how we actually behave to the ones we are closest to, like our partner. We best not dismiss our partner's criticism just because it is clear that they too are not perfect. What we see of ourselves reflected in their eyes and opinion is also what we are, if only to them. That should mean something to us, even if we believe that they hold mistaken views.

A common copout is to say that all of what we see of ourselves in their eyes may be true "as long as" our partner has no shortcomings of their own that might cause them to see us wrong, and therein is the rub. The common refrain is "They don't see me right and their own short-sightedness and personal faults are why they have such a bad opinion of me." Their own warped view they take to be my fault. That's the common refrain.

Not so fast. I have an answer for that argument as well. We all have faults and blind spots, so we may tend to take what our partner says about us with a grain of salt – heavily discounted. They don't 'really' know us or they have an attitude in our case, etc. Perhaps they are prejudiced by past experience, etc., and how can we ever dig out of that hole? Really? Do we actually believe that is all there is to it, that we don't also have a finger in that pie and that our partner (somehow) does not really know us? Give me a break!! Even I can't swallow that one.

Isn't it interesting that this bad image of us persists in them and comes up again and again at these difficult times? Why not the other way around, that we are mostly good, with a touch of bad? For the sake of not furthering the argument, we might at least try on accepting how our partner sees us as true "for them" and do something about it, for their sake. After all, most of us well know how to improve our social appearances. I know I have lost track when I find myself quoting to my partner (or to myself), "Well, other people like me." That is a bad sign.

And there is another point worth considering. No matter what our partner is throwing at us or appears

to think of us when the going gets rough, our reaction to what they point out to us is entirely our own. If we react negatively, meanly, bitterly, etc., this is all our own choice, and has nothing to do with them. Whether they are right or wrong, well-behaved or bad, our response is purely our own. We can't blame them for the response they can provoke in us. That's all us.

And how do we forgive ourselves for our own bad behavior? Talk about karma building up! If we think we can outlast facing the whole truth of what I am pointing at here, good luck. As I like to say, it is like trying to sneak up on a mirror. It's just a fool's errand; it can't be done.

So, summarizing, the best case to get off scot-free from responsibility is that our partner is really messed-up when it comes to us, and sees us as a cup half-empty, instead of half-full. And perhaps we have just been trying to be good, to do better, etc. But then we are responsible for how we react to their hurtfulness. If I am so good, my response to their "wrong" criticism should be understanding and compassionate, meaning I should feel for their state and do what I can to help the situation. Why am I reacting?

You and I both know that very seldom is it the case that we are above it all and not part of the problem. Mostly we are right in there, snarking away, tooth and nail. This is why I tend to say that marriage (or any close relationship) is the most common form of yoga or union. And it lends truth to the Zen story of the Roshi saying to a student who was seeking his teacher's blessing. "And now for your final and greatest test, meet your new wife!"

Marriage (or a close-relationship) is the most common form of yoga. Most of us practice it, but how well is another story. It occurs to me that it might be easier to actually figure this out than to continue to avoid facing it head-on.

[Photo from warmer times. I am in the midst of sorting through hundreds of thousands of photos. What am I to do with them all? I even like some of them.]

MICRO-CONTRAST

February 16, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

“Micro-contrast” is a very popular term considering it has no formal definition that I can find. Some even claim it doesn’t exist. Nevertheless it has become increasingly important in my photography work. Perhaps I can’t define it, but I know it when I see it.

What follows are some thoughts I have been having about local satisfaction -- micro-contrast. It seems that everything these days is going local, locally grown foods, and so on. And this even extends to photography and what has been called local contrast, more frequently termed micro-contrast.

Perhaps the issue of micro-contrast is popular now in photography because more and more makers of cameras are removing their low-pass (AA or blur) filters, exposing more detail to the sensor. Unlike analog imagery (like film), digital imagery finally reduces a photo to a large series of small pixels that, if looked at closely enough, don't line up together smoothly, especially with straight lines. Instead, we get a jagged line on very close inspection, an effect that is termed "aliasing." We have all seen aliasing on our computer screens when we over-expand any bit-map graphic.

To counter “aliasing” camera makers introduce what is called a low-pass or anti-aliasing filter over the

sensor that effectively gently blurs the jagged edges between pixels, making them appear smoother to our eyes. However, at the same time that low-pass filters improve the lines, they also very faintly blur the entire photo. Not everyone is sensitive to this.

And micro-contrast is not the same as sharpness, although they are related. Contrast at the pixel level, such as increasing contrast around the pixel edges, is called sharpness, while contrast that is greater than the pixel level, but less than the overall picture, is called local or micro-contrast. Sharpness is how well resolved the boundaries between color areas are. Micro-contrast is being able to differentiate between areas that are very slightly different in color and luminosity -- enhancement.

