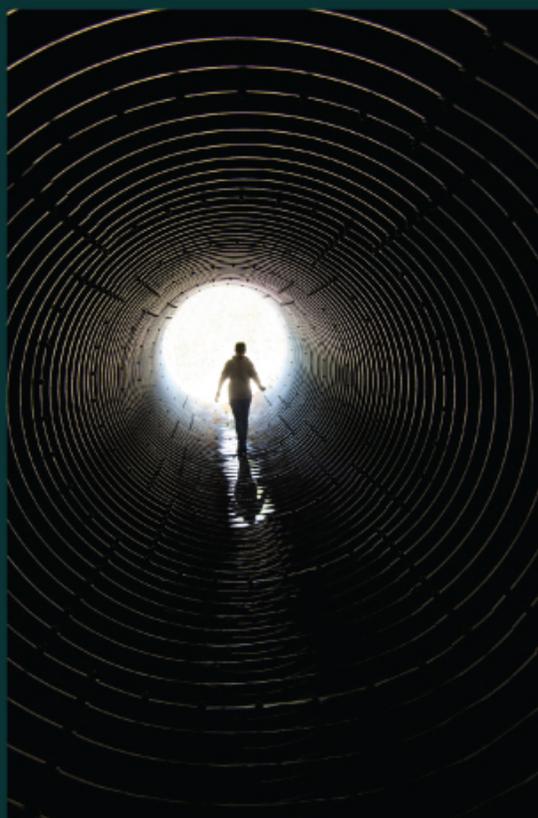


# URGENCY

## In Dharma Practice



by Michael Erlewine

**Urgency  
In  
Dharma Practice**

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Michael Erlewine**

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## **FIRE & BRIMSTONE IN THE DHARMA**

In my experience, every religion or spiritual practice has a little (or a lot) of what I call “fire and brimstone,” imperatives, words for action that also can put fear in us. They are not always right out front on the surface, but if you poke around or dig down, they are there.

The way I have come to appreciate the fire and brimstone is the following. If we are new to the teachings, too much fire and brimstone will tend to snuff out our flame of interest in that approach and we move on. However, if we stick around, at some point, the imperative or commanding tone is welcomed, because we have faith in the process and want to get right down to it and do what needs to be done.

That absolutely happens in the dharma, at least in my experience. There are times that we, each of us, have to be spoken to directly lest we go off the rails. And if going off the rails is what we have to do, then this or that spiritual technique is not going to work for us.

Just as when my dogs used to come home with some dead and rotting critter in their mouth and I had to tell them: DROP IT! And they usually did, although I can tell you a funny story, which I might as well tell here or forever hold my peace.

We used to have a dog name Kota, half husky and half perhaps golden-lab. He liked to police our yard, in case any other dog or neighborhood cat had gone in and peed or left something. He was on it. I thought of a joke to play on him, which ended up as a joke on me.

A traveling circus had come to town and we took the kids to see it. And laying on the ground was one big elephant turd, about as big as a small football. I grabbed a couple of abandoned paper plates, scooped up the turd and without drawing attention to myself brought it back home and placed it out in Kota's yard. Since he freaked out on any foreign trespass, I wanted to see what he did when he found the huge turd in his yard. Could he imagine what huge creature had laid it there?

Anyway, we put the turd in the yard and let Kota out in and he started sniffing around his yard as he liked to do. Sure, enough after a while he came across this elephant turd and instantly froze. However, instead of freaking out and jumping back as I imagined he might, he immediately grabbed the whole turd in his mouth and took off running. He started to eat the damn thing. It was funny.

A Dharma "Catch 22"

The idea is simple. I am not yet enlightened yet, but am older now, with probably not that many years left, am easily distracted, and not much into forced routines. You tell me if this is unusual.

What are my chances of becoming enlightened before I die and why should I even worry about it?

The very great majority of dharma practitioners (not to mention everyone else in the world) are pretty much in this same boat or WILL BE before they realize it. One

thing we do know (if we are honest with ourselves) is that we are not enlightened yet no matter how we may rationalize it. If we have to even ask ourselves the question, the answer is “No, I am not yet enlightened.”

And we are told by the Tibetan Buddhist teachings that in the bardo passage soon after death we either will or will not get another human birth depending on how we have used our current life, this one we are living now. Sounds biblical, and this is some of that fire and brimstone I was talking about. And while another human rebirth or life is not guaranteed, we can however easily get a lower birth, one in which the dharma practice we have put off doing in this life is impossible, such as being reborn as a bewildered animal, and so on. What a thought!

