

Dharma Blogs

2016 Fall



by Michael Erlewine

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2016 Fourth Quarter

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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 fourth quarter of 2016, posted on Facebook and Google+.

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MYTH: CIVILIZATION IS THE CORRUPTION OF INFANTS

October 4, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

We've all heard that old chestnut. It is a Western myth that the mind is clear and pure, just as we find it at birth. The American take is, were it not for our cultural "bad" habits, babies would all grow up to be rinpoches or the equivalent. This is something we may like to believe, but the Tibetan (and Asian) view does not support this, even a little bit. The Buddhist view is: when we are reborn (and take on a new body), we proceed to draw upon our karmic traces from previous lives and draw around us a personality based on that karma, not just one determined by our genes and cultural background. This is why identical twins can be so different, etc.

Further, here in the West our take on the mind is that it is something that we use, like a flashlight or microscope, to study and look at the outside world. We are not trained (and have not been introduced) to using the mind to investigate or look at itself. In other words, we don't use the mind to look at the mind. That is an Eastern concept. The average American has had zero training in looking at his or her own mind. In fact, the very notion is totally foreign (Asian) to most of us.

This fact alone makes turning this all around (flipping it), so that we use our own mind to look at itself not only an opportunity, but one of the last very real adventures. This is not what we have been brought up with. In fact, it goes against everything we know and have been taught.

And it is not like we can just up and look at our mind whenever we should decide to. We are culturally so removed from it that we have to be taught HOW to look at the mind. And just to be clear to those of you reading this, the entire point of all of the scores of preliminary dharma practices is to prepare us to recognize for ourselves the true nature of the mind, once and for all. That is the whole point.

There are many hundreds of techniques and practices that go under that name “meditation,” but only a very few of them are what the historical Buddha taught. Most are one form or another of relaxation therapies, which probably won’t harm us, unless we consider missing the opportunity to learn authentic meditation harm. And almost all the rest are purification practices of one sort or another. Then there are the very few methods (Insight Meditation and Mahamudra Meditation, etc.) for actually recognizing for ourselves the actually and true nature of the mind.

The essential or pith texts state that Insight Meditation and Mahamudra Meditation, as taught by the Karma Kagyu Lineage, require a teacher who has themselves attained at least authentic recognition of the mind. It takes one to know one.

UNWAVERING ATTENTION

October 5, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The Karma Kagyu Lineage Prayer 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 blessing that meditation be free from intellectualization.”

Here, the “body of meditation” means the main body of meditation itself, the whole thing. Unwavering attention takes effort, but what kind of effort? It can be misleading and we can easily be misled. It is not that it takes great effort on our part to have unwavering attention or that effort alone will help, but rather that it takes effort to relax, which is an oxymoron. How do we “try” to relax? It is the same with the advice to have unwavering attention in our practice. How do we do that? How do we make our attention unwavering? It is not by trial and effort.

We must first learn to relax and only THEN will our attention becomes unwavering or thereabouts. In other words, relax and the point of it all (call it unwavering attention) will appear effortlessly. Unwavering attention is what remains when we allow the mind to rest and not attempt to alter it.

In other words, we can't make our attention unwavering by sheer effort, but it becomes unwavering when we rest our mind and allow it to naturally arise, as it actually is, unwavering. It's we that do the wavering. We can stop trying and allow it to happen.

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WHAT IT WAS

October 9, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Well, what can I say, folks? I am, or should be, speechless, humbled would be the better word, but you know I have to write about my time at the 50th Anniversary of the Grande Ballroom and my time with the Yardbirds. This was WAY beyond any expectations I might have had.

For one, it was an all-day affair and of course I arrived as early as I could. That's just me. I would rather stand around and wait than not be wherever I am going. The event was at the Ford Community and Performing Arts Center in Dearborn Michigan, which is a very large and elegant place. Margaret and I arrived around 10 AM and had been told to find our way to the VIP table, where we were supposed to have tickets and badges waiting for us.

Well, you know how those things go. Somehow, our names were not on the list, so there we stood wondering what to do. Then, someone arrived with the word that Jim McCarty of the Yardbirds had sent down word (or our names were found) that we were to be "special guests." And before we knew it, there we were with large badges on lanyards hanging around our necks that said in big letters "Special Guest." That was embarrassing, but we wore them, of course. What it meant was that as we walked around and people could read the badge, they had to asked us

who were were. We must have been somebody famous to have to wear a tag that marked us as special guests. LOL.

And there I would be, trying to explain what on earth made us special, and I could of course come up with no reason other than the truth, that we were friends of Jim McCarty of the Yardbirds and he had greased the way for us. I must say that Michele and (poster-artist) Carl Lundgren who put this whole event together did an outstanding job. No thought was spared to make the event as meaningful and fun as possible. And even the people at the VIP table told me I might just as well relax and enjoy being "special" because that is how we were going to be treated, and we were. It was those tags.

And, as a musician who had been there at the original opening of the Grande Ballroom on October 8th of 1966, and whose band (Prime Movers Blues Band) had played at the Grande, I ended up being interviewed on camera by CBS while I was standing around yesterday. There was also a huge ballroom filled with vendors of memorabilia, mostly rock posters. The room also had a raised stage with bands playing throughout the day. However, the bands were so loud that when I tried to buy a reprint of a poster, neither myself nor the vendor could hear one another, so I had to come back later when the bands were taking a break. That must have been hard on the vendors.

They had a special room where Margaret and I could hang out for the VIPs and, of course, the Special Guests. It had food, drink, and comfortable couches where we went and talked with members of the other

bands and generally just took a load off. And so it went.

We were told by the Yarbards' manager Henry Smith that we should meet him later in the afternoon and that we would be invited to sit in on the sound check. Well, it got way better than that. Henry met us and told us the band was waiting to meet us, so there went, filing past the VIP room, and going into the area that said "Yarbards Only." I felt sheepish. And there was James McCarty and the whole band, who were so friendly and welcoming. Margaret laughed, because after introductions I apparently stammered out that I was at a loss for words, a mighty rare event.

Then Henry said that as for what we could do, Margaret and I could just be with them, do whatever they did, hangout, go to the sound check, eat dinner with them, and all of that, which we did. It was just too good, so much fun.

We went with them to their "Meet and Greet" session, where the VIPs got their albums signed and they gave out (and signed) a new poster by Carl Lundgren and things like that. Did I mention that earlier we were given a whole bag of stuff, gifts, records, etc.? That too.

We had dinner, Jim McCarty and I sitting together on a couch, talking about the Karmapa, and all kinds of things. Very definitely, it was like a waking dream. And that is how it was. This blog is getting too long, so I will have to save any account of the show until another time. Suffice it to say that the opening act was pure Detroit music from back in the day, literally an assault on the senses, which is how they like it.

This was followed by a full show by the Yardbirds, with encores.

So, this old guy had quite a day. Just thought you might like to know.



A VENT OF PURE OXYGEN

October 10, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I am back home from our recent trip and getting back in step with how it is here. Looks like we had the first real frost last night so the autumn colors should be peaking soon, the reds in particular. And as my mind settles back on itself, the following image has been coming up a lot, so I will share it with those interested.

It has to do with how our senses feed into our perception and memory. While the input of the six senses is inherently pure, it is colored by our accumulated mental obscurations on arrival to our consciousness. The result is that everything that is fresh and bright in the moment is filtered by our biases and the accumulated karmic bubble that we find ourselves trapped in. Here is a simple analogy that I find helpful.

Our senses are like one of those security camera feeds we see in convenience stores that are connected to a surveillance monitor, a simple pure signal as conducted. It is what happens to the signal when we attempt to grasp and remember it that is important here. The incoming freshness of the senses themselves are filtered through our biases, colored by our prejudices, and the resulting memory (on contact) is no longer fresh and fluid, but rather immediately becomes a frozen snapshot that we proceed to "Photoshop" and mold to our habitual altered way of

seeing things. This filtering happens automatically, way before we have any awareness of it. We literally see through a glass darkly, as the old saying goes.

In other words, the senses themselves are like a pure oxygen vent that is fresh in the moment, but when we attempt to save and record that moment to memory, it (by definition) becomes a static recording that we then can't help but color with our prejudice and rationalizations until it is a dim reflection of its initial freshness. We mentally Photoshop it with our karmic traces and it is not even a one-time coloring. Our memories are continuously modified as we change, and as our mind filters and re-filters events. Over time, our recollections become more and more caricatures of their original pure sense impressions. And we cling to them and even use them as guides, like backing into the future using a rear-view mirror that itself is warped to our obscurations.

This is why one of the cardinal pieces of advice of the great Buddhist teacher the Mahasiddha Tilopa is "Don't Prolong the Past," if only because it cannot be done without all the morphing and alteration that memory involves. Our memories are a revolving hall of mirrors in which we easily become lost, continually haunted by our own reflections.

Unlike the past which no longer exists and the future, which does not yet exist, the present moment contains all the freshness life offers us, if (and this is a big "If") we can relax and allow our mind to settle-out enough so that we can actually be aware of it. Check it out for yourself.

“I CAN’T GET NO SATISFACTION”

October 11, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

This is about embracing the moment, just as it is. What we need is at hand, always, and that by definition. This is the first rule of counseling and the keystone of any therapy. Put another way, it can be stated that until we accept what-have, what is at hand, we cannot change our situation. The old admonition to “Start Where You Are” holds true.

So, it pays to take stock of our current situation as the means to go from there to anywhere else we sigh. If we refuse to accept where we are, including its circumstances and discomforts, it is like having a car but not getting in the driver’s seat. Unless we are in the body of our own circumstances (and accept it just as it is, warts and all), we will go nowhere or almost nowhere. And this concept scales. It works from top-down to bottom. For example:

If we practice meditation each day (or just have an attitude about the day we are having), if we don’t accept things just as they are with us that day, but instead hold out, hope for, or demand something better, like perhaps wanting to repeat or match that “great” meditation we had yesterday, we are inviting trouble. In this case, we not only CAN make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear. In fact, we must.

It is easy just to spin our wheels and be irritated that the day is not working out as we wished, that the signs are just not good, and that perhaps sometime later (like tomorrow) will be better, etc. -- postponing. Yet, this is just the problem itself speaking to us. Look directly at it.

Always, the good advice is to start just where we are, irritation, warts and all, and transform all that (by complete acceptance) into the means to realize a good day, a good attitude, or a good meditation. This is just how it works, friends.