Micro-contrast has come more into its own in recent years with the advent of larger camera sensors (and larger pixels) because it allows better contrast differentiation between individual pixels. As mentioned, low-pass (anti-aliasing) filters blur out information that the limit of the sensor cannot resolve, whatever goes past the so-called Nyquist limit.

Micro-contrast resolves clarity in all the details, while not detracting from the overall image. It has been likened to an audio recording, where although you are listening to the entire symphony, you can still isolate and here the whisper of a wind instrument in the background of the mix. Larger camera sensors (36 MP and above) make for better micro-contrast, and wider lens apertures enhance this effect until flaws in the lens optics themselves begin to degrade the image. In general, large sensors, wide apertures, and

highly-corrected (APO) lenses make for better micro-contrast in my experience.

Medium Format cameras (Hasselblad, Mamiya, Linhof, Rollei, and so on) used in advertising and landscape photography typically don't have low-pass filters because their larger format makes low-pass filters less necessary. As DSLRs sensors get larger and larger, the need for AA filters is becoming less, and camera makers are going naked, removing the low-pass filters with the result that the resulting images are sharper and local contrast (micro-contrast) is enhanced.

As mentioned, where low-pass filters on cameras kind of blur out the ultra-fine detail, these new cameras like the Nikon D800E and the Sony A7r (and others) are letting the sensor resolve detail to the limit of the sensor, and the result are sharper images and a renewed interest in micro-contrast.

In a way, micro-contrast is the reverse of "bokeh" (a Japanese word for the beautiful blurring of an image), usually whatever makes up the background. So while bokeh is a general softening or blurring of an image, micro-contrast is just the reverse, an apparent sharpening or crisping of an image so that it sharpens and better captivates or satisfies the eye.

Micro-contrast is vaguely analogous to some of the fractal imagery, where infinitely tiny areas of the image are granular and self-similar or reflect the larger patterns of the whole scene, with the effect that there apparently is no end to detail.

In other words, rather than be uninteresting and without detail, micro-contrast encourages the eye not to roam farther, but to find contentment in each part of the photo, wherever it roams. To me, micro-contrast is local satisfaction for the eye and the mind.

In my opinion, what is called micro-contrast depends on sensor resolution (usually the more pixels the better), acutance (subjective perception of sharpness based on edge contrast), and highly-corrected (APO) lenses.

I include a number of photos taken with the various higher-end Nikon camera bodies using various apochromatic (APO) lenses. They may or may not meet your specifications for having "Micro-contrast," by IMO they are headed that way.

Here are photos that show micro-contrast IMO.

<http://spiritgrooves.libsyn.com/micro-contrast-in-photograp...>

SPENDING TIME

January 2, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

This is bit of a ramble, so you have been warned.

How to spend my time? I think about this a lot and I always have. For me it amounts to something like the economics of time, my time. How can I best use my energy to benefit both myself and other people? It is actually kind of an art, but one that I have not yet fully mastered; I'm still working on it. It can be painful.

One thing I have learned is not to bite off more than I can chew or, if I choose to tackle a really large task, to approach it in way that might actually work. I try to tailor my meal to my appetite. The secret of working large undertakings is to not choke on the task so that you give up and abandon it. I tend to take it in small bites and make sure each bite is delicious-enough so that I stay hungry. The process itself has to be self-encouraging if I want to go a long way. For me it can't just be one bitter pill after another. Yet, bitterness to some degree is probably somewhat in the eye of the beholder. That's a wrinkle.

Having undertaken to document all recorded music, all recorded film, all major rock-concert posters, a major astrological library, and many other topics, I believe I know something about what big tasks require of me, if only in hindsight.

Let's say I want to count the number of grains of sand on a beach. I could start at one end of the beach and begin, one grain at a time. However, the sheer task may not only be physically overpowering, but mentally and emotionally too. IMO that is not how to approach it. Linear solutions are not the only useful ones; approximations may be good enough for most work. That is what estimates are all about. Choose your poison wisely.

My point here is that I have to weigh the end result I am trying to achieve against the physical, emotional, and mental cost of getting there. i.e. "how" I get there. If that first approach, serially counting every last grain of sand, is obviously going to break me down so that I never finish, it is better to find another way or move on to other projects. I must factor discouragement into the process. And will any of these many solutions affect the final result? Does the "kind" of result really matter? Is the result more important than how we arrive at it?

