

Dharma Blogs

2017 Spring



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 Spring of 2017, posted on Facebook and Google+.

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“NO PARTICULAR PLACE TO GO”	8
THE BUCK STARTS HERE	10
THE STILL LIFE	12
DO I HAVE MY MIND RIGHT?	14
ABOUT EATING TO LIVE	16
SPIRITUALLY TECHNICAL	20
HURRY UP AND WAIT	22
ORDINARY “ORDINARY MIND”	24
GIVE ME A BREAK.....	26
OF TWO MINDS	28
THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER	31
HOW DO WE KNOW?	33
BETWEEN OUR UPS AND DOWNS	35
MYOB.....	38
PAYING ATTENTION	40
POINTING AT THE ILLUSION	43
A BRIDGE TO THE MYSTIC	45
AWARENESS OF AWARENESS	49
MORE ON AWARENESS	51
“SLIP SLIDIN’ AWAY”	53
PERSONALITIES: CHOOSING A FUTURE	56
GETTING PERSONAL.....	59
DON’T TRY SO HARD.....	61

A STELLAR PERSONALITY	63
MIND IMPRESSIONS	65
INVEST IN THE PROCESS	69
MEANWHILE, BACK IN THE JUNGLE	71
THE NEED FOR WRATH IN POLITICS.....	73
SEEING BY FEELING.....	77
“SOMETHING IS HAPPENING HERE...”	79
GETTING IT	82
ABOUT-FACE	84
SEEING AT THE EDGE.....	88
LOOKING UP	90
THE GESTURE.....	93
REAL-EYES	95
VIVID SEEING	98
THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS.....	100
FIND YOUR LEVEL	102
ROUNDING THE CORNER	104
A NEEDLE IN A HAYSTACK.....	107
CONNECTING THE DOTS	110
TOUCHING HOME	114
BELIEVE THE TRUTH	117
“FEEDING SAMSARA TO ITSELF”	119
BEYOND RECOGNITION.....	123
VIVID INSIGHT	126

BEHIND THE WHEEL.....	128
FAMILIARIZATION.....	130
TIGHTEN UP ON IT.....	132
SPIRITUAL MIDWIFERY.....	134
STRIKE AT THE HEART.....	136
KARMA ACCUMULATION.....	140
ORDINARY MIND.....	141
FISH OR CUT BAIT.....	143
THE TWO ACCUMULATIONS.....	146
EFFORTLESSNESS.....	150
“TIGER, TIGER BURNING BRIGHT”.....	153
SEARCHING WITHOUT THOUGHT.....	157
INSIDE OBSERVER.....	160
EMPTINESS APPEARING.....	162
FIRST LIGHT.....	164
INTO THE STREAM.....	166
MIST IN THE MORNING.....	168
KARMA BURNS TWICE.....	170
HOW TO REST.....	172
THE LA OR ENERGY BODY-DOUBLE.....	174
RESTING THE MIND.....	179
“I’M LOOKING THROUGH YOU”.....	180
MINDING THE REST.....	181
THE LAMA OF APPEARANCES.....	183

ZEN AND THE ART OF PHOTOGRAPHY	187
TOUGH LOVE.....	193
NO BEING WANTS TO SUFFER.....	200

“NO PARTICULAR PLACE TO GO”

April 1, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Without fully realizing it, we are caught in the process of living, the flow of Samsara. Like a freight train, we are hurtling through time and space. As Chuck Berry said, “With no particular place to go.” The operative phrase here is “without realizing it.” That’s why Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism is so all about “realization.” What good is life without the realization of who we are and what we are doing? So, this post is about realizing our non-realization. We should be able to do that. In the late 1960s, my first dharma teacher, Andrew Gunn McIver, a traveling Rosicrucian initiator, used to repeatedly drill me with the phrase:

“These five things observe with care:
To whom you speak, of what, why, when, and where.”

For all practical purposes, he was talking about realization or something close to it. Since everything, all words, ideas, thoughts, intentions, inventions, etc. come from the mind, recognition and realization of the actual or true nature of the mind just makes sense, literally. We are all busy realizing what we can; otherwise, we wouldn’t even know who we are or where we are at, whatsoever. Not that we necessarily do, anyway.

This spot where we are on the surface of the Earth is rotating (at least at the equator) at about 1,000 miles an hour, while the Earth plunges through space at

67,000 miles per hour. So, we can't say that we have never been anywhere or that we are not going anywhere. But we can realize that we don't "realize" it.

If that is enough, well, you already have it. For those of us who opt for realizing more than we do now, how can we do that? For sure, the very process of life will rub off some of our sharp corners and at least a little realization will result. If we don't want to wait for that or that result is not enough in time we have, there is at least one pro-active approach that has stood the test of time. It is called Buddhism and for me Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism at that.

My point is that we can wait and let the process of life rub off some of our obscurations or we can be proactive and use one (or more) of the tested dharma practices to remove what fogs our clarity so that we can realize the actual nature of the mind. And, it's not an either/or sort of thing. Every bit of obscuration that we clear away means more clarity to realize what, in fact, is.

THE BUCK STARTS HERE

April 3, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The temperature reached something like 64 degrees here today, what I consider just right for walking, and so Margaret and I did. Better yet, the sun was out and it was very bright.

As for me, I am in one of those moods where no direction seems quite right. Normal comfort eludes me and I'm just a little beside myself, as they say, not quite falling into my regular routine. Something does not feel right and I just can't find my ease. No use in pushing or trying, and I know it will pass.

But while this mood is here, it's here, and so I might just as well accept it. For me, more and more of the time, Buddhism points to relaxing with what is, with no attempt to change it or worry it or wish it were other. It is just what it is. And so am I.

Somehow, some time ago, I washed over the dam, so to speak, and am already well downstream. Although I still worry, I'm mostly past that. "Go with the flow" comes to mind, but not with the meaning that I should be more conventional," but rather to get with the change that is. Roll with it. Be the change.

We can never run away, because there is no place to hide. And even turning away or ignoring is the same thing. I have never been too comfortable with the

saying “What you fear shall come upon you.” I prefer the more proactive approach that where we are right now is precisely the means we need to transform our life, kind of like “The Buck Starts Here.” It always does.

And I understand that the opportunity for realization and enlightenment is never closer than this precious moment, whether we are happy, sad, or indifferent. In other words, as the Tao points out, don’t change a thing; rather, realize everything just as it is – the good, bad, and the ugly. And I love the saying by the great Mahasiddhas that “In the midst of experience, realization can arise.” I might need to add something to the effect that realization is something we “do,” not something that passively happens to us. “We” realize.

In other words, realization is a process, not just a state of mind. Like breathing, it is something that we learn to do and, like breathing, something we continue doing once we start all the way to enlightenment. And similar to a baby at birth, the birth of realization in our dharma practice is something that at some point we just get the hang of and start doing. Or, like the doctor who spanks the baby to get it to breathe, we may need a little help. In fact, the pith teachings (highest) say that without having the nature of the mind pointed out to us, we will never get it on our own. To me, that’s sobering, yet very helpful to know. We each have to realize the nature of the mind for ourselves, but we don’t (and can’t) do it all alone.

THE STILL LIFE

April 4, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Snapshots are something I used to take with a camera, and my iPhone can still do that when needed. Otherwise, for me photography has become more and more of a slow-motion affair, something I do with considerable care. It takes time.

There is, of course, the stable tripod, on top of which is the geared head (a solid block), on top of which sits a focus rail and bellows, with the camera, and on the camera there is, of course, the lens. And that is just for starters. Next, the light has to be right or I have to make it right as best I can. It's always either too much or too little, so I am either diffusing it or reflecting it.

Every step of this process is slowing me down; as mentioned, it takes time. And I have not even got to the process of actually taking the photos. And by "photos" I mean that, because usually I don't take a single shot, one camera frame or image, but many, sometimes up to 150 shots to make a single image. So, how "Zen" do we want to get?

And then there is the "Seeing" through the lens thing; I have written about that here often. There is the looking through the lens and the seeing of what is being photographed. Then there is the "Seeing" itself, not only looking at the subject, but also seeing the "Seeing" that is taking place. Not only seeing the

Seeing, but resting in that “Seeing” to the exclusion of watching, if you understand me right. In other words, we can totally “See” clearly, but not watch at the same time. It takes all of us.

And all of this busy technique is a like a dam that holds back time from just evaporating, a speed bump that slows me down to a crawl, something apparently I very much need. And in the busyness of that slowed moment, I’m completely occupied with clarity and simply resting in lucidity. Gradually, my photos got better too.

DO I HAVE MY MIND RIGHT?

April 5, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I always think that winter ends before it does. It not only includes March but most of April, too. Rain, rain, and more rain here in Big Rapids, Michigan. It must be spring. Some flowers are out, the very early ones and those butterflies that overwinter like the Mourning Cloak, and of course the snakes and frogs are here, at least minimally. It's me that's not out, at least not in this rain. All I can do is stare out the window and remember the old saying that "April showers bring May flowers." Let's hope we don't have to wait until May. I hear there is more snow coming tomorrow.

Now that I can go outside, at least somewhat, where do I want to go? And what do I want to do? I guess I just want to be outside, to feel the warmth of the sun, to open up a window or two and let the air in. There is nothing I really want to do other than get my mind right, whatever that means.

And it's not about this or that, or anything or anywhere, for that matter. It's not about where I am, who I am with, what I'm doing, and so on. What it is about is the mind; do I have my mind right? And what's that?

Well, "that" is not just sometimes, but all the time. I'm still learning all of this, a day at a time. No, there's nothing I want to do, except feel right. And I'm

working on it. Whatever else I do in a day, there is this sub-text, this other activity that is going on here. I'm cooking rice or washing dishes or... whatever. At the same time, I'm also resting my mind, letting things just be what they are. It's hard to explain, but I'm doing it nevertheless.

And I don't want to be distracted from doing, well, nothing. I see everyone is doing this or that, going here or there, but I don't really care. Maybe, after I get all my stuff together, I will take it on the road. Maybe not. What I'm doing is not very interesting; I understand, but that's the way it is. There is something tedious about doing anything at all, other than to just exist. Travel, to me, is like the French word "travail," just too much work.

A life of intention is tiring. It somehow is forced or filled with too much "trying." I see it going on, but I just don't want to do that. At least, not just now. Give me a little time and I might get around to it. Yet, currently, I'm full up. I've got more than enough to do just being here.

Sure, I can do things or get things done. But that's not what it's about for me just now. I am already doing this or that, but at the same time I'm not doing anything, not really. My mind is resting, just as it is. That's a lot in itself, yet it's nothing at the same time.

I'm not saying everyone's wrong to be doing their stuff; only that I'm not so interested in doing anything in particular and I have no particular place I want to go other than right here. I am interested in resting in the mind, just as it is, like: all the time. And I'm avoiding not doing that.

ABOUT EATING TO LIVE

April 6, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Snowstorm coming! It can't last long, but we are due to get four to eight inches. We'll hunker down and wait for warmer weather to melt it away. We have plenty of food. Then again, it may just rain more.

Lundberg Brown rice (short-grain) is big around here, kind of the staple on which many of our meals are based. We don't eat white rice anymore, since a lot of the nutrients are removed to make it white. A motto for my diet is "Whole Grains or No Grains" and I try to stick to that. The diet laid out by my cardiologist is very lean on oils and salt, and, well, just about everything. I try and use as little oil as possible.

I can forget about meat, chicken, fish, and all dairy products, because that's not happening. No butter or cheese and as little oil as I can get away with. I use organic olive oil for the most part. This leaves vegetables, grains, and beans. We eat them. And I eat a lot of avocados when I can get good ones.

I am not a chef and don't really like to cook; but I do like to eat. I use a small egg pan to cook up food because it keeps the quantity down. Otherwise, I make too much food and someone has to eat it, usually me. Before this particular eating regime, it could be said that I (more or less) lived to eat, at least

in winter. On this diet, I definitely eat to live, but I'm getting used to it.

I have to eat something each day and cutting out many of the foods I used to eat is one way to eat less. No problem. Yet, I am so deviously clever at expanding the quantity of what I eat that I have to monitor myself. Sometimes that's like letting the fox into the henhouse.

We soak not only our beans, which many folks do, but also our brown rice, usually overnight. It helps to remove various tannins, etc. We also mix a small amount (<25%) of Sweet Rice into our short-grain brown rice and let the mixture soak for 10-12 hours or so. If you soak rice, it takes a little less water to cook it.

WITHOUT SOAKING:

2 cups Short-Grain Brown Rice

2 $\frac{3}{4}$ cups water

Bring to boil, cover, and cook on very low flame for 45 minutes.

WITH SOAKING:

Soak overnight (with lots of water, then drain)

2 cups Short-Grain Brown Rice

2 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups water

Bring to boil, cover, and cook on very low flame for 30 minutes.

Brown Rice is our equivalent to bread, although we do eat some bread, mainly locally-fired Spelt or Kamut bread (with sprouted grains) and almost always

toasted. Not allowed to have butter, I sprinkle a little olive oil on the bread or some organic peanut butter.

So, food in my life is short-grain brown rice and veggies that are combined in various ways. For salt, I use a small amount of sea-salt or Tamari. The Miso Tamari that I use is made by South River and is kept in the refrigerator since it is fermenting.

<http://www.southernrivermiso.com/store/c/8-Tamari.html>

We also make our own Gomasio, which are toasted sesame seeds with a little bit of seaweed (for salt), also sometimes Tekka (a miso condiment).

So, typically I will warm up or fry some short-grain brown rice along with some vegetables that might include carrots, cabbage, broccoli, beets, and potatoes, plus some baby kale leaves. I jokingly call it “Hippie Hash,” but it’s better than that sounds. There are no restaurants in our town at which we can eat, so we don’t.

I also cook up potatoes, either as hash-browns or I cook a whole bag of small red potatoes and have them around to add to different veggie mixes. The important thing for me is to keep the quantities small; otherwise I eat too much. Eating food is very comforting or so it seems.

And we often eat beans that are first soaked overnight, cooked a long time, and then just eaten plain or flavored in different ways by oils and spices. In general, we avoid spicy foods and don’t use hot sauce. Due to my heart condition, my diet is kind of super-vegan. People do not flock to our house to eat.

Our food is very simple, but not a problem. It's actually tastes fine.

SPIRITUALLY TECHNICAL

April 12, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Refining the technical edge of life actually requires that the edge be refined. Failing that, falling short is an exercise in futility. Nothing is achieved. “Close, but no cigar” as they say. The purpose of the technology is all about the process that returns the result. If that result is not there, who is fooling whom?

I’m all about a better technology because I would like a smoother process to obtain a better result, but, as I pointed out, not at the expense of the result. What is the relation of the process to the result?

I am process oriented because I believe that careful attention to the process not only produces better results, but itself is one of the results. So, I am result oriented to the degree that the process and the result are related, which in photography it seems they very much are. In other words, I can’t ignore the process and expect good results. Life is similar.

This idea that the processes in life are part of the result is an important one, IMO. It is totally “Zen.” In other words, the way we travel is also part of our destination. We are traveling to travel better. Another way of saying this is that we do our best to remove the suffering involved in the process of living life.

After all, where are we going if not just to the end of this life? That thought alone makes the process of life more of a goal than the end result, which is always death. So, the true result of living is how we live, the way we go, not where we end up.

HURRY UP AND WAIT

April 13, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Perhaps it only dawns on us as we get near the end of our life, when the rat race slows down. We finally think: "What's the hurry?" Of course, we slow down when the exit looms large. This is where we get off. Suddenly, the process needs to be looked at more and more carefully. The process of living may not be everything, but it beats the hell out of whatever comes in second.

Aside from the process, the only result of our life that lasts is what we take with us, however that works and whatever that is. It makes perfect sense (as the Zen practitioners point out so well) that the process of how we live life not only needs examining, but for most of us is fertile ground for realization. As the Tibetans have frequently told me, "Kalé, Kalé," which means "slowly." Where are we hurrying to?

As I like to joke to myself, the point of "no return" is the point in life where we pause, stop, and turn or look back, call it "the pause that refreshes." Just where exactly was I going in such a hurry? It escapes me now. After a lifetime of projections, what is there to project at this point? We suddenly have a rear projector, looking backward. As a kid, all I could think about was what I would become; now, as older, it is more supposed to be like what I was. However, I am still looking forward.

Although, for me (and this is part of the beauty about Buddhism) I do project beyond this life, based on what I will take with me when I leave. So, I'm not stuck in the past, at least my own. The great teachings of the Mahasiddha Tilopa (as found in his upadesha or pith teachings), which are called the "Six Words of Advice:"

(1) Don't Prolong the Past
(2) Don't Invite the Future
(3) Don't Dwell on the Present
And then

(4) Don't Try to Figure Anything Out
(5) Don't Try to Make Things Happen
And finally:

(6) Relax, as It Is.

Such slogans as these are not intended to be read once and go in one ear and out the other or fall glibly from the tongue. They are the demarcation of reality, literally everything we need to know. But, of course, they are not meant as conceptualizations alone, but rather to be fully implemented in action. In other words, we don't watch our own enlightenment; we each must realize it.

ORDINARY “ORDINARY MIND”

April 14, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

“Ordinary Mind” is a term that is frequently used in Buddhism to indicate the natural state of the mind. And that’s a good thing. However, ordinary mind is also used to indicate our mind when it is distracted as it ordinarily can be. Here I am talking about our ordinarily distracted state of mind. Not a good thing for much of anything.

Anyway, I’m still all wrapped up these days in vetting cameras, which has been a major distraction for me recently. Distraction means time away from being more undistracted. I would like to bring un-distraction into my distraction (and remain undistracted), but at one of these points I just have distraction, which means that my mind becomes quite ordinary. It’s ironic that I can be undistracted doing photography, but apparently not in making major decisions about photography equipment. There has to be some humor in that, no?

It’s a good lesson and a reminder to me that we can extend whatever realization we may have (and must do this on our journey to enlightenment), but that circle of increasing inclusion still only extends so far, after which point we become distracted and our mind reverts to being quite ordinary. About the best I can do under such circumstances is to acknowledge that I am distracted. I am aware of that, which is a start.

All of this reminds me of riding down an abandoned two-track road in the forests, one full of ruts, bumps, and rain gullies. So, I'm bumping along with all of this and trying my best to remember to take each bump to the path. I'm distracted, but I am gradually grasping it.

GIVE ME A BREAK

April 17, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

We all come to breaking-points or turning points in our lives, many of us more often than we would like. That's basically the kind of articulation life is based on, call it flexibility, elasticity, or what-have-you -- growing. There is no question we can bend when push comes to shove, but how far? The simple fact is that many of us are just not used to change or can never manage to really get used to it.

Times that demand change, that we be more flexible, just naturally arise into our consciousness and they, like an alarm clock, persist until we give them the attention they demand. And there is no use being afraid of them because that only makes things worse. Anyway, here they are. As they say, "go with the flow" and see how that is, see if you are more comfortable "giving" than receiving. And here "giving" means giving-in to the change. So, in such times, we are on the receiving end of things, however else we might want to view it. We just have to take it.

For me, myself, and I, such times of shift or change tend to be uncomfortable, at least until I manage to get comfortable with them. Often, it is like the chrysalis or cocoon that caterpillars make, only to eventually emerge as butterflies. Sometimes it is like that; sometimes not. Either way, I really have no

choice but to come to terms with change when it appears on the horizon of my life. Negotiation.

And I am talking about, well, perhaps not a sea-change per-se, but change enough to upset whatever apple cart I have going for myself. Change is inconvenient to the status-quo. And it can be just plain humiliating to have to change my direction by, say, 180 degrees, although usually it is less than that. Either way, it is "I" that am changing and looking back on such times, most often they were a good thing for me.

It can be hard to be unsatisfied with where we are at this moment, but also not have any idea as to just where we are going, might be going, at least not yet. I can't stay as I am, but I certainly having nothing better in mind. Be that as it may, the fact is that change is upon me; it's too late to back out because I'm already changing, ready or not. I'm in that birth canal.

And I have learned, over time (and very gradually) to trust change of this type. And by trust, I mean to trust (or give) myself to the process because, like the butterfly from the cocoon, I usually emerge from it more whole than I was and certainly refreshed. So say I: give me a break and I'll take it, sight unseen, always sight-unseen. That's the beauty of it. It is I that am changing.

OF TWO MINDS

April 18, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Threading the eye of a needle is an image (and an analogy) that I often use. However, the process of going through the eye of a needle itself is another thing entirely. Do we ever fail or is it that we just don't remember any of life's alternatives except the one we end up living? I can't say.

Like the carrier pigeon, we eventually find our way back home again. We just don't feel right until we do. We know whatever it was is over when we find ourselves relaxing, exhaling. We start again from there, from that moment.

How do we make hard choices? I don't jump at them. I take my time or, perhaps more accurately, it takes me time to feel the situation out until I know the correct choice for me. I feel a little one way and then I feel a little the other way. I walk down one path until I can sense how that is and then go down just the opposite way and feel that. I try not to make mistakes, but ultimately it comes down to using my intuition, to how I feel.

If the future is a matter of feeling out alternatives, if I have the time, then I am very cautious. I move very slowly. Of course I use reason too, but that seldom takes me far enough or, as they say, I don't always listen to the voice of reason. When I run out of

reasons, I am left with feeling my way. I have no choice, and so that's what I do, intuit or "feel."

Ultimately the chaff naturally separates from the wheat and I can see clearly. It may not be the choice I think I want, yet it is the obvious solution. My "reasonings" eventually give way to the reality of the situation. Sometimes the truth hurts, but it does set you free or frees you up.

To give another analogy, it is much like a body-double or should we say a mental double or doppelgänger. We are torn or split between two possible decisions or lives, only one of which can be right, at least for us. One of them may be what is all reasonable, like whatever we think is best, while the other could be what we really feel like doing. So we are torn, as they say, between the devil and the deep-blue sea. And yet, we sometimes have to decide, one or the other. Period. It's like the old song "Did You Ever Have to Make Up Your Mind?"

As mentioned earlier, we can't just figure it out by thinking, because as often as not, "thinking" or what we "think" we should do is one of the alternatives. It's not that easy. In my own case, recently, it took days, weeks, and actually many months for me to sort it out. And it was particularly difficult because I was torn between two alternatives, but in the end I rejected both of them in favor of a third. I didn't really see that coming, although it always was there as a possibility.

We learn to trust our intuition, but the operative word here is "learn," and that takes time and actual doing on our part. I am usually pretty good at intuition, but in

my recent decision, it took me a long time to find a solution I can live with.

THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

April 19, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The nights are still cold, with the days getting warmer and there is even some sun. We started putting in some of the window screens, looking to have air circulating throughout the house once again. Spring is definitely here. I can go outside; now, will I?

I fast-walk each morning at around 6 a.m. for a couple of miles and later in the day Margaret and I try to walk a couple more miles, including four hills. Folks ask me what I do all day and my answer lately is “not much,” except I am pretty busy doing whatever I do, including nothing.

Of course, I try to write this blog each day, and lately photography has been taking up a lot of my attention, including my time. The problem I’m having involves checking out a lot of new photo equipment, all within a timeline in order to return it should it not measure up to what I need. That’s been giving me fits and every time I sort it out in my mind, something or other in me flips and I’m back in a quandary again. I can’t keep up with all the changes in my own mind these days. Go figure.

I come from a background of nature photography, originally doing my best to capture photos of the kind you might like to see in field guides, but that was years ago and has grown old. I no longer like to hunt

down critters or travel to places where they hang out and attempt to photograph them. I no longer am what I call a “gotcha!” photographer, trying to capture anything that’s living. So what am I?

Good question. Glad you asked! These days I am more of a “found” nature photographer, taking photos of whatever I find or come across that moves me. Yet, over the years it has become clearer to me that, as they say, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. So yes, nature is beautiful, but it takes one to know one.

It seems that what I like more of the time is form and composition. I care less and less whether it is a form in nature or just “form” anywhere at all. And, for sure, I am an impressionist, attempting to register my impressions in photos of what I see as beauty. And I see photography and photo images as impressions; they impress me. I like to capture that. I like to share that.

And I know that I write a lot of words, but I am tiring of them. The old saying that “A picture is worth a thousand words” makes increasing sense to me. I get that. Often, my photos tell more about who I am and what I am thinking than all the words I could conjure up. I love words, but I also see that words fall short of reality. As I used to tell myself in a poem I wrote:

‘Prose is like carrying water in your hands,
Poetry like drinking from the faucet.’”

In other “words” you probably know more about me from my photos than from my words.

HOW DO WE KNOW?

April 22, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Good question. Perhaps an even better question might be what is “knowing?” And how, when, and where do we start getting a handle on REALLY knowing this life we are living? It is perhaps helpful to consider one of the traditional uses of the word “know,” meaning to know carnally. Knowing life involves “being” life, as in: really existing – fully living it.

What’s the difference between being mentally aware (having unwavering meditative attention) and passively “just watching” life go by? Before we can evaluate our life, we all have to have something to evaluate. As the great German philosopher Hegel said, “We go behind the curtain of the Self to see what’s there, but mainly for there to be something to be seen.” Of course, we want to “know” life, but in order to do that, there has to be something to be known and it is WE that have to do the knowing. In other words, we have to live life a little before we can accumulate enough experience to form an opinion as to know what life is or is not. We have to have some real-life experience in order to evaluate. It’s the old “To Be or Not to Be” question.

Sure, we can pretend that we are “just looking” and are not complicit in the process of life, but to me that is playing the part of the victim. In that case, if we are

just taking it all in, we are behind the curve of life, rather than living it. Everything's happening "TO" us, rather than our being and knowing what is happening. IMO, that's what's called "masochism."

Or, we can be very aggressive and take life as we find it, take as much as we can. And that's what's called sadism. An alternative is that we can go for, as the pith-dharma texts point out, some middle way between being passive and aggressive, what we could call the "happy medium." As it is now, each of us are somewhere in the middle of all this, but how "happy" are we and just where are we between passive and aggressive? Which end are we nearest?

The answer is both, of course -- always. Taking the middle way requires both ends. It's an open and shut case, like opening and closing our fist or like a heart beating. Torn between such extremes seems to be the nature of Samsara. We are always in the middle, but also experiencing both ends.

Samsara is a Sanskrit word that means something like "wandering" in this world; in short, we are torn between our own ups and downs – cyclic existence. And still busy cycling.

BETWEEN OUR UPS AND DOWNS

April 25, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

During the downward end of our normal cycles (our low point), reality can get a little thin sometimes, and the meaning of it all may seem a little sketchy. Yet, we rebound on the upswing. For me, it is easiest to notice my own downward spiral during the three days just before the New Moon, which we are now in. New Moon is this Wednesday.

It is common to think of reincarnation or rebirth (if we think of it at all) as something that happens at the end of life or between lives, but I've come to the conclusion that in reality we retake our life-vows constantly through our various cycles, especially when they peak.

We egg ourselves on during the high or "good" times by affirming life and wishing for more and more of it. Then, when stuck in the downward end of a cycle, we regret all that and bemoan our existence. It would be funny, if it were not so much in our face and always with us. Indeed, life does go up and down and round and round. That is the nature of this cyclic existence we all live, what the Buddhists call Samsara.

Perhaps the most-difficult fact is that no single state of mind lasts that long, either our ups or our downs. Eternal change is a constant. What goes up comes down, and what is down goes up – the Ferris-wheel of

life. We are subject (sometimes a victim) of our own mood swings. Right now, the dark-of-the-moon is upon us, those three days before the New Moon, what in Medieval times were called the “devil’s days.” New Moon is coming up and the Tibetan Buddhists call these days “dharma-protector days.”

Like riders on an eternal freight train, we hurtle along life’s track, passengers every one of us. I am struck, repeatedly, by what is perhaps the most important practice in the particular lineage of Tibetan Buddhism I practice, the Karma Kagyu, which is the Lineage Prayer. We say it every day and each line in it is profound. But the line that for me echoes throughout my day is the one that says:

“As it is taught,
The essence of thoughts is dharmakaya;
They are nothing whatsoever and yet they arise.
To the meditator who reflects upon the unobstructed
play of the mind,
Grant your blessing that the inseparability of samsara
and nirvana be realized.”

The “inseparability of samsara and nirvana” says it all and kind of rounds it off, caps, and seals it within itself. And that is what the practice of Mahamudra Meditation is all about, which is often called the Great Seal. There is no escaping this reality. Sooner or later, it will occur to us, try as we might to turn this way or that. It is the obvious.

Realizing the condition that we are in is the key to transcending it. “Understanding” it is just a passing thought and experiencing it we all do. But, “realizing” the nature of Samsara (and the nature of the mind) is

what dharma practice is all about. Indeed, we are all stuck in what the Buddhists call the “vicious” cycles of Samsara.

And while they don't seem so vicious when we are on top of things and riding high in life, they are vicious enough when we are in the lowlands and feeling life perhaps too much. And there are so many cycles to realize, cycles so short (like the heartbeat or breathing) that we can't keep them in mind and cycles so long (like the circle by our solar system around the galaxy) that we cannot begin to grasp. But cycles of the duration of a day, a month, and a year, those we can kind of keep in mind or at least be marginally aware of.

That same Lineage Prayer that I quoted above also states:

“As it is taught,
Unwavering attention is the body of meditation;
Whatever arises is the fresh nature of thought.
To the meditator who rests there in naturalness,
Grant your blessings that meditation be free from
intellectualization.”

I have to ask, how unwavering is my attention?

MYOB

April 26, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Meaning, of course, mind your own business, which is great advice at the dharma level. The very process of our own life deserves our attention. Otherwise, we are so easily distracted that our attention gets watered down and fractures. I should know. I've tried it.

“Keep your nose to the grindstone” is the old phrase, meaning sharpen your attention. The Zen Buddhists are very keen on paying attention to the process of our life, moment by moment. I second that. For one, it keeps me out of trouble. And secondly, the “process” is one of the primary results life offers, much more so than any expectations of end results we might imagine. We all know that the end or “final result” is the same for all of us, materially.

If I think about it, I've been concentrating much of the time since I was very young. This probably prevented me from getting lost in distraction, although I still get lost enough as it is. Yet, having my mind on whatever interests me, what I am doing, is a definite blessing. It's the same principle as having a mala (beads) and using them with mantras to remain mindful. Working on projects that interest me is similar if not identical in function.

The process I am talking about here is our life process, one that pertains to what we are in the

process of becoming, yet what the result we become depends very much on the process of how we get there, how we handle it. That's how important process is. To me, it's not even really a Catch-22, because the process is the key to all becoming, no matter how you slice it.

There are all kinds of mysterious phrases like "Being is Becoming" and the like throughout spiritual literature. "Being" is always becoming, yet never "being" in any absolute sense. We could reverse it and say "Becoming is not Being." I used to joke with myself that the word "becoming" should be used in the old sense of, for example, "Isn't that dress she wears becoming? Doesn't it become her?" Try that one out. To me this clarifies it.

See my point? In this meaning, becoming is always just shy of being in any permanent sense. Or, as Shakespeare said, "Much Ado about Nothing." After all is said and done, it's just an illusion. Or, as the Tibetans say, a "magical illusion."

PAYING ATTENTION

April 27, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

How do we pay attention and what do we pay it to?

IMO, we pay attention to “whatever” until such time as we don’t need to; after that, we just are “attentive.”

Using a mala (the Tibetan “rosary”) is proof of this. Of course, saying “OM MANI PADME HUM” accumulates merit, but here I am talking about the haptics and having somewhere to place our attention. Using a mala is like finding a good spot to rest our attention, so that it does not distractedly wander.

Khenpo Rinpoche, the Tibetan lama I have worked closely with for the last 33 years, seldom volunteers advice; usually, he just responds to whatever questions I have. Yet, one year in an interview, he suggested that I might like to try saying mantras with a mala. That was it; all he said, and that through a translator. So, I got a little wrist mala that is easy to carry in a pocket and gave it a try. Before I knew it, I was reaching into that pocket and saying a few rounds without even thinking about it, just spontaneously.

And what I found out, of course, is that this is a great place to rest my mind or to focus-on when my mind is restless or wandering. I can’t tell you how many times, when nervous or whatever, and without realizing it, I

find myself automatically using that little mala. I don't wear it on my wrist, but it stays in my pocket. Some practitioners use prayer wheels and other focuses, but for me this little wrist mala, which I carry in my pocket and don't take out, is perfect for my sometimes wandering attention. It's no wonder that they are popularly called "worry beads."

[Photo by taken by me. You can find all kinds of inexpensive malas on eBay or Amazon.]

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POINTING AT THE ILLUSION

April 29, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I'm batchin' it here at home, while Margaret is up north with our granddaughter Iris and doing some other things. All in all, life of late is pretty good. The weather is still gradually warming up toward summer, just not today. It's cold, so there is not too much heat here yet, not enough to complain about anyway. And it's raining like crazy with flood warnings issued.

I spent most of my day doing photography (inside) and the rest of it trying to figure out what kind of photos I really like and feel like. The photo shown here is something that I like.

Years ago, when I was young, all I wanted to do was take photos like you might find in a nature field-guide. Well, that has all changed. And today my idea of a photo has morphed from being an image of a particular piece of nature I wanted to capture, to photographing nothing in particular.

Instead, in my mind, it's all about form and color, no matter the subject. It seems to me that everything I see in my mind is a gesture, a sign or symbol of something beyond itself, rather than something more particular within itself. For instance, take this photo shown here.

Sure, I love Cyclamen and I could easily have made a very detailed image of this flower (and have many times). But that's no longer how I feel. Instead I feel much more abstract or impressionistic. These days I like images that give me but a touch of reality, a bit of the real detail, but that also point beyond the reality to the magical illusory world we all live in, whether we happen to be aware of it or not.

I realize this is not everyone's cup-of-tea. Sometimes, you just want a picture of a flower. Well, not me, at least not lately. I want to just touch-in to the facts, which are like a pointer, an impression, something that perhaps marks home base, but at the same time points beyond the bare facts to the ephemeralness of it all, to the "unreality" of reality, what the Tibetans call this "magical illusion." Both are true, reality and its "unreality," its illusory nature.

I don't have enough words or, rather, words are not enough and I can't put into words the actual nature of reality as it occurs to me. Anyway, we should all know that words are only pointers beyond themselves to a reality that we each are trying to realize. Well, if a picture is worth a thousand words, then let this photo speak for me.

A BRIDGE TO THE MYSTIC

May 1, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I can remember reading, carefully reading, the books of Carlos Castaneda, in particular his book "The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge." This must have been in the late 1960s. At the time, I was already working with my own "Don Juan," a travelling Rosicrucian initiator for a Rosicrucian order, who was in his 80s at the time.

So, I knew what a "Don Juan" was to someone with open ears and I was already in the process of being trained. My teacher's name was Andrew McIver and he came to this country from Scotland by way of Canada, years before. Andrew was my first authentic life teacher and I knew it and he knew it. When he died about a year later, it was me who packed up what few things he had and sent them to his sister in Scotland. I saw to his burial and designed a simple gravestone for him, with the symbol of the Sun on it, a circle with a dot in its center. His grave is in Forest Hills, a 65-acre cemetery in Ann Arbor, Michigan along Geddes Road. On the desk where he worked, I found a single sheet of paper with the name "Michael" taken apart into all the words that could be made from it.

It seemed to me that Andrew knew everything that was important about life and taught me how to become aware of it. He connected this life I was living

in to the dreams inside me of something greater and became a bridge between this world and whatever is beyond it, which essentially turned out to be the awareness (and correct approach) as how to view and realize this world.

I spent long days with Andrew, days during which I never said a word, but listened. And you know I am “wordy.” He would tell me that he was tuning me like you would tune an instrument and that someday I would wake-up and realize all of what he was placing into my consciousness. I just took it all in. At the end of a long day with Andrew, I would almost stagger home to my little room and collapse from the exhaustion of listening so hard.

For one, he taught me of the Great Saturn Return that we all experience and pass through, but have trouble remembering what happened to us. And, equally important, he taught it to me BEFORE I completed my first Saturn Return at the age of thirty, so that I went through that return with “eyes open,” so to speak, rather than sleepwalking as most do. One thing he drilled into my mind was, “We have to stop only reproducing our kind and start reproducing our self.”

And, by this, he meant lineage and that we must pass our mind training on to those others who can receive it. Andrew endlessly repeated the training he placed in me and was not above calling me out in a group of friends and requiring me to repeat some of it out-loud to others, which I did as best I could.

I cannot forget his story of when George W. Romney, then the governor of Michigan, was greeting a group of folks in Ann Arbor and shaking their hands. When

he reached Andrew, he said “How are you?” as you would to an old person. Andrew held on to his hand and, staring him in the eyes, he said, “It’s not ‘how’ are you, but ‘who’ are you!” Andrew was like that.

My point here is to explain that Andrew was a living bridge between this world and the “Other World,” whatever that world is, a link beyond what I knew and what we all are destined to someday know. He turned what was an in-turned flower within me, outward and upward, so that it could open and bloom properly, fully.

Andrew found that which had been forever hidden (and waiting) within my consciousness, recognized it, welcomed it, and made room within time for me to open. He gave me, as a songwriter friend of mine said, “a safe place to bloom.” Andrew, who was a spiritual midwife, appeared and was there to welcome me, a live birth to this world’ He assisted at my spiritual birth.

The bridge between this physical life and the spiritual worlds is obvious (but hidden) in the one place we would never think to look, in plain sight. We are all like flower buds waiting to bloom.

As another teacher of mine, the great bluesman Howlin’ Wolf said to me during an interview of him I did at the first Ann Arbor Blues Festival in 1969:

“Just like a flower. You see, we’re trampin’ on this grass. We stay here a couple months and tramp right around here, we gonna’ kill it. Just as soon as we stop trampin’, the first warm sunshine, and then the grass gonna’ start a growin’ again.”

Andrew McIver was the warm sunshine that helped me grow beyond just endlessly waiting for a safe place to bloom.

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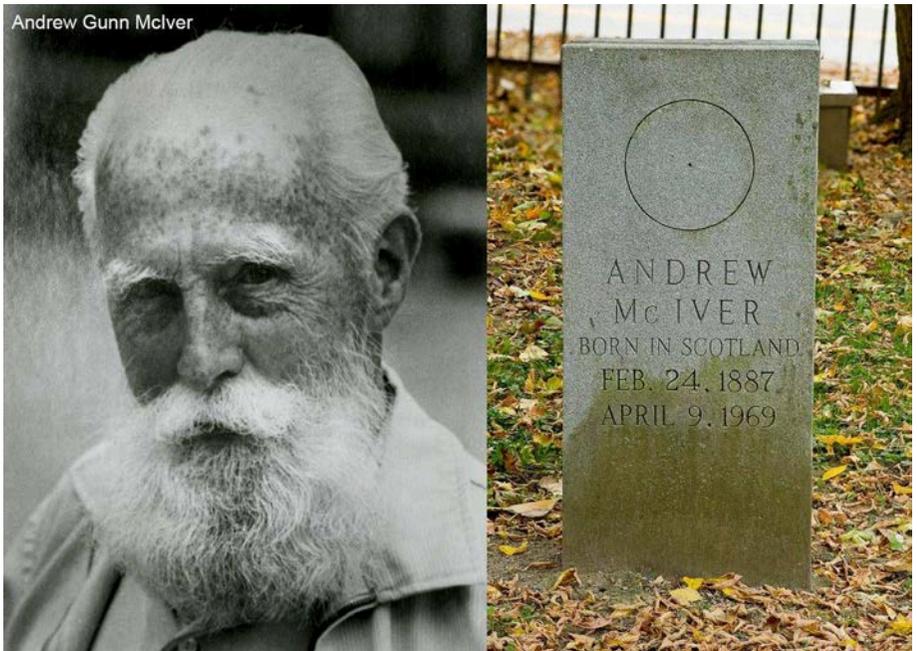
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AWARENESS OF AWARENESS

May 1, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Even if it is on trickle-charge, the key or path to liberation and enlightenment for each of us (according to the Buddhists) is “awareness.” It always has been. You can’t leave home without it. We all have some awareness, even if we are not aware of it.

If nothing else, we can be aware that we are not aware. That too is awareness, and it can be crystal clear. It’s like the game that we used to play as kids, where we all put our hands, one on top of the other, and whoever had their hand on the bottom of the pile moved it to the top as fast as they could. And so it went. In a similar way, like a hall of mirrors, we always have some sort of awareness going on. Otherwise, we would not be aware enough to live. If we feel bad or sense that we are unaware, we can always start over and be aware of that, i.e. that we are unaware or that we feel bad. Whenever our awareness gets stale or we lose sight of it, we can be aware of that fact and that alone amounts to a fresh awareness.

As mentioned above, we may not be aware that we are aware (aware of our own awareness), but it’s out there somewhere being aware of something. We can rectify all that by being aware of that fact (that we are not aware) and that becomes our awareness. So, ultimately being aware of our awareness is a habit that we have or do not have. If we do not have it, we

can learn to be aware by starting with being aware that we are not aware. As mentioned, that too is awareness. It is up to us to be aware of what we are aware of.

It may seem like trying to catch a tiger by the tail, but it's not all that difficult and we are aware of something, all the time anyway, even if it is only trying to chew gum and walk at the same time. Look at all the things in life that we have had to learn by rote and sheer practice. Learning to be aware of our own awareness is well worth the effort.

In summary, there is no way unless we are dead that our awareness is not busy doing something. And the Tibetans tell us that even when we are dead, our awareness moves on. So, it could be as simple as taking inventory as to just where our awareness is just now, like reading this blog.

And if you don't feel all that aware, that awareness of not feeling aware itself is fresh awareness. As I mentioned at the beginning of this blog, we can't leave home without our awareness, because we are that awareness personified. So, we can't lose our awareness, even at death, so take a look around and begin to be aware of what you are aware of. After all, you are driving the car.

It's that complex or that simple.

MORE ON AWARENESS

May 2, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The Buddhists point out to us that “awareness” is not only present and desirable, but that we are never without it. And if we don’t feel that we are aware enough, we can easily change that by just being aware that we are not aware enough. That awareness of not being aware is perfectly fresh, clear, and of the moment.

And they speak of “unwavering awareness” being the body of meditation. That must be awareness of our awareness, because awareness of some sort is always present, even if we are not aware of it. In other words, we are not aware of our own awareness.

Awareness is like a lit candle in a dark room, flickering away in the breeze of life. You can’t miss it because it is the only game in town. Nothing else is happening. So, it’s not rocket science to become aware of our own awareness, because here it is right now reading this line. Just be aware of it.

And, like two mirrors infinitely reflecting one another, our awareness of awareness of awareness... blows away anything else and is the only elephant in the room. Like turning up the frequency of a strobe light, there soon becomes a continuum of light. Being aware of being aware of being aware... etc. Might as well just be aware.

Whatever mess we are in, however badly we may feel at the present, however unaware we imagine we are... just being aware of THAT brings forth perfect fresh pristine awareness. Work with that. In summary, we can endlessly start over. So, the Buddhist texts say not to concentrate on WHAT you are aware OF, but rather on the awareness itself.

Like one of those old flicker-books we had as kids, page after page of life reflects the motion of the mind refreshing itself, which is called the present. Apparently, the problem is that we concentrate on WHAT we are aware (or not aware) OF, rather than the awareness itself. We are looking in exactly the wrong direction.

Meanwhile, our own awareness, the natural luminous clarity of the mind is busy illuminating the world around us, but we are not aware of it. We can learn to be aware of our own awareness and not just what we happen in the moment to be aware of.

“SLIP SLIDIN’ AWAY”

May 3, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The classic dharma teachers say we should remain present and not let ourselves be shuffled into the past by the waves of time or forced into the future by our own daydreaming and expectations. The great Mahasiddha Tilopa, my particular sage of choice, perhaps said it best in his famous “Six Words of Advice,” the first three of which are:

- (1) Don’t Prolong the Past.
- (2) Don’t Invite the Future.
- (3) Don’t Think About the Present.

And the other three:

- (4) Don’t Analyze.
- (5) Don’t Try to Make Things Happen.

Ending with:

- (6) Relax, just as it is.

In Tibetan, these are single words, but in English translation we have to sketch it out a bit to be clear. However, in a nutshell, those six words of advice (pith instructions) sum it up and say it all.

These words of advice are for those who have at least learned basic sitting meditation (Shamata) and are

engaged in Insight Meditation and Mahamudra Meditation, but we all should be aware of them. They are like flight instructions or at least proper instructions in spiritual aerodynamics, like: how to fly right.

Our approach and attitude toward Samsara, the winds of change (like flying a kite) very much determine whether we will fly or fail. Those six instructions of Tilopa tell us exactly how to orient ourselves to time so that we can become spiritually airborne. They are all that we need. However, we would do well to have an authentic dharma teacher to show us how to implement these words of advice and remain steady on-course.