On top of whatever our current will for dharma practice is (and our hopes for enlightenment), we also have the growing pressure of this inevitable showdown in the bardo, where (bodiless and without all the things from this life) we will have to somehow pilot our mind through (so we are told) what is said to be (for the majority) a most terrifying experience. And just how stable are we when terrified?

And we won't even have the steering wheel of this heavy body to tie us down. In the bardo, we are anything but grounded. If we get frightened, and think of a bad place, we will (so the teachings say) instantly be there. It's much like in a dream or nightmare.

At the time of death, we will each be alone, as we are today when we dream (or even when we are not

dreaming) and even a few moments of reflection should tell us how disciplined that is. Just consider your dharma or spiritual practice and ask yourself: have you achieved the results you expected, were looking for, or that you feel you need? Is it enough? If you are on shaky ground here and now, then just imagine what you will be like in the midst of the bardo passage.

It will be like trying to control the outcome of a dream, for we will be one big mind with no body. Or, it could be like trying to drive a car without a steering wheel. You probably won't be able to point yourself anywhere and just have it go there or the reverse: whatever comes to your mind, you WILL go there, including into your worst fears. This is not me making this up; this is what the dharma texts and teachings actually say.

Keep in mind that the outcome of the bardo experience will determine whether you or I have another human body, another chance to learn and practice the dharma, or whether we will instead fall into lower realms where it will be very difficult to do much of anything at all, certainly nothing like the opportunity we have now in this human life.

Forget about the pain of intrauterine life, the trauma of birth, and all the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" that Shakespeare points out. It gets a little Old-Testament like. Those of us who have not managed to enlighten ourselves in this life will have no choice but to try and qualify for yet another chance at a human life in the bardo, hoping to somehow keep what we now have, and to at least come out even, but with no guarantee. I

am imagining that 99.99% of us are in roughly the same boat.

We will be angling for and hoping for another human rebirth, another chance on a human life, rather than fall into what are called the “lower realms.” If it has been hard for us to get serious in this life, it may be almost impossible to practice dharma in the next. Ninety-nine percent is a good percentage, basically like: all of us.

If you have ever wondered why many of the Asian Buddhists are into the Buddha Amitabha and his “Pure Land” Buddha realm called Sukhavati (Tibetan: Dewachen), it is because, of all the buddhas, the Buddha Amitabha has promised each of us an easier access to his pure-land realm, an access that for most would take place in the bardo instead of rebirth – at what otherwise is the changing of the bodies and perhaps also changing realms.

Sukhavati is said to not only allow us to avoid falling into lower rebirths, but also to avoid our even taking another human rebirth whatsoever. According to the teachings, if we merit it, we go directly to Sukhavati at death and we become enlightened, period, end of births from karma. This is due (as the teaching say) to the compassion of the Buddha Amitabha for sentient beings, in this case we humans.

Obviously, as an unenlightened human, I know nothing about this Sukhavati realm personally, but am only sharing with you what the teachings tell us. This option (Sukhavati) is very appealing compared to the alternatives.

Aside from trying to qualify for Sukhavati, the majority of us are practicing not only to become enlightened using the methods Buddha taught, but also to get our minds in good enough shape before we die so as not to lose our balance in the bardo and fail to obtain at least another human birth, complete with all its joys and sorrows. So, there is some extra pressure on many of us, and that pressure increases with age, as we actually get closer to that deciding moment. Imagine!

My only point for even writing this is to take a look at how this urgency to qualify for yet another chance at human life might affect our ongoing ability to become enlightened, our will and ability to practice. Getting another human rebirth after this life amounts to getting our foot in the door to do our life all over again, like the movie “Groundhog Day.” In itself, a rebirth in the human realm I understand. I don’t consider myself a dharma teacher, but rather a sharer of what I know or have experienced with the dharma in an attempt to get this all out in the open and being discussed. This “secret” thing is not true in Tibet, where they talk and debate and argue about the dharma, all of it, all of the time. I don’t know exactly how we Americans came up with our attitude that we should not talk about the dharma. It’s true of our yidam practice, not to talk about it, but not because it is secret, but because a yidam is an individual thing that works for us but probably will not work for anyone else, so there is no point in sharing it, except generically.

A human birth provides us with nothing more than another chance at life, another opportunity to practice the dharma and to work toward our enlightenment, that

is 'if' we can be born in a time and place where dharma is available to us, which is itself not certain or guaranteed.