In other words, doing things in serial fashion, linearly, is seldom the way-to-go in my case, especially if the task is huge. I tend to process large undertakings by iteration, one phase at a time, not one grain at a time. I could go on, but if you are following me, you can extrapolate from what I have pointed out here, which brings me back to my theme.

I somehow must gauge how to approach a task so that it gets done (AND in a manner that I can do it), not so that it gets started, but never finished. And getting a task done in a hurry is like rushing to reach the end of life. What's the point? It is one thing to persevere (and to not be discouraged by adversity),

but quite another to ignore or put up with an uncomfortable process for the sake of some imagined result. Like the Heisenberg principle, the process itself affects the result. In that case, the process should be reexamined, and made more comfortable, especially if it is a long ride.

If my appetite for results is larger than what I can stomach, that is a recipe for failure. And there is another factor that may be peculiar to me personally, and that is: working with other people, although I feel I am probably not alone here.

We all know that too many cooks spoil the broth, but more troublesome yet is working with a group that is incoherent. And by "incoherent" I mean several things. If your group partners don't know how to do things, and yet don't know they don't know, then that is usually a problem. The team members have to dovetail together somehow. It is often easier for me to do everything than hobble myself by marching folks through the process each step of the way against their will, that is, unless I intend to be their teacher. I tend to lead by example and like to point something out just once, not repeatedly; unfortunately today, teaching has become a form of therapy for many people.

For better or for worse, therapy is not something I relegate to others, but rather I do it myself when I have realized that I am doing something incorrectly. Getting to the point of that realization is what I work on. Unfortunately, many professional therapists I have met could use the same advice. As the Bible (Matthew 6:22) says "Why worry about a speck of

sawdust in your friend's eye, when you have a plank in your own."

More difficult yet is when I find myself in a group project with people who are unable or unwilling to maintain a certain code of ethics and work habits. For example, they are not really serious about the task or perhaps don't know what "serious" is. Or worse, group members actually compete negatively with or sabotage one another. I have built some very good teams, but I have also ended up stuck with teams where it would have been better to just do it all myself -- easier and faster. And, as an aside, serving on a board of directors (in my experience) is an exercise in futility.

For me, the worst of all is finding that the people I am working with, often middlemen, are ethically challenged and, in the end, are just not people I want to spend my life with -- period. I have quit huge projects just because I didn't want to be around the kind of people involved. "Why bother!" was my comment, which leads me back to my main point: we each have to feel our way along in what we do.

And something else that I have been slow to learn is to reevaluate a situation as I go along. Things change every moment. It seems I can't just set my sights on a target and plow ahead. Instead, I have to continually adjust my sights as I move forward, not so much based on where my imagined targeted-result is, but more often how I feel about the process of reaching it. I need to be comfortable with the process. Of course, this "process" thing has its limits too.

If the process becomes so slow that there can be no perceivable result, that doesn't do it for me either. Or, if a project turns into one of those where you have to "go along to get along," then I tend to abandon it. In that case I have been known to upset the apple cart. That is a problem I have. Those kinds of things are unrealistic for me, which means that (in my case) a career in politics would have been out of the question.

If the coat fits me, I tend to put it on. If it does not, I usually take another route. Ideally, teamwork, as in assembling a good team, is the best way to go. If one can direct a really good team, there is no need to micromanage. Each member of the team has his or her job to do. Teamwork is best, but a good team is also hard to put together. Many people don't understand that a finely-tuned team is worth more than any amount of the physical assets involved. Expert employees are always the greatest expenditure in the budget, but worth it every time. The reverse is also true.

Perhaps it is just because I am getting older, but lately I am less willing to squander time on projects that we used to call "Charlie Foxtrot," a term similar to FUBAR or the more toned-down SNAFU. My BS-detector must be getting more sensitive; I often find myself realizing I have been there, done that. When this happens, I try to pull in the reins a bit, restrict my scope, and drop the culls. Years ago I would try to bite my tongue and wade on through the muck, but not much was ever accomplished. This I believe is what is called "a lost cause."

I learned long ago that, as the old song says, "I want to be in that number when the saints come marching

in." I have to consider myself (along with others) as one part of the whole, not as an exception, either way, not first or last. In other words, I am one among a million, not one in a million, meaning that if I go against myself, that is counterproductive. I always do my best to bring my "self" along. As the Tibetan Buddhists point out, we have to first enlighten ourselves before we can help to enlighten others.

However, since the Self is not a "being," but rather a collage of our personal attachments, it is better that we learn to understand just what our self is and see through that mirror rather than gaze at our reflection in it. If there is one thing "worse" than being selfish, it is persecuting or getting down on our own self. That would be like beating a dog or like destroying our own car instead of learning to drive it properly.