The pivotal point is, of course, awareness... awareness on our part that we are not accepting how things are, but rather holding out for something better than the moment appears to offer. That seldom works. Instead, what often works is, as mentioned, becoming aware that we are holding our nose and waiting for better times where we can "be" or begin. It is best to abandon that attitude in favor of accepting the moment just as it is. And starting from there, by embracing things as they are, often we can turn that less-than-perfect mood or day into true satisfaction and come back into balance again.

I have made this mistake myself, of course, and usually the pivot point, as mentioned, is realizing that I am holding out for something better, rather than seizing the moment as it is, embracing it (and its irritation), and turning it into the kind of moment I was hoping for. It is that simple, but we first have to be aware that we are holding out and reverse that tendency. We do that by giving up the tension of holding back, and giving in to accepting what is and working with that.

MAKING THE JOURNEY: WAVES AND WATER

October 12, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

A drop of water falling into a still pond creates ever-increasing concentric rings that each reach beyond themselves, rings that also most perfectly define the position of the original drop. As the poet Sir Edwin Arnold put it, "The dewdrop slips into the shining sea." Just so.

This whole concept of waves and water is a thread that runs through Buddhism, that waves and the ocean they ride on are both just water. And the traditional analogy, of course, is that thoughts and the mind are like waves and water. Thoughts are just the mind in motion and the absence of thoughts is the mind at rest. They are united and one. This analogy represents dualism at its best, and the identification of them both as water represents the non-dualistic resolution of this dichotomy, conceptually.

We habitually split everything into two, the I and the you, the we and the them, the this and the that, and on and on. Putting that Humpty-Dumpty dualism back together again into one view is no small feat. Still, that is the challenge we face and also where we find ourselves -- habitually dualistic. What's the problem with being two-minded, instead of one? Well, the obvious thought is that here we are, perpetually two-faced, with all the energy expended that is required to remain so. More important is the simple fact that

being split-minded, we are not single minded, when non-dualism is what is required to recognize and realize the true nature of the mind. They are one and the same thing.

We have to stop crossing our eyes, whereupon the two-nesses (dualisms) collapse into their inherent oneness, through (and in) which we extend ourselves to see and recognize the actual nature of the mind – single file, not two by two. I am reminded of the gospel of Matthew and the line “Straight is the gate and narrow is the way.” As mentioned, the very great majority of dharma practices are purification techniques that help us to gradually remove our dualisms, recoup the energy it required to maintain them, and learn to extend ourselves unilaterally – singly. The result of all that dharma practice and the various techniques is to pare down our dualisms until they no longer obscure the actual nature of the mind itself, so that we can see and recognize it.

Once the true nature of the mind is recognized, that realization itself sets off a chain-reaction that gradually (or not so gradually) collapses dualisms like a row of dominoes. However, we first have to reach the point of Recognition, which is why the many dharma practices exist and why I write all these blogs, to help make folks aware of the sequence of events involved and to gradually expose you to how all of this works and what it is about. We each have what can appear like a desert of practice to cross, but indeed, there is an oasis at the end of that journey.

I’m making this journey myself, but am also there to help others as I can make that same journey.

MICRO KARMA

October 13, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Karma is the result of our previous intentions and actions that is ripening. And karma trumps genes, the accidental, and circumstantial. To use an analogy, karma is like rolling a pair of loaded dice, where karma is the “load.” When the dice are rolled, the tendency will be determined by the load.

If we continuously dig a groove by underscoring over and over again through repeating the same action, our tendency to fall into that inscribed groove is more probable. The deeper the groove, the more pervasive and long-lasting the karma. And what most folks don't seem to understand is that micro-karma, the tiny actions (cringes, shocks, reactions, prejudice, etc.) we perform hundreds of times a day, accumulate beyond our imagination. And this accumulated karma, just like the more major actions (kill, steal, etc.), is also exactly recorded, ripens without fail, and inevitably arises to further obscure our awareness.

I can write about this over and over, but until we each become aware enough to actually see it go down, and watch ourselves fall into these inscribed grooves, we will never take the quite obvious steps to catch ourselves in the act and no longer record that action. If we stop acting in that particular way, we stop recording that karma, and it gradually exhausts itself,

dries up, and we are that much clearer of mind. This is not rocket science, folks.

All that is required to do something about this endless accumulation is a little more awareness on our part. How do we get that awareness? We get more aware by loosening our fixation on all that is going on around us. Even a little bit of wiggle room we gain can be enough to get our foot in the door of greater awareness, and even a little more awareness can be enough to catch ourselves in the act of the repetitive underscoring of unnecessary actions that we habitually repeat.

With no increased awareness, we are on a subway train hurtling through a life of increasing obscuration. Once we catch ourselves at it by realizing what we are doing, we can begin to tone down our habitual actions, and by that realization gain back a little more of the energy and awareness that we now squander unknowingly. And awareness begets more awareness, until pretty soon we find ourselves scaling back the karma we habitually record, and we soon have a domino-effect in our favor. We can then gradually pull out of the nose dive we have been on, well, virtually forever.

Just as karma is relentless in its accumulation, the removal of karma through increased awareness on our part can be just as powerful and relentless, once started. It does not take forever to start, but it does take a little bit of practice on our part to get it rolling.

CLINGING TO THE SKY

October 14, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

My moods still go up and down, even in the course of a single day. That “up” or high-moment that I so like to hold onto is only as durable as my next disappointment. These seemingly inevitable ups and downs are the hallmark of Samsara, this dualistic world we are caught up in. If only I could freeze-frame the good times and ride on those. But the ferris wheel of my life always keeps on turning and before I know it, I am on the other end from the highs, meaning, down in the dumps, at least relatively speaking.

We not only have the ups and downs to negotiate, but also the endless polarities that our habitual dualisms invoke. Smoothing out some of the ups and downs of life is what preliminary dharma practice is all about. The whole idea is to take these dualistic, two-sided “I and you,” “we and them,” and “this and that” (not to mention our ups and downs) and restore the connection between the two, not to blur them together as vanilla, but so that we realize the oneness that unites them, that they are connate, one. Interdependent is how the world actually is. Even polarities are united by their opposition, etc. For all this, awareness is key. All dharma progress always leads back to our increasing awareness, but how do we do that?

The Tibetan dharma literature points out that it is the gaps in our obscurations that we must look for. I am reminded of when I am on a subway (or train) platform and perhaps standing a little too close to the tracks. As the subway rockets through non-stop, I am frozen in the flashing of car after car going by, almost unable to move. For me, that is an analogy of how we experience the endless cyclic nature of life, unable to find a gap in the incessant stream of events.

In other words, at least in the beginning, gaps in the freight-train of life can be hard to find and they depend upon increasing our awareness to observe them, but we first have to get our foot in the door. We can wait for the exigencies of life to bring breaks, occasional gaps in our habitual obscurations or we can undertake various dharma practices to help facilitate finding gaps in our habits. Where will this increased awareness come from?

It is very simple. Increased awareness comes from relaxing our fixation on whatever we are fixated on, such as our fears, biases, hopes -- whatever captivates us now. "Relaxing" means just that, letting go, and turning our gaze from the outside, inward. Turning inward can be as simple as relaxing the grip on our deer-in-the-headlights fixations, even a little bit. We are looking for the chink in the armor of our fixations, that gap of oxygen, some fresh air.

Concern with ourselves, these endless fixations and busyness, prevent us from seeing through, much less beyond our self-preoccupations and recognizing the actual nature of the mind and how it works. But, as mentioned, there ARE gaps. Once we learn to be aware of them, we can gradually widen the gaps and,

best of all, learn to actually see through them, like looking through a window. Beyond our self-imposed obscurations is the nature of mind itself.

This is what needs to be done, what has to be done. And, best of all, with a little instruction and the proper effort, we can each do this.

TURNING THE MIND

October 16, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The “Four Thoughts that Turn the Turn the Mind,” also called the Common Preliminaries, are where many folks come face-to-face with the reality of Buddhism. I know I did. Unlike the Ten Commandments and many other religious imperatives, the “Four Thoughts” don’t tell us what to do, but are rather the simple facts of how it is. When I first encountered the Four Thoughts, it was like reading my own mind. I had been thinking about the exact same points myself for many years. The Four Thoughts were already my own thoughts, so of course I listened up and identified. For those who are not familiar with these four thoughts, here there are:

THE FOUR THOUGHTS

(1) THE PRECIOUS HUMAN LIFE: This life we are living is precious to us and we don’t want to waste it.

(2) IMPERMANENCE: Life is fragile, like a soap bubble, impermanent and transient.

(3) KARMA: Our every act (and intent) has consequences.

(4) SAMSARA: This cyclic world of ups and downs we find ourselves in is endless. We cannot game the system and will never get all our ducks in a row.

As you see, these four thoughts are not imperatives, but simply obvious truths. The Four Thoughts are also traditionally called the “Four Reminders” or the “Four Reversals.” The Four Thoughts frequently are the first thing dharma students encounter in the Buddhist literature or from a lama. Something you may not know is that after we have completed all the preliminary practices and are finally ready to study and practice Mahamudra Meditation (the ultimate practice), the first thing we do is to once again study the Four Thoughts.

This happened to me, and before seriously beginning Mahamudra practice, I spent three years just on the “Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma.” That’s how important these four thoughts are. In other words, they are called the Common Preliminaries because they are preliminary (go before) and are the base of everything that comes after. Without them firmly (and constantly) in mind, realizing the dharma is not possible.

As mentioned in the previous blog, if an authentic spiritual teacher cannot be found, the Four Thoughts can easily be learned through time spent with and study of Mother Nature. In my case this was especially true. I wish I had the space here to tell you my personal story. My particular introduction to non-dualistic thought and Insight Meditation came through the combination of a bit of life adversity and plunging myself deeply into nature for some six months. This period was so definitive that I was out watching the sun come up each day for something like six months straight, something I had seldom done for a great many years even once.

My point is that these four thoughts are not just for going in one ear and out the other, but rather they are necessary to ground us so that we can practice dharma successfully. By being able to keep all four of these thoughts actively in mind, we remain down to earth, “sober” enough, to intuitively grasp the dharma and act on it. Otherwise, the danger is that we walk around like we are going to live forever, unable to get serious to the point of realizing much of anything. The value of the four thoughts is symbolized by the earth-touching gesture of the historical Buddha of our time.

A NATURAL TEACHER

October 15, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The area of Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism that I identify with (and work within) is the Karma Kagyu Lineage, whose leader is the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje. As luck would have it, because of the diaspora in Tibet, I had the chance to meet many great rinpoches and even spend time with them, including the Karmapa. In addition, I have worked with one particular Tibetan rinpoche for over thirty-three years. An integral part of Vajrayana practice is working closely with a living teacher, someone who can act as a guide in our instruction.