Whatever skills or imprint we start out with in our next life will come from our dharma practice in this current life. It is entirely up to us. We set the pace. It all comes down to our actually having to DO something toward awakening ourselves, toward becoming enlightened. No one will or can (not even a Buddha) do it for us, and we can take all the time in the world to get the job done, lifetime after lifetime if needed, and so we have up till now.

Nothing will ever change for the better, except as we change it. We are not going to stumble on or luck into enlightenment. If that were true, we would have done it a long time ago. We are, as one high rinpoche puts it, the "stragglers," the ones who have not managed to get enlightened in all of the time in the world of eternity up to now - eons.

Fear of the bardo (and attempts to get ready for it) remind me a little of being distracted and worn out by a low-paying job while all of our hopes or dreams go unattended. Our fear and worries about our future may make that future all the more urgent, but they also can detract from our concentration on our dharma practice. And I don't mean to be disrespectful.

We are told that the most important thing is to study and practice the dharma and move toward enlightenment, step by step. However, at the same time we have to somehow get ready to pass through the eventual bardo

experience at the end of this life, if we don't reach enlightenment before we die. This is not something we can just ignore or endlessly put off, as there is an end to our current life and then there we will be: in the bardo.

The two should be the same thing, meaning: if we work hard at our dharma practice in becoming more aware, that alone will stand us in good stead when we enter the bardo at death. And if the two are not the same, that is, if our fear of not being ready for the bardo overpowers our actual ability to do our daily dharma practice, then the amount of actual dharma practice we get done should take priority over the fear of what will happen in the bardo and not vice versa. In other words, our fear of the bardo can inhibit our actual dharma practice.

At the time we die, nothing we have done (with the exception of dharma practice) will be of any use to us at all. Our money, friends, all our experiences, and any and everything we have accomplished in this mundane life will be totally useless in the bardo realms. We won't even have our familiar body, but will be the 'horseless headman', just out there (or in there) alone with our mind, driven about willy-nilly only by whatever discipline we actually have mastered, not by our intellectual understanding of the dharma. Thinking won't help.

All the dharma talk, hopes, fears, dreams, and what-not part of our dharma practice will also be lost to us, leaving only whatever imprints and dharma skills in directing the mind we have actually acquired up to that point. All of our clever rationalizations will add up to

nothing and make no sense. There will be no sense to make.

Many have told me that when they are in the bardo, they are counting on their dharma teacher or some dharma saint to appear and guide them. I can't say that's not true; I only ask: how will that work?

My impression is that we will only have whatever essentials we have learned from our teachers, meaning the realization we have recognized and internalized through our own practice. And even their essence won't just rub off on us. We have to acquire or master even that for ourselves. Teachers can only point the way; they can't do our practice for us. They can't live our lives for us. In the bardo, we will have to make up our mind on the spot based on how our mind is made up, as in: how we made it up in this life. We won't suddenly be different than we are now as far as mind training. We will be what we have done and how we have lived: karma.

In summary, we seriously have to figure out how to work on becoming enlightened in this life, while at the same time live under the pressure and the age-ticking clock to prepare for the inevitable bardo passage. The growing pressure to meet the demands of the bardo can actually inhibit us from doing the practice needed to be confident in the bardo, a "Catch-22" if there ever was one.

**PRESSURE**

However, we do have some tools available to us, in particular the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma,” and they traditionally have been called the Common Preliminaries, the very first step and foundation for what practices come after in our dharma practice. All Buddhists know them. And we can learn from them. Here they are:

### (1) THIS PRECIOUS HUMAN LIFE

Life is precious! We all know that and from time to time our own life, of course, may seem most precious to us, but the same goes for all other life, even that of the smallest insect or creature. All beings want to be happy and not to suffer.

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

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

the one happy medium. Too often we act like we are going to live forever, etc.

## (2) IMPERMANENCE

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

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

Witnessing the heartbreaking impermanence nature displays is one way we are affected, often bringing out compassion within us for the suffering that most animals and beings experience. This helps to keep us sober. Then, there is the recollection of our own impermanence, the fact that we will for sure die. This is harder for us to look at, so we tend to push it out of our consciousness most of the time.

Impermanence can also urge us to not waste time, because our own life will expire one day soon, and for

all we know, it could be today. As the Ven. Bokar Rinpoche said to me years ago when I left his monastery in West Bengal, India, “Michael, Tomorrow or the next life, whichever comes first.”

Or, as the Ven Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche said to a group as he rose to address them “Some of you will die soon; the rest a little later.”