I am happiest when I am busy on some project, but picking the project and the proper approach is what I am writing about here. Ultimately, what is proper use of my time? It is partly the product, but also very much the process involved. And I have written many times here that, in the end, the product is the process for many of us, i.e. where we are going and how we get there are the same thing.

Perhaps my greatest problem is that I tend to assume that others have the same intent and motivation that I do. No offense, but this is not always the case. My first true dharma teacher would often say to me that at some point we have to stop just reproducing our "kind" and, instead, start reproducing our self, and by "self" he meant our spiritual orientation and dharma (methods).

THE BODY LANGUAGE OF REALITY

January 3, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

One of the mainstays of my life-guidance system are the almost imperceptible signs that constantly inform me, you know, the subtle signals or mind gestures from the outside world that somehow catch my attention, flag me down, and lead me within. And these are not just natural phenomena, but they also exist in a more organized form in the images of the Buddha and great Bodhisattvas, where these great beings are making mudras, those fascinating sacred hand gestures. But, of course, mudras are not limited to using the hands and, perhaps more important, they are not static and frozen in time, like we see in a drawing or photo.

In other words, mudras come and go; they arise and melt away again like the circles that birds make in an empty sky; they vanish as fast as they appear. Watching the great rinpoches performing sacred rituals, it takes a sharp eye to witness the mudras as suddenly they appear and vanish in all that fluid motion. Yet they do appear, just as their sacred sand mandalas are formed and then swept into the sea, the gesture of offering.

If they have no permanent presence, then what's the meaning of their existence or our own? We might just as well ask why there are flowers or rainbows. Everything is a sign of something, but what is it that

catches your personal eye, that speaks to you? And I am not talking about superstition, but rather perception and intuition, learning to trust what we see at first glance rather than second-guessing what we see. It is all there in a micro-second flash of identification. Trusting what we see, as mentioned, is what this blog is all about.

Learning to live and find guidance in the many subtle signs around us takes time. I have been doing it for as long as I can remember. Trusting what I see without the safety net of overthinking is what it takes. Signs appear in those split-second moments when we can relax enough to admit them, but they do tell. And they can mean so much. They guide, they warn, they confirm, and as the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa used to say, "First thought, best thought." Take advantage of your intuition. It waits on you.

Since I am a kind of slow learner, often I have to see an identical sign repeated more than once. Twice usually does it, but sometimes it takes more to get my attention. What is it trying to tell me? I finally acknowledge what is by them the obvious and take remedial action or whatever is indicated. The old saying "Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me" holds true here. We are expected to act on what we see, and to not just ignore it.

And this reading of "signs" is not just for the very few or for our "psychic" cousins. It belongs to all of us by our very nature and, if it is dormant right now in much of society, this was not meant to be the standard. It would be like driving a car without headlights and mirrors. But we may have to learn to use our intuition just as we learn to drive a car. The cosmos has

already issued each of us a license to read sign language for the duration of our lives. And we give signs too!

Reading signs differs from the nagging comments from my Self in that there is always a ring of truth to perceived signs as opposed to the vested self-interest. Intuition whispers, while most self-references are like white noise. It is best I ignore the noise.

In a sense, the world is alive with signs. Everything can be still around me yet I can see the signs when they appear, winking and blinking in space, signaling me, waking me up, guiding me. When I think about when I first began seeing them, I go way back to when I was just a little kid studying nature. Even then I was reading nature's signs all over the place. I was aware of the tiniest movement around me. I would go sit in the grass in the woods. It would take time, but after a while what was still around me would begin to move. Tiny critters crawling, bees and butterflies, and the world of nature would begin to appear to me. That's where it began and I took it from there.

By now, reading signs is so habitual that I do it without thinking. Actually, I always did it without thinking, because thinking only blurs what I am pointing to here, these signs. I am thankful to have learned what is called "Insight Meditation," a Buddhist technique that is a kind of finishing school for sign reading, because beneath the outward signs is what we call the intuition and insight, and, as the saying goes, "When intuition speaks, we listen." That is where all the creative ideas in the world come from. Of course every idea, every thought in the world originally came from the mind, which is why the

Tibetan Buddhists call the mind the "Wish-Fulfilling Jewel?"

Signs are the body language of reality. There are no empty gestures.

THE NATURE OF SHAMANS

February 2, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[Medical update: My fall on the ice last Thursday turned worse yesterday and severe pain ensued, sending me to the hospital and X-rays. It turns out that I have two fractured ribs high up on my ribcage. The prognosis is six weeks of pain of some kind or another. I don't know why, after three days, sudden pain would happen. It is like being stabbed with, sorry to say this, an ice pick. It definitely has my attention.]