If I may: There are thousands of books on Buddhism. And among all those books there are “some” that I feel are essential. And among the essential books, there are sections or parts that stand out. These are often called “pith instructions.” And, among all those essential pit instructions, there is one key set of instructions that I hold most dear. And that is the six words of advice by Tilopa, given above. So, if you are rolling it in one ear and out the other, there is not much more purchase I could provide you to hang on to the essence of what we need to learn than those six words.

They are the roadmap to where everyone, including all of us reading this blog, are going, put very simply and to the point. We all know the old saying, which are:

"Tell them what you are going to tell them.
Tell them,
Then tell them what you told them."

Well, hopefully I have mostly done that here and you
have heard. We've all been told.

PERSONALITIES: CHOOSING A FUTURE

May 6, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Let's take an example: someone living in the 1960s, where there was so much flux, and so many alternatives to choose from.

Back then, we might have chosen to champion women's rights. We might have stood for civil rights and alternative culture. We might have chosen to eat more whole and organic foods, as opposed to eating more processed foods. We might have preferred self-educating ourselves, rather than pursuing a more formal course of study. We might have elected to experiment with alternative states of mind, rather than the accepted religion of our times, and so on. You get the idea. These are choices we might have made back in the day.

At that time, way back then, these choices were often not all that clear. I know, because I was there. These alternative choices did not stand out as obvious choices because everything was all mixed together in the present moment, and there was more like a haze of confusion rather than a list of clear choices to be made. We had to go by our gut feeling in making choices and choosing anything unconventional involved a risk.

Unconventional choices were just that: not conventional. They went against the grain or trends of

the time. Some (many in fact) even carried penalties, imposed by society, like choosing to not finish high school or choosing to educate yourself rather than to get a degree. It took guts or foolishness to make those hard choices and there were few rewards other than personal satisfaction.

Now, let's jump ahead some 30 years or so and look at the personalities that resulted from these different choices.

THE MOST SIGNIFICANT SUBSET

A person (personality) that chose (way back then) to self-educate themselves, to expand women's or civil rights, to have a more natural birth experience, to learn about whole foods, to home-school their kids, or pursue alternative religions, would at least (today) be very distinct and perhaps more interesting (and useful) to society than a person who chose to follow a more conventional route back then that has since faded to obscurity. Some of what were alternative choices then are mainstream now. Why is that?

As time changes, certain qualities are found to be more useful or interesting to society and these are sought out and promoted; they naturally come to the front. Those persons who have these qualities have a personality of more interest (of more use) to society at large than one without these qualities. Both types have personalities (conventional and unconventional) and as personalities go, neither is more or less a personality. Why is one more interesting than the other?

The process of time and change naturally selects the qualities most needed for the present time, and if a particular person happens to be composed of the most significant subset of these qualities, that personality will be interesting, perhaps even scintillating. Today's unconventional are tomorrow's conventional. Everyone wants to learn more about what it takes to be that way, because today those alternatives may be considered useful. Ecology and clean air are good examples.

I grew up in an era when almost everyone smoked, in planes and trains, buses, and cars. There was no apology for someone blowing smoke where we breathed. You just had to suck it up. Those who did not smoke, like those who never touched a drop of alcohol, were frowned upon - teetotalers. Ugh. They were no fun. But today, all that has changed, thanks to one person at a time giving up those habits and daring to defy convention. We all know how the tobacco companies fought this change.

Another example: If in the 1960s, for some reason, you had decided to learn the Chinese language, your skills would be in great demand today. English speaking Americans who know Chinese can get a job anywhere. Who could predict that China would become so powerful, although, if you think about it, this should have been a no-brainer.

(To be continued)

GETTING PERSONAL

May 5, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I have had some fun over the years poking at our concept of a self, pointing out that it is nothing more than a collection of our attachments (likes and dislikes) and that even those are always changing.

And, although the Self is, as I put it, a case of “permanent impermanence,” this does not mean that it is useless or not interesting. The Self is useful and can even be fascinating; this is perhaps best seen in the different types of persons around us, as in: our personalities.

We each build our personality by the choices we make and the things we like (and dislike) and only time will tell if we have made the right choices or not. Most of us would like to have an attractive or interesting personality and the endless stream of popular magazines is testimony to the fact that imitating what is considered “cool” is the way many personalities are put together these days. We copy, big time. Monkey see, monkey do.

But real personal power, the actual power or attraction of the person, has little to do with imitation or copying what works for others and has everything to do with the choices we each make in life. And this happens to be pretty easy to explain, so I will give it a shot. And this is what makes the concept of the "Last

Judgment" so important, thus the proverbial advice of "don't judge," at least not too soon... and perhaps not at all. Wait for it.

At any given time, like today for example, we are surrounded by choices and are free to choose so many different paths and directions. We can't travel all the roads that life offers us, at least not at the same time, so we must choose one and leave the others behind -- un-traveled. In many cases, we won't know if we have made a good choice until farther on down the road, often much later in our lives.

Unconventional Persons

Choosing what everyone is choosing, as shown in the popular magazines of the day, copying what others do, does not guarantee that these personal choices will result in a personality that reflects how we really feel inside ourselves, or even what is good for us -- what we really need. Using what is now current or popular is (by definition) peaking or already peaked and will probably not be very useful much farther down the road of time. It is of today and not tomorrow.

Not choosing what is popular at the time, holding out for something more authentic or true for us, and digging deeper may also, by definition, be unpopular and very risky. We go against the grain, against what is conventional, and there may be a price to pay. How will we know if we have made the right choices? We will know later on down the line, for better or for worse.

(To be continued)

DON'T TRY SO HARD

May 4, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

It doesn't help. Instead of working to keep our edge, relax, and you will see that the edginess of life itself will keep you sharp enough (and more naturally at that) than endlessly trying. It requires no effort other than the effort (or lack thereof) to relax. We've all seen the popular Christian slogan "Let Go and Let God," which is essentially the same idea as the Buddhist slogan "Relax, as it is."

A true conservative, in the good sense of that word, is someone who does not waste time or energy. Learning to let go and just float in time, ultimately, is not an option, but a necessity. It's only a matter of time so, as I like to say, it is better to go and meet our maker than to wait to be fetched, not that I am a theist.

It reminds me of those cheap steel kitchen knives that rust or degrade at a rate that they kind of keep themselves sharp. As mentioned in other blogs, it's all about awareness, which has no edge or limit as it is endless and limitless. We are never on the brink of awareness, because it has no "brink," but is a constant and has no edge either. It's simply that we are not aware of our own awareness. We are looking everywhere else but at awareness.

I will admit that “resting in awareness” takes some training for any of us; it’s not something that most of us can just “do” on demand. What any of us can do, however, is begin to recognize that awareness has no limits, not anywhere, including whatever awareness we currently have. At any point we can stop looking only at what we are aware of and start being aware of the awareness that is always right there, being aware.

A STELLAR PERSONALITY

May 7, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The point here is that one way of looking at our personality is as the result of a series of choices we have made in the past. Someone who, for whatever reasons, has managed to make five or ten really good choices in their young life often appears as a most valuable and fascinating "person" today. Others may kick themselves for not having made the same choices and try to imitate those choices now, but this is usually just a little too late to bring about the same effect for themselves. Their imitation has not been forged by time. The die is cast early on.

In other words, there are real practical rewards for developing our instinct for making good choices. What I am pointing out here is that a stellar personality, one filled with many points of light or interest, was made long ago (just like stars in the sky were), not only by natural talent, but through a process of making careful correct choices. And here, "correct" means correct for what the future will need.

We may not all be Leonardo-DaVinci material, but we each can learn to use our own mind and intuition to make choices that will bring forth a destiny worth living for ourselves and for society. Choices that we make today, which may seem very unpopular now and may even separate us from acceptance and popularity, can in time result in a personality that is

key or crucial for the society of the future, even precious. This is the idea of the last judgment, personified. It is the final or last judgment that counts.

THAT FASCINATING PERSON

When you meet a really fascinating person, take note of what about them is so fascinating and you may end up with a short list of the significant choices they made, choices that others did not make. They invested their time and energy in ways that have proved useful to society today, although at the time, that choice may not have raised any eyebrows, or perhaps even seemed like a waste of time. This is called having the courage of our convictions.

Our personality is the most significant subset of all the choices we have made, the things we have cared for and loved, and what we have rejected or hated. If most of those choices are now relevant, then our person appears almost unique. You get the idea. That is how personalities of note are made.

The truth always wins out in the end because it (by definition) lasts longest. We may not have this or that talent, but any of us can learn to choose what is true and authentic for us as individuals. As my first teacher used to say, "Michael, it is not true because I say it; I say it because it is true."

MIND IMPRESSIONS

May 8, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Windy day, with some sun and temperatures in the upper 50s. Freeze warnings tonight. That's the topical report. Nestled in all that is "me, myself, and I." And I'm restless. Who knows why? I don't, at least not exactly. Somewhere I read in the shamanic literature that each spring (in temperate climates) the "spirit" attempts to leave the body. I have no idea exactly what that means, but certainly I am tired of the body of winter, cold, and freezing. Anyway, where would I go? Well, maybe south?

I've been on Facebook for many years now, ever since June 15, 2007 when I overcame my stupid resistance to it and decided I wanted to share more of what is going on inside with me, not to mention the prodding of friends to join in. I usually write every day, but I don't always manage to do that. And I try to keep what I write fresh, about something I am actually going through or at least inspired by the moment or the time-phase I'm in.

However, I can't always write the best blog because sometimes with what I'm going through I either don't fully understand myself or sometimes life is just too chaotic or painful to try to put into words. There is such a thing as "more than you want to know."

The last three days I have been watching a live-streamed teaching by my dharma teacher of 33 years, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. This particular teaching was on the Stupa, the dome-shaped Buddhist monuments that go back thousands of years. They are all over Tibet and by now there are even some in this country. We happen to have a stupa right here at our center, because we built one. And it was no simple thing to do, but that would be another story. I enclose a photo of our stupa.

Most folks don't even know our stupa is there, because it is way at the back in our yard. Only people walking down the alley might see it and I'm sure they wonder what it is. In fact, it is a little difficult to explain, because the stupa represents the nature of the mind for all to see and it's hard to explain the nature of the mind. Period.

When we were building our stupa, we had a circular brick walkway put in around it so that we could circumambulate the stupa. The masons who did the work didn't know what to make of the stupa, so rather than invade their Christian-orientation with Buddhist jargon, I just said that my father had died some years before, and they simply nodded their heads. They were "good" with that explanation, because they knew my dad and assumed it was some kind of monument, which it is, just not one for my father. Anyway, building our stupa was a big "project," including turning the wooden dome on a lathe and so on. We all worked on it, especially my brother Phillip.

But I digress. This recent teaching by Rinpoche on stupas was quite detailed and I took in a lot, not that I can remember it all. But I was particularly struck by

the making of what are called tsa-tsas, the little clay dome-shaped statuettes (see inset in photo) that help to fill the larger stupa. Tsa-tsas are small iconic statue-like objects that are typically made by placing clay from the earth into a mold. Modern tsa-tsa molds tend to be filled with plaster-of-paris instead of clay. Like all Buddhist offerings, while the finished tsa-tsa is important, the real offering is not only the completed tsa-tsa itself, but also the making of the tsa-tsa, the actual process of fashioning and especially the “offering” of it.

All that is very involved and this is not an article about making tsa-tsas, but rather more about the intent and process of making them. Suffice it to say that each tsa-tsa is carefully formed, filled, and cast from its mold. But what caught my attention (and why) was when Rinpoche explained that, aside from solid physical tsa-tsas of clay, there are even tsa-tsas made entirely of water, air, and fire that can be offered. Now, that was news. It never occurred to me that practitioners literally could use a tsa-tsa mold to capture the wind, water, or fire and thus bless that, but they do. To me, this was like the Native American “dream catcher,” another way to hold spirit.

Rinpoche explained that they literally use a tsa-tsa mold to capture (and briefly contain) the wind, water, and even fire and thus offer it. Once I grasped that you can kind of capture these more fluid substances, it became clear to me that, like making these more ephemeral tsa-tsas, each of the photographs that I carefully make (some of which have over 100 layers) is the same idea. This is especially true, since long ago I mixed my dharma practice and the process of taking photos (quite by accident). And “mixing” means

mixing until their qualities are one and the same -- indistinguishable.

And I also realized that years ago when I did a couple of rounds of what I call dharma boot camp, the traditional Extraordinary Preliminaries (termed Ngondro), my favorite section was the Mandala Offering, where you make over 100,000 offerings using a copper plate and carefully arranging a pattern of rice and precious objects on it, while reciting a particular sadhana. I got really into it. And making tsas seems very, very similar and my photographs are just another kind of tsa-tsa, at least for me.

So, I have been making my own form of photo tsas for years, carefully, reverently, lucidly, and happily, only I do it with photos and the photo is the mold that gently holds the impression made by the camera and lens, an impression of the natural mind through nature. I spent some time today dedicating all my many hundreds of thousands of photos for the benefit of all sentient beings. It made perfect sense. Photography is already sacred to me, so why not dedicate it, and so I am. I also, but seldom show them here, make many photos of dharma items. I may start showing some, so you have been warned.

INVEST IN THE PROCESS

May 9, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The message getting through to me, once again, is attention to process; attend to the process and the result will take care of itself. I'm not talking about trying harder or making greater effort. That's a buzz-saw. Instead, it means being more careful with each step of the process. "Careful" means with-care or full-of-care, not just like "be careful lest you fall." With-real-care is the idea.

In other words, relax with actually caring. Perhaps love is a better word, as in "with loving care." What is love, but inspired-care, complete attention to something we totally care about? Our path may be uneven, perhaps even rough in spots, but as the great Mahasiddha Tilopa said, even so, "Relax, as it is."

With photographing flowers and plants, the flower inspires attention and care. Yet, ultimately it is the attention and care on our part that is most important; that's the takeaway. It is the PROCESS of "offering," not what is being offered, that is important. The process is the offering. And, this concept is so very Zen.

OK, OK. But how do we do that?

Any process can be broken down or articulated into the series of the steps that we are aware of. Each

step of the way can be done carefully. I would say “lovingly,” but we may have to work up to that. “Carefully” is something we should be able to manage, making sure that each step along the way is measured with attention and executed properly, giving it the space it needs and the time it deserves.

Where’s the love? For me, the love comes from the complete immersion in the process, something beyond just caring, like “being care.” We grow to love the involvement itself and the crystal clarity and lucidness that arise from it. In dharma terms, this is part of what is called Insight Meditation.

Perhaps the love comes when the care is taken care of and gotten out of the way, so that we can get more into the process of just putting our heart into it. If we “fall out of love,” we find ourselves once again making effort, “trying” instead of just doing or being. We all know that experience. To fail ignorance by a meter or a foot is the way I use to put it to myself. As the old song goes, we all want to be in that number, when the saints go marching in.

MEANWHILE, BACK IN THE JUNGLE CHANGE

May 10, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Change is not always gradual. Either that, or all change reaches a breaking point (the straw that breaks the camel's back), where our internal tectonic plates shift or move and we go along with them. And we don't all always graduate or finish up what we have been doing at the time. Sometime change just pushes or pops us out of and beyond where we are. Ready or not, here it comes. And we are just done with that phase of life, good, bad, or indifferent. We are pushed on to inherit (and have to interpret) life anew, whatever that means for us.

This change I am in now has very slowly been coming for some time. I could feel it moving in my depths and sometimes almost see it out of the corners of my eyes, so to speak, but I could not quite place it, much less gather what it means for me. I do know that something is happening here, Mr. Jones.

Like a slow-moving cloud that I'm still in the midst of, this has been with me (or us) for months now. Of course, I'm talking about significant change, perhaps a somewhat massive change. And I don't mean change for everyone, unless everyone is feeling as I do. All I can do is delineate my own internal changes, not speak for you or for anyone else.

I have seen this type of change before, a number of times in my life. In fact, I found the following in my journals from back in the 1960s:

"Relieved of duty in the middle of the war, I must be a traitor. I must have made some terrible mistake, to be relieved. I mean, I looked forward to a life long-filled with searching and suffering. And now this, this terrible guilt of non-involvement, of really not caring like I used to care, and I would rather die than not care. Caring did not mean love to me; it meant worry and suffering continued. To be carefree, this I never thought to ask for. I had lost my edge, my suffering."

It's not quite what I'm feeling now, but related. A life-change sweeps in and inundates me right in the midst of whatever I'm doing. One of my favorite slogans is "A Rising Tide Raises All Boats." Whatever flood I feel now is doing just that, floating my boat right up and out of where I have been laboring for however how long.

I have to laugh. With whatever work I am doing still undone, I'm just out of here and on to who knows what and where. Or, is this just the unrest of our nation and the Full Moon at work? I don't know.

It is a fact that we do change. And change can push us beyond the shore of whatever we are currently doing until we can no longer find that "whatever it took" within us to be doing that. Our motivation, drive, or impetus dries up or just vanishes. Gone. We feel differently and find ourselves beginning to turn our attention elsewhere. And then we just move on and start to pick up on whatever change IS happening with us.

THE NEED FOR WRATH IN POLITICS

May 10, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Those of us that were raised Christian should know that in the Christian religion iconography is rife, at least in the Catholic tradition in which I was raised. The various saints, statues, paintings, etc. are filled with icons, symbols, motifs, etc. which, if we study them, contain many hidden or obvious meanings.

However, Americans (and Westerners in general) have problems with understanding the Tibetan iconography, in particular the wrathful deities and, for that matter, they don't even like to look at images or paintings of the protectors, the wrathful deities. I found it worthwhile understanding what these deities are all about, so here is a brief introduction.

Tibetan deities are not people or even beings in the ordinary sense of the word, but rather qualities in our life that can affect us for good or ill, depending on our own behavior in relation to them. In particular, the fierce wrathful deities are not angry or evil, but like the laws of nature represent what can't be abrogated or successfully ignored, much less gone against.

We beings don't contravene the law of gravity with impunity, but just the opposite. In other words, we don't break nature's laws; they break us if we transgress them. Like the wrathful Tibetan deities, nature's laws represent the kind of ring-pass-not or

incontrovertible barrier that we cannot transgress without suffering the consequences, i.e. like jumping off a cliff.

Of the three main types of bodhisattvas in Buddhism, the Bodhisattva Vajrapani (shown here) represents the truth or power of dharma. The other two main types of bodhisattvas are Manjushri (dharma wisdom) and Avalokiteshvara (dharma compassion).

While there are peaceful forms of Vajrapani, the most common and popular form is that of a wrathful deity. And let me remind us that “wrath” is not some form of extreme anger or for that matter any kind of anger. Rather, wrath, like the laws of nature, is something that cannot be ignored or gone against. We all know that the fierce forces of nature are exacting to the last iota and cannot be contravened. Wrath is like that, a righteous truth and even fierce form of energy that defies anything that defies it. Why? Because, as the truth, anything but the truth will eventually fail.

In the history of Buddhism, Vajrapani is one of the earliest (and principal) bodhisattvas, representing the sheer power of the dharma to defy anything that transgresses from the truth. In my own Buddhist practice, I was early-on so interested in Vajrapani (and a wrathful form of it at that) that I repeatedly asked my root teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, to teach and offer the Vajrapani empowerment. He finally gave that empowerment and at our dharma center here in Big Rapids, Michigan. Rinpoche gave a particular Vajrapani empowerment (and teaching) called “Dorje Tumpo,” a wrathful form of Vajrapani from a cycle of empowerments of the 9th Karmapa, Wangchuk Dorje.

I then did that Vajrapani practice for many years, completed the mantra requirement of 1,200,000 mantras, and eventually even traveled to India, where I again received that empowerment, this time from the living emanation in our lineage of Vajrapani, His Eminence Goshir Gyaltsap Rinpoche. Khenpo Rinpoche then asked me to teach that practice to our sangha, which I did. So, while I'm making no claims, I did put in real time and practice relating to this wrathful deity. So, why bring up Vajrapani just now in this blog?

For me, Vajrapani has always been a touchstone for the purity of truth. In the politics of today, and particularly these days in Washington, we need more than just a touch of Vajrapani, who represents the prime protector of truth in the world. Truth is a quality that we all very much need close to us just now. Personally, it would help to purify our minds from all of the surrounding confusion going on recently in politics.

The word "Vajrapani" means "vajra (thunderbolt) in the hand" and the most popular depiction of the wrathful form of Vajrapani shows him holding a dorje (vajra) or thunderbolt (the power of compassion) in his right hand, while making the Karana mudra or gesture to ward off what is untrue. Basically that mudra wards off evil or untruth and signals to stop or get back -- "Thus far and no farther." The dorje or vajra (thunderbolt) has the power to cut through all confusion or mumbo-jumbo and get right to the truth.

In his left hand, which is making the Vitarka mudra (that invites discussion or argument), Vajrapani holds a lasso with which to bind the untruthful to the truth.

His legs are in the crouching or dor-tab posture. He wears a tiger skin around his waist and is adorned by snakes on his arms and neck. Vajrapani wears a headband of five skulls, has a third eye, and is often surrounded by flames. His color (in paintings) is a very dark blue.

Anyway, you get the idea. You can look at the photo. Vajrapani's wrath and fierceness keeps negativity and what is untrue at bay, something this country could use more of just now. Hopefully, you get the idea of why the Tibetans invoke this particular wrathful deity.

SEEING BY FEELING

May 11, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Whereas we Americans may not personify the qualities of the mind like many of the world's spiritual groups do, we still like to signify these same qualities in our own way. Getting to know the various Tibetan peaceful and wrathful deities is more than just a cultural exchange. I was raised around the ornate embellishments of the Catholic Church, so I was used to the various saints, symbols, strange language, and so on being a little exotic, but I was not quite ready for where the Tibetans took all this. And what was funny at first is how dead serious they are about it. I got used to it. And, after a long time, I began to understand.

Although the Catholic Church was colorful and ornate, mostly it was conceptual and intellectual. I have never been able to get my arms around just ideas and concepts. I need to get into it more than that. For example, I took Algebra-101 three times in a row and never got it. They finally just pushed me through to get rid of me. I have a practical streak that has to be felt in order for me to learn.