In the Vajrayana tradition, in order for dharma training to be successful, the bond between a teacher and student has to be considered sacred, the relationship more immaculate than an operating room, and the guru more skillful than a brain surgeon. I am often asked by those who would like to begin dharma practice how can they find such a teacher, someone with whom they can work this closely. And it is not an easy question to answer.

It is said that there are 84,000 dharma teachings, thus 84,000 dharma teachers, and 84,000 types of dharma students. And that is probably just a figurative number. The point is that we each have to find a dharma teacher from whom we can actually learn. We can't assume that just because a dharma teacher is

well-known that they will fit our personality. The only rule of thumb I can suggest is to judge a teacher not just by their reputation, but by whether their words and teaching strike you deeply, as in: you actually learn from them and progress.

I could point you to this or that dharma teacher that I respect, but even if you went to them and became their student, you might not be able to learn. Dharma training can be very individual. What I write here is not meant to be discouraging, but just as I did, you may have to go and try out this or that dharma teacher until you find one that fits you. However, in the meantime, there is one dharma teacher that I can recommend with no hesitation whatsoever and that is Mother Nature. Until you find the perfect human teacher, there is no better instructor than nature herself.

I agree with the well-known landscape photographer Hand Strands, who said: "Nature is always true and never trivial." In lieu of a living human guru, nature is the perfect teacher. Even though I have a living teacher (and have had one for decades), nature is still a constant companion from whom I never cease to learn. More important, the laws of nature always demonstrate truth and help to keep me in line.

Nature has the perfect demeanor, always demonstrating the preciousness of life itself, its absolute impermanence, the obvious laws of karma cause and effect, and the cyclic impossibility of ever gaming this dualistic system of Samsara, i.e. ever getting all our ducks in a row.

Nature perfectly offers in minute detail exactly what we encounter in beginning dharma practice, what are called “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma.” If I have time, I will try to go into these four thoughts further tomorrow and how Mother Nature perfectly presents them.

[Here is a photo taken recently just after first-light, out along a seasonal road in the Michigan wetlands. Overnight temperatures hover around freezing, night after night, but not plunging below that. Still, the trees are turning colors, led of course by those fleeting reds, a color that appears just for a day or two in any one area and then is gone. With the trees un-leafing, so to speak, suddenly there is much more light all around in the forests.

And although I still go out around dawn or soon thereafter, it is getting increasingly colder at that time of day, so part of me is also coming in, looking toward my tiny indoor studio for the coming months. I am already eyeing the indoor plants at the local supermarket as possible subjects. Today I brought a couple of them home.

THE ADVICE OF CHÖGYAM TRUNGPA

October 17, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The “Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind” made an indelible impression on me on contact, but they were really driven home to me by the time I spent as chauffeur for the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. What can I say? Meeting Trungpa Rinpoche was a profound experience, an island of sanity in the crazy sea of my life. I believe that Trungpa was a siddha, a very highly realized being. At least he had me rapt, coming and going, from first to last contact.

His comments to me about the “Four Thoughts” are a perfect example of this. As it turned out, I ended up designing the poster for Trungpa’s lecture in Ann Arbor at Rackham Auditorium in February of 1974. During the time I spent with Rinpoche, he commented on the poster I had made for him, which featured a woodcut of a Tibetan dragon, shown here.

Unlike in the West, where dragons breathe fire and are often feared adversaries, in the East they are sacred and often celestial beings. I reproduce below the woodcut of the Tibetan dragon that I used for Trungpa’s poster. As you can see, this is a dragon flying in the clouds, clutching a precious gem in each of its four paws.

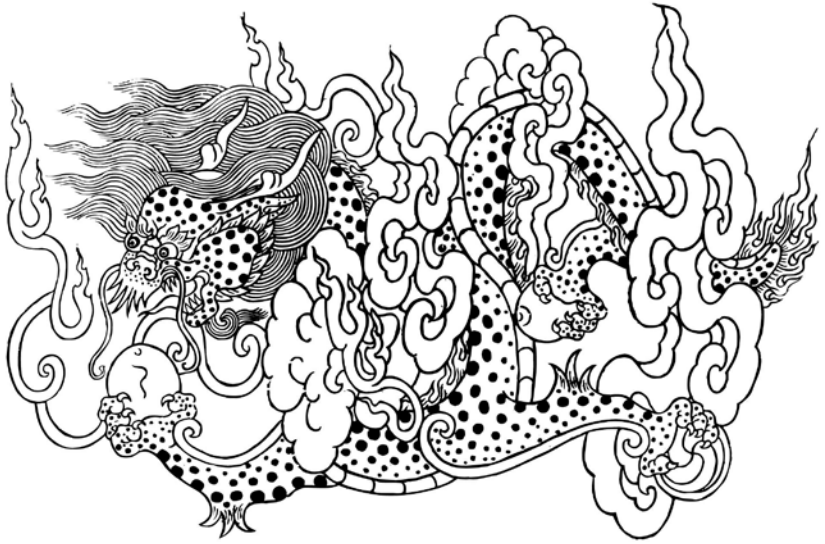
Anyway, Chögyam Trungpa looked the poster over and asked me if I knew what the dragon image stood

for. I told him that I did not, but had chosen it because I thought it was beautiful and fitting. Trungpa went on to explain to me that as long as the dragon held a precious jewel in each of his four claws, he could fly, but if he dropped even one of them, he would fall from the clouds to the ground.

The implication was that the dragon held the four thoughts that turn the mind toward the dharma in his claws, one in each hand. In a similar way, we need to keep each of the “Four Thoughts” in mind, not just one or two. If we can do this, our mind can progress toward realization of the dharma, but if we drop even one, we fall right back into Samsara, this cyclic world of ups and down.

Well, I took this to heart, just as I took anything Trungpa Rinpoche told me, but it took me some time to realize how important what he pointed out to me was for successful dharma practice. And, over the years, this has come home to me more and more emphatically, in particular the fact that apparently I am such a poor learner that it takes some very upsetting, tragic, or health-related personal event in my life for me to get all that serious about, well, anything.

Trungpa’s advice was that we need to grasp and keep these four thoughts that turn the mind firmly in mind, all four of them at once, for our mind to get right so that we can absorb and practice dharma meaningfully. I pass this story and Trungpa’s advice on to you because it emphasizes that these four thoughts are essential for dharma practice, not only in the beginning, but also in the middle and the end.



BEWILDERMENT

October 18, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The Ven. Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche writes:

“When we watch a television program, we have no trouble identifying places, persons, animals, mountains, and so on. Through becoming involved with the program, we identify with what we are seeing and begin to feel an emotional response. Actually, what we are looking at are not places, persons, animals, or mountains, but points of light on a tube in a little box. This confusion that is necessary to enjoy a television program is similar to bewilderment or ignorance, where the very vividness (intensity of the images) of the mind’s lucidity overpowers the mind.”

Thrangu Rinpoche’s comment is spot-on. We sit enchanted by a TV movie, tears running down our cheeks, emotions in high gear, and what we see is not even real, but rather, as Rinpoche states, just points of light on a silvery screen. Is it so hard to believe, as the Tibetan Buddhists suggest, that the life we live from day-to-day is not identical in nature, a screen we project ourselves on and then, fascinated, watch, until the power eventually is turned off?

The movie-watching analogy is apt, along with the concept that we easily overpower our self with images that we ourselves project. Thrangu Rinpoche’s point is that it does not take much for us to slip into taking a

movie as something real enough for us to emote to and get lost in. It should therefore be meaningful to us that the great rinpoches of the past point out that this life we are living now is exactly such a movie-dream, one which we can (and eventually must) see through and wake up from.

Good morning!

THE HALO OF HARD TIMES

October 18, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The role of adversity in dharma practice should not be underestimated. I hate to admit it, but in my case, hard times are responsible for a lot of my real dharma progress. Given good times, I tend to slip on by and coast. It just comes naturally. For me, it is the hard times, when the rubber finally meets the road, that sober me up enough to get a grip on actual reality. Otherwise, I am on vacation – vacated to one degree or another.

It doesn't seem fair that only when hard times come do I listen up, and it certainly does not recommend me to myself, but there you have it. It seems that I am very smooth in sliding through it all, avoiding whatever I deem difficult, and riding free on what is easy. I admit that it does not speak well of my character.

However, when I look back over the history of my dharma practice, even with all of its quite regular routines, it still seems that I managed to skim over much of what might have brought me to grips with reality. Sure, I can stand back and observe it all through the window of Mother Nature and the great outdoors, and it does affect me deeply like many movies do, in the gut, but for how long? And of course I am a "sensitive" one, but what (and when) do I actually do something about it, like respond with

dharma action and real change? The answer is: seldom enough to please me.

Then, along comes the school of hard knocks, an event (or two) that throws me for a loop and puts me to the floor. Sadly, only then do I really come eyeball to eyeball with reality and let some changes in. Otherwise, like a chameleon, I only alter my colors as it suits me, and this most unconsciously.

Do I think that I am the Lone Ranger in all of this? No I don't. Not a bit. I am the rule, not the exception, and I know it. It's a fact that I never search out hard times, but I do seem to benefit from them, dharmically. How ironic and perhaps even sad is this, but true?

For me, it appears there is always a silver lining in my hard times, much as I would like to think otherwise. The hard times are rough enough, but the byproduct of increased dharma progress is also undeniable. As mentioned, I don't welcome hard times or consciously go looking for them, but I have learned to make hay while the sun shines if the hard times come. As long as I have to suffer untoward events, I might as well take advantage of these wake-up calls and progress dharmically. The rough times do come for all of us, and when they do, at least we can take advantage of the sobering they bring to gain some realization about life.

"You can't keep a good man down," but how else does the dharma get our full attention?

“FROM MY COLD, DEAD HANDS”

October 19, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I might jump around a little bit in this blog, so bear with me. The above quote is one of the slogans of the National Rifle Association, “I’ll give up my gun when you pry it from my cold, dead hands.” No, I am not going to talk about guns here, but rather about the habit of attachment and fixation; guns are just an easy example. As they say, “The fix is in.”

And, as the Karma Kagyu Lineage Prayer states:

”Detachment is the foot of meditation, it is taught.
Attachment to food and wealth disappears.
To the meditator who gives up ties to this life,
Grant your blessing that attachment to ownership and
honor cease.”