Meanwhile, I want to talk a bit about shamanism, because there seems to be considerable misunderstanding about what shamans actually are and do, so let me know if this makes sense to you. And I am not making this up out of whole cloth either, but simply following the general lead of Mircea Eliade, an expert in comparative religions in genera and shamanism in particular.

It is important to grasp that shamanism differs from established religion in that it is not passed on or inherited. Neither is it some kind of evangelical airborne religious virus. Shamans by definition are one-offs, one-of-a-kind. They fly solo and don't run in packs. This is not to say that there are no so-called shamanic groups out there who claim to teach shamanism; the very concept to me is pretty much an oxymoron. Shamanism cannot be taught. It is basically an accident of nature, and is more in line

with natural law than with organized religion or anything close.

As pointed out, there is no seed or germ that causes one to become a shaman. Instead, every conventional society since the world began has had shamans, and this by definition. Here is how I understand this works.

The societal conventions we live within (and are obliged by) are more arbitrary than we might imagine. Society defines a body of un-natural law (a state of mind) that, nevertheless, is quite rigorous and binding. Just as cities have limits, every society has its boundaries, but wandering beyond society's limits has more consequences than wandering beyond our local city limits sign and out into the countryside.

Because every society has conventions and limits, by that same token society has those who somehow don't fit, who wander or find themselves (often without knowing it) beyond the prescribed limits. And I don't mean breaking rules or civil law. I am talking about our inner psychology and alternative states of mind. Through one kind of intense psychological experience or another, be it drug or naturally induced, an individual can find him or herself thrust beyond the conventional edge of the unknown into the unknown itself.

Perhaps you can begin to see why what I am describing here is not any kind of organized religious experience, but rather something that is bound to occur anywhere society establishes itself with its mores and conventions. Some few persons in any society will, no doubt, fall through the cracks and be

immersed in an experience that society knows nothing of. This quite naturally occurs wherever we have conventional borders or limits. Like anything else, a society is defined by what is beyond its limits, where we "don't go there."

That this happens cannot be argued. It is what happens next that is important, i.e. what can be done for those who find themselves thrust beyond conventional experience and struggling with alternative realities. Society does not know or understand what the persons who wander beyond its limits are experiencing, and for the most part does not want to know. Literally speaking, society has not experienced these alternative mental states themselves, or else they would not be alternative, but normal.

This leaves the straggler to figure all this out on their own and to somehow find a way back into normal society or be condemned to wander in society's twilight zone perpetually. Society tends to paint these individuals as "crazy" in small or greater ways and it is hard for the victim to refute these allegations because they in fact are wandering in the wilderness of the mind. They know that what they see and experience is not "normal."

In other words, if those who fall through the cracks of normality cannot stabilize and find their way back within the limits of society, they are doomed to remain outsiders. And here is the point:

Those who do manage to stabilize and re-enter society, more or less, retain the knowledge and experience from their journey beyond the pale, and

theirs is a rare experience and understanding indeed. They can rightly be call "shamans," the ones who can stabilize their minds within these alternative states of mind and return to normal or to a "new" normal.

Moreover, their experience and expanded awareness of these alternative states of reality allows them to spot others around them who have fallen (or are falling) through the cracks. In many cases the shaman can guide those lost back onto the track of a normal life. This becomes their main function.

Once a shaman is stabilized and confirmed in their experience of alternative realities, they can assist others destined to follow the same route, but the idea of organizing shamanism just does not compute. Again, shamanism is a natural result of any organized society. Any time we have a clear definition of normality, we will have those who fall outside that, for one reason or another.

I know of this because for many decades, aside from experiencing alternate realities myself, I became someone who counseled those who had taken drugs (usually acid) which had imprinted them deeply but which effects the person was unable to stabilize and recover from. I served (as best I could) as a guide back to a more normal life.

In summary, shamans have no lineage. Shamanism is not an avocation, but more an accident of nature, a singularity. A convocation or convention of shamans is a contradiction in terms. The shaman's knowledge of alternative states of mind has some overlap with the results of Tibetan mind training. Both have developed greater awareness. The experience of the

shaman of alternate states of reality tends to be in relation to society's norm, while the realization of the yogi through mind training has to do with the nature of the mind. They both are spiritual or psychological disciplines, but the shaman is for the most part concerned with relative truths, while the meditator's goal is the realization of the absolute nature of the mind itself.