As a pretty-good astrologer, I got to know some of the best astrologers of my time. The great English astrologers John Addey and Charles Harvey became my friends. At one point they even invited me to join a secret society or spiritual brotherhood. It was a great

honor to be asked to join them and I wanted to know what I should do, at which time they introduced me to some of their reading material, which was very “Platonic” in nature. I did my best to read these books, but the writings were way to “goody-goody” or abstract for me. I couldn’t do this, so I asked them if I could do some kinds of physical things, like lick stamps, fill envelopes, etc. But no, that was not the deal. So, in the end, I did not join them, although I valued their friendship very much and remained friends.

Although on this blog I often deal with very abstract spiritual ideas, the only way I can do that is to ground them in practice, bring the ideas to ground, so to speak. There is a part of me that is very practical.

Like a blind man, I cannot see with the abstract mind, but I can feel my way along through life by my intuition, my gut. If you understand these blogs I write, it is because of the feeling in them, not the abstraction.

I understand that feelings are abstract to many folks, so I can’t write for those folks. But some of you are like me. You too are feeling your way along with your intuition. We see by feeling, by heart.

“SOMETHING IS HAPPENING HERE...”

May 12, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

We obviously are in a time of change; just look at the fat leaping out of the political frying pan. As the bard wrote, “Something is happening here. But you don’t know what it is. Do you, Mister Jones?” Well, I think we do know what’s happening, and if we don’t exactly know, we all get the idea.

I know that when I don’t feel like writing my more normal blog (as I do now), that something else is going on around me or perhaps around all of us. Anyway, at these times I end up writing about what’s going on internally and how it is with me. So, if you can relate to this, here is what I’m getting just now:

Yes, it’s turmoil. But, my guess is that through all of this it still feels O.K. or at least like it could be O.K. This obviously is the end of one chapter and the beginning of another, but there are too many waves in the water right now to see clearly just what that might be. Heaven knows, I have looked.

So, conceptualizing this current change we are in having failed, all I have left is whatever I can sense or feel is going on. And those of us who are older (and perhaps more stuck in the mud-of-time), whatever waves of change are rolling in are not likely to move us too far from where we already are. Yet it could surprise me.

For sure, whatever is happening is unsettling, but my guess is that it will settle down after a while and I will be little worse for the wear. Yet, also in my mind, there is no question that in all this commotion I have been rolled up to the brink once again and had at least a look out-beyond.

And about all I could see at that overlook was how useless intellectualization and concepts for their own sake are worth. Do we have a choice? I hope so. Perhaps we can choose to either go deeper into the body of any experience (of change) or get farther away into out-of-body experiences.

So far, this current change has led me deeper into experience and somehow I'm actually enjoying it, rather than stepping farther away from it. And in that experience I don't feel like I am losing any freedom, but in some way I'm becoming freer than I was. Readers will have to decide whether my analysis of this moment for myself relates in any way to what you are experiencing.

So, in summary, mental tectonics are shifting. No doubt. We are changing. So far, despite all the smoke and mirrors, something positive seems in the air. In my case, I am getting more, not less, involved in the sheer experience of life, with less of me hanging out and watching. I'm losing my grip on obligations that are just obligatory, and that loss feels good, not bad. Whether I will reach for another grip and grasp, probably, but at this point I don't know what it is. And I like the feel of freedom and letting go.

It's a bit like a micrometer-caliper, one of those with a large rotary dial to measure tiny changes. I'm

watching what are essentially micro-vibrations that measure perhaps minute movements, and then extrapolating from there.

It's a good question whether we can experience more deeply and still be fully aware of it at the same time. We shall see.

GETTING IT

May 13, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

How quickly time folds in on itself, replacing what is present with what was. As a young person, I was very much (or felt like I was) something of, like the title of the old Robert A. Heinlein book, a “Stranger in a Strange Land” wandering around in this world. And, as time continues to telescope my history, pushing it farther and farther into the past, I don’t want to forget who it is that I was or am. As time passes, my history becomes more like a caricature of itself than something I can remember all that well. When has any memory that we have improved in clarity over time? Most history is all too forgettable.

We can’t go back or as they say “you can’t go home again” and we can’t go forward into the future, either. It is a no-brainer that being in the present makes sense, as if there were any other choice. LOL.

If it is to be found at all, clarity can be found in this moment, in the “now.” And let’s not forget the pith instructions of the great Buddhist Mahasiddha Tilopa:

“Don’t Prolong the Past.”

“Don’t Invite the Future.”

“Don’t Think about the Present.”

Well, that about covers our options, does it not? So, what are we to do? Tilopa then answers that question and adds:

“Just relax, as it is.”

I can't argue with the above, as a prescription, but doing it is another matter. We can't just “try” and relax; we have to actually relax and, as Tilopa pointed out, “as it is,” without thinking, hoping, commenting, or changing anything. If you want it straight and in few words, Tilopa's words of advice say it all. If you want more detail, there are libraries of Buddhist books to be read, but their conclusion will still be the same, now and a thousand years from now.

What I found I needed was advice and instruction on how to do all this, what practices will get me there, and how to go about doing them. All of these words, all of the texts, the books, the sadhanas, the mantras, etc. must end in action on our part. We can wait forever (and have been), but sooner or later we must effect our own liberation. As Rinpoche once said to a group of us “We are the stragglers, the ones in all the time up until now didn't get.” We finally have to just go and get it.

ABOUT-FACE

May 17, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

For many decades, I have studied (and practiced) not only the dharma, but before that the Western occult tradition, on my own and with the help of several very fine teachers.

And by “studied,” I don’t mean just book study, but rather life study, living the awareness of what I’m going through. And, I am quite familiar with what are called the “chakras,” which many think are simply spheres of light (and sensitivity) aligned up and down our spine, but in reality are also vast areas of the mind (and correspondingly of the world) in which we all wander and roam.

As the occult tradition points out, these seven chakras are opened, one-by-one, in many different orders, but mostly in a fairly standard order. I wrote a whole book about this called “The Astrology of the Heart,” for those interested in these sensitive areas.

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

When we exhaust what we can learn and absorb from a particular chakra (and it begins to dry up for us), we are simultaneously born into or emerge into the awareness of another of the chakras. Shamans know this and much of their function is to serve as guides

for us while exiting one chakra and being born into the next. These transitions can be very sensitive times for us and are initiations or life-changing events that are seldom celebrated, but should be.

In some cases, the rules or laws of one chakra are different or even the inverse of the preceding chakra that we have just vacated. I could go on and have, in various articles, books, etc., but here I want to point to a somewhat similar correlation when it comes to dharma training.

I have written extensively here (Facebook and elsewhere) on the “Six Words of Advice” of the great Indian Mahasiddha Tilopa, the key and final word of which is to “Relax, as it is.” This phrase may appear as obvious or self-explanatory, but the implications of it are broad and the realization of it is not simply a walk in the park.

We are used to driving our projects forward, toward the future. It takes will and perseverance on our part to get things done and this willful-persistence we have is difficult to deconstruct and remove. Yet, like the scaffolding used to create a building, eventually it has to be removed. And all this is clearly pointed out in the various forms of meditation training, i.e. that a point comes in our practice where we no longer grow by driving forward, but rather by just the inverse, allowing things to emerge and come to us. To my mind, it seems that I’m going through something like this just now.

Lately, I am coming up empty of drive, the need to force myself into the future through efforts of will and sheer perseverance. That willful drive is a discipline I

have, but one that does not feel comfortable or right to me just now. I find that I currently have a distaste (amounting almost to revulsion) and no longer feel like driving my ship onward with thought, word, and deed as I habitually have up to now. So, what then am I doing?

I no longer feel like pushing, using whatever force of will and drive that I have, which is considerable, to get things done or make things happen. What occur to me are the third and fourth words of advice from Tilopa:

(4) Don't try to figure anything out.

(5) Don't try to make anything happen.

I believe it is these two admonitions that I am currently grappling with, and my comment would be that not only should we not "TRY," but we CAN'T try and expect any success in our meditation. In other words, it's not just "don't do it," but we reach a point where we can't do it, unless we willfully go against everything that feels right and good. It no longer feels right to us to push, if we do. This is where I am at.

In other words, it's not only a "cease and desist" order as far as "push" goes, but perhaps even a directing for us to "go the other way," which means the reverse or inverse of what I have been doing up to now, if only remedially. If we change direction, we have to come to a stop, then stop, and then gradually begin to head the other way. That takes time and right now it seems that I have rolled to a stop, have more-or-less been standing still for a time, and now it seems (as of

today) that I'm finally beginning to move in the opposite direction.

In this process, I have to abandon, let go, surrender, and cease to push, push, push, and instead learn to allow things to more naturally happen, arise, and more gracefully present themselves to me. One of the most valuable services of the shaman is to counsel us during one of these deep changes and advise us not to push anymore (lest we hurt ourselves), but rather to invoke and begin to allow change to show us the way. Are you still with me?

So, it has taken some days of having little to no motion (or idea) as to what is happening, but I'm sharing with you what I am making of all this change. Now, it remains for me to see if I can... relax, as it is.

LOL.

SEEING AT THE EDGE

May 18, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The edges have it. Without them, there is little discrimination, which says something about dualistic or relative thinking in general. Lost in a desert of flat sand or an expanse of white snow or a sea of waveless water is just an analogy for what I'm pointing at here in regard to change. When there is no motion and change, it is hard for us to see what's going on. Astrologers can see the same concept in the retrograde planets and their stationary points, only in addition to the distance a stationary planet strays from its norm, astrologers might like to consider what I am pointing out here, the complete lack of motion at the stationary point.

As the poet H.W. Longfellow wrote, "The mills of the gods grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine." Actual meditation training is not primarily conceptual, even though words and concepts are used to help us get oriented and have a base understanding. However, we go beyond concepts into the actual meditation experience and begin the process of realizing in that experience the nature of the mind itself. As the pith dharma teachings point out, "From the midst of experience, realization can arise."

Like taking different routes to climb Mt. Everest, all of the pinnacle methods of Buddhist mind training reach the same end-result, Realization as to the true nature

of the mind, including Mahamudra, Dzogchen, Maha-Ati, and so on. In this case, all roads do lead to Rome.

Coming to a complete standstill as regards change is breathtaking, which only goes to show me how dependent I am on change to measure my life. In fact, I have to remind myself that no-change is also a change from what I'm used to.

Like it or not, I am primarily a phenomenologist, measuring life through the lens of my own internal changes. Tibetan Buddhism is a perfect partner in the examination of the mind, which I have been doing since I was a fairly young child. The toolset of the dharma is eminently designed for the task. Perfect.

Through mind training, I gradually take hands-on control of my own mental vehicle and learn to better steer in the direction of greater clarity and enlightenment. What a relief!

LOOKING UP

May 19, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

What we see is what we get and we get it all the time. We see stuff and we see people; yet what we see (including our reaction to it) is not always clear. Let's talk about this and I will start with an example:

In the course of an average day, we meet or even see folks with various personalities, races, religions, impediments, problems, and what-not. How do we determine if our reaction to someone (or something) is a prejudice we have or a projection we are reading from the person we are looking at? Let's be clear, our reaction is 100% ours and we have to own it and do something about it, if needed. However, it is a sticky wicket whether what we are reacting to is coming from us or from a projection from the person we are seeing, or both.

This can be a real can-of-worms, so please take note. As mentioned, if our reaction is from our own prejudice, of course that is our problem. If we are just seeing the projection of, say, a stranger's insecurity, well, that is another story. And, as mentioned, quite often both views are true. How can we ever hope to disentangle the two?

Noting our reactions and learning to tone our reactions is a very important dharma technique, one I

have detailed many times. For those interested, it is available here:

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

However, there is an additional approach that I have found to be very valuable, so let me explain that:

What we see out there in the world of people and things can (and often is) very confusing to sort out. We could even say that what we see is polluted by many things, including, of course, our own biases. With that in mind, an alternative to trying to sort what we react to out is to, instead, become aware of our awareness (or lack thereof), so to speak. Here's how.

What that means is that when we are confronted with a situation where we are confused, i.e. where perhaps we are unable to separate our own prejudice or bias from what someone else may be projecting on their end, is to not attempt to figure anything out, but just be aware of what we see (note it), but without making judgments or anything. Just note it.

In other words, simply be aware of the situation, and note that your "awareness" of the situation is not tainted, cloudy, or confused, but rather is just normal and crystal clear. Look at that awareness and rest-in and be satisfied with that. The ability of our awareness to "note" what is in fact there in front of us is available to us 24x7. We may not know how to view or handle the situation we are in, but we can easily note that we are in it... and rest in our clear awareness of the situation.

We are continually looking down and out at what is happening to us and seldom up at our intrinsic awareness as to what is happening. Yet, that awareness is available to us all the time, every day and even at night. Dharma teachers suggest that we learn to Identify with that clear awareness that can see (and note) what we are involved in and rest in it as much as possible.

What I am saying is very simple. We don't have to figure out and make sense of everything we experience. The fact is that we can't. So, when faced with something that is not clear or that confuses us, then, instead of trying to sort it out by thinking, thinking, thinking, just note it. "Noting it" is just being aware of it, as it appears to us, warts and all, but not commenting to ourselves about it. And while you are noting it, also note that the awareness with which we "note" anything is not confused, but very clear. Make a habit of noting what "IS and identify with that clear awareness.

It's amazing that such awareness is right there and has always been with us. And, although we use it, we mostly are unaware of it.

THE GESTURE

May 20, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

In beginning dharma, especially in the Extraordinary Preliminaries (called “Ngondro”), there is a lot to do, and this takes real and dedicated effort on our part. It’s not done any other way. However, after we complete these preliminaries, there are several directions we can take. And one of those directions is preparing for what is called the recognition (on our part) of the true nature of the mind.

However, when it comes to actually recognizing the true nature of the mind, we are not going to find it by simply looking for it; it takes looking for it in order for us to know that. There is a mudra or gesture here.

And by “looking for it,” I don’t mean just a glance around our inner life or something conceptual (such as thinking about it), but rather getting off our mental duffs and “physically” going into our mind and really, really, really looking for it. We must develop certainty that the mind, in the sense that we believe it is a permanent existing thing, just cannot be found; yet, here it is. It appears.

Not only will “just looking” for where the mind is, not find anything, but in fact the “looking” itself is enough to further obscure our seeing. I am reminded of the popular phrase, “Wait for it.” Or, let it happen, let it come to you. In this case, “trying” to realize the mind

won't get it, whatever "it" is that we think we are looking for. Yet, we have to be certain of this. Only then have we turned the corner, so to speak.

In swimming, we learn to tread water as well as to just float. In meditation training, a point comes when less is more and we also, metaphorically speaking, have to just let go and float. There is a learning curve. In other words, first we try to grasp the dharma (make an effort), after which, not finding anything by grasping, we gradually give that up, let go, and allow that grasping-ness to dissipate. It's not unlike making a fist (the looking) and then (with the not-finding) gradually opening the hand. Only then do we receive. It's similar to the old Buddhist saying of turning your bowl right-side up, instead holding it upside-down.

First, we grab for it and then, finding nothing, we give up, let go, and, like a flower, gradually open. That's the operative gesture here.

REAL-EYES

May 24, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

It is important to understand what Realization (as related to Buddhist mind training) is all about as compared to “realization” with a small “r,” the kind we use every day around the house.

When we realize anything, we are replacing what we have been doing with our awareness with whatever realization that just occurred. For example, I realize that I am now uncomfortable with whatever I’m doing. Maybe my big toe hurts (or whatever) and when I realize that my toe hurts, I step-back, step away from the moment and this realization supersedes my former view of things. The realization replaces what I was thinking, experiencing my toe hurting, but not realizing that fact. In other words, we are endlessly updating the situation in our own mind through realizing what the heck is going on.

Realization always shuffles itself to the top of the present experience, replacing whatever we were just thinking about or experiencing with itself and clarifying our take on things. In this way, we keep on track of things, always shuffling the latest realization to the top of the deck.

While “being present” (and the present moment) appears (and is said to be) continuous, in actual practice (from our point of view) it is more like a series

of jerks or realizations, one replacing the other in an endless attempt to remain present, like a lot of small “Aha!” experiences. Now I see it; now I get it, again and again. Realizations.

It seems that everything that, while at first “present,” gets old and drifts into the past; we daydream, wander, and follow thought after thought, often for quite a ways. However, sooner or later, we have to be updated, because we are lost in the past or in future expectations, etc. The present is always with us, but it is not static, but rather fluid – moving on. It’s up to us to blink and thereby update our situation, over and over. Time may be continuously present and flowing smoothly, but we update it in a series of our mini-takes or realizations as to what is going on.

Even a cursory read of the classic upadesha (pith) texts are enough to tell us that “unwavering attention” is said to be the “body” of meditation, and that means continuous (moment by moment) attention or awareness, with no exceptions. The learning curve of awareness for most of us is a series of intermittent realizations, updating our daydreams with flashes of reality. We come up for air, but still, most of the time, our head is down, lost in wandering reveries, following thoughts, noodling, or whatever.

This is why in learning Mahamudra meditation, it is recommended to invoke many very short sessions, which help to jump start that “unwavering attention” requirement. As one of my dharma teachers put it:

“The length of an acceptable session in this practice might last the time it takes to pick up a cup of tea –

from that moment until you actually drink a swallow of tea.”

VIVID SEEING

May 23, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Guru Rinpoche taught: “While there is nothing to be seen when the mind looks at itself, there is a vivid quality of seeing.”

This is so true that I can’t help but feature it, underline, and highlight it. We look for the nature of the mind, but cannot find it because the nature-of-the-mind is that it has no nature. However, a byproduct of the mind looking at itself is this vividness of “Seeing” or recognition of the mind’s nature that Guru Rinpoche points out.

As my own dharma teacher put it: “Therefore the search by a dualistic cognition (by the outward-facing function of mind that can only perceive something other than itself) must be unsuccessful. If you could find the mind in that way, it would have to be a dualistic phenomenon, but it is not.”

Here Rinpoche is saying that using our conceptual mind to look at the mind itself will never find anything, because the conceptual mind can only see what is outside itself, just as our eye cannot see itself.

In using the mind to look at itself, non-conceptually, what remains is the “Seeing,” since there is nothing internally that can be seen or found. Yet, as Guru Rinpoche points out, “there is a vivid quality of

seeing.” That is, as I understand it, an understatement. This “Seeing” (and resting in it) is what arises when the mind looks at itself, and this Seeing is a gateway or window into realizing the true nature of the mind.

This is the kind of “Seeing” that fuels my photography and my practice, when I can manage it.

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

May 22, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I was raised listening to and eventually reading Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland." And, ever imprinted on my young mind was the marvel of Alice stepping through the reflection of the looking glass into the magical world beyond. And that early impression has only been strengthened by the many Tibetan Buddhist analogies of this world of appearances as reflected in the mirror of the mind.

It is written by Arya Nagarjuna that "Our minds are like a mirror that reflects things and the reflections are the reasons for which we assume that our minds exist, although they are nowhere."

Another lama commented on the above statement of Nagarjuna's that:

"A reflection in a mirror is not actually contained anywhere in that mirror. It is not on the surface, it is not within the surface, and it is not behind the mirror."

And, as the Mahasiddha Jomaqshiri wrote:

"Like a tree without a root, my mind itself is empty like space."

This last quote points out that just as there is no such thing as a tree without some form of root, like a

reflection in a mirror; the mind is empty of both existence and non-existence. And appearances are nothing other than our own bewilderment appearing before us.

In other words, what is being said here is that appearances, how the world appears to us, is directly proportionate to the particular kind and degree of bewilderment we have accumulated – karma.

FIND YOUR LEVEL

May 22, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

There are said to be 84,000 dharmas or teachings on the dharma, so there should be at least one teaching that you or I can respond to at any given time. The problem is to find out where and what that teaching is. Also, a lot depends on who teaches it to us and how. We can respond to some teachings, no matter who presents it or how they present it, especially if it is what's called an upadesha or pith teaching. The great teachings speak to us directly, if we can listen.

And, it's a two-way street. The teaching or teacher may speak to us, but we also have to be ready and able to receive it. So, the way we learn dharma can be various and at times complex.

My point is that there is a world of dharma teachings out there. We just have to find the right ones that can spark us. Listening or reading in drone-like fashion has little value. Yes, it's the dharma, but no one's listening or able to register it at the time. It doesn't help us if the teacher talks over head (or under), and for that matter if we just can't connect. The result is still null.

Don't assume that just because it's the "Dharma," that the translation you are reading is coherent in your terms. Buddhist scholars may never have practiced and practitioners may be unable to express

themselves. Better than books for most of us is working with an actual teacher.

To me, a dharma teacher is someone from whom I can actually learn the dharma. This kind of connection is the most precious of all. In fact, the Tibetans call their most valued teachers, “rinpoche,” which means “precious one.” Indeed.

It matters little whether the dharma teacher we work with is big, little, black or white, etc., friendly or prickly, etc., and their personal life and personality is none of our business, either. The only thing that matters is whether we connect with them and through them we can realize the dharma.

How we tell we have found a teacher, as mentioned above, is when we are able to learn the dharma faster than we can on our own. This is why we can value a particular teacher, but not be able to learn much from another. One person’s teacher may not connect or make sense to someone else. This, again, is why there are said to be 84,000 dharmas, 84,000 teachers, and 84,000 students.

I do my best to share dharma teachings on this blog, but I know very well that they will resonate only to the few that can connect with me and for the rest of my readers, they will probably go in one ear and out the other. That’s just the way it is and perhaps has always been.

ROUNDING THE CORNER

May 21, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I find myself often using aerodynamic images when talking about dharma training, analogies like finally taking off or better yet, the dharma providing us with the mental streamlining we need to withstand the wind tunnels of Samsara. Most folks have yet to realize that the dharma is not an option, but ultimately an unavoidable necessity.

Apparently, most of us are in rough shape when we first start out on our dharma path, certainly not ready for prime time. This is why so many folks, myself included (like the proverbial fools who rush in), sooner or later, succumb to undertake what are called the Preliminary Practices, even though they looked to me at first glance like something out of the Middle-Ages. However, we eventually understand why they are called “preliminary practices.” Simply put: we have to do them before we can proceed. We are at that point basically roughly hewn and still have too many sharp corners to get through the eye of the needle of Insight Meditation.

So, while the title of this blog does refer to turning the corner, it also means rounding off our rough spots. And this amounts to the same thing. We have to remove some of our impurities before we are pure enough to respond fully and intuitively to the dharma.

We are not yet sensitive enough to pick up on our own internal intuition. What can we do about that?