The above Buddhist text is perhaps not a very modern way of putting things. We touchy Americans don’t like the imperative, especially being told to “give up” anything. We insist on the right to have it all, even if it is harmful for us. And our vices are the last to go.

In the lineage prayer, ATTACHMENT to ownership and honor is what is being pointed out. Not ownership and honor, per se, but rather the attachment and fixation to them. To use an analogy, how long do I cling to an upturned canoe in the rapids of the river of my life? When is it time to just let go and roll with the

river? And when I do (at long last) let go and I am at last one with my fate, does my well-being improve, and what am I to think of that?

It is the attachment and fixation (clinging to the upturned canoe) that needs to be released, so that we can just go with the flow of the river of life. It is not easy to let go, because the clinging is so habitual. However, common logic tells us that in time we will let it all go anyway, like it or not. Of course, it is only a matter of time. Everything is.

Another concept I chuckle at is the idea of being damned. I have to laugh a little that the word “damn” is identical in sound to the word “dam,” an object which blocks things, including water. Take the dam away, and the water flows naturally. That’s the idea and our fixations are the dam. Relax our fixations, and things begin to proceed in a more natural manner.

And, as many of you know, I am fond of the analogy of the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, where sticks in a random pile are taken away, one by one, until nothing at all is left. This is exactly what happens with our fixations through dharma training; they are taken away, one at a time, until nothing remains but clarity itself, and we can see!

So, how do we un-fixate? In order to stop fixating we have to be aware that we are fixating in the first place. It is a perfect Catch-22, the recursive quality of fixation reinforcing itself. Awareness has to arise in whatever gaps or chinks that exist in our fixation. In a very real sense, this is what the great majority of dharma practices are about, purifying our

obscurations until we reach a point where they are more transparent than opaque.

Then we can see beyond our self, so to speak and begin to make out the landscape of the mind itself. Talk about Atlantis rising from the waters of Lethe. That's got to be it.

And to repeat myself, I have found that the easiest and quickest way to develop enough awareness to get a grasp on our own mind is reaction toning (Reaction Tong-len), which for those interested is described (among other techniques) in this free e-book: "Tong-Len: The Alchemy of Reaction."

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../Tong-len%20-%20Second%20Edition...>

WHERE IS AWARENESS FOUND?

October 20, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Awareness is a natural product of removing obscurations, plain and simple. There is no point at which the dharma techniques themselves generate any awareness. Their only function is purification by removing impediments to awareness. Dharma practices hopefully facilitate awareness, but they are not themselves awareness. By removing obscurations, awareness is what remains. So, don't look for increased awareness as something coming from outside, like from on high. Awareness can only be found inside and is naturally always already there.

So, unless we are actively removing obscurations through our dharma practice, nothing will happen. No awareness will ever arise, because, as mentioned, awareness is always already there, just hidden by our own obscurations. It's not like when we rub two sticks together, we get fire. If we understand that, then it should be clear how important it is to practice effectively and under authentic guidance. Anything less and, as mentioned, no awareness will result and through ineffective practice, further obscuration may even accumulate.

This is why it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of practice by any other method than direct results. Reciting a mantra 108,000 times does not guarantee anything. Practicing a dharma technique for a certain

length of time, even years, is no guarantee either. These are just convenient approximations, but it is difficult to measure awareness except by direct achievement. Awareness does not come from our teacher, but only from us. We already have it, but just don't know it.

The bottom-line advice is to follow our teacher's instructions with great care until awareness actually results. It is KEY to accept that we have no idea what greater awareness, much less realization or enlightenment, is like. We are blind to our inherent awareness, except perhaps in fits and snatches. Just as there is no free lunch, there is no way (at least that I know of) to practice by rote or to automatically be mindful. Mindfulness requires just that, actually being mindful. We can't just throw some spaghetti at the wall and see what sticks.

Because of this, we can see why the great siddhas suggest that many small sessions of practice, done with the proper intent, are often better than grinding out a long session during which we are not fully present. In other words, we have to be there (and learn how to be there) 100% for dharma practice to be effective. We can't fake it and nothing less than our full attention is required.

In summary, there is no back door to awareness, to realization, and to enlightenment. As the New Testament says, "Straight is the gate and narrow the way." For each of us, there is only one way to realization and that is the removal of our own particular obscurations. While we all may share common types of obscuration, the removal of our personal set (and their particular arrangement in our

case) is unique to us and probably has to be undertaken in a certain order.

To me, the message here is that, unlike many things in life, we can't just put dharma practice on automatic and expect anything good to result. It seems better to do a small amount of practice carefully, with mindfulness and direction, than to risk staining our practice by forcing or doing it by rote. There is no substitute to full attention and actually doing it. This could be the one thing in life that we can't skimp on and still have any success.

PHOTOGRAPHY DISCUSSION

October 22, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I participate in a number of other blogs, all of them about photography. Here is part of a discussion with other photographers for those interested:

Michael: "In my work, the 'audience' is secondary, and usually limited to me, myself, and I. After all, I am trying to tickle a deep-seated itch that I have. More important IMO is the 'process' itself of taking photographs, the state of mind it induces, with the resulting photos more of a byproduct. At least that is how it began. I find that attention to (and complete extension in) the process itself (to the exclusion, if possible, of witnessing) creates clarity and lucidity; over time I find the photos themselves have also improved. It is my belief that we can't realize more than what 'is', but with full immersion in the process, we perhaps can grasp the extent of what is and convey that impression. Just my two cents."

To this, another photographer replied:

"I have feelings very similar to yours. Process is a HUGE part of why I make photographs. So important that I lost interest in digital photography and returned back to film, giving me a much more tactile experience. Every part of shooting film elicits a response deep inside me for reasons not entirely clear. I guess I like touching tangible objects rather than creating virtual ones such as computer files. In

the past 5 years, I have developed by hand close to 1000 rolls of film and even to this day, the feeling of opening up the tank, pulling out the reel, and unwinding the wet, freshly developed film, gives me an intense, near primal joy. The pause between snapping the photo and developing (usually days, sometimes weeks or even months), along with the pause between developing the film & scanning it for visual evaluation, adds another dimension of anticipation. For some, the immediacy of digital is a detriment, not an advantage. Anyway, I thought your reply about process was very interesting.”

Michael: “Haptics generally refers to anything we can touch and feel, but we all know that we are also touched and moved by ideas and especially emotions, so I like to think that haptics extends to mental and spiritual realms as well. For me ‘process’ is not so much about the haptics of touch as it is about ‘seeing,’ where it is not WHAT is seen that is important, but the act of seeing itself. We know that the eye cannot see itself, but not everyone is aware that ‘seeing’ can see itself seeing, which is what I was trying to express in my first comment. We can rest our mind within the process of seeing and, as mentioned, clarity and lucidity are the result. Resting our mind in that way amounts (analogically) to having access to special 3D glasses or a lens for viewing the world, and IMO the resulting photographs can reflect this.

The wonderful photographer Ming Thein responds:

“I actually find I make my best images when the process becomes intuitive or automatic or far less ‘heavy’ than the seeing and composing – then, I’m ‘in

the zone' and don't really think consciously about anything other than the view through the finder. Personally, I find that if I have to allocate mental resources to remembering which button and knob does what, then I just have less left over to devote to composition."

"At a more detached level, I think we're actually saying the same thing: the result still influences the way the audience thinks, even if that audience is limited to just you. But you perhaps think a bit less consciously about it to prevent potential unproductive effects, though."

Michael: "I believe we are saying the same thing, because, aside from having to make a living (which also can be a significant driving factor), the only thing I am aware of that cuts through the fog of inertia is the clarity of being suspended in the moment, unencumbered by extraneous thoughts and doubts. Resting the mind in the process of seeing is like putting our nose to a pure oxygen vent, the unique freshness of the present moment. "

This from Ming Thein, my favorite photographer's blog, which can be found here:

<https://blog.mingthein.com/>

SEEING WHAT CANNOT BE SEEN

October 23, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Freshness is in the moment, only. Obviously the past is no longer fresh and the future is not yet here, which leaves this present moment to consider, "Right now." The philosophers, scientists, not to mention the Buddhist logicians have all parsed time and declared that the present that exists between the past and the future is infinitesimally brief, in fact, unmeasurable, and yet it is all we have.

As for what the great Tibetan lamas have to say about working with this current moment, it is "Don't Alter the Present." They don't say, as Baba Ram Das said, "Be Here Now" or anything that requires effort or action; instead they say to simply relax as it is and not alter the moment. Or, as some of the Zen practitioners say, "Do Not Do a Thing."

The moment between the future and the past that we call "now," as mentioned, is brief, even instantaneous, so there is no way we can capture it. Anyway, even if we could, that would just result in a memory, which is already, by definition, in the past. There is nothing we can do but relax and allow the present to arise and reveal itself as it will. Of course, that is easier said than done.

Yet, this brief present moment is where (and how) the entire history of the world came from. We should

know by now from trying that both the past and the future are beyond our reach, however slightly, and that all we have to work with is the present. So, it is what we do with and in the present that counts. This much we all know.

It should interest us that the highest Buddhist teachings concern themselves, above all, with the present and with being very careful not to alter it in any way. Equally, these teachings point out that following our endless train of thoughts (their content) is an exercise in futility, while learning to look directly at the nature of thoughts (all thoughts) is key.

And it is over this point that Buddhist meditation divides itself between dualistic and non-dualistic practices; it is with dualistic (beginning) styles of meditation that we use analogies, while non-dualistic meditation (Insight and Mahamudra) are by their nature ineffable -- beyond concepts.

However, by using analogies, the dualistic teachings proclaim a lot, but we have to keep in mind that an analogy, by definition, is not the reality, so we must be very careful not to reify analogies to the extent of taking them as the reality. An analogy is just that, an analogy, an oblique way of bouncing a ping off what can only be finally a realization.

One common analogy is that thoughts, irrespective of their content (what they mean), are like windows into the nature of the mind, windows through which we gaze, but not at any "thing." In non-dualistic meditation (such as Insight Meditation) the "seeing" itself is what is seen, so we could say "Seeing sees itself seeing" and rests in that recursive state.

We can't see beyond the limits of the mind, which is limitless, but we can see up to and including those limits, if that makes any sense. To do this, we have to give up any kind of objectification (and subjectification) and fully extend ourselves in the moment, with no monitor or witness. The preceding sentence is just an analogy.

In that moment of seeing we see what cannot be seen, which is nothing that matters, but is nevertheless something actually to be seen that is absolutely clear and lucid.