As for Don Juan and the worlds of Carlos Castaneda, sure, there are probably shamans in the deserts of the southwest (or wherever) that employ all kinds of totems, hallucinogenic herbs, and what-not. In my experience the true shaman is not attempting to invoke altered states of mind, but just the reverse, trying to balance and stabilize these states. Their wish is not to get outside society's conventional time, but rather to rejoin society and share their rather unique perspectives.

THE ORDINARY IN EXTRAORDINARY LENSES

March 28, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I love the line in the film “The Outlaw Josey Wales,” when Chief Dan George takes a piece of colored candy from his pocket and says to Clint Eastwood, “All I have is a piece of hard rock candy. But it’s not for eating. It’s just for looking through.” That’s what lenses are all about, looking through. Many cheap lenses have all kinds of aberration and faults that make them painful to look through.

I do my best to avoid these kinds of uncontrolled lens aberrations. I have spent years seeking out better and better-corrected lenses, what are called apochromatic (APO) lenses, where as much of the distortion and aberrations have been removed as possible, leaving what could be characterized as a pure transparency, just a clear medium that we can see through. But here is the ironic part.

When we finally refine our apochromatic lenses until nothing impedes their transparency, I find that something of great value is missing or has been lost in some of those lenses. Like the trace elements in sea salt that the body so desperately needs, something similar happens in fine lenses. What I call a “forensic” lens, a lens that is absolutely flat and actually copies whatever it sees (a “relay lens”), has little of interest to relay.

I am putting aside for this discussion the artistry of the photographer who can make almost any lens dance. Here I would like just to discuss the lenses themselves.

In the last analysis, when we have removed all defects, all aberrations, distortions, etc., we end up with a relay or copy lens. What you see is what you get. It is at that point that I find that certain imperfections in the lens themselves may have meaning and use, if they can be controlled. Oddly enough, I am reminded of my first real-life or dharma teacher, an 81-year-old man who was a traveling initiator into a Rosicrucian order, who had the little finger of one hand permanently slightly bent. He would say to me that this imperfection was all that there was keeping him in this world.

Of course, I had no idea what he meant, but it could be something like I am describing here with lenses, that when all is said and done (as for correcting a lens), that the best lenses have some remaining twist, differential, or “fault” that allows us to see through them into a world that is not simply a copy of what we ordinarily see, not just a relay lens. Instead, that ever-so-slight defect is what gives a lens character and makes it different or special from what I label as a pure copy or forensic lens. I am asking about lens character.

I have struggled to find highly-corrected APO lenses, lenses free and clear of all distortions, etc., only to find that with the vanishing aberrations sometimes go the very thing that led me on in my search for clarity-in-lenses in the first place. What kind of Catch-22 is

that? And what kind of life-message is that? For me, it is a particularly profound one.

I have assembled scores of lenses that can be used for close-up and macro (or micro) photography. Some are more corrected than others. The best are apochromatic to one degree or another of refinement. The worst, the least-corrected lenses, cast color-fringing that destroys the “sharpness” of that particular lens. I have few of those kinds of lenses left in my collection and never use them.

When I look into the “best of the best” apochromatic lenses, as I mentioned, I find ones that are extremely flat and very clear. You would think that was enough, the sheer transparency and clarity, a lens that transmits a perfect copy of the world out there. Yet, oddly enough, this kind of “copy lens,” what I call a “forensic lens,” is not satisfying to me.

It appears that along with the vanishing aberrations as we correct a lens, often goes that differential or angle of interest that has led me on all this time in my search for marvelous lenses. I admit that this is hard to explain or put into words. Some of you will know what I am talking about here and can comment in your own words.

It is the defects in life that make it challenging, that slow me down (brings me down) into actual experience, something that for a “thinker” like myself I tend to avoid. In a similar way, I am finding that in the last analysis, in the last judgment, so to speak (the most recent, anyway), I am sorting out APO lenses into two groups. On the one hand are those that are essentially relay lenses, copy lenses, free of almost

everything but their own transparency, and on the other hand are those lenses that have some small (but to me beautiful) defects remaining that ever-so-slightly alter the image so that what I see through that lens takes me out of the pure copy-world I am so familiar with and puts me into an altered space where I somehow see beyond the ordinary.

I know that many of you reading this will say that I am overthinking things, but am I? An example would be the EI Nikkor APO 105mm f/5.6 enlarger lens. It is absolutely highly corrected, not only in the entire visible spectrum, but even beyond both ends of that spectrum and into the near infrared and near ultra-violet. Yet, and here is my point, this lens has a distinct character or draw.