As for me, initially I wanted no part of the Extraordinary Preliminaries. I was looking to just get on with enlightenment (whatever that is) or at least be well along on the path to it. I did everything I could think of to avoid these what seemed to me heavy-handed preliminaries, i.e. like doing endless prostrations or memorizing and saying a 100-syllable mantra, etc., much less doing each practice over 100,000 times. "Give me a break" was my response.

Of course, it was the same "me" who eventually came crawling back to the preliminaries and finally understood why they were the fastest route to where I really wanted to be, which was to have much greater awareness than what I was running with at the time.

So, I did them and it took years. And when I was finally finished and asked my wonderful teacher what's next? His response was, "If you want to know what I would do, if I were you, I would do another round of Ngondro." Whoa...was all I could say, but I did another round and doing that helped me to begin to round corner, in all the meanings of that word.

I don't know why I could not get enlightened without doing much of anything. Certainly, nothing else in life has come to me without work on my part. How naive I was to suppose that spiritual accomplishment is supposed to come to us without work. After all, wasn't it enough that I finally came around to wanting more awareness? Now, let me just have it.

Oh, I see. I have to earn that too? Is there no free lunch, anywhere? No, there's none.

So, my concern is for the few readers here who can, through all the din and the dust, hear me speaking to you. I am like you and you, me. Don't waste time on what does not matter or will not matter much in 20 years. Start now and be beginning to learn what actually works, i.e. the dharma. Even if you make up your mind to take the plunge into practice, it is going to take time and effort to be successful at it. So, start now, my friends. It's not too late and it's never too early.

A NEEDLE IN A HAYSTACK

May 25, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

One of the traditional analogies that appear in several forms in Tibetan Buddhism about the recognition of the true nature of the mind is the following:

Imagine a huge sea of sand, perhaps the size of a football field and very deep. And somewhere in that field is a hidden a precious treasure and we've been given the opportunity to find it. There are different scenarios, but they involve our sifting through the entire field. Imagine how long that would take?

Then, contrasted with that, another alternative is to have a guide who knows exactly where in that field the treasure is, and who can tell us where to find it, so that we can just go to the spot, just reach down into the sand, and pull out the treasure.

In this analogy, the sea of sand is this Samsaric world we live in and the treasure is our path to enlightenment. The guide is a lama, a dharma teacher who can tell us how to practice exactly what we need in terms of dharma to get on the road to our enlightenment.

I admit that the analogy is a little contrived, but the point is still good that, according to the Tibetan teachings, the chance of our recognizing the true nature of our mind is slim to none. It could take almost

forever or as they say “innumerable lifetimes.” However, with an authentic dharma teacher, someone who has actually recognized the nature of the mind, we can, with training, also recognize the actual nature of the mind, not in many lifetimes, but in this body and this life.

Anyway, that’s the analogy. About all I can say about this is that it is a solid analogy, even if it is a little arranged. And, as mentioned in Tibetan texts, we meet this analogy again and again in the course of learning about the dharma.

I would add that in my experience, this is a true analogy or an accurate way of describing the situation we find ourselves in. Heaven knows, I have spent many years trying to figure out the dharma by myself, only to come up with a patchwork-quilt kind of approximation to the dharma, a “sounds-like-this” sort of thing. It asked as many questions as it answered.

When I finally met an authentic dharma teacher, a lama with whom I connected, from there on things got better fast. Yes, it’s still been a lot of work, but like the coming of spring, each day is warmer than the last.

Tibetans can be very dramatic about all of this. For example, one classic analogy as to how difficult it is for us to be fortunate enough to have a life in which we can learn the dharma is this:

Imagine that the world, the entire globe of Earth, is covered with water. And in that water there is one blind turtle that only surfaces for air once every hundred years. On the surface of the water is a single small donut-shaped inner-tube, and it is constantly

being blown about by winds and storms. What are the chances that the turtle, when it does surface, will stick its head up and through the middle of that inner tube?

As the Tibetans say, that is how long it takes for us (in the innumerable rebirths we have) to have a single birth in which we have the good fortune to be born in a body (and a place and time) where we actually have the opportunity to learn the dharma. That's how rare is what the Tibetans call "a precious human birth." And their point is not to waste this opportunity.

CONNECTING THE DOTS

May 26, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Just as traditionally all roads led to Rome, all dharma practices lead to what is called “Recognition,” being the recognition of how our mind works -- the true nature of the mind. As I have mentioned many times in this series of blogs, please don’t confuse “Recognition” with Realization or Enlightenment, although Recognition is itself a realization. However, it is not the complete “Realization” of the mind, but certainly it is the gateway for all dharma practitioners to achieving that realization.

Just as the crack of dawn is not the full Sun or the thin sliver of moonlight after the New Moon is not the disc of the Full Moon, “Recognition” is just the first glimpse of recognition, but it is a true example of realization. Like peeling an orange, we have to continue removing the peel before we have the whole orange.

I could write endlessly about the stages in the process of Recognition, but here I would like to focus on the expansion of that first glimpse of recognition into something more, something much more. It takes time and effort. Yet, the effort is not the effort to get things done, but instead, it is the effort to relax more and more deeply, which sounds like an oxymoron – “try to relax.”

Another analogy might be the use of a “starter” in making sourdough bread. Sometimes it is called the “mother” and, if cared for, it can grow and spread beyond itself. In a similar fashion, our first glimpse of recognition (as to the nature of the mind) is like opening a hole into a much larger universe, one that we can gradually widen until we can, so to speak, crawl through. This extending or expansion of our view is what I am discussing here.

Let’s be clear that it is our own myopia that restricts us, although I am sure that great siddhas perhaps grasp it all at once, like turning around and suddenly seeing the Full Moon. More commonly though, we may have a glimpse of recognition and from there we begin to learn how to expand and extend that realization to include other activities.

My understanding is that Recognition is not restricted to sitting on the cushion, reciting mantras, or reading sadhanas. It is much more organic than that. In fact, it is more like a force of nature and can happen anywhere, anytime, and most important when doing almost anything. Traditional teachings say “In the middle of experience, realization can occur.” A common challenge is not to cling to whatever activity Recognition first occurs in. Recognition imprints us, big time. In other words, don’t mistake the baby for the bathwater. The baby is the recognition, not the way we achieved it, i.e. what we were doing at the time, although they often are linked.

Like turning a glove inside out, Recognition starts with just the tip of the finger but, with extension spreads, and gradually includes everything “outside” within itself. It is unstoppable, but unless pursued can lay

dormant until we extend it. Like the wheel-of-the-dharma, recognition has to be turned or worked, and we have to work it ourselves. Even our teacher cannot do it for us.

And how do we extend realization? The word itself says it all: we can “realize” all at once or by degrees. However, the process of realization requires that WE do the realization. As mentioned, no one can do this for us and apparently this takes time.

An analogy for this expansion or extension of realization, in its variety, depends on our openness. This might at first be like peering at enlightenment through a keyhole. Or it could include gradually widening the keyhole until it is ever more inclusive. Or, ultimately, we could just open the door and walk through. It’s not locked. I would imagine that our own limitations, obscurations, history, etc. are what restrict our view to what we already know rather than to help expand that view.

It takes time to make the connection in our head that recognition (and the realization that comes with it) can actually be directed (and expanded) here, there, and everywhere, i.e. it takes time to learn that realization is universal.

Just as the nature of one thought (once known) is identical to the nature of any other, with the expansion of our realization after recognition, it can take time to realize the universality of it all.

As all of the pith dharma texts point out, recognition of the nature of the mind is a turning point, one after which there is certainty. And “Recognition” is

permanent and irreversible. There is no going back. And there is going forward, but only if we take the time to extend and expand the realization.

Finding the earmarks and hallmarks of the stages that I'm pointing at here may not be immediately discernible to the practitioner who is first realizing this. It is a bit like staying with what we know, until such time as we realize that the words in the pith dharma texts are not meant only for others; those words are meant for us. This is it! And we are already well down the road.

TOUCHING HOME

May 27, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

We've all had the experience of suddenly realizing that we've left something on the stove and forgotten all about it, or some similar lapse. We are happily going about our business and then we remember that we forgot. Oops! It's that remembering we forgot that I'm talking about here.

For those of us who meditate, it is similar to Tranquility Meditation, realizing that we have been distracted from whatever we are supposed to be concentrating on, our breath, a pebble, a flame -- whatever. There we are, noodling along with this daydream or that and WHAM! We remember, realize that we have forgotten to be mindful, and return to the object of our meditation. It's a wake-up call.

My point here is not the fact that we have been distracted, but rather that in the moment when we realize that we have been distracted (so the great lamas tell us), in that instant of dawning awareness, we actually glimpse the true nature of the mind -- in a flash! This is what the lamas say. And then, of course, we roll right back into the wash of our normal mental goings-on.

That moment or flash of remembering, in that sudden realization, we are unable not-to see (or avoid) the actual crystal-clear nature of the mind, because there

it is. In other words, we all experience the nature of the mind in those moments, however briefly, and it behooves us to pay attention to this brief event. Why? Because, if we pay attention, we can begin to familiarize ourselves with that moment, however brief, gradually expand it, and hopefully learn to eventually rest in that clear state.

We get the idea that, as far as meditation and mind-training are concerned, we are surrounded at all times by the awareness that we are attempting to recognize, the key to nature of the mind, but due to our blinders or obscurations, we somehow can't catch it or approach it directly. As they say, it is so close that we can't see it. Just too near.

This idea that we have been off on a tangent, more typically some distraction, is not limited to daydreaming and momentary lapses of attention. It also happens in longer time sequences like days, months, and even years. Right in the middle of our unaware hiatus, suddenly we are back, aware again, and we often don't even know where we went, but we do know that we have been absent without our own leave for however long.

And just as there is (we are told) the glimpse of the mind's nature after our distractions, so there is a bit of a honeymoon each time we wake up from a longer diversion, whether it be months or years.

So, getting back on track is what I'm talking about here and, in a smaller version, we often do this all day long, ever correcting our course and trajectory, moment by moment (or at least day-by-day), through

realizing what's happening to us. I could go on, with example by example, but hopefully you see the point.

As a great lama teacher pointed out: "... The reason you are able to see the nature of your mind in that instant when you are distracted (and that is what is happening in that moment: you are briefly seeing your mind's nature as it is) is that you are surprised when you notice that you have been distracted, and for that moment you are incapable of altering your mind. Therefore, you see your mind's nature as it is, genuinely. Then the alteration or the fabrication comes back, and that is why it stops.

BELIEVE THE TRUTH

May 28, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

A high Tibetan lama teaches, “The survival of the mind or experience beyond physical death is at this point an object of belief or faith. None of us have concepts of having gone through the death process in our memories. Therefore, none of us know. We believe it. This belief is very important because it is a true belief. We do continue to experience after our death. Nevertheless, we do not know that. We only believe it. It happens to be a correct belief, but nevertheless it remains a belief.”

The Tibetans have an interesting way of looking at belief. We all have the right to our own beliefs or, as the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa used to say, “Your guess is as good as mine.” In America, we say things like “your belief system” and we don’t know whether what you believe is true or not.

Meanwhile, in some of the Tibetan Buddhist teachings they say it makes a difference whether what you believe as the truth is actually true or is not. Belief in the law of gravity is what they call a “true belief,” while a belief in unicorns is not.

This is nowhere more true than a belief in what your lama or authentic dharma teacher tells you. And here is where I feel “belief” in the Tibetan Buddhist system makes the most sense. If everything my dharma

teacher points out to me is true, meaning everything that I can personally test out and check, then when I'm told something I have no way of checking, like after-death bardo states, I believe what my teacher says.

It is not true because Rinpoche says it; Rinpoche says it because it is true. The belief in something that is in fact true is a "true belief," while a belief in something that is not true is not. There is a difference between these two uses of the word "believe."

As they say, "In for a nickel, in for a dime." Although a principle maxim of Tibetan Buddhism is to check the Buddhist teachings out for ourselves; don't take them on trust. However, there are some very important teachings, like what happens after death, that we just have no way to check out for ourselves, except by checking out of this world, which we will get an opportunity to do soon enough.

In the meantime, if 95% of everything I have been taught (or has been pointed out) to me by the Tibetan lamas checks out, I tend to take on faith that the other 5% also is true. I call this true belief, rather than just "believing."

“FEEDING SAMBARA TO ITSELF”

May 29, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

There are many types of dharma that can be practiced. The particular form that I follow is called Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism of the Karma Kagyu Lineage. I was first introduced to it in 1974 when I met (and was briefly the chauffeur) for the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche.

One of the main principles in the Vajrayana approach is that the ties that bind us are the very ties that eventually can free us, thus the title of this blog. Like the knotted snake, we can untie our own knots. Just as many of our most powerful medicines came from poisonous substances in small quantities, so in Vajrayana Buddhism of the type I practice, our personal faults and obscurations become the key to our liberation.

One of the great shocks for me in learning the dharma is to realize that Samsara and Nirvana are inversions of one another. They are what are called “co-emergent,” meaning they are opposite sides of the same coin. Like reciprocals of one another, they add up to one – a unity.

In the Mahamudra Lineage Prayer, which I say every day, one part reads:

“As is taught, the essence of thoughts is dharmakaya.
They are nothing whatsoever and yet they arise.
To the meditator who reflects upon the unobstructed
play of the mind,
Grant your blessing,
That the inseparability of Samsara and Nirvana be
realized.”

It's that last line, “That the inseparability of Samsara and Nirvana be realized” that is the clincher. If you ever thought that there was someplace we are trying to get to (other than here), I hate to disappoint you. At the very least, so the dharma points out, it's not another location physically, even if it is some other world. What changes through dharma is not our physical location, but our attitude, or “view” of what we already have now. Well, for those of us waiting in line at the exit-door to get out of this hellhole of a world (as it sometimes seems), think again.

The Buddhist idea of heaven is not one of Pearly Gates up yonder, but rather another round right here again in Samsara, with no improvements, unless we personally make them. In brief, we are not going anywhere other than where we are now (mentally) because we take it with us. So that fact alone is the best advertisement there is for finally learning dharma, at least for me.

What does it take for us to realize that we have no real choice when it comes to practicing dharma? I am reminded of the first section of the classic poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins called “The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo,” of which here I will only quote the more down and heavy first part:

THE LEADEN ECHO

“How to k  ep– is there   ny any, is there none such,
nowhere known some, bow or brooch
or braid or brace, l  ce, latch or catch or key to keep
Back beauty, keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty, ... from
vanishing away?

   is there no frowning of these wrinkles, rank  d
wrinkles deep,

D  wn? no waving off of these most mournful
messengers, still messengers, sad and stealing
messengers of grey?

No there’s none, there’s none, O no there’s none,
Nor can you long be, what you now are, called fair,
Do what you may do, what, do what you may,
And wisdom is early to despair:

Be beginning; since, no, nothing can be done
To keep at bay

Age and age’s evils, hoar hair,
Ruck and wrinkle, drooping, dying, death’s worst,
winding sheets, tombs and worms and tumbling to
decay;

So be beginning, be beginning to despair.

O there’s none; no no no there’s none:

Be beginning to despair, to despair,
Despair, despair, despair, despair.”

LOL. I know. It’s dark, but it points to the concept of impermanence, which is one of the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind toward the Dharma.” If you want to read the second section, “The Golden Echo,” which is nowhere near as convincing IMO, here is the link.

<https://susansworthreading.wordpress.com/tag/the-leaden-echo-and-the-golden-echo/>

And I am not trying to bring us down, but like a catch or latch that we first press down to release, I view this poem as helping remind me of that second thought that turns the mind, "Impermanence."

BEYOND RECOGNITION

May 30, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Much has been written about the many preliminary dharma practices that lead up to what is called the “recognition” of the true nature of the mind, but what happens then? Before we can answer that, it helps to understand just what “recognition” is. This dharma quote was very useful to me:

“The mind not looking at itself is the single cause of beginning-less Samsara.”

So, where have we been looking all this time? The answer is that we have been looking from the inside out at the world. That’s what we do, no? So, right off the bat, “recognition” involves reversing that and learning to use the mind to actually look at itself. Another quote from dharma teachings that I found helpful is:

“Recognition of your mind’s nature is not Realization. It is not enlightenment or awakening. It is the understanding of how to meditate on your mind’s nature thereafter, and gaining that understanding involves assiduous examination and dialogue.”

The Buddhist teachings also say: “A distinction needs to be made between the recognition of the mind’s nature and the attainment of Buddhahood. Someone who has recognized the nature of their mind has not

by any means attained Buddhahood by doing so, but they have attained a recognition that they can use through gradual familiarization to eventually achieve Buddhahood.”

And this is a traditional admonition:

“If someone has not recognized their mind’s nature, the best thing they can do is to engage in conventional imperfect virtue – by means of gathering the accumulations, and so on. If you have not recognized your mind’s nature, there is no point in pretending that you have and trying to practice in a way that would be appropriate for people who have. It would be kind of like banging your head against a wall. However, if you have recognized it, then that is the beginning of the training. It is not the end of it.”

At “recognition,” it’s like someone finally turned off the air-raid siren, those noisy distractions that have been playing in the background all our life. Silence. Our endless effortful-search for dharma is suddenly over, because we have finally found what we have been looking for all these years, even if we didn’t know what it was supposed to be like.

That’s what “recognition” is about, recognizing for the first time the actual nature of the mind and how it works. And the key word here is “certainty,” knowing for certain not only HOW the mind works, but along with that just what has to be done going forward and most of all that we, just as we are, can do it. Up to that point everything was always somewhat hypothetical or perhaps tentative, and we did not know whether we really belonged and just where we fit in.

With “recognition,” all that is swept away as we realize (with a small “r”) just how the mind works. We get it, and all of the many practices we have done all those years are fulfilled; recognition is their result. We don’t practice that way any longer or, if we do, we do it with a different attitude.

Again, from the teachings: “As far as practicing this or working with this is concerned, it does not involve meditation on anything whatsoever. There is no object of meditation in the practice of Mahamudra, because it is simply your mind becoming more familiar with itself, with its own nature. We use the term “practice Mahamudra” simply to refer to that.”

In other words, we grasp how to familiarize ourselves with the mind and go on from there. What exactly we do differs for each of us, but the thread that binds is whatever extends or expands our realization. We may start realizing something over here and perhaps manage to extend it to over there, etc. By relaxing more deeply in whatever recognition of the mind we have, we incrementally expand the world of our realization.

Like a few drops before a rainstorm, through expanding our realization, we become more and more familiar with our own mind. That’s the analogy, although, unlike waiting for rain to come, here rain only comes through our own extension of insight. This then becomes our practice and it is called Mahamudra Meditation.

VIVID INSIGHT

May 31, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

As for using the mind to look at itself, Guru Rinpoche states:

“While there is nothing to be seen when it looks at itself, there is a vivid quality of seeing.”

And commentary on that statement includes “In other words, you do not see anything, but there is a definite vivid experience of seeing or recognition. That is what is called Lhaktong (Vipassana, “insight”) or “special insight.”

“Insight Meditation,” at least as done in the Karma Kagyu Lineage (in which I practice) is a hallmark of the transition between doing the accumulation practices (Lojong, Ngondro, etc.) and (along with a special version of Tranquility Meditation) the grand tradition of Mahamudra Meditation.

As Insight Meditation is non-conceptual, rather than relative or conceptual, it cannot be expressed properly in words. Nevertheless, I will do my best here to give those who wonder about this special practice some idea or flavor as to what it is all about, although it is unspeakable.

It’s not unspeakable because it is secret, but because it is indescribable or unutterable. We simply cannot

put it into words, try as we might. As mentioned, Insight Meditation is non-dual or non-conceptual. There is no subject in here looking at an object over there to be seen. Subject and object collapses and we are one and the same.

Anyway... as mentioned, when we engage in Insight Meditation, although there is nothing to be seen, yet the “Seeing” of that “nothing” itself is seen. And that special form of seeing is like a window through which we look into (and rest in) the nature of the mind, which, unless you have experienced it, must sound Greek to us. Again, it’s indescribable.

And through that very small eye of the needle, over time, we pass and never return. In a popular analogy, it is like a wormhole into another world, although it is just this same old world, but finally just clearly seen. Or, it’s like a laser beam that once focused, works wherever we turn our attention.

So folks, I’m running out of words to describe Insight Meditation here, so please bear with me. Let me switch more to the first-person and give you some of my own experience. To the degree that I have been trained in Insight Meditation, it is the most refreshing, exhilarating, clarifying, and determinate experience I have ever known. Nothing on this earth that I have experienced comes close and, as mentioned, words cannot be fitted together to describe it.

As the Tibetan texts say: “When you then look at the nature of your mind and you vividly see it as emptiness, that is the appearance of vivid seeing or insight (Lhaktong or Vipassana) within stillness.”

BEHIND THE WHEEL

May 30, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[Before I continue, just a word about life here in warmer weather. It's good! Took a long walk at dawn and then went out to an old railroad trestle-bridge to look at the mighty Muskegon River. Although the town I live in is named "Big Rapids," the wild water has calmed down a lot since the old lumbering days. Still, the river manages to claim a few lives every year or so. Here is a shot of it taken from the old railroad bridge (turned into a trail) around 6:30 A.M. The mist is just rising from the water.]

In some of the more advanced Tibetan Buddhist practices, in particular what is called the "Pointing-Out Instructions" (where the dharma teacher points out to us the true nature of the mind), there are two classic approaches to these instructions, usually meant to be taught one before the other, like a "one, two" punch.

The first approach appears typically analytical, one that involves examining the situation (as we so like to do here in the West) conceptually (you know, thinking about it), trying to find where the mind is, what color and shape it is, and so on. This is the process of actually teaching us how fruitless that type of analysis is. When we have exhausted all our attempts to explore the mind conceptually, we are ready for the second part of the pointing-out instructions, which is non-conceptual.

The subsequent (second) approach is very straightforward and does not involve intellectualization. It simply consists of directly looking at the mind itself, but not conceptually. With help of an authentic dharma teacher, we are shown how to use the mind to look at itself and in the process we learn to rest in the special kind of “Seeing” that results from this kind of looking..

A rough analogy might be that it’s like learning to drive a car, with the first method studying how to drive the car, reading the manuals, taking the tests, etc. without ever getting into a car, while the second is learning to drive a car (as I learned when I was 14 years old), which involves actually getting in the car (as I did with my father and mother as guides) and driving it. It’s a bit like thinking about something as opposed to just doing it.