This "seeing what cannot be seen" is not only worth seeing, it is the key to enlightenment.

THE VALUE OF ANALOGIES

October 23, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

When it comes to the dharma and spiritual training, where the result is greater awareness, not to mention enlightenment, we automatically find ourselves in the world of analogies. After all, awareness, realization, enlightenment... concepts like that... are beyond our ken, meaning we can't know that which we have not yet known, and this by definition.

Because realization, even when realized, is ineffable to someone who has not realized it, we are stuck with expressing such realization through analogies, and we do. And analogies, of course, can only take us half way, because a perfect analogy would be the realization itself and thus need no analogy.

Since an analogy is just that, it is not meant to be a substitute for what it is an analogy of. Perhaps the best use of analogies is to guide our own expectations in a useful way, rather than let us imagine whatever we will, which we inevitably do, given the opportunity. Analogies are never more than a "sounds like this" kind of affair.

Completing the gap between an analogy and the real thing is always up to us, something only we can do as we are able to manage it. Such closure, by definition, is always a "Eureka!" event, the moment when we finally realize what any analogy is getting at. Closure

for the analogies in our life is the process of non-dualization, like focusing our eyes, making two into one, realizing finally that they have always been one anyway.

So, until that fine day that we realize something, we are at the mercy (and kindness) of analogies to give us the flavor of, and perhaps a taste for, the realization itself – the real thing. However, the danger of analogies is that we tend to reify the analogy and end up thinking it is the actual realization, while the blessing of an analogy (if it is an apt one) is that it helps resolve our own mistaken expectations once and for all. “Helps” is the operative word. Anyway, that is the Catch-22 of analogies.

Analogies are unavoidable and can be useful, provided, as mentioned, that we don't mistake the analogy for the realization and start expecting the analogy instead of the reality. And this happens just all the time. In other words, don't reify the analogy!

The good advice is to keep our mind open for the realization of what the analogy can only point to. Keep the blank slate “blank” and don't fill it up with studies, readings about, rumors, and especially imaginations, and all of the things we do when we have expectations and try to invoke the future.

As the great Mahasiddha Tilopa so wisely said, “Don't invite the future.” Wait for it to appear (as it is) in the present and then don't alter that. The freshness of this present moment is invaluable beyond measure. Everything that has ever happened happens right now.

THE SUN IS SHINING

October 24, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Just where is the past and where is the future? We might like to think of time as linear, with the Past on one end of a long line, the Future at the other, and the Present somewhere in the middle. However, there is no direction (East, West, North, or South) that we can step toward that will take us into the past or future.

If we want to think that way, we would perhaps be better off thinking that the past is this outside world which is aging with impermanence and a future that comes from somewhere within. Or, consider the fetus, where what is to eventually be outside forms on the inside of the womb, like a crystal. In that case, the inside surrounds the outside from the get-go, etc. As for me, the symbol that means the most to me is that of the Sun shining in the firmament, with its light rays extending out always, in all directions, taking from inside, brilliantly burning on the surface, and eternally shining outward.

I can't help but reflect on the fact that all my memories, anything in my past, have automatically already been processed, and will continue to be further processed, literally, from "now" on. It makes resorting to the past (and past images) a hall of mirrors that can only become more and more warped as time moves on. We wander in the fog of the past at our own expense and risk. Even the least logic should

tell us that this is a lose/lose situation. The past can never be made to be present again. The great Mahasiddhas say, "Don't Prolong the Past." In other words, as the old saying goes "Let sleeping dogs lie."

The same goes for forcing the future, leaning too far into the wind. There is no life there, not yet, and it is as anaerobic as the past. No oxygen. We would need a space suit to go there, so to speak. In the bell-curve of life, we are penalized for being either ahead (future) or behind (past) the curve of the present. It's forever either too soon or too late, our choice, which leaves us with the present to consider. The past is already dim and growing ever dimmer, the future vague and still uncertain. Like the spaceman, we live in the bubble of the present (and always have) as we travel through time.

The teachings say that the heart of this present moment is lucid awareness, a bubble or presence that is behind all our obscurations. Like the Sun in the sky, this clarity and lucidity is always there. We can't see it because clouds of our own obscurations stand in the way. Still, we have some "awareness" right now, at least enough to read this sentence, but perhaps not enough to see through all of the impurities we have accumulated.

In summary, whether we think about the past or imagine the future, we do it from the ever-changing present. Behind the curtain of the Self (and its fixations) is this incredible awareness that has always been with us and that without which, we would not be conscious. It is called Buddha Nature. This bubble of awareness holds at bay the encroaching past and

burgeoning future like Moses held back the Red Sea. Think of Buddha Nature as the Sun shining in the firmament, keeping both the past and the future from overwhelming us and insuring a controlled release of energy. This is the eternal present, feeding on the future, and endlessly sending its echoes into the past.

THE LIGHT OF THE MIND

October 25, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

A little more on the here and the “Right Now.” We access both the past and the future from this present moment. Each is an excursion from the “Now,” with all the attendant risks of memory (past) and expectations (future). So, where does the light of the mind come from? Tibetan Buddhists point to “Buddha Nature,” which is like the Sun, in that it is always shining in the midst of the mind. And, like the Sun, it too can be obscured by clouds, so our Buddha Nature is obscured by our own confusion and fixations.

Perhaps the above comments are just some fancy words for the clear and lucid consciousness that lights up our life and is always shining beneath whatever obscurations cloud it from our awareness of it. Certainly, this is the light that, like a flashlight, we shine wherever we want to see, even if we have not yet learned to see the light itself directly and unobscured.

Just as the eye cannot see itself, the clarity by which we see everything that we CAN see, cannot yet see itself. As mentioned, it’s like shining a flashlight everywhere around us, except at ourselves. Just as wind can blow away clouds that obscure the Sun, the dharma can gradually remove our obscurations, so that the natural clarity of our Buddha Nature

(something we all have internally) can shine through, even though right now we cannot see it.

It's like when we search for our reading glasses while we are wearing them or feel the urge to put on some music, when it's already playing. It should not surprise us that the obvious often escapes us when it's right before our eyes. Reality is often too close for us to recognize it. Yet, there it is.

Just as the Sun in the firmament lights up Earth, Buddha Nature lights up the mind, although for any one of us, it may be partially or almost totally hidden by our obscurations. Still, what light we do have is what shines through from behind or despite our impediments. It is what allows you see this page. This is why most dharma training does not so much introduce anything new, but rather reveals more and more of what we already have only some of, like clarity and lucidity. In the pith dharma texts, the gradual result of dharma practice is often described as like the Sun coming up. Given time and a little practice, it dawns on us.

RE-MINDING

October 28, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

It can be discouraging to realize that the little flashes of insight we manage to eke out through beginning dharma practice eventually have to reach incandescence, get beyond being just intermittent, and happen continuously. A reason for pause is due to the sheer amount of effort we have put out to even get those brief glimpses. It is like one of those perpetual-motion machines that don't work because we have to perpetually put more energy into them than we get out of them. Luckily, that is not how all this works.

It is true that it takes great effort and practice to create the muscle-memory needed to build a successful habit with many dharma techniques, particularly with Insight Meditation and what is termed "Recognition" of the mind's true nature. However, what is not understood is that, once started, when incandescence is reached, Insight Meditation becomes self-fueling. An analogy might be that although we have to cock a revolver for that first shot, the energy from that shot ejects the empty shell and automatically loads the next and successive bullets. That is what I mean by self-fueling.

Although it takes practice and effort to break the habit of ignoring the mind's nature, once broken, the clarity and lucidity of the mind transforms the effort into a

downhill slope. So, if you imagine that dharma training is like Sisyphus rolling a boulder uphill forever, that would be wrong. There is a turning point, where we reach the crest of the hill of effort, after which things are self-propelling from there on out. No real effort. With that threshold once crossed, we stop “meditating” (with effort) and begin non-meditation – resting in the nature of the mind itself.

Reaching the crossover or tipping point mentioned above (“Recognition” of the mind’s nature) is dependent on the careful instructions of an authentic dharma teacher, one who has recognized the true nature of the mind. Like the drop of rain before the downpour, our first glimpse of realization needs to be followed by a second and third until such insight keeps at bay (and washes away) our lifelong tendency to simply ignore the nature of our own mind.

This process of finally “Seeing” the mind’s nature, at least for the great majority of us, depends upon our getting ourselves properly oriented in attitude through the various dharma preliminaries, followed by having the successful Pointing-Out Instructions from a guru, and then whatever time it takes after that to stabilize the recognition so that instead of a single drop, we have a downpour.

All of this requires what the Tibetans call RE-minding, learning to remember to actually LOOK at the mind’s nature over and over and over again until we don’t need reminding, but just naturally look at the nature of the mind instead of ignoring it, as we do now.

It does take effort on our part to build the initial habit, the muscle-memory required to remind ourselves to

look at the mind's nature, once we have been shown "how" to look. It has to be done over and over again, much like we strike flint and steel until we have a spark that results in a fire. My point here is that once the fire is lit, it becomes self-feeding, and won't go out. Just as it takes a special set of conditions to recognize the nature of the mind, so, after recognition it is difficult-to-impossible to "un-recognize" that nature. That, my friends, is the beauty of this process, but it takes perseverance!

“SHORT MOMENTS, MANY TIMES”

October 29, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The above quote is from Tulku Urygen Rinpoche, but his advice for Insight Meditation is echoed by scores of great lamas and Mahasiddhas throughout the history of dharma. This is not to say that long periods of sitting-meditation cannot be valuable, but they are for a different kind of meditation training. There are some good reasons why short moments of practice are recommended for the non-dual practices.

In general, short moments of meditation do not refer to Tranquility Meditation (Shamata), but rather to Vipassana (Insight Meditation), although the principle can be useful for Shamata Meditation as well. The problem with long sits for Insight Meditation practice is that the odds of the freshness of insight meditation surviving for more than a very short time (at least in the beginning) are slim to none. If we have a moment of awareness, an insight, or glimpse, it is very difficult to maintain that insight and not have it turn into something we end up trying (or hoping) to maintain. The great lamas say that the chances of an insight becoming conceptual and overriding whatever non-dual insight moment we had are almost one-hundred percent. The takeaway here for Vipassana Meditation favors short and frequent meditations rather than long effort-filled practice.

Because of this, it is suggested to do many very short moments of practice, where we look directly at the nature of the mind (or attempt to), yet not try to sustain, maintain, or in any way extend or alter that insight. My own lama has said that a session could be as long as it takes to raise a teacup to your lips and take a sip.