Perhaps when we correct any lens, when we distill it down, removing (or controlling) all the aberrations, etc., what is left is some “distillate,” some trace effects that become what we call the character of that particular lens. Perhaps this is what that elusive term “micro-contrast” is all about. And perhaps some APO lenses have very little trace-character to them or a trace-character that does not satisfy us in some way that we require. I can't say for certain.

Then there are lenses like the CRT Nikkor-O, a lens that makes no pretense in terms of being highly corrected, but nevertheless is very fast (f/1.2) and has high resolution, but at the same time has admirable defects that are almost unpredictable, but so lovely.

So, for me at least, the bottom-line here is that I have run the gamut of most of the APO lenses I can find to fit the Nikon F-mount and have begun to modify my

previous desire to find the “Holy Grail” of APO lenses, which has now morphed into: I want highly-corrected APO lenses that, nevertheless, have a distinct character or distillate that projects me beyond the obvious ordinary into the extra-ordinary. In other words, the extraordinary only can be found through the lens with a touch of the ordinary, some beautiful defects.

This article is not meant so much as a statement, as it is a question. What are your thoughts about this, for me at least, dilemma?

[Photo taken with the Voigtlander 125mm APO-Lanthar f/2.5]



“WE’RE STILL DREAMERS”

March 14, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

This post is a little eclectic. Forgive me please.

One form of the little fat-bodied insect, the cicada, hibernates for 17 years underground before emerging into daylight. After more than forty years of my own kind of hibernation in a rather tiny office, I too may at last be emerging. I am not sure yet, but there are signs. Whether I will have wings to spread remains to be seen.

I have not played this song for you before, but I will here, because it grasps so perfectly what I want to say. This is a song by the Yardbird’s drummer James McCarty, who over the years I contacted and interviewed. We are kindred souls. His album “Out of the Dark,” created years later, carries the spirit of the 1960s into the present. The song is “We’re Still Dreamers,” and we are.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SEK_ddLq2ks

We bought a very small house in 1980 for \$30,000 and have lived in it ever since. When we finally made a little money, instead of moving to a larger home (with our four kids and dogs), I elected to just add-on to my home and let it go at that. Our house was less than a block from my business and I was not willing to give up that perk of being so close. I could walk to

work in two minutes. So here we still are, but the businesses have gone.

In order to build successful businesses, as an entrepreneur with no safety-net, I had to put the pedal to the metal, as they say, and concentrate very intensely, which I did. And now that my businesses are all sold, I have to learn to take my foot off the pedal and allow myself to coast to a stop. I am working on that.

It has only recently occurred to me that it is OK to stop pushing, to relax the furrowed brow, and perhaps to even look around. I have had my head down for so long I don't know what is up.

Every time I have seen His Holiness the 17th Karmapa, head of the Karma Kagyu Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, he spontaneously manages to help me turn the wheel of my own dharma. This forthcoming visit appears to be no exception. Already that event is upon me and I am increasingly swept up in that change, this time perhaps not so minor.

All those years of intense concentration as a programmer working on my businesses had the unexpected side-effect of preparing my mind for learning meditation. Much of what I learned through dedication to that work was also applicable to basic meditation training. Of course I was also formally practicing Buddhist meditation all of those years, but not as successfully as with my businesses.

“Practicing” anything has an aspect of artificiality. After all, we practice because we don't know how to do something. And we practice until intuition kicks in

and we get the hang of it. Then we just do it. Well, I have done my practicing. As for how am I feeling? I am reminded of this prose I wrote back in the 1960s when I first woke up. It comes to mind now.

“The morning’s brightness lights the day. And when that day is gone, the quietness of evening here approaching settles to sleep this restless world. Hard can I hear the frantic rush, as I turn away from the edge out into floating rest am I. It is not my conscious direction doing this, but as a head down-turned all life now turns up a blossom to the night, the night of time urges me open, at last a flower too, open to life.”

“Already the dawn.”

“Still, around me, urging caution, a retinue of persons set my spirit, like a jewel is set, in time. But where before my worry, now my rest. The tide rolls on beyond me. Ever changing, it rocks me now asleep. And in my sleep, awake am I, so clear a bell is ringing.”

“The smart of persons lash and crack to drive me at time’s edge. My personal ties are slipped, as floating out, I’m gently tugged. Too long have fought to force my thought, and not, at ease, arising like some cloud to pass.”

“My work undone, yet done, I rise. Drifting through strains, I sieve, and pass myself, open out to nothing thoughts to touch back not once more.”