The two-step process is one of: (1) exhausting our dependence (and confidence) in dualistic conceptual thinking, in favor of (2) directly using the mind to look at itself. This is what pointing out the recognition the nature of the mind is all about. It is not just another practice, but clearly marks the dividing line between the many preliminary practices and the actual process of realization itself, which is the main path to eventual enlightenment. This involves a deep change in our approach to life and, of course, in how we practice dharma.

FAMILIARIZATION

June 1, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

In the Buddhist Vajrayana teachings it says, “In the actual meditation of Mahamudra, there is no real sequence of techniques to be practiced because the actual meditation of Mahamudra simply consists of sustaining the mind’s recognition of itself or of its own nature. That is the only thing there is, so you cannot really divide it into a beginning part, a middle part, and a concluding part. Therefore, you do not need to worry about the time of practice or astrological factors.”

“You do not need to plan to do Mahamudra meditation at a certain time of day, nor do you need to coordinate it with any kind of calendar and think that this day is better for Mahamudra meditation and this other day is not as good.”

I find it fascinating that the word “familiarization” is key to understanding what Mahamudra meditation practice is all about, simply becoming familiar with our own mind. In other words, in Mahamudra meditation, there is not a sequential series of steps or prayers or for that matter anything particular that we must do, other than to continue becoming familiar with our own mind.

And, as an astrologer myself for more than fifty years, it speaks to me that these teachings on Mahamudra

specifically point out that all of the astrological factors I am so used to looking at are not a part of Mahamudra practice. It's not like all of the many practices in The Preliminaries, which are called preliminary to recognizing the actual nature of our own mind, bring me back to this whole idea of becoming familiar with own mind.

All of the above depends upon us, with the help of an authentic teacher, actually recognizing the true nature of our own mind. Only then does the "familiarity" kick in. This familiarity is what we do once we have achieved recognition of our minds true nature, and it should come as no surprise to learn that "GOM," the Tibetan word for meditation, means familiarizing or habituating ourselves with the mind. Mahamudra practice is nothing else but that: becoming familiar with our own mind.

TIGHTEN UP ON IT

June 2, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

A high lama writes, “This is why the instruction was given to first tighten up your body and your mind. Make your posture, gaze, and attention strict, and as soon as the tension itself becomes an obstacle, then without losing the posture or the attention, relax the tautness. The reason for this is that the tightness dispels torpor and promotes clarity. The subsequent loosening up or relaxation dispels agitation and promotes relaxation. In that way, you use your gaze, your posture, and your attention to prevent torpor or sleepiness. That is not considered to be alteration.”

This is a very revealing quote, with many applications for both beginners and advanced practitioners – tightening and loosening. I guess it’s more like dharmic breathing! Analogically, it reminds me of making a tight fist and gradually opening it – again and again. By doing that, we cross (and re-cross) the line between too much and not enough, until we find what is called the “happy medium,” which hopefully is us.

And the last line, to me, is the most important, pointing out that this tightening and loosening is not to be looked at as an alteration of the mind. That advice is important! And this is because, in the more advanced forms of meditation, it’s all about not altering the mind by conceptualizing, thinking, or in

any way modifying it. Just leave it as it is, or as the great Mahasiddha Tilopa put it. "Relax, as it is."

This is very good advice and if it sounds easy, guess again. It's like the old phrase, "Hurry up and wait," but here it is more like "Try and relax." That's either an oxymoron or some kind of Catch-22. We need to relax, but with no effort made. How do we do that? And the answer is, gradually, and very slowly. All advanced meditation practice is about relaxing at full mental awareness or attention. As they say, "Nice work if you can get it, and you can get it if you try," only here you cannot try. When it comes to effort at relaxing, it has to be the effort of making no effort – a hall of mirrors.

And we all should know by now that describing advanced meditative states of mind is an exercise in futility, because they are ineffable. So we are at the mercy of whatever we can glean from the most pith or communicable dharma texts or, better yet, an authentic dharma teacher who actually KNOWS what he or she is talking about. An authentic dharma teacher is one who speaks to us, one who has realized what we have not realized AND can communicate it to us so that we can get it.

What pays dividends in life these days? We know the banks don't, at least in recent years, so where can we invest? And the answer for me is that the dharma pays dividends and is more than worth investing in. The dharma rewards us with something more precious than money, to name two obvious benefits: clarity and wisdom.

SPIRITUAL MIDWIFERY

June 3, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[I am babysitting my granddaughter Emma for a couple of days. She is five-years old and informs me that she is not a baby anymore. I went out very early this morning, with Emma and her dad to a tiny micro-climate where the rare Michigan Showy Orchid can still be found. We were a little early for full blooms, but enclosed is a photo here of a budding orchid. Isn't she lovely?]

My dharma teacher taught: "The different stages and techniques presented here are not really successive techniques in the sense that one is to be practiced and then discarded in favor of the next and so on. They are more like stages in the progressive clarity of recognition and familiarity. If you understand therefore that the relationship between these techniques is more organic than it is mechanical, then you will understand what it is that is to be practiced when you leave here. First, you recognize your mind's nature by looking at it. Then, you sustain that recognition."

Mostly, we tend to think that learning from a teacher, which to some degree has to be didactic, is not very organic. And this may be true or seem true early on in our dharma practice. We do have to learn how to practice and there is some step-by-step following of instructions involved with that, but that's not the whole of it.

Ultimately, the process of realizing the nature of our own mind is more like a form of cultivation than an instilling. Our dharma teacher is not putting something in us as much as helping us to remove what blocks or impedes our own natural awakening. Actually, spiritual midwifery is more like what goes on between an authentic dharma teacher and a student. The teacher is helping us out, assisting at our spiritual birth, not putting something in or doing anything to us. And we need the help.

As my dharma teacher pointed out to a group of us, “We are the stragglers, the ones in all the time in the past up until now who never got it.” In the lineage I practice in, it is the lama who points out to us how to recognize the actual nature of our own mind. There are a great many ways of learning dharma, but it pays to read the small print of any particular path.

Many, if not most, methods take innumerable lifetimes, incalculable eons to achieve recognition of the mind’s nature and enlightenment. With the help of an authentic teacher, we can achieve at least recognition (as to the nature of the mind) in one body and in this lifetime. That’s some fine print.

Everything can seem so intellectual and thought-out in this modern world, but if you have ever been at the birth of a child, you know that something organic in us is still very natural and strong. Dharma awakening is organic like that. It’s just waiting to dawn on us; with a little encouragement and guidance, it can happen.

STRIKE AT THE HEART

June 4, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

What follows is a statement Rinpoche (my dharma teacher of some 33 years) made to a group of us in 2005. When I first heard it, I was struck to the heart and his comment helped to eventually change my mind and life. I will explain why and how, but first Rinpoche's statement:

"I do not know that much about it, because I do not use one, but having watched people work with computers, I think that the type of concentration that people employ in order to work on a computer is probably a good opportunity for looking at your mind's nature. Judging by the demeanor and facial expressions of people as they work on the computer, it involves a state of concentration that is equal to that of a state of great pleasure or great misery [laughter], and therefore I think that if you want to see the nature of your mind you should look at it while you are working on your computer."

As mentioned, when I first heard this, it came home in a flash and I took it to heart. And I had reason. I worked at a computer as a computer programmer every day since the early 1970s. Not only that, but I had been doing so diligently even before computers were available to regular people like me. The lowly 4-function calculator only appeared on the commercial market in 1972, followed in a few years by

programmable calculators, and the first home computers appeared in 1977.

I was walking point and used the 4-function calculator, various programmable calculators, and had my first home computer in 1977. I don't want to drone on about my use of the computer, but it was extensive, used constantly, and I was busy programming seven days a week. I was used to concentrating intensely every day and for most of each day at that. That's how I made my living. So, in 2005, when I heard Rinpoche make the above remark, it struck me to the core. It was suddenly so very obvious.

I realized that here I was pretending or trying to concentrate sitting on the meditation cushion, when I was already a confirmed expert at concentrating. You can't salt the salt. So it came to me. Why could I not just use my accomplished expertise on the computer in practicing meditation? And so I did just that, which I won't go into here, but I have written about it in several books. From that moment (and the Pointing-Out instructions Rinpoche gave that same year), for three years afterward, aside from my daily dharma practices on the cushion, I began to also practice dharma while at the computer... and I did it all day long, religiously.

Then in 2008, I had a real (for me real) breakthrough with my dharma practice. So, the moral of this blog, and the reason I am writing is that, although dharma practice may be taught very clearly, the process of awakening is way more organic than just following instructions. We each have to assimilate and adapt the dharma instructions to our own life and experience, just as I had learned to do with my

concentrated computer training for those three years. I was building on some 33 years of intense computer programming. Even so, the set of dharma instructions I had been given had to be tailored to fit who I was and how I worked. One size does not fit all.

Remember: all advanced meditation training is said to be little more than familiarizing ourselves with the nature of the mind and how it works. So, “familiarizing” involves becoming comfortable with adapting the dharma to our particular talents and life situation. We must find the dharma that naturally is already within our life and actions, rather than just apply some intellectual ideas. In other words, the dharma is WAY more organic than it appears from just reading the more formal books (or listening to teachings) on Buddhism.

I realize as I write this that what I am pointing out is going to be like water off a ducks back to most readers. Unless it sticks in our mind, it will be in one ear and out the other before we know it, as it did with me for so many years. What I am saying here is that it is hard to imagine (until you realize it) how very personal the dharma has to become for us to take it to heart and make it our own. Otherwise it is just too foreign. That’s why the Tibetan Buddhists make such a big deal about “realization.” And something that does not easily occur to most practitioners is that it is WE who have to do the realizing!

Of course, we should treat the dharma teachings (written or oral) with the greatest of respect, but not so respectful that we never even try it out. And the dharma is not a coat to put on and wear. That will never work. Realization means to absorb the

teachings until they are as close to us as the very air we breathe, and get it under our skin like a hand fits a glove. This is what the Buddhist revelation called “Recognition” is all about, finally recognizing the nature of our natural mind, how it works, and that we can, warts and all, work it just as we are right now. We don’t have to wait for anyone or anything. However, we do have to realize this.

If you have some area of your life that you already have mastered that involves intense concentration, consider adapting it to meditation practice as a starter.

KARMA ACCUMULATION

June 5, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

When we learn to recognize the nature of our thoughts, they are freed without fixation, and it is said:

“This is very close to Buddhahood.”

My dharma teacher clarified this:

“The statement that “this is very close to Buddhahood” means that this is the unmistakable means through which Buddhahood is actually achieved. This is the auto-consumption of samsara. This is feeding samsara to itself. This is allowing thoughts to consume themselves. This is how samsara is overcome. You overcome samsara by seeing its nature. Insight into the nature of those thoughts which would otherwise accumulate karma and prolong samsara is more powerful than the potential of the thoughts to accumulate karma.”

From me: “No comment.” That says it all.

ORDINARY MIND

June 6, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Classic Buddhist Texts on recognizing the nature of the mind point out that: “You need to sustain it by being undistracted, because as soon as you are distracted, then you are completely ordinary.”

And a comment to the above by a high lama: “‘Ordinary’ here simply means that you are accumulating karma again. You are bewildered again, because you are distracted from the nature.”

In Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism, at least in English translation, there are two very different meanings for the phrase “ordinary mind” and they are as different as night and day. “Ordinary,” as used in the above quote means what we commonly think as ordinary, meaning our ordinary distracted, perhaps bewildered, daydreaming state of mind where we are lost in thought, everything but realized or possessing clarity as to the nature of our mind.

On the other hand, “Ordinary Mind” (in Tibetan: Tamal gyi shepa) also means the natural, unadulterated, true nature of our mind. Awareness of “ordinary mind” in this context is the product of realizing it. So, perhaps it is easier to think of “ordinary mind” (as used in the above quote) as the unrealized nature of the mind and “ordinary mind” in the context of “Thamal gyi

shepa” as the realized or recognized nature of the mind. They are two sides of the same coin.

However, one has to make sure which context is being referred to in any given context. And the point of the above quote is that being aware of the nature of the mind is extraordinary only as long as we are aware of it. A glimpse is not a lifetime. And the moment we stop looking at the nature of the mind and just start following the train of thoughts as we usually do, start singing along with our own distractions, our mind is immediately quite common or “ordinary” again.

The point here is that glimpses of the mind’s nature have to increase in frequency until some threshold is crossed and they are continuously present, much like the old celluloid movie reels were single frames that, when they occur frequently enough, reach the point of continuity so that they appear as continuous.

After the student initially recognizes the actual nature of the mind, that recognition has to be expanded or extended so that rather than intermittently present, it is present all the time. That’s what we are talking about here. And when we are aware of the nature of the mind, we are said not to be accumulating karma, while, with common or ordinary distracted mind (lost in thought), we are accumulating karma, so to speak, to beat the band.

FISH OR CUT BAIT

June 7, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

A common question, and an important one, is that if we are practicing Mahamudra Meditation, does that mean we don't do things like deity practice, Lojong, and the various preliminaries needed to gather the accumulation of merit? And Rinpoche very clearly answers this question:

Rinpoche: “No. He does not even mean that. Well then, what does he mean? He means that you need to make a distinction between different aspects of cultivation. You are not always cultivating or sustaining a state of recognition of your mind's nature. However, when you are doing so (when you are resting in mere un-distractedness (the true even placement of Mahamudra), then at that moment you do not do anything else. At that very moment, when you are resting in the recognition of your mind's nature (that alone from the Mahamudra point of view qualifies as even placement), you do not pollute this state with any technique or any conceptualization.”

And Rinpoche continues: “But you are not always going to be resting in that state. Therefore, it is like a bird that sometimes flies and sometimes rests. You have to make a distinction between when you are flying, at which time you must flap both wings—the wing of means and the wing of discernment without which you will not be able to fly—and when you are

resting. At some point that bird comes to rest on the ground or on a ledge. At that point the bird does not spoil its state of rest by continuing to flap its wings. The bird folds its wings and simply rests. In the same way, when you are resting in the even placement of recognition of your mind's nature, do nothing other than being undistracted. Do not meditate on anything. At other times, flap your wings appropriately.”

Although “Recognition” of the true nature of the mind is a life-changing event in terms of dharma, from which there is no reverting or turning back, it does not mean that “Presto!” we are unwavering in our awareness of the mind's nature. Far from it, for most of us. Our initial glimpse, peek, or look at the nature of the mind transforms us, but that transformation lasts only as long as we remain aware of it.

It is the subject of many great pith dharma-teachings that it is up to us to expand and extend our glimpse of nature of the mind to include more of our time and attention. Otherwise, and we can easily check this, we are as we were and always have been, distracted and riding the freight train of our thoughts. No?

As Rinpoche so clearly points out, when we are aware of the mind's nature, doing and holding that is enough; that's all that we have to do. However, when we fail that awareness and find ourselves plowing through whatever we have on our plate, lost in hopes, fears, and all of that, THEN, as Rinpoche says, we have to flap our wings and do all the practices that support our seeing the true nature of the mind.

If we can have unwavering attention and awareness of the true nature of the mind, we are good to go.

We've done enough practices. If we don't, then our time is wasted if we are not doing the preliminary practices (or something useful) for achieving and sustaining the recognition of the true nature of the mind.

So, this tautology is true:

If we are not resting in the actual nature of the mind,
then we are not resting in the nature of the mind.

THE TWO ACCUMULATIONS

June 8, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

This is a little complex, so bear with me please. Even a cursory overview of dharma practices shows that they fall into two obvious groups, the many preliminary practices that prepare us (with the help of an authentic dharma teacher) to recognize the true nature of the nature of the mind and, secondly, practices that we do (or don't do) AFTER recognizing the nature of the mind.

Much has been made of the fact that this second group of dharma practices mixes our on-the-cushion time with post-meditation, i.e. what we do off the cushion during the rest of our day. And, as important as "recognition" of the true nature of the mind is, if we read the fine-print, the effect of that recognition persists only as long as we can maintain that recognition. If we cannot, as the teachings clearly point out, our mind becomes quite ordinary once again when we are distracted.

During the time that we maintain recognition of the mind's nature, there is no need for continuing with whatever preliminary practices we have been doing, because those preliminary practices primarily exist to help us reach the recognition of the true nature of the mind. It would be like salting the salt, so to speak.

It is that second condition or point I would like to discuss here, that when we cannot (and do not) maintain the recognition of the true nature of the mind, our mind reverts to being quite ordinary again, putting us (to some degree) right back where we started from.

It is important to point out that while “Recognition” of the mind’s true nature is an irrevocable (and permanent) life-changing dharma-event, it needs not only to be maintained, but also extended and expanded. Failure to do this not only does not expand the scope of our recognition, but can cause that recognition to fall into disuse and thus, aside from the benefits of having attained recognition, eventually be more a memory than the continuous means for awakening (and eventual enlightenment) that it is intended to be.

Therefore, if we attain “Recognition,” yet find ourselves not resting in the nature of the mind (i.e. our mind is again quite ordinary), what are we to do about that? Well, the traditional advice is to once again perform (go back to) the preliminary practices or whatever portion of them helps us to continue (once again) with the recognition of the nature of the mind and its expansion. And the essence of the preliminary practices can be conveniently termed “The Two Accumulations,” and that is what we will look at here.

The Two Accumulations are often stated as “Merit” and “Awareness,” sometimes also referred to as Skillful Means and Wisdom – your choice. What is important to grasp is the very special relationship these two accumulations have with one another, which is that they serve to fuel and refine one

another, alternately. This needs to be thoroughly grasped and understood.

By “Merit” I understand this term to mean meritorious actions, so here I prefer the term “skillful means,” since to do something skillfully is well-known to all of us. And as for “Wisdom,” which means many different things to different people, the term “awareness” comes closer to being understandable by just anyone, i.e. becoming more aware. So the Two Accumulations (for this discussion) will be called Skillful Means (merit) and Awareness (wisdom).

Understanding how these two terms interact and generate one another is of crucial importance to any dharma student, because together they are the closest thing to a perpetual-motion dharma-machine I am aware of. One term generates the other. I will explain.

When we do anything skillfully, the result is better than doing the same thing poorly or sloppily. We all know that. In the case of performing dharma actions or practice skillfully (meritoriously), the result spiritually is greater awareness, instead of less or the same amount of awareness. Correspondingly, if we generate greater awareness, we are even more aware (than before) and can better see to act skillfully (use even more skillful means) and thus generate yet still more awareness. And so on, recursively, ad infinitum.

Hopefully, you see how each of the two accumulations helps the other to greater heights. The more skillful our actions, the more awareness results,

and with more awareness, the better we can see to act yet more skillfully, and so on. Each fuels the other.

This recursive relationship between awareness and skillful means is a powerful tool to increase both merit and awareness to the point where we are capable of sustaining looking at the actual nature of the mind. So, if we have trouble resting in the true nature of the mind (and maintaining it), practicing the Two Accumulations (using any of the preliminary-practice techniques) is perhaps the most efficient way to overcome that. And it works perfectly.

[Photo taken by me.]

EFFORTLESSNESS

June 9, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[A little update on my whereabouts. Went out at dawn this morning and visited once again this tiny micro-environment to check on how the rare Michigan Showy Orchid was doing. The area is very wet, with little running streams, lots of shade, and streams of sunlight coming through the canopy. Need to wear boots. I include a photo. Also getting ready to go to my 29th year in a row for the 10-Day Mahamudra Meditation intensive at our monastery, driving the 800 or so miles and back.]

Classic dharma quote: “If you attempt to meditate on something, to do something to your mind, no matter how refined that meditation may be, it is still going to be a diversion.”

This quote (and this kind of quote) refers to the dharma practices we do AFTER we have had a glimpse as to the nature of the mind. And I always have to reiterate that recognizing the true nature of the mind requires that this “nature” be pointed out to us by an authentic dharma teacher. We can’t do it alone or we would have done it many lifetimes ago. We may “be” what we are trying to realize, but we don’t realize what we are (or if we are), and thus need the “Pointing Out” instructions as to the nature of our mind from an authentic teacher.

“Authentic” here means that the teacher has had the recognition personally as to recognizing the nature of the mind AND that the WAY they point it out to us actually works, i.e. we get it. Through it having been pointed out by an authentic teacher and our readiness to receive this teaching, we recognize the nature of the mind. The teacher or lama who first successfully points out to us the nature of the mind so that we recognize it is called, in Tibetan, the Tsawi Lama, which means “root” lama for obvious reasons.

After the pointing-out instructions and achieving recognition of the true nature of the mind, THEN the above quote comes into play. Before that, during the many so-called preliminary practices we are not worried about “attempting to meditate.” Instead, we are trying to concentrate, attempting to mediate, and all the many other types of preliminary practices. We are making efforts.

As I like to say, The Preliminaries are like making a tight fist, while after recognition, it is like relaxing and opening that fist. So, the quote at the top of this blog is about letting go, what is called resting in the nature of the mind. When “resting,” any attempt to “try” to meditate (and making efforts), instead of helping meditation, will be a diversion from mediation, a sidetrack or obscuration.

Once again: in the preliminary dharma practices, we tighten up, while after “Recognition,” we learn to rest and loosen up. So, tightening up, concentrating, making efforts, and trying mostly takes place in The Preliminaries, while doing so after “Recognition” will only bring on more obscurations. There is a time for effort and a time for effortlessness. The analogy I use

for myself is bobsledding. At the top of the run we push like crazy, while once we are going we hop in, tuck in our legs, keep our head down, and ride.

Before “Recognition,” we make efforts to practice, concentrate, and meditate. After “Recognition,” we make efforts to “not-meditate” or not-make-efforts, if that makes sense. We learn to relax, as they say, “As it is.”

[Photo taken by me.]

“TIGER, TIGER BURNING BRIGHT”

June 10, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

{Note: Also created a new group that anyone can join, called "Spirit Grooves/Dharma Grooves" at https://www.facebook.com/groups/126511571262266/?ref=br_rs}

The closest analogy to recognizing the actual nature of the mind is some of those (not so popular now) paintings where embedded within the painting is another deeply-hidden image, one that we can't see until it is pointed out, but once pointed out we can't not see it. Here is a clumsy example. Can you find the hidden tiger within this painting of a tiger? Can you find it? Try it, but don't spoil it for others, please.

That tiger example is something like “Recognition,” only much cruder, but the hidden tiger CAN be found and, like recognition, it's not what we expect.