When learning Insight Meditation and, in particular when it pertains to “Recognition” of the true nature of the mind, the first challenge is to actually have that initial recognition. This revolves around having an authentic teacher point it out to us. After we actually have that glimpse of recognition, which may be brief (but still very much a realization), the traditional way to deepen that insight is to extend it by frequent attempts to again and again look at the nature of the mind, like doing it as often as we can, on and off the cushion. That becomes a practice.

Each brief insight (and its clarity) serves to replace our habitual dualistic fixations with a moment of lucid clarity, one during which additional karma is not being recorded. The absence of the usual fixations gradually reprograms our consciousness, replacing our history of fixation with one of relief and non-duality. As these moments of clarity increase in frequency, and karma dies out by no longer being recorded as heavily, a new past or history is created, while our fixations are left to twist in the wind and gradually die out.

In effect, with each session we are overriding our habitual tendency for dualistic fixation and replacing it with clarity. Literally, we are lessening our own karma

by not further recording it, thus gradually thinning it out.

Frequent short sessions of Insight Meditation can gradually be lengthened until more and more of the time we are resting in the nature of the mind and less and less of the time we are fixating in Samsara, where we can't help accumulating karma. We literally become or "fashion" a new person. This approach can be contrasted to that of endlessly trying to rework our past through therapies in an attempt deal with it.

FULLY IMMERSIBLE

October 30, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

A well-known Dzogchen teaching:

“See the view of no viewing.
Train in the meditation with nothing meditated upon.
Carry out the conduct of non-doing.
Achieve the fruition in which there is nothing attained.”

Obviously, such poetry is an attempt to describe the indescribable, and a good one at that. The above quote is famous; the more we get beyond what are called “relative truths” -- dualistic dharma practices with a subject (you) and an object (meditate) -- this is the kind of statement we will find.

Why? Because beyond the “relative” (dualistic truth) that we use in everyday life exists what is called non-relative or “absolute” truth, which has no subject and no object. This is “non-duality,” which by definition is ineffable, i.e. beyond words. “Non-dual” means it has no ends, unlike our normal dualistic thoughts, where there is “we” as a subject on one end and whatever else on the other (some object). Instead, in non-duality there is no separation of subject and object, but rather a continuous loop, a unity which is endless or infinite.

When we venture beyond dualistic dharma training (such as the various preliminary practices: Four

Thoughts, Lojong, Ngondro, etc.) and on into non-dual realms (Vipassana, Mahamudra), there is no leverage that can be found, nothing to hang onto. Instead, we entirely are just “there,” fully extended in the present to the limit of our limits and “the” limits. This full immersion, by definition of its inclusivity, requires all that we have, with no part left behind to watch the show -- no witness. In other words, this non-duality (and non-dual dharma practice) is a moment in which we are fully extended to the exclusion even of any conception as to what we are doing. We are “all in,” so to speak, yet, still, we know. This fact that we can “know” when “all in” is something that few are aware of and that we all need to experience, because its import is revolutionary and wonderful beyond words.

Although we cannot go beyond the limits of the mind itself, we can realize the full extent of the mind up to those exact limits, which is all there is anyway. However, we cannot do this dualistically, with some part of our “self” set aside as a witness or watcher. The full extent of the mind requires the full extension of our consciousness to the exclusion of any self-consciousness or “watching.” In other words, the realization of the mind requires 100% non-dualistic extension on our part, and nothing less. We can’t take notes, but we can “See” and having “Seen,” perhaps later reflect on that seeing. This is reminiscent IMO of the line in Hamlet’s soliloquy “To Be or Not to Be.”

THE CHILD IS FATHER TO THE MAN

October 31, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

'The child is father to the man.'
How can he be? The words are wild.
Suck any sense from that who can:
'The child is father to the man.'
No; what the poet did write ran,
'The man is father to the child.'
'The child is father to the man!'
How can he be? The words are wild!

A poem from my favorite poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins.

"What's past is prologue," as William Shakespeare wrote in "The Tempest." Everything that impresses us is recorded and stored in the Alayavijnana, the "Storehouse Consciousness." Memories are stored impressions of our actions and experiences. Some have better memories than others, but no matter how good the memory, everything remembered is tempered and shaped by our biases and prejudice either as they are recorded, the moment we try to recall them, or both. Memories rise up into consciousness at will, when we are able to remember, or spontaneously as some event stirs them.

First of all, our memories are all that we have of the past, so we probably have no way of knowing how warped and Photoshopped they are by fixations, our

likes and dislikes. And we perhaps don't realize that what we do remember is an ever-changing target, a direct reflection of our current hopes and fears. The facts of history come in and out of favor as the times change. And what is true for recorded history is also true for our personal history.

What I call the "Last Judgment" is always the latest (and eventually someday the last) take on things we have. That can be a good thing, because it leaves room for us to change our mind (and attitude) and see things differently. But all of these thoughts make rearranging the past to our satisfaction, which we can't help but attempt to do, somewhat of a murky affair.

We tend to look at life not only through rose-colored glasses, but glasses of all kinds of colors, sizes, and shapes. There is no doubt that clarity, such as it is for us, is to be found in the present, not in the past or the future. That is why I refer to the "present" as the oxygen vent compared to the anaerobic past and future, both of which are chokers. Life is confined to the present tense.

What we do with the present moment is kind of up to us. For many, the present is like a train station, where we get on any old train of thought that comes along and ride and ride. One thought follows another and, if nothing else, this amounts to how we entertain ourselves. It helps to pass the time and life goes by.

Those who have paid their dharma dues and learned to stabilize their mindfulness somewhat with Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) can then use that stability as a base for practicing Insight Meditation

(Vipassana). With Insight Meditation, we do something quite different when a thought arises. Instead of following one thought after another, until they become a train of thoughts, we are instructed by an authentic teacher how to look at the actual nature of each thought, and to ignore the content (what the thought is about).

Looking inward at thoughts (instead of outward as we normally do), looking directly at the nature of a thought as it arises, rather than at its content (as we usually do), the thought vanishes. In the space where the thought was, we then simply allow ourselves to rest completely in that empty gap or space. The upshot of this process is that, if we allow ourselves to rest totally, we can extend fully, to the exclusion of our habitual dualism (or any witnessing). Then the gap where the thought was becomes like a window through which we can look, but we don't see "something;" rather what is seen is "Seeing" seeing itself seeing, ad infinitum. The recursion is enough to blow away obscurations.

Yes, it is recursive or infinitely regressive (or whatever the right words are), but the net result is pristine clarity and lucidity. This is the "insight" in Insight Meditation. As mentioned, it is not insight about any particular "thing," but rather insight itself into the nature of the mind, there being nothing (no "thing") to be seen. It reminds me of the great quote from the German philosopher Hegel, when in his book "Phenomenology of the Mind" he wrote:

"We go behind the curtain of the Self, to see what is there, but mainly for there to be something to be seen."

Insight Meditation is a form of realization, not just another experience or conceptual understanding. Like the tip of a blowtorch, insight burns a hole through our dualistic concepts and fixations, replacing them with luminous clarity and lucid seeing itself, and this gradually (or for some, suddenly!) results in our realization of the actual nature of the mind. That realization (and its stabilization) is what can stop the accumulation of karma and eventually remove it.

THE SECRET LIFE OF OATS

October 31, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (michael@erlewine.net)

Who eats oats? Here in Northern Michigan, especially in winter, we do! And morning oatmeal is the way it happens. But all oatmeal is not created the same. Those of you who love oatmeal will read on, while those of you who don't really know it yet probably won't, but there are some oat secrets here.

I am not going to flood you with why oats (and especially whole oats) are healthy. You can get that on the web. What I will point out is that there are different ways to prepare oatmeal available and how they differ.

ROLLED OATS

Take some perfectly good oat groats (oats without a hull) and smash them between two steel rollers and you get rolled oats. All seeds are nature's way of protecting the future. We all know that. So the moment you smash an oat groat, you expose it to the elements and it begins to lose its life expectancy and also its health benefits. It becomes a processed food.

And depending on how much you flatten and further process it determines whether you have regular rolled-oats oatmeal or some form of 'instant' oatmeal, which is further processed. I don't eat these except in Apple Crisp and related deserts.

STEEL-CUT OATS

Take the whole groat and instead of smashing it flat, cut it into several small pieces with sharp steel and you have steel-cut oats. Everyone loves steel-cut oats more than rolled oats because it tastes way better and is somewhat healthier. There is still some life protection in the pieces over being just flattened. That being said, we don't eat oats this way often anymore either.

GRIND WHOLE OAT GROATS

This is one of the preferred ways we eat oats nowadays, and they taste way, way better than steel-cut or any other cut or flattened oats. And they are very much healthier in that all of the precious nutrients and so on are still right there. But there is a price to pay and that is the fact that you unless you want to cook them whole, you have grind them yourself. And we do.

In this super-busy world, who has time to grind oats? Well, it only takes about one or two minutes and it makes a world of difference in the eating. You can pick up a used hand grain mill on eBay for not much or get them on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) new for about \$19.95. You just put in the oats (or any grain) and grind. Out comes the oatmeal. It is an easy hassle and does not take long.

GRAIN MILLS

We retired our hand mills years ago and invested in an electric mill, of which there are many on the market. Ours is from Retsel:

<http://www.retsel.com/>

It is kind of pricey (\$400-500) but it lasts a lifetime, is built like a tank, and will grind all-you-can-eat flours of any kind, like for bread, pastas, etc. Think about it.

THE MORNING OATMEAL

The morning oatmeal is as easy as pouring about 1/3 cup of whole oat groats into the mill and turning it on. A minute or so later I've got oatmeal at whatever type of grind (fine or coarse) I like. Meanwhile I have been boiling 1 cup of water. I just pour the ground oatmeal into the boiling water, whisk it a bit, and I have fresh oatmeal that also has all the bran and nutrients that the whole oat had.

And, if I am in the mood, I roast the whole oats for a minute in a cast iron frying pan before I grind them and I have toasted oats oatmeal. Too good! My wife Margaret (who really is the wizard of grain grinding and oatmeal cooking around here) usually soaks the oats overnight ahead of time, causing them to swell up, dries them out in our oven, roasts them, and then grinds them. This is one of the best ways to cook oats.

The pilot light in our commercial oven is so strong that it dries things out. By the way, perhaps the single best kitchen investment we ever made was to purchase a commercial gas oven with six burners. That was in 1972 and it is still perfect today these many years later. And you can often pick up a used oven for very little at restaurant supply houses. Get it steam cleaned and you have something of very great value that will make you smile every time you use it.