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

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

I want to differentiate here (for my own clarity) the urgency we have in general to use this human life we have efficiently (while we have it) and the fear or pressure that is connected with our upcoming bardo passage, the determination if we do or do not get another human rebirth. There is pressure there.

To me, it seems that there are two kinds of worries here, one the urgency of impermanence in general and

the second, the urgency whether we will or won't have another chance at a human life in the near future, and of course they are related. In my own life, I add still a third worry, which is that the worry about whether the bardo decision (next human life or not) is so strong that it will seriously detract from the ongoing process of finding a dharma practice that will move us toward enlightenment.

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

### (3) KARMA

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

The aftertaste (with understanding karma in my experience) is that as you get more into looking at karma, you begin to realize that not just the big decisions or actions bring results, but that ALL actions (everything we do) brings some reaction, lays down their own track or casts some fine shadow. And if we

repeat that action, good or bad for us, the track only deepens.

Karma is said to “burn twice,” first, because whatever we do will bring a reaction, and, second, when that karma that is generated ripens, we will suffer that too, for better or for words.

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

Karma is not only about committing bad deeds and paying for it, but also about shaping our lives almost invisibly by every small action we do. This is perhaps best celebrated in the methodical care and gentleness shown by some of the great Zen masters in every move they make, like the traditional tea ceremony. The more we work our way into the practice of dharma, the more careful we become in our every thought, word, and deed. We are on tiptoe.

#### (4) SAMSARA

The fourth of the “Four Thoughts” is the consistent undependability of this world, also sometimes called “the revulsion of Samsara,” Samsara being this world that you and I live in. We live in a state of change that

itself is changing, or as I like to say it: I will never be able to quite get all of my ducks in a row. I always believe I will, but I never have yet, and the teachings suggest it is mathematically impossible BECAUSE Samsara is dualistic.

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

Only when we are severely struck by impermanence do we actually sicken and become nauseas with life as we know it; only then does it turn empty of meaning for us. Otherwise, we keep it hopping at all times. We even turn the burner up.

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

## SUMMARY

We are juggling at least a couple of balls here. On the one hand we have the dharma practice we have been given or have discovered works for us. And we may or may not have any great signs that it is working yet. Then, on the other hand we have to fight against time to get at least to somewhere with our practice that will help

us to influence the outcome of upcoming bardo experience.

As mentioned earlier, these two aspects are not only related, but should be working hand in hand. However, it is all too easy for them to get out of phase with one another, so that the urgency of the bardo confrontation becomes dominant and distracts us from our dharma practice enough so that we somehow manage not to get that job done with the result that our mind will not be ready to meet the bardo. This vicious cycle is not uncommon.

As mentioned earlier, the proper sequence is that with the help of a qualified teacher, the true nature of the mind is introduced to us, studied, pointed out, leading to our own recognition and the subsequent steps in dharma practice toward realization. If we can sustain that, we automatically will be ready for the bardo and will need have no fear.

However, if due to advancing age or lack of faith in the techniques or teacher, the urgency to get the mind in order overpowers the calm and steadiness needed to make progress in mind training, we have a problem. The tail is wagging the dog.

## THE ANSWER

As you see, this can be a serious subject, one well worth being aware of. The point of this 'fire and brimstone' talk is not to imbue you with still more pressure or fear, and not to force you to force yourself

to practice harder, but hopefully to encourage you to practice smarter.

When the meditation teachings say to “rest the mind,” they actually mean ‘rest’, not push or force anything. The eventual outcome of all this (the bardo after death) is of crucial importance to us and yet mindlessly forcing ourselves forward is not restful. Although oxymoronic, we are in a hurry to rest the mind, if that makes any sense. And forcing yourself to rest is difficult to do, just as trying to get to sleep when you have insomnia is difficult. “Hurry up and rest!” does not work.

The ancient metaphor of holding a raw egg in your hand comes to mind. Too much pressure and the egg breaks, too little and the egg falls and breaks.

If we force ourselves to practice too much, we get nowhere, and if we are so lax we hardly practice, we get nowhere. Like holding the egg, it takes just the right amount of pressure to make progress. So, it can be helpful to examine our practice to see if at the present we are forcing it or not doing it enough. Proper practice is not a switch you can just turn on or off, but something that requires constant attention and vigilance. That is the whole idea of meditation, remaining aware all the time, learning to do that.

Ultimately, most of our practice is just that, “practice,” and not the real thing. We are going through the steps and motions perhaps for years until something clicks and we actually get the idea of what we have been trying to do all that time.