In recognizing the nature of the mind, we have to first detach from our habitual fixations long enough to recognize the actual nature of the mind, which is, of course, fully present to us this minute. Let's call it mind adjustment, but like brain surgery we need someone skilled in this who “has our number” and can help us outwit our own Self long enough to latch on to the reality. It's not unlike a newborn trying to latch on to their mom.

This blog may require two posts, but we shall see. My recent blogs have focused on some pretty advanced and complex dharma instructions called the Pointing-Out Instructions, which refer to recognizing the true nature of the mind. Even if we are not ready for these instructions, it helps to get a roadmap and overview of what dharma training is all about. I wish that I would have had the understanding early-on that I am doing my best to share with you here. It would have helped.

This particular group of blogs are related in that they focus on what happens (and what we do) AFTER we get a glimpse of the true nature of the mind, which is called “recognition.” However, of equal (or even greater) importance are the exercises we do BEFORE “recognition,” in order to facilitate the recognition of the mind.

It is a fact that the Pointing-Out Instructions typically have two parts, an analytical part which is PRIOR to “recognition” and a second (non-analytical) part that comes AFTER “recognition.” In this blog, I am discussing those particular analytical exercises that lead up to the actual recognition of the mind. As one dharma teacher points out:

“These are quite special instructions for revealing your mind’s nature to yourself through repeated scrutiny. However, you have to actually do it. You cannot simply learn it and then cast it aside. You have to actually go through the process of repeated scrutiny on each point until a decisive resolution has been achieved.”

The above concept is quite straightforward, but there is a subtle twist that I will try convey. And this point is

very, very important and not always made clear. Let's start with the groundwork:

If we want to learn something, perhaps we read a book about it. If we wish to go further, we might take a class on it, and if we really want to master it, we can apprentice ourselves to someone who has already mastered it. However, when it comes to learning the dharma, a book is not enough, a class is not enough, and even taking personal lessons may not be enough. At one very crucial point we need a guide.

With dharma, we not only have to understand it. We not only have to learn it, we also have to personally practice it, and not practice it just one time casually, but perhaps endlessly repeat it with great effort, like 100% effort. We can ask ourselves: when is the last time we gave 100% effort? Aside from dabbling in dharma practice, which many do, concentrated dharma is an "all in" sort of affair if we want to actually realize it.

As far as the traditional dharma preliminaries go (ngondro, Lojong, etc.), as purification practices, they remind me of boxing, where a fighter has to work to get down to a fighting weight. In the dharma preliminaries, we struggle and try to purify ourselves from various obscurations until they no longer obscure the actual nature of our mind. When we get down to our dharma "fighting-weight" and our obscurations have thinned out, we may be ready for the Pointing-Out Instructions being discussed here.

However, since we have habitually been distracted all of our lifetime(s), we need help in transferring (or jogging) our attention (and perhaps our identity as to

who we really are) from the “deer-in-the-headlights” distractive appearances that surround us now to realizing the actual nature of those appearances. In other words, we have to snap out of our bewilderment and learn to look beyond our distractions and instead begin to focus on looking at the nature of the mind itself.

To accomplish this requires help from someone who has already recognized the nature of the mind enough to carefully point it out to us and see if we can get it. It is (and always has been) right here in front of us, but it can take some nudging or life event to jar or cause us to pop out of our normal distractions and suddenly see the mind’s nature.

While the first part of the Pointing-Out Instructions appears very analytical (which it is), it reminds me of the photographer who holds up his hand and says, “Watch the birdie” while taking our photo. In effect, this particular kind of analysis quietly accomplishes something other than further conceptualization, and it is most powerful. We need to grasp it.

More on this tomorrow.

SEARCHING WITHOUT THOUGHT

June 11, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The teachings state: “The point being made by the Buddha here is that you are never going to find this true nature of the mind unless you look for it. It is not enough to simply meditate. It is not enough to simply rest in a state of tranquility. You have to actually look at your mind to find its nature. You have to examine it, scrutinize it, and search.”

The first part of the Pointing-Out Instructions is traditionally called the Logical Analysis of a Pandita (scholar) and it appears at first glance as very conceptual and perhaps a little dry, which it is, but then it's not. And here's the twist. In this logical analysis, we are asked by the teacher to search our mind to see where it resides, what color it is, and so on. For example, we might be asked to examine the mind to see if it is the color red.

For years, I more or less ignored this part of the teaching because I instantly could see that the mind is not the color red, or green, or blue, or whatever. I could think about that in an instant and I did, and fell into the habit of waiting until Rinpoche offered something a little “juicier” than asking me what color the mind is. That was just a time-wasting mistake on my part, and I will explain why.

Although with the “Logical Analysis of a Pandita” we are being asked to search the mind, we are NOT being asked to think about it or just merely conceptualize what we are being asked to do. Instead, and here is the twist, we are being asked to get off our conceptual duffs, not think, but rather go and exhaustively search the mind... for whatever is being asked for. THIS is what I missed for all those years, to not just conceptually think, conclude, and then drop it, but rather, like exercising a never-used muscle, we must use and stretch the mind by actually searching it, as requested.

In this respect, the mind is like a muscle that we have never used, but that CAN be exercised, and if exercised, is the dharma-preparation we have been missing in order to see the true nature of the mind. Absorb and repeat reading the above sentence because it is crucial. We must EXERCISE the mind (like we exercise our body) by searching it thoroughly, exhaustively, and completely until we are certain of what we have found, even if it's nothing! We must wear ourselves out much like in Zen, the student exhausts conceptuality with the koan, which is exhaustion is an answer in itself.

So, if you read me right, you should now see and appreciate that the “logical analysis of a Pandita” has a non-conceptual point to it, which is the physical searching of the mind itself. It is this exhaustive “physical” search of the mind that completes the preliminary practices that we have been doing all these years.

And, if you imagine we can just quickly search the mind, it is not that easy. I was given these Pointing-

Out Instructions a number of times by very qualified lamas and never grasped anything. Nada. At one time, one of the five highest lamas in our lineage sat me down on a chair in a room, just the two of us, and tried his best to point out the nature of the mind to me, but I couldn't get it. It was embarrassing. Years later, when I finally did get a little glimpse of recognition, all I can say is that it was nothing at all like I expected or had been imagining it would be for all those years. So, you are right to have no expectations, because we (and this by definition) can't have any clear idea as to the nature of the mind without first recognizing it outright. We either have recognized it right or we have not. There is no gray area.

So, there you have what I feel is the single ingredient that, at least for me, was missing from my moving forward with the more advanced teachings. I was thinking and conceptualizing, when I should have been actually searching the mind thoroughly and exhaustively. When I finally did figure that out, and searched my mind, things began to happen.

INSIDE OBSERVER

June 12, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Tibetan dharma teaching: “How do you do this? Simply by letting your ordinary awareness—the awareness that experiences everything that you experience—rest in a state of undistracted lucidity.”

What we are experiencing right now, thoughts and their content, may be up, down, and all around. Yet, the part of us that can be aware of these thoughts, if we will look, is always clear and luminous. Just check it out. For example: whatever health we have, life situation or mood we are experiencing right now, however good or bad that is, the mind that realizes our personal situation and how we feel is clear. And, if we can identify with that clarity (and not just with what the heck we are going through), we can get a taste of clarity and luminosity of the mind.

We may be looking for greater clarity in life, but to find that we have to first “look at the looker,” at “who” or what in us is doing the looking, because that is where this apparent clarity resides, even if we can’t locate or put our finger on who we are. That clarity of mind that realizes or “looks” is the vivid awareness that allows us to be aware of the “good, the bad, and the ugly” in our situation, so to speak.

Years ago, while studying the German philosopher Hegel with a political-science professor, I was given

the task to think about and then write a paper about Hegel's special trinity of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. How is synthesis achieved? If we put this in dharma terms, how do we resolve our many dualisms so that they are seen and realized as non-dual? How do we stop crossing our eyes, so to speak?

After a great deal of thought, I realized that synthesis WAS possible to both experience and realize, but not without giving up our perch as an outside observer. We can't get beyond or outside of the whole of what "IS" and thus "objectively" realize it. We can only realize the whole enchilada by resting in that realization up to its natural limits. In other words, we have to be "all in."

This study was back in 1963 and it set the stage in my dharma practice for what the Tibetan Buddhists call "Recognition," although it would be years before I made the connection. We eventually give up dualistic conceptualization in favor of the non-dual experience of realization. In other words, there is no such thing as "meta-realization," meaning that we can't realize the nature of the mind and also stand outside of it, dualistically watching or conceptualizing the whole thing. We can only let go and rest in the realization of the vast nature of the mind. That is the limit of what is possible. However, we can realize EVERYTHING there is, because there IS nothing beyond the limits of the mind. We can't "BE" and watch at the same time, or as Shakespeare said it, "To Be or Not to Be."

So, although I labeled this blog "Inside Observer," that is an oxymoron, as there is no inside observer, just inside "observing."

EMPTINESS APPEARING

June 12, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Let's start with a little poem I wrote some years ago.

SEMANTICS

It's not just that being,
Is empty;
It's that there is,
An emptiness,
Of being.

It's never been there,
But yet here it is.

In the above poem, I am pointing out something that I find interesting. Sometimes a poem is better than any attempt to explain it in prose. Nevertheless, I will make some comments.

Just as we can mispronounce words, putting the accent on the wrong syllable, the same is true with ideas. This is quite true of “being” and “emptiness,” where we frequently see statements that the essence of our being is emptiness, and the like. But the concept, IMO, is so much easier to understand if we just flip it and say that there is an emptiness (or lack) of being. The gist is that we don't have (and never have had) any substantially existent permanent being.

We are empty of permanent being and somehow we must sense this!. And yet, here we are.

And another poem I wrote that says something related:

EMPTINESS

It's not just that,
Appearances that arise are empty,
It's that appearances,
Are the emptiness arising.

This poem attempts to express that appearances and emptiness are what is called connate, two sides of the same coin. These poems express two important dharma concepts, not very well perhaps, but hopefully well enough that they can give you a taste of what they are about.

If this approach interests you, then you have just read about it. Next step is to ponder and contemplate these ideas for a while. Certainly I had to do that, and still do it.

FIRST LIGHT

June 18, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

It's about 4 AM here in the mountains above Woodstock, New York and I am up and starting my day. It looks like rain is coming, but I hope to squeak in a walk down the back way up the mountain as soon as it is first light. My legs are still sore from yesterday's climb.

Busy, busy, busy with this and that, and taking short naps when I can is part of the mix. I will see if I can write a little. Here is a quote from our precious dharma teacher:

“If you ask, ‘Is that awareness of the present moment the mind’s nature?’ the answer is no. But it is as close as we can get in the beginning to the mind’s nature. It is therefore the direction we take or the road we walk on to reach the mind’s nature. It is as if someone were to show you that if you take this road, if you walk on this road, you will reach the place you are trying to go. The road is not the place, but the road is the only way to get there and you have to actually walk on it.”

The present is our road. The past is like the ever-shifting sands of the desert, always changing as we do and also receding. As the great Siddha Tilopa put it, “Don’t Prolong the Past.” Tilopa also said “Don’t Invite the Future.” We can’t make out the future and at best can only see its shadow. And he then said,

“Don’t Dwell on the Present,” which kind of cuts down our choices. What he meant is don’t fixate on the present, don’t “think” about it, but just let it be as it is. In fact, he said, “Relax, As It Is.” That’s the ticket.

The present holds our only path or way to awareness and it starts with allowing ourselves to be aware and to accept what we presently have, where we are at right now, warts and all. Most of us know that old chestnut, “We can’t change what we refuse to accept” or the phrase that says, “What we need is always right at hand.” That, of course, would be here in the present. Right now.

Much of Buddhist training is allowing ourselves to become more and more aware, until we can get our arms around or grasp what it is for us, where we are at. Then we can begin to do something about it.

I have to run, but yesterday Rinpoche quoted a line I really liked, which I will share with you. Not sure of the exact words, but it went something like:

“It’s not that the bird flying in the sky had to turn back because he ran out of space.”

INTO THE STREAM

June 19, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Yesterday, Sunday, was Rinpoche's birthday (or when we celebrate it) and hundreds of people came to celebrate this event. It was wild.

The weather was muggy and fairly hot. I walked down the mountain some distance very early, when it was barely light. Fog or mist was everywhere, and I could not see where I was going even a short distance ahead of me. It rained lightly. After the walk, I entered the stream of the day's activity and was once again swept up in the schedule.

A quote from a teaching:

"My point is that you are still trying to think your way out of this. We will never think our way out of this because we thought our way into this. "

"We have been thinking throughout beginning-less time and it has never done us any good. The only way out, the only way to stop samsara is by seeing what has always been there. It is not an object of thought. You cannot see it by thinking about it. That is why you have to look at your mind for brief periods of time... very, very short moments, because you will only be able to remain free of concepts about it for that long."

Our concept-laden approach habitually thinks in terms of “we” as a subject and something or someone “out there” as its object. We are dualistically conceptual from the get-go, with nary a rest from that. Yet, all of the great books, not only in Buddhism, endlessly point out that spiritual realization is ineffable, beyond elaboration or words. If we finally do begin to realize the nature of our own mind, it won’t be with words and concepts. We will never grasp the essence of our own mind conceptually, because realization is beyond even experience.

Like taking off our clothes, we will go naked of concepts into that good moment, with no way to express what is realized other than being it. “We” extend beyond what is verbal and immerse ourselves in the waters of clarity and “See,” with nothing to be seen. We leave off our endless watching, commenting, looking and instead realize what we have been thinking, talking, and wondering about.

It is full immersion in the moment to the point of knowing in real-time and in the flesh what up to then we have only been thinking about.

MIST IN THE MORNING

June 20, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Yesterday, there was rain on and off throughout the day, including some downpours and rolling thunder. This found me dashing between buildings (as much as I dash anymore) holding something over my head. In between were bright patches of sky and incredible mist trails rising and drifting across the mountain top. It was hard not to just sit down and watch it all. The following quote is not from this teaching, but from another.

“If you don’t reject the wish to avoid what is unpleasant, there will never be a time when you abandon worldly activities.”

What it says is that unless we deal directly with what is presented to us (or confronts us) in life, we won’t get beyond the superficial and endless gathering of obscurations. So much is made of this present moment and what appears in it for us. If something is “permitted“ to happen or appear to us, denying it, ignoring it, or banishing it from our mind is exactly what we don’t want to do.

In many of the higher dharma practices, whatever is uncomfortable or we don’t like is precisely the key to growing through that experience. The advice is to take everything we experience -- the good, the bad,

and the ugly -- to the path, because they are an open doorway to our own realization.

It could be as simple as that annoying kid on the subway or the sock we don't pick up, yet can't ignore. We are surrounded by opportunities and they are carefully pointed out to us by our own reactions. If we don't like or hate something, that is our flag to give it some attention, not try to escape from it. It is similar to the fact that bodily pain is our notification that something needs to be dealt with. That idea.

And now, it is approaching 5 AM; the birds are singing outside this window, and I know the first rays of light will soon give me enough light to walk down the mountain (a ways) and back. I believe Margaret will be going with me today!

KARMA BURNS TWICE

June 21, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[As for the 10-day intensive, all is well and I have fallen into the routine of it all, with wonderful teachings and sharing with friends. I will share a bit of a teaching for those interested in this.]

This above title is a traditional saying, pointing out that karma affects us the moment we create it, and it remains as an imprint within our mindstream, and eventually ripens as the consequence to our original action. So, effectively it is a one-two punch. Here are some words of my teacher about all of this, and I quote:

“The karma that is accumulated really has two phases in its effect upon you. The first phase is that as soon as the imprint of an action is present in your mind it becomes yet another obscuring factor, yet another level of veil obscuring the mind’s nature.”

“However, it does more than that. Eventually, when the circumstances exist for it to do so, it will become ripened. Ripened is when the imprint is no longer present as an imprint but becomes present as actual physical experience. For example, we have all done a lot of good things in the past. We know that, because we have been born with human bodies in this life.”

“Nevertheless, each and every human being has their own individual set of circumstances. Some are happy, some are miserable, some have long lives, some have short lives, some suffer many illnesses, some suffer very few, and so on.”

“To some extent, all of this is a result of those individuals’ actions in previous lives. The reason why there is a good thing about the ripening of karma as sickness is that once the imprint ripens as experience, as karmic illness, it is no longer present as an imprint. This means that particular obscuration is gone. It is not a disaster waiting to happen.”

HOW TO REST

June 22, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

A quote from a teaching:

“It is like a bundle of grass or reeds or wheat grass, of which the restraining cord is suddenly cut. As long as the bundle of grass is tightly bound by a restraining cord, it will all stand up somewhat unnaturally because of the force of the binding. But when the cord is cut it all just completely flops to the ground. It flops to the ground without any kind of particular direction. It just falls where it will, without anything keeping it off the ground. It flops totally. In the same way, your relaxation has to be completely letting go, complete relaxation, complete suspension of any attempt to prop yourself up in any way.”

I have seen this in Tibet, where there are many small fields or plots of barley. When they harvest the grain, the straw or stalks are bound in a bunch with a cord around their middle and they stand up. When that cord is cut, as Rinpoche says above, it is remarkable. The stalks don't just fly all around, but rather almost imperceptibly just slump or come to rest ever so naturally. It is something to see. Anyway, that is how we should allow our mind to rest, that naturally.

As for me, yesterday was very busy, mostly due to video problems. I will spare you the details, but in general cords failed (and the failure had to be found),

equipment arrived and didn't work, etc. So, I spent most of my time chasing all this down. It took all day. At the end of the teachings two friends of ours arrived from downstate to say hello and that was nice.

It is 2:30 AM, and I am up and doing stuff. The photo shown below I took. It is of the large and very lovely statue of White Tara in the main shrine room. It is taken through some glass, so there is glare.

THE LA OR ENERGY BODY-DOUBLE

June 23, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Today during Q&A, someone asked Rinpoche about the La, which reminded me of this short article I wrote about the La some years ago. I thought it might interest some of you.

Something that I imagine few readers here will know much about is what the Tibetan Buddhists call the 'La.' The 'La' is an energy-body we each have that is superimposed between the physical body and our mind or mental body. It is often described as a shadow of the physical body, a complete mirror-reflection of our physical and psychological makeup.

The La appears to be what western theosophists and psychics call the etheric body, which term itself originated from Tibetan texts. What is interesting about the La is that when we die, our mind-consciousness (in some form) goes on into the bardo (and is reborn), while our physical body decays and dies, but the La remains with the physical body as a kind of body-double, a psychic duplicate. The La is in some sense similar to what we call the 'Self' or the remains of our self after death but, as I learned yesterday, should not be confused with the Self.

When we die, the La lives on as an etheric mirror-image but decays as the body decays. It does not transmigrate to the next lifetime. It is not reborn. In

other words, the La is somehow useful when we are alive (and as long as we have life) as a supporter to the physical body. ‘

It is not correct to think of the La as being a mirror-reflection or remains of what we call our self. Remember that Tibetan Buddhists point out again and again that what we call the ‘self’ is nothing more than a collection of our attachments (likes and dislikes) and while the self is a natural and permanent part of us, it does not have any permanent existence or “Soul.” Our sense of self changes with every new desire and craving, so what made up our self when we were a kid (a new bike, etc.) may not be anything like what makes up our self as an adult (a new child, new car, etc.).

It the La relates is some ways to our 'self' image. It, like our Self, has no permanent existence, in any case. When we feel good and are healthy, the La and our physical body coincide or are somehow in synch, and we feel like ourselves. We feel energetic. But we are not always in equilibrium. Each of us sometimes get, as I like to say, ‘beside ourselves’, out-of-synch, and out of sorts. We can be separated from our La when our connection to it becomes weakened or we suffer a shock. If we become too separated, it can result in physical sickness and psychological upset, and in extreme cases, according to Tibetans, even in death of the physical body.

So, somehow we all need our La to stay with us and not wander. The La can be disturbed by sudden shocks to the system, accidents, emotional disturbances, and so on, at which time it can separate and wander away from the body leaving the physical

body depressed, out-of-sorts, and subject to illness and anxiety. Perhaps we all know something about how this feels.

The La is similar in some way to our physical and psychological self, but is not the common Self we all have. In fact, the Tibetans say that what western mediums and psychics claim to be (as in séances, etc.) as contacts with departed spirits is not contacting their consciousness (which has gone into the bardo and perhaps to another rebirth), but their La. It is the La that is channeled in every case, and never the consciousness of the deceased. The dead person's consciousness has already gone beyond into the body and is in the process of rebirth. Only the La remains for an indeterminate time.

After death, our consciousness and La separate, with the consciousness going beyond death, but our La stays here with our body. The La stays with the body as long as it takes the body to decay or until the body is destroyed. This is why Buddhists tend to cremate the body or tear it up, so that vultures can eat it. In that way the La (energy reflection) is eventually destroyed and does not wander around in some kind of Limbo.

It is claimed that it's not easy to become aware of your own La, except by its absence. In fact, Tibetan doctors take a pulse reading for a person's La from a different point of the body, the ulnar artery, from what they do for the usual medical pulse. The La meridian or channel goes from the heart to the ring finger along the ulnar artery. As mentioned, the La can be weakened by accident or when we are in shock, very sad, or depressed. It can also go away for a time.

One account I read likens it to a radio and a transmitter; if the radio gets too far away from the transmitter, there is signal loss. The connection weakens or is lost. The same is true if the La gets too far out of the body. Not only can you feel out of sorts, but if it continues, you can become ill, disassociated, and so on.

And it is possible to permanently lose your La, which Tibetans consider very unfortunate and they have rituals for restoring the La to a particular body. This is kind of a scary thought, and some people have been said to lose their La and never be reunited, in which case they gradually wither and die. This is not said to be common. Yet we all know what it is like to wake up from a fearful dream and be out-of-sorts for some time.

I am not sure how much personal awareness of or conscious experience I have had with my own La. There have been times when I have not felt fully present in my own life (you know: “beside myself”) and have had to consciously work on getting back into my body, pulling myself together, and getting centered, so please note that I am not an expert in this, but just interested (as some of you may be) in this fascinating topic. Here I convey only what I have understood from the teachings I have attended and the texts I have read. Yet, I do know this:

When we suffer a sudden shock to our system, like a close friend dies, we have an accident, or whatever, our sense of the Self is often shattered or vacated. We know from the teachings that the Self is little more than the sum total of our attachments (positive and

negative). In other words, our attachments are the glue that holds the Self together.