COOKING WHOLE OAT GROATS

The best way to have oats, in my experience, is to cook the whole groats. This is not an easy task and takes a long time, usually some hours. Simply put whole oat groats in a pan with a lid and a lot of water and place them on the stove. Use a flame-tamer to keep the whole thing from burning, and stir (or scrape the bottom) frequently. This is a labor of love, but well worth the effort. And now for a brilliant twist on this approach:

SUPER-SECRET, NOW REVEALED

The tip-of-the-top, the VERY best way of cooking oats, was invented by my wife Margaret. She deserves an award for coming up with this. This is (almost) the only way we eat oats anymore. Take the whole groats (the whole berry) and soak them overnight. We soak a bunch and store what we don't use in the refrigerator.

Next, take the soaked oats and process them with some water in one of those "Magic Bullet" small blenders, which only cost about \$30. Just hit the switch for a few seconds, which chops up the groats as fine as you want. Now place the chopped groats in a saucepan with more water and cook for 15 minutes or so or until done. This makes the most incredible oatmeal I have ever eaten in a fraction of the time (and fuss) that it takes to cook whole groats on a flame tamer (as described above). This is the way to go. It takes very little time and preserves all of the oat's nutrients up to the last minute.

So there you have my oatmeal spiel for what it is worth, and for making a great breakfast it is worth a lot, if you take the time. As I get older, there is less and less processed food that satisfies us and so we are being herded toward whole this and whole that. Whole grains are hard to beat in this category. Try 'em.

[PHOTO: Here is a photo of our kitchen showing our Retsel grain grinder sitting right out (where it always is) on our counter.... to the right of the toaster. We use it all the time. An insert of what the Magic Bullet looks like is on the left. Above it are various whole grains. For breakfast, we like to use oat groats and mix in either some barley or buckwheat, depending on how cold it is outside. Buckwheat is the yang of the yang grains. Barley is a little lighter, and oats are the main deal.] Please share!



EFFORT THAT LEADS TO EFFORTLESSNESS

November 2, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@erlewine.net)

A source of confusion in dharma practice, but one that is important to understand, is the role of effort in practice. This topic runs through all levels of Buddhist teaching, the relation of trying (and effort) to accomplishment and awareness. The short answer is, as quoted above, that effort is valuable only to the degree that it leads to effortlessness. To the degree that it does not result in effortlessness, effort is not only wasted, it is dangerous and can actually make increased awareness and realization harder (or much harder) to acquire than otherwise. I should point out that this emphasis on less effort does not extend to the dharma Preliminaries (Shamata, Lojong, Ngondro, etc.), where sustained effort is encouraged, but rather to more advanced practices like Vipassana (Insight Meditation) and Mahamudra Meditation.

There is no question that, as with any technique that we set out to learn, some effort is needed to get us started. Dharma is no different from any other kind of practice. In fact, practicing dharma may well take more effort because essentially we are flying blind. Forgive me for once again giving an analogy that I often repeat, that of learning to play a musical instrument.

There is a real difference between learning the chords, notes, fingerings, etc. that are necessary to

play an instrument like the guitar and actually just playing music. We all know that. A certain amount of muscle memory (technique) is required before we can allow our musical side to relax and just play. Learning a dharma technique also requires a similar kind of technique to be learned, but there is one very big difference.

With music, when we get discouraged or our interest wanders, we can always go and put on an album of our favorite musician and remind ourselves why we wanted to play music in the first place. However, with spiritual techniques like the dharma, there is no CD or DVD that we can put on to remind us where we are headed. None whatsoever and it is even worse than that.

Why? Because we have no idea what increased awareness brings, much less what recognition of the mind's true nature or enlightenment might be like ahead of time. In this sense, with spiritual practice we are flying blind, going solely on our own imagination, what we have read and heard, and whatever teachings we may have attended to provide us with a concept as to why we are practicing. So, the concept we have in our head as to the results of dharma practice (what we expect) is something that we mostly just made up, and so on. And expectations seldom fit reality.

There is a case to be made that the more advanced dharma techniques (Vipassana, Mahamudra) are little more than a way to help us modify our expectations until they do fit reality. This is where the lama comes in, someone who has recognized the nature of the mind, and can help us resolve the difference in our

mind between our expectations and the true nature of the mind. Obviously there is a big gulf; otherwise we would already be enlightened. It is almost impossible not to have at least some expectations.

And this relates very directly to our effort and how to spend it and not waste it. As mentioned, effort is required to learn any technique, but with the dharma, especially anything beyond the Preliminaries, every ounce of effort is only useful if it contributes to effortlessness, to utter relaxation. And that is not a simple thing to do. “Try to relax” is an oxymoron, by definition. Even “Relax” is an imperative. As the great Siddha Chögyam Trungpa said, the correct maxim seems to be “Relax, as it is.”

So, like putting on clothes and taking them off again, in beginning dharma practice we undertake a lot of effort and in later practices we have to walk any overage back again. It's a push-me, pull-you sort of thing. We may have to literally unlearn habits that it took a long time to learn. It reminds me of clenching a fist and then opening it again in a relaxed manner. First we get our stuff together, tighten-up and concentrate with the dualistic practices (Preliminaries, Lojong, Shamata) and then we learn to relax and let it all go with non-dualistic practices (Vipassana, Mahamudra).

To repeat myself: in the beginning we learn to concentrate our mindfulness and in later practices we learn to relax and allow the mind to present itself “as it is.” The turning point between these two approaches is when, with the help of an authentic teacher, we manage to connect and align our expectations with the reality of how the mind actually is. When the two

coincide and become one, no longer dualistic, we then have what is called the “Recognition” of the actual nature of the mind. We finally get it. IMO, this then is the real beginning of dharma realization. Questions would be welcome!

[Since we are a dharma center, of course we have shrines here, there, and around. This personal shrine in my small office is the place where I do my daily sitting practice. Not fancy, but still a reference point for my mind.]



TOFU VS TEMPEH

November 3, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@erlewine.net)

Soy products are globally ubiquitous. They are everywhere and in everything. And something like 95% of soy products are GMO. I won't even mention the horrible fake-meat soy products that exist. Ugh. Years ago, my family and I ate tofu. Back in the 1970s, we even made our own tofu, because you could not buy it anywhere, except maybe in specialized oriental stores, where it was not clear how it was made or what was in it. And making tofu was a lot of work.

In recent years it has come to light that while tofu has some health benefits (high in fiber and protein), it is (at least commercially produced tofu) highly processed and contains "anti-nutrient" compounds that over time (or in large amounts) are not healthy and can even inhibit our body's ability to absorb nutrients. Unfermented soy (like tofu) is high in phytic acid, which can prevent the absorption of magnesium, iron, zinc, copper, and calcium. It is also a trypsin inhibitor, which makes it difficult to digest proteins. Unfermented soy products contain goitrogens, compounds that can interfere with the body's ability to regulate its processes.

And lastly, unfermented soy has phytoestrogens, which are natural compounds that can imitate estrogen in the body, which can affect fertility and

sexual development, not to mention (for males) erectile dysfunction, low sperm count, and growth of male breast tissue. I know, this sounds terrible, but check out the research for yourself. In addition, the over-processing of tofu, can introduce contaminants, including MSG and aluminum, both neurotoxins. There IS a healthy soy alternative to regular tofu use, and that is tempeh.

TEMPEH

In my book, there is a phrase that I subscribe to and that is “Whole Grain or No Grain,” and this goes for beans too. Unlike tofu, tempeh is made from cooked whole soy beans, which are naturally fermented for a number of days, using a mold called *Rhizopus oligosporus*. Tempeh is rich in nutrients, high in vitamin B2, and has more protein and fiber than tofu, not to mention manganese, phosphorus, magnesium, and copper that can be absorbed. And it is not generally processed very much, especially if you can find an organic variety with no additives.

The fermentation process in tempeh helps to break down the phytates and antinutrients in soy, which makes it more digestible and not harmful to the body, as well as introducing bioactive peptides. It is important to find organic, not overly processed, forms of tempeh. Any soy product, including tempeh, should be eaten in moderation, due to its estrogenic properties.

HOW TO COOK TEMPEH SO THAT IT TASTES GOOD

Since I offer the praises of tempeh, I should show you how to cook it. Now, Tempeh tends to get a bad rap, but it is really high-quality protein in a digestible form. The problem is how to cook it so that it does not taste, well, not-so-good. Tofu used to be the king of protein, but in recent years more and more of us old-timers are finding that it is not so digestible and there are other drawbacks which I mentioned above. You can Google the web for that. We use little to no tofu anymore.

As mentioned, back in the early 1970s there was no tofu for sale in grocery stores, so we had to make our own, which we did. Making tofu is a time-consuming and somewhat messy/difficult process. I remember well. Those were the years that we also had wooden kegs of miso, Tamari, and umeboshi plums in the basement. Anyway, back to tempeh.

Tempeh, like miso, is a fermented soybean product, and like miso, tempeh is very much more digestible than either the whole cooked soy beans or the processed tofu. And tempeh, unlike miso, is not salty, which for folks like me is important. Unfortunately, you have to know how to cook tempeh to keep your guests from trying to escape from the dinner table. It can taste, well, different, and sometimes pretty bad. Here is how I frequently cook tempeh and love it.

COOKING TEMPEH

I usually cook two or three of those 8-ounce store-bought long rectangular packages of Tempeh at once.

No use making just a wee bit of tempeh, because if you make it right, it all gets eaten up, usually before the leftovers hit the fridge.

I first carefully slice the tempeh bars into short slices, so that each slice is perhaps 1/8th of an inch thick, by 3/4 inch high and 3 inches long. As mentioned I cut up two or more packages this way and place the slices (still tight against each other) in a glass-bottomed baking dish. Then I briefly (or longer) marinate the tofu by pouring (sparingly) on the slices some or all of the following ingredients: Tamari (soy sauce), Umeboshi Plum Vinegar, Mirin (rice wine or some rice vinegar), red oil (sesame oil with hot pepper), and sometimes roasted-dark sesame oil.

I don't always use all of the above, just whatever we have on hand or what strikes my fancy. And I don't soak the tempeh with any of them, but kind of sprinkle each of them on in splotches. By the time I sprinkle several of the above condiments, I have usually gotten something on all parts of the tempeh, and it is soaking in between the slices. At this point you can let it sit, flip the tempeh over to let the condiments flow the other way, or whatever. I tend not to wait too long and I find little gained by waiting and I will tell you why below.