“A clear sleep is soft; its ever blooming sound is silence. Now to find my way among the slips of time. And slip I will, now lost to striving, and lounge in this

room of emptiness. To lie back in time, behind its edge, and ever look eternally. No way to pass this on. This is: passing on. Slamming against the walls of time, I shove off into eternity, and spread open a flower, so wide.”

WHO PUT THE PSYCHEDELIC IN PSYCHEDELIC ART?

January 17, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I have been very busy of late, actually working on a rock-concert poster project. I thought some of you might appreciate the following thoughts.

If there is one artist who put the psychedelic in the psychedelic art era (the 1960s), in my opinion that artist is Rick Griffin. And if there is a single poster of Griffin's that best sums up his psychedelic statement, it has to be this one, which has been nicknamed the "AOXOMOXOA." Griffin's flying eyeball (BG-105) may be the most universally recognized of all the psychedelic era posters, but the AOXOMOXOA most perfectly represents what that era was all about.

Rick Griffin's AOXOMOXOA

The word "AOXOMOXOA" is a double palindrome, meaning not only does it read the same forward and backward, but also each letter in the word is also reversible, and when flipped horizontally also reads the same either way. As the story goes, "AOXOMOXOA," was an idea given to Rick Griffin by Grateful Dead lyricist Robert Hunter, when Griffin phoned him up and asked him for a possible title for the new Grateful Dead album cover Griffin was working on. Hunter suggested that he put a lot of the

palindromes that Griffin had been playing with (words like 'mom,' etc.) together to form a larger word.

"Dead Heads" have speculated as to the possible meaning of the word, with thoughts like the "AO" means "Alpha and Omega," the sacred seed syllable "OM" is in the center, "X" is a mysterious number to be solved for, and so on. Others have speculated that this is an Aztec or Mayan word. Beyond the words is the actual imagery created by Rick Griffin, and it says it all.

Griffin's incredible sun (an egg surrounded by sperm wriggling to get in) burning in a clear blue sky, endlessly radiating light and warmth above, while warming the earth below where the most dark womb of the earth receives that light and (also endlessly) brings forth life. Here is the mystery of life and death drawn out in psychedelic imagery worthy of Carlos Castaneda and the mysterious world of Don Juan. This poster has an immediate and a lasting impact on our consciousness. For me, it is unique in the world of psychedelic posters and is the single most important graphic from that era.

And if these incredible graphics don't speak for themselves, Griffin thought to literally spell it out for us in the very type on the poster itself, the name: Grateful Dead. If you cover the lower two-thirds portion of the name "Grateful Dead," the very top third spells out for all of us the very truth of that time, the very essence of the psychedelic experience. It clearly says "We Ate The Acid," and that says it all. We ate the acid and it changed our life and set the tone for a generation.

The Hawaiian AOXOMOXOA

Called the "Hawaiian AOXOMOXOA," this is a poster for a show that never took place. Rick Griffin hand carried 25 back from Hawaii himself on the plane. The printer destroyed all the other copies because he was never paid for the gig. Of the 25 that were salvaged, there were four printer's proofs, three on the same stock as the posters and one on a slightly different stock. These 25 were the only originals of this most classic poster. There have been two reprints, one that is smaller.

The AOXOMOXOA for the Grateful Dead Avalon show on January 24, 1969 is considered by many collectors (including myself) to be the quintessential statement of psychedelic art. This Hawaiian show is the only other Griffin poster that reflects the same Carlos-Castaneda-style psychedelic landscape and sun, first seen in the poster for the 1969 Avalon show and later on the Grateful Dead album "AOXOMOXOA," released in June of 1969. Although elements of what can be seen in the AOXOMOXOA posters can be found in other griffin works, these two posters are his only work with a fully developed sun and surrounding landscape.

The Hawaiian AOXOMOXOA is one of a few (and perhaps tops that list) of the most coveted and rare psychedelic posters. One poster collector that I know, a man who personally assembled the largest collection of rare psychedelic posters in existence, is reputed to have the Hawaiian AOXOMOXOA framed and showcased above his mantle. This can be said to be a quintessential piece.

I have studied these concert posters for many years and have assembled what is probably the largest single database of rock posters in existence, personally photographing more than 30,000 posters myself. Of course I owned a mint copy of the AOXOMOXOA and I also owned one of the very few proof sheets of the Hawaiian AOXOMOXOA. A proof sheet contains the poster image and often several handbills or cards. Here is a photograph of my proof sheet, which I sold for \$20,000 some years ago.

[This is the original "AOXOMOXOA" by Rick Griffin for a show at the Avalon Ballroom in San Francisco on January 24, 1969. This image is the copyright of Griffin's wife Ida.]