So, when we suffer a shock and are in one way or another devastated, we momentarily lose our sense of the Self, along with our attachments or fixations and find ourselves at a loss. We just don't care about the small stuff as we normally do. Usually, in a few days our sense of self returns as we gradually re-attach, but in some cases I can imagine that this can take a very long time.

My point is that when we reach a life event when our Self is shattered and we lose our sense of Self, this is an ideal time to practice dharma and awareness and learn something in the space our Self has vacated – a respite.

ADDITIONAL NOTES: As our teaching here at KTD continues and we have more opportunity to ask questions about the La, the whole concept has been clarified to a greater degree. First, I was spelling the word wrong as some here pointed out. Second, Rinpoche said that the La is not the Self, as I wondered, but a separate sentient being that takes up with us and considers us its own charge. In other words, we are its “human,” so to speak. When we die, however, it eventually gives up on our remains and moves on to somewhere else.

This is all a little “Greek” to me, but I wanted to correct my previous comments on that perhaps the La is what we call the Self, but Rinpoche said no. I will keep trying to understand this very interesting concept.

RESTING THE MIND

June 24, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[Note: As our teaching here at KTD continues, we have had more opportunity to ask questions about the “La” as mentioned in the previous blog. The whole concept has been clarified to a greater degree. If interested, please see the previous blog for changes.]

Meanwhile, here at the monastery the teachings and practice continue, although we are winding down and soon Margaret and I will be back on the road to home.

Very busy, but here is a quote from Rinpoche for you to consider:

“The point of samadhi, the real way to meditate, is to allow your mind to rest in its own way. It is not to just relax your mind or rest your mind. It is not even to force your mind to rest. It is to let your mind come to rest in relaxation in its own way. Then simply look directly at the nature of that relaxed mind. When your mind is relaxed in that way you can easily see its nature directly or nakedly. Maintain mere undistracted recollection. All that has to be maintained in order to sustain this recognition is to not be distracted from it. The only effort required is the amount of recollection that keeps you looking at your mind. Whatever thought arises, do not reject it, accept it, change it, or alter it. Do not do anything to it. Simply look at its nature.”

“I’M LOOKING THROUGH YOU”

June 25, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Today is the last day of the 10-day retreat intensive. Tomorrow, we will begin our journey back home, bearing the gift of Rinpoche’s teaching.

During the teaching, Rinpoche emphasized the value for beginners of at least hearing about and at some point starting to learn the more advanced practices like Mahamudra meditation while they were working through the preliminary practices. With that in mind, here is a quote from an earlier teaching Rinpoche gave about learning to look at the nature of thoughts.

“Since the nature of all thoughts is the same, no thought is so bad that its nature cannot be seen, and no thought is so good that it is worth special treatment beyond simply having its nature looked at. Therefore, simply remain free of distraction and look at the nature of your thoughts. This is practiced as a continuity like the flow of a river. As each thought arises, you simply look at its nature, and you need make no distinction between thoughts.”

I won’t try here to paraphrase this quote, but I will make clear that when Rinpoche says looking at the nature of the thought, he is not talking about the content of a particular thought, i.e. what the thought is about. Rather, in Insight Meditation and, of course, Mahamudra Meditation, we don’t focus on the thought’s content, much less follow that thought as in a “train of thoughts.”

Instead, we learn to see past (or through) a thought’s content and look directly at the nature of the thought. And we rest in the nature of each thought. Like the title of the old Beatles tune mentioned above, we look through or beyond the content of a thought and rest in that “Seeing” of it’s nature.

MINDING THE REST

June 26, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

This morning Margaret and I will be heading out from the monastery on our way home. Hard to say whether we will make it in one day or have to stay over somewhere and get home the next day. We made a bunch of sandwiches, have some fruit and crackers, and a few other things. We never stop at restaurants because they have nothing we can eat (or will eat), but we do fine.

Here is a quote from Rinpoche:

“It is quite obvious that if true relaxation of mind is the key to liberation, then clearly we have not been doing it. It is not habitual to us. It goes against the grain of all beginning-less samsaric habit. Therefore, although objectively speaking it is the easiest thing to do, practically speaking it is not, because we have never done it.”

Rinpoche is talking about simply being able to allow our mind to rest. We can be diligent and try to do all kinds of things, but “trying to relax” is basically an oxymoron. Trying does not do it; only doing does it, and here we are speaking of resting our busy mind.

Attempting by force of will to rest reminds me of trying to sleep when we it's 3 AM in the morning and we are

lying on the bed staring at the ceiling. I refuse to do that, but always get up and do some work until I am able to fall asleep. It's 1 AM as I am writing, and I am up and writing this blog in a small public room at the monastery.

I will see if I can sleep after I finish this blog. Anyway, learning meditation is like that, at first trying to concentrate and get focused, but then letting that all go in relaxation. It is like the heart beating, close, open, close, open, and so on. It can take years.

Anyway, here I am in the middle of a summer night up on the mountain. Wishing you all well and getting ready for the long trip home.

Karmapa Chenno!

THE LAMA OF APPEARANCES

June 27, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I would like to discuss the relation of what we call “The Dharma” to “Mother Nature,” our natural environment. Now, this may take several blogs, so bear with me. As a naturalist, here is my early history.

I was born in Lancaster, PA. My parents lived in town when I was very young, so I don't remember much of that. However, when I was just a boy, we moved out of town into the country to a house my parents had built. We were the first and only house at 101 W. Roseville Road, located between two large farms.

It is from that time that I have memories. As the oldest child of five boys, I had no one to look up to other than my parents. I did have one older cousin, but I saw him only infrequently. It was just me and my younger brothers out there on Roseville Rd. while I was growing up and, as the oldest child, I did not consult them much. Like most oldest-children, I was kind of on my own.

In lieu of anything else, what was out there where we lived on Roseville Road (and in quantity) was the natural world, the world of nature. It was not long after moving that I first began to observe Mother Nature, and eventually I did that most of the time. We had no neighbors, thus there were no other kids to play with. So, for much of my time, it was just me, the two

farms, and nature. At the peer level, the natural environment became my one friend and constant companion. I soon was fascinated.

Of course, as a kid I originally was taken with nature in-motion, in particular all the little living creatures moving around. And the lawnmower on our back yard would frequently unearth baby field rabbits that I endeavored to keep alive and raise. I loved all living things and it was only slowly (and somewhat later) that I came to discover the sheer beauty of the natural world.

At my current age of almost 76 years, of course, I am entranced and in awe of the beauty that nature offers us. It is this that I do my best to capture with photography, but that is just the recording media that I happen to use. Not recorded are sounds, smells, and feelings of the intricate textures of the natural world, but I do take them in and hold them dear.

For the above reasons, back then, when I was growing up, I had no main focus other than nature herself. It was never that I was forced, taught, or introduced to nature except by my own exposure to it, and that was very gradual, yet constant, and absolutely convincing. Is it any wonder that later in my life I held to nature's laws and found many of the manmade laws hard to understand?

And, as mentioned, while I was busy catching, studying, and being immersed in nature, like the sun slowly coming up, came the incredible beauty of nature and it took hold of me. I don't know what the exact relation of nature is to the dharma, but they have to be closely related, if not virtually identical.

Later, as an adult, when I went through my greatest time of dharma-awakening (and was in the midst of all that), it was my dear friend Lama Karma Drodhul who pointed out to me that what I was realizing so vividly is called “The Lama of Appearances,” which, like a lama or human dharma teacher, also is a pure form of dharma.

In other words, the natural world itself is capable of teaching us quite perfectly. The net result for me is that, not surprisingly, my most powerful dharma awakening happened to take place not sitting on the cushion, but rather through and immersed in Mother Nature. When this dawned on me, it was like going home again... or reaching home for the first time... finding my own nature through and in nature. At the same time that nature was the nature of my own mind. And I saw this.

So, of course I want to know more about the relation of the dharma to nature. For me and more so as I age, every soft breeze, delicate shadow pattern, budding flower, and composition that I perceive in nature speaks to me at the heart level.

Perhaps at one time I considered nature as a possible distraction from dharma, but that thought has melted away and nature is to me as much dharmic as dharma was, so to speak. The two are identical as far as I can see.

I know that samsara is fierce and that nature is a part of samsara, but so is nirvana, since they are said to be connate – arising together.

For me, the art of photography as well as the beauty of music, poetry and the arts have shown me the way into the dharma itself and the nature of my own mind.

ZEN AND THE ART OF PHOTOGRAPHY

(from the Lama of Appearances)

June 28, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

This blog (and story) might have been called something like “Zen and the Art of Nature Photography,” but I don’t happen to be a Zen practitioner. However, after many years of working with a brilliant Tibetan Buddhist teacher (and Rinpoche), I did manage (with the aid of photography and nature) to get a glimpse of recognition (not enlightenment, mind you) as to the true nature of the mind, and it was nothing like I had led myself to expect all those years. That is why I am writing this.

There may be some of you, like me, whose expectations and imaginations are more of an obstacle to spiritual realization than a help. In fact, our expectations (hopes and fears) can make it almost impossible to have any realization. We think we already know what we are supposed to be finding when it comes to spiritual experience and (by definition) that is exactly what we don’t know, and are trying to find out. For those folks, hearing this story might be useful.

Before I relate that story, it is important to say at least something about how appearances themselves, in

particular that natural phenomena or “Nature” that surrounds us, can assist in our own realization.

The word “dharma” is slowly working its way into the English language, but at this point most people would have a tough time defining it. Originally “dharma” referred to the teachings left by the historical Buddha (and subsequent teachers), teachings meant to point out the method or path for us to achieve realization. That is the point of all the Buddhist teachings. Therefore, the word dharma generally refers to the path or means through which we can discover the true nature of the mind and eventually realize enlightenment.

Our personal dharma (for each of us) is the specific way or method that will work for us to gain realization, the particular signs and path in the world around us that we can pick up on and through which (by following) we can eventually reach realization. It is written that there are 84,000 dharmas or pathways to enlightenment, and it is up to each of us to discover for ourselves the personal way to realization, our particular dharma path. After all, it is the only path that will work for us, so we have no choice. We can't reach realization except by a particular path and no one can do it for us. Teachers don't somehow enlighten us. We enlighten ourselves and the guide or teacher is there to point out just how this can be done.

And our particular dharma, the means through which we can find realization, is everywhere around us and always has been right here before our eyes. In other words, our personal dharma path is just as present in the busiest city as it is in the most remote mountain cave, but due to our various obscurations, we are not

yet able to pick up on it. We don't see it! According to Buddhists, each of us has been wandering for innumerable lifetimes trying to find the particular path or dharma that will work for us, the precise method that will lead to full realization. Yet, up to this point we have somehow managed not to see it, and have been distracted by all the other things we are doing instead. It's a busy world!

There are thousands of Buddhist books and texts available in which the basic nature of the dharma path has been carefully laid out for us to understand and yet, even if we have read them, we still have not gotten it. And that is why great dharma teachers are so precious. They are able to point out to us the true nature of the mind. In fact, in Tibetan Buddhism the name given to the very highest lamas is "Rinpoche," which literally means "Precious One."

Of course, today there are many who profess to teach the dharma. Some teachers know what they are talking about and some are only fooling themselves and others. And, even if we find a good lama, the particular dharma or path that they teach may not be the right one for us. It may not work in our case. And it is written that the "root" lama for each of us (called "Tsawi Lama" in Tibetan) is that lama or guide that is able to finally stop our endless wandering by pointing out to us the true nature of the mind, so that we get it. And then we have it.

This then is the precious lama we each are looking for. Yet the personal root lama we need may not be easy to find or may not be available in the particular part of the world we happen to live in. And teachers that cannot actually guide us only waste our time and

further distract us from finding a workable path, which brings me to the main point of this particular series, that of the “Lama of Appearances.”

The word “lama” has many meanings, but here I am using it to refer to those dharma practitioners with enough realization and experience to serve as guides for the rest of us. In the Karma Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, usually someone is called a “lama” if they have completed the traditional 3-year closed retreat, which is a very rigorous practice.

It came as somewhat of a surprise for me to find out that there are other kinds of lamas aside from the particular root lama or personal guide, our main lineage lama. In fact, it is written and taught that there are actually four kinds of “lamas” or guides to realization:

(1) The Lama of Lineage

The Lama of our Lineage, the particular school or approach to Buddhism to which we naturally belong, includes our root lama. Today in Tibetan Buddhism, there are four popular lineages, the Gelugpa, the Nyingma, the Sakya, and the Kagyu. Although all four lineages share much in common, each of the four lineages has its particular approach or path. For example, I find that I naturally am most in tune with the Karma Kagyu lineage. Lineage lamas are the dharma teachers that are available in our times.

(2) The Lama of the Scriptures of the Sugatas

However, there is also another “lama,” the Lama of the Scriptures. The extant teachings and Buddhist

texts themselves are considered a lama. This “Lama of the Scriptures” refers to the dharma teachings themselves as guides, the actual texts and instructions left by the Buddha and his enlightened followers.

(3) The Lama of Dharmadhatu

There is another lama, call the Lama of Dharmadhatu, and this refers to the final goal or state of realization, where the teacher or guide is pointing out the Dharmadhatu and true nature of the mind itself. I can't say much about that in this blog, because it is more advanced than we are considering here.

(4) The Lama of Appearances

And there is a fourth kind of lama, which is what I am pointing out here in this series called “The Lama of Appearances,” the “lama” of the natural world surrounding us. In other words, the world of appearances we find ourselves embedded in is also a perfect reflection of the dharma and can serve as a lama and guide to us in pointing out the dharma path, if we will just take notice and observe carefully. Although all appearances reflect the reality of the dharma, I am mainly talking here about the world of nature that is as close as the nearest parks, fields, woods, and streams.

Mother Nature is also a perfect reflection of the mind itself. All the truth as taught by the living lama or written down in the ancient dharma texts is also perfectly “readable” in nature herself. It is all the same text, with the same message, and pointing to the identical path or dharma. In other words, there are

different lamas or guides, but only one teaching that they all point out or toward.

In fact, while we are searching for a living lama that works for us, the world of nature is always present and is as clear and unflinching as any teacher could be.

TOUGH LOVE

(From “The Lama of Appearances”)

June 29, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The message of the natural world, Mother Nature, and the message of the root lama (main dharma teacher) are in truth the same. Let me give one example:

In all the lineages of Tibetan Buddhism, there exist what are called the “Common Preliminaries” or “Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind toward Dharma.” These four thoughts have real power, for they can turn our minds away from the endless distractions of everyday life and toward a dharma practice that is more liberating than what we have going for us at the moment.

That is why these four preliminaries are the entrance gate or starting point to the dharma for many forms of Buddhist practice. And, although they are called ‘preliminaries’, they are hardly only that, for awareness of these four thoughts are also considered essential for the most advanced forms of meditation, such as Mahamudra practice.

The “Common Preliminaries” are also called the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma,” “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind,” or simply the “Four Thoughts.” And they are not some abstract

philosophical conundrums, but are the very essence of practicality and common sense.

THE FOUR THOUGHTS:

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- (1) This human life we have is precious.
- (2) Life is Impermanent and fragile.
- (3) We are subject to Karma. Every action or cause has an effect.
- (4) Undependable. Our daily world of business-as-usual is inherently unstable and can't be gamed.

When I first encountered the Four Thoughts, I was amazed at how real and practical they are, just what I had always been thinking about anyway. For example, the first thought about the preciousness of having a human life: I always felt that my life was precious and I sure did not want to waste it. I want to be put to good use and for my life to have a purpose.

And the second thought, “impermanence,” is a thought that has always been in the back of my mind whenever I can stand to think about it. Everything that is born will also die and that includes me! How could I avoid coming to terms with that thought, at least every once in a while?

Although perhaps less obvious than the first two thoughts for me was the third thought relating to karma. Now here is something I am still learning about, that every action we take will have a corresponding effect depending on our intention and effort. I tend to be a slow learner and it takes me a long time to examine the bad results of my actions (again and again) before I finally am willing to stop doing the action that caused it, especially when it

comes to bad eating or pleasure habits -- whatever.

The last of the four thoughts is that this world around us (the Buddhist call it Samsara) is (by definition) inherently undependable. In other words, no matter how hard we try, we will never get all our ducks in a row, so to speak. I keep thinking that I am clever enough to somehow game the system and have only the upside and keep what I don't like at arm's length, but life proves me wrong consistently.

After having been raised Catholic, with Catholic school, Sunday mass and classes, and all of that (rules, warnings, threats, and admonitions), something as practical and natural as the "Four Thoughts" made perfect sense to me, like a breath of fresh air. I was already well on the road to understanding these concepts on my own. So, my introduction to the dharma was a welcome relief to the fear and trembling that my upbringing had instilled in me concerning matters of faith and certainty – this life and what comes after life.

Since the four thoughts seemed more or less obvious and natural to me, I set about learning more about the dharma and its path. And my beginning meditation attempts led to more advanced practices and so on it went. Thirty or forty years of practice went by and I gradually moved along to more and more advanced dharma practices. But it was not until I was introduced to Mahamudra meditation (said by many to be the most advanced and sublime form of meditation as practiced in the Karma Kagyu Lineage) that I again really encountered the Four Thoughts and head-on at that.

Of course, I never forgot about the Four Thoughts, any more than I could forget about my eventual death or my wish to have my life used for a good purpose. Yet, they were mostly on the back burner, so to speak, while I was concerned with these more “advanced” (or so I thought) practices. When teachings on Mahamudra meditation eventually came my way, the Four Thoughts were clearly presented once again, not just as preliminaries, but as essential to keep constantly in mind when approaching Mahamudra meditation. In fact, I spent some three years thinking and practicing with just the Four Thoughts.

In other words, the Four Thoughts are not something to simply touch upon and then move beyond. The texts clearly point out that it is essential to keep these thoughts fully in mind (constantly) when undertaking to practice Mahamudra meditation, because they keep things real and help to prevent our being distracted by everything else going on around us in life.

So, I discovered that in advanced meditation (as in beginning meditation), it is important to be aware that life is precious (and so very impermanent), that our every act will have results in proportion to our intent, and that try as we may (like the fable of the princess and the pea), we will never quite get comfortable in life, no matter how we feather our nest. Not only are the four thoughts important, but without them there is no advanced meditation possible. But, how to keep these four thoughts always in mind? That is the question.

Of course, finding a qualified dharma teacher is key and I have the good fortune to have found a most qualified lama to work with. But I am not alone in that. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, the lama I have worked with for the last 33 years, has many, many students aside from me, and that involves sharing his time, and no one of us has as much face-to-face time with Rinpoche as we might like.

I am not complaining, only explaining. And the point of this whole story is that there is another very qualified lama available to us all of the time, one that is expert at helping us to recognize the Four Thoughts and keep them always in mind, and that is the Lama of Appearances, particularly apparent in the world of nature. And nature is as near as our own backyard where we live; and the fields, streams, meadows, and woods nearby. And she is a fully qualified and most-enlightened teacher!

Nowhere are the Four Thoughts more obvious and consistently pointed out to us than in Mother Nature. Nature is beautiful and that beauty is real beyond our imagination. But the reality of impermanence, the results of cause and effect, and the preciousness of all life are equally real in nature. Nature plays no favorites and she never blinks. All we have to do is observe. It is all carefully laid out, written in reality, and as clear as any dharma text. There is no confusion about the laws of nature. We don't break them; they break us. Nature is a harsh and unforgiving mistress indeed.

Even a casual acquaintance with the natural world takes one beyond sentimentality and into how things actually are -- the reality. If you are emotional about

all of this, then observing nature is an instant and prolonged heartbreak -- all of time. Just look around you!



NO BEING WANTS TO SUFFER

June 29, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

(From “The Lama of Appearances”)

One of the first sentences from almost every Buddhist teacher I have met is this one:

“All beings want to be happy and no being wants to suffer.”

How simple and true! Every sentient being is struggling to be happy or at least content, just as we are, and no being enjoys suffering. That is how it is for all sentient beings. Most animals spend their entire lives looking over their shoulder, terrified of being eaten, while at the same time trying to find enough food to eat, often another being. And yet Nature is so peaceful and beautiful in appearance. Please connect the dots for me, between these two concepts. How can something so sublime and beautiful be so terrifying?

When we observe nature, we are observing the Four Thoughts clearly spelled out for us in stark black and white. Nature shows no mercy, and the law of cause and effect is inexorably exact down to the last detail

when it comes to questions of life and death. Life is so precious for many beings that it is hardly there for them but for an instant. In nature, impermanence is a stark fact, not an abstract concept.

For me (and many people), it takes something like a death in the family or the death of a loved one to remind me of impermanence. When something tragic happens in my life, I come out of my forgetfulness of how impermanent life is, and even then usually only for a short time. I tend to wake up when something terrific or striking happens to me. Otherwise, I kind of agree to forget about impermanence, which I find just too painful to remember all the time.

Well, Nature is the cure for that, if we will but observe. Everywhere in nature, the four thoughts are clearly demonstrated for all to see; impermanence, the preciousness of life, action and result, and no real resolution or permanent solution to life. We just have to spend the time and look around.

And Nature is a brilliant teacher. Talk about equanimity! Nature is always the same, always on the job, and she never pulls her punches. Nature tells it like it is, 24x7. But we do have to actually take a look and not turn away or flinch at the hard spots. For example:

It is painful for me to walk on the tarmac of a road after a rain and find it covered with earthworms and slugs trying to get from one side to the other just as the sun comes up. The sun will fry most of them to a

crisp before they ever reach the other side, and I can't physically pick all of them up and move them to the other side of the road and safety. And some are even crawling in the direction the road travels! Here are these sentient beings struggling to live like we all do, wiped out by a decision they made to cross that road at sunup.

Or the broken blue Robin's egg on the sidewalk, with the tiny bird almost ready to hatch or still alive, and the cat or Crow raiding the bird nests and eating the hatchlings while the parents scream and can do nothing to prevent it. There are countless examples of the day-to-day tragedies that are played out all around us in the natural world. The same rules apply to the human world, but we won't go there just now.

I am not going to drag out all of the possible sentimental thoughts we could share about how cruel nature is. Nature is a tough love, to be sure, but she is simply a reflection of a reality that, while beautiful indeed, is equally harsh, however much we may like to dress it up and perfume it. That is not my point here.

This writing is not about getting sentimental. It is about taking advantage of these natural facts to help wake us up to the reality so clearly spelled out in nature. The book of Nature is a tough-love read, for sure, but it is also a real teacher, available to each of us all the time. Impermanence is the smelling salts of the dharma, and we all could stand a whiff of it now

and again. Careful observation of nature can provide that.