I cook the tempeh in a wide flat sauté pan and start by heating up a small (but not insignificant) amount of sesame (or olive) oil into which I place the tempeh and proceed to braise the slices, turning them over every which way. I try for some visible signs of browning on the tempeh before taking my next and most secret step.

Into the now hot and braised tempeh I pour about a half a cup of hot water and immediately put the cover of the sauté pan on tight. What this does is raise a cloud of steam in the pan and the steam gets all through the tempeh, but most of all it liquefies all the condiments causing them to be evenly spread over all the tempeh slices making each slice very flavorful and without the sometimes shock of 'tempeh with no flavor'.

I let this steaming happen for a couple of minutes, perhaps turning over the tempeh once or mixing it around, and then I take the cover off and go back to braising. Basically at this point I want to boil off the water I just added, dry out the tempeh, and proceed to further browning (and almost scorching) the stuff.

Next, I do the water thing all over again, tossing in a half cup of hot water and covering the pan once more, waiting a few minutes, removing the cover, and browning up the tempeh. In this final browning process I tend to push the browning to the limit. I dry those suckers out. And that's it.

Combine the tempeh with some cooked vegetables and brown rice and you have one delicious dinner.

“BEHIND THE BEYOND”

November 4, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Shakespeare, of all writers in English, came as close to the essence of the Tibetan Buddhist teachings as any I have yet seen, even if he only touched on it here and there. This too-brief article on Shakespeare’s use of words (shared from new Facebook friend, Peter Zhang) is something I have been aware of for over fifty years, i.e. the juxtaposition of words, arranged to confound the intellect.

Consonants slamming together, eased only by vowels, are something that Shakespeare (who was a master of words) fully understood. Words, at best, can only walk us to the edge of sense, from which we can perhaps but peer into the ineffable. And this edge serves as a launching pad, from which we can finally shove off and leave behind any sense at all of who we are, not to mention where, what, when and why. Behind this beyond, we can at last stretch out, stripped of all minding and stark naked of thought.

We are no longer seeing something, other than the seeing itself. Enough all by itself, this clarity and lucidity is satisfaction personified; the Vajrayana Buddhists call it Vipassana (Insight Meditation). What we like in Shakespeare’s assignment of words, here and there, is available full-time through Insight Meditation.

The article is here:
“How Shakespeare’s Unusual Words Shift Your
Mental Pathways”

<http://bigthink.com/how-.../this-is-your-brain-on-shakespeare...>

INSCAPE -- THE WAY IN

November 5, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins introduced the concept of "inscape" to the English language, a word he coined to indicate our access to the beautiful and profound, the way into allowing the mind to rest naturally. Scholars tell me Hopkins keyed on this concept from the work of Duns Scotus, another of my favorite poets. I can't say I agree with most scholars as to their interpretation of what Hopkins meant by "inscape." I have my own understanding and will use that.

Inscape to me is a natural sign (a signal in our busy life of distractions) that gets our attention and reverses us from looking outward (as usual) to looking within to rest in the nature of the mind, however briefly. That rest is crucial.

Another way to phrase this is that an inscape is the signature of the beautiful, a sign that catches the eye. For example, on a nature walk, when I finally get outside my busy day and try to relax, it takes time. An inscape is that sign or bit of beauty that first catches my eye and carries me away from my normal life of outer distraction and into the spatial-ness of the moment. Immediately, I slow down, calm down, and find rest in that beauty. I am suddenly more at peace and beyond the rush of time once again. I am free. I call these avenues (or ways within) "inscapes," as I

believe Hopkins did. An almost perfect analogy would be the way certain kinds of plastic sheets, when pulled, suddenly stretch (and become clear) at the same time – polymer chains.

I used the example of a nature walk to illustrate inscape at work, but we search out inscapes wherever we are and in whatever we do. Without these instantaneous moments of rest, without some beauty, we could not go on. These nanosecond events are essentially timeless connections to the true nature of the mind, which is beyond time -- eternal. Eternity can be found not at the end of the line, but always just in time.

I attempt to create inscapes in language as I write. Inscapes are our way inside this instant, through the particular here and now, and thus beyond time to a moment of pure rest. I call it the vertical dimension. The horizontal is our linear life story, the vertical the inner dimensions available in any teleology. For example:

Every sentence tells a story from left to right, from the first to the last word, but along the way the combination of words, pitched one against another in the sentence, create peaks and valleys of attention (awareness). These can be inscapes, ways into the timeless aspect of a moment. Inscapes are designed (like pit stops at a raceway) to attract or flag us down along the horizontal or linear line of our life and guide us within to allow the mind to rest, however briefly. The mind is not limited to rest in naps or in sleep at night, but much more so in these briefest of moments through inscapes of beauty that un-distract us into the

experience of pure rest. We escape by inscape, and heaven knows we need the rest.

These inscape moments are nothing new to any of us. We find and use them all the time to get essential rest or we would go nuts. It is helpful to become aware of what we are already naturally doing.

Inscapes are an integral part of what is called Vipassana (insight) meditation, where this concept of directly looking at the nature of the mind is learned and practiced.

Of course I, like you, have made use of inscape moments all my life. However, it was only when I began to consciously practice them through close-up and macro photography that I learned to look through these moments instead of just "at" them. Their effect was compounded by iteration and focused concentration until I began to see through the object I was photographing and look instead at the true nature of the mind. That is where all the rest there is "IS."

These moments catch our eye or catch our ear and in a nanosecond deconstruct our distraction and supplement life with space and expanded time in which we then dwell. We have a whole other life of lucid clarity that we touch upon all of the time, but are not yet quite aware of. That's the point: to render the mind openly at rest.

FINDING A RAINDROP IN A DELUGE

November 6, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Spiritual opportunities, for most folks, are something they wait for, windows or gaps in time. “Waiting” for an opening in our obscurations to appear is a passive approach; it could be a little like “Waiting for Godot” in the play by Samuel Becket; it might take forever. The reality is more like a bell curve, where we are either ahead or behind the curve; we either lead or drag.

Most of us start out dragging, passively waiting for something to happen, a gap or insight to appear. This is, for many folks, their idea of spirituality; it is like thirstily looking for a drink, with a cup of water in our hands. In other words, most of us masochistically wait to be dragged (behind the curve) to our destiny or, on the other hand, sadistically push life (ahead of the curve), when the middle-way or “happy” medium as praised by the sages is to be able to ride on the tip of the top of the wave of the bell curve – this present moment. My point is that what is required is to be proactive and go to meet our maker, so to speak.

We should know by now that the past and the future can never fully satisfy because neither fully exists for us. What is satisfaction? Satisfaction depends upon full realization of what “IS,” realization to the exclusion of anything obscuring the mind. Realization is total, i.e. not dualistic. There is no subject and object, only what in fact is – full extension.

As for inverting our view from our current preoccupation with the external world to familiarity with the mind itself, it is like taking a glove off from inside out; we have to start somewhere and the reality is more like a Möbius strip (or torus). There is only one side and yet still it is connate. The thread that unravels all this can only be found in thoughts viewed as a container, rather than for what they contain (their meaning.) Finding a raindrop in the middle of a deluge is the appropriate analogy. The answer has always been attention (and awareness) to the process, process, process.

In other words, we are eternally midstream, caught between, as they say, the devil and the deep-blue sea. And in that little bit of hell we must create our particular heaven, from one moment to the next. Like distilling fresh water from salt, a drop at a time, we drink our eternity.

As for language, words can but walk us to the verge (and edge) of reality, but never take us further. Beyond that, we must go on our own, "in toto," without the crutch of language to lean on. And it's naked that we go inside, stripped of our intellect, and it is as fresh as pure oxygen.

Like the nursing mother helps her infant find the nipple, so do we need help to unravel this tight-knit mass of distractions in which we find ourselves caught. Someone has to show us how, someone who has realized how this is done, not someone in the same boat as we are. If we could have done it ourselves, we would have already done so. Why have others we know not done it? The answer is they do not know how.

The Buddhist approach to this problem is a technique called Vipassana (Insight Meditation), but in the tradition I train in, it can only be pointed out to us by an authentic master of the technique, one actually who knows how. The Tibetans state that we will never (not ever) find it on our own. As mentioned above, that would be like trying to find a raindrop in a deluge, a drop in the ocean.

DHARMA MECHANICS

November 8, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I am often asked where (and how) someone can find a dharma teacher. The answer is difficult, due to the fact that each of us has a particular accumulation of obscurations and who knows what kind of dharma teacher it will take to help us unravel it. Otherwise, I could simply say, just seek out the Dalai Lama, the Karmapa, or some other great dharma teacher, which would not be a bad idea anyway. The point is that there is no assurance that any particular dharma teacher, even a very high lama, will be able to help us un-code our particular pile-ups. With this in mind, the following thoughts might be useful.

We all have heard of the 14th Dalai Lama and many know of the 17th Karmapa and other great dharma teachers. We know that they have a very high level of realization, so we are told. We cannot know what that realization is because we can't see past our own set of obscurations. It is axiomatic that we cannot know what greater awareness is than that which we personally have, and this by definition, because we don't have it. It takes one to know one, and we are not on that pay grade, yet.

Many years ago I had a chance to offer the Dalai Lama the traditional Tibetan white scarf, personally, and to meet him. And I have met the 17th Karmapa a number of times, even spent three days with him at his ancestral monastery in central Tibet, before he

fled the country. And yes, I was impressed; it was wonderful to be with both of these great teachers, but (sad to say) I soon fell back into my particular personal ruts not long afterward. That is the whole point of Samsara, this cyclic world we live in. What goes up, comes down, especially any high states of mind we manage to reach. Our current personality and practice is unable to retain and hold on to any insights so that they become realization. Realization, by definition, does not go away, any more than when we realize how to turn on and off a light switch, that realization goes away. But realization of the nature of the mind, most of us do not yet have.

Both of these great beings, the Dalai Lama and the Karmapa, were inspiring to me, but not much of their awareness rubbed off on me or even seeped in by osmosis. In other words, the level of realization of a teacher is not the only thing to look for. Well, if not that, then what?

The “what” is the ability and willingness on the part of a teacher to actually work with us, warts and all, and to show us how to transform ourselves. That is what we need to find. And this is a little easier than getting in the queue to work with the Dalai Lama. I imagine that line is long.

We do, however, need to find someone who has what is called “authentic” realization. And realization here refers to the initial recognition of the true nature of the mind. “Recognition” is not