## THE FUNCTION OF A TEACHER

In both the Zen tradition and the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the job of the teacher is to point out to the student the true nature of the mind and how it works. Everything else is secondary and not essential. Once that job is done, once the teacher has pointed out to the student the true nature of the mind, and the student has recognized it, the teacher's work is done. Period,

Perhaps the most common obstacle to recognizing the actual nature of the mind are the hopes and expectations of the student. Invariably, we build up an idea of what recognition or enlightenment is, based on books, teachings, and our own imagination. We 'think' we know what we are looking for, when by definition we don't or we would already have it.

That is why the teacher must disappoint those expectations, using whatever means necessary. This is perhaps most clear in the Zen tradition, where the master employs laughter, comedy, force, surprise, etc. to upset the applecart of the student long enough for them to let go of their fixed expectations and let some light and air come in.

It is at that moment of recognition of the mind's nature that the student stops guessing, expecting, and wondering, and instead just gets it, not enlightenment, but we simply understand for the first time the actual nature of mind we have been trying to figure out all this time. And by seeing the problem, we simultaneously see the solution and know how to deal with it. We see that we can, just as we are now, do it.

## THE STUDENT

In other words, recognizing the true nature of the mind brings its own response, the chief hallmark of which is literally becoming responsible for our own dharma practice. In that instant of recognition the torch passes from the teacher to the student, not because anything has really been transmitted, but because the student is no longer looking outward to the teacher and world for direction, but suddenly sees how to direct his or her own practice from inside for the first time.

In that moment of recognition, it is obvious to the student what needs to be done and recognition is not an experience that will pass, but a simple “Aha, I get it now!” It is like those figure-ground paintings where you look and look and suddenly you see the image within the image. You recognize what it is and can see it at will from that time forward. A simple recognition, not an experience that comes and goes.

We no longer need a teacher because we finally see the problem ourselves and instantly know how to deal with it, and it is also clear to us that only we can do it because: we each have to enlighten ourselves. No one else can do it for us, not even a Buddha.

And while this initial recognition of the actual nature of the mind is not realization and certainly not enlightenment, it marks a clear turning point on the dharma path and the beginning of really effective practice.

In recognizing the true nature of the mind, the student also recognizes that they already have everything needed to practice properly, and that in fact no one else could do it for them.

There is nothing further that we need from that point onward except the time to actually and finally practice properly.

In summary, once we recognize the nature of the mind, that is, the way the mind actually works, we no longer need a teacher, for we finally see that it is completely up to us. Once we see the nature of the mind, we see what it is and it is obvious how to deal with it. We then respond naturally and are eager to practice, because we clearly see what needs to be done. It is not that we have been all of this time obstinate or unwilling to put in the effort. The simple truth is we did not know what to do. Before this recognition, we had no real idea of what the task was or how to do it. We were just practicing.

In the last analysis, only we can enlighten ourselves, but we don't know how to do that. A teacher can point out how that is to be done, but it may take some time to find a teacher that we are in synch with enough to actually take direction.

Not even a Buddha can do this for us, because enlightenment by definition is something we each have to experience for ourselves. After all, that is the whole point, to experience enlightenment. But to be able to get on the path, we have to know how the mind works and that is what all the years of meditation practice and

sadhanas are all about, to prepare us to recognize the true nature of the mind.

So, in closing, if any of the above strikes a note, then the very first step, no matter how old you already are, is to seek out proper meditation instructions and get started. And by meditation, I don't mean the guided meditation of losing yourself in some inner dream-like realm, but I meant the sit-up-and-take-notice kind of awareness meditation as taught by the Tibetan and Zen Buddhists, and many other groups.

It is never too late to begin while we have life and breath. And although most beginnings may be a little humiliating and involve fumbling and not knowing what we are doing for a while, beginnings will soon pass into actual learning something how the mind works and working with it.

My point here is that an effort will have to be made on our part and that only we can do it. We can wait forever, but no one will ever do it for us. I started very late in life, and almost did not learn to meditate properly at all, because I wanted to place out of Meditation 101 due of all my previous years of spiritual work. I was gently told by my meditation teacher that I would have to start at the beginning, not because I had not involved myself in spiritual work, but because if I was honest with myself, I really didn't know how to meditate.

I almost turned away and said forget-about-it for this lifetime. I am so glad some little part of me was able to know the truth and agree to start at the beginning with meditation.

A list of centers where you can learn the proper mediation at no charge can be found at [www.Kagyuu.org](http://www.Kagyuu.org). I am sure there are other centers that are authentic, but these I have actually checked out and worked with.

May this be of some small benefit to those who read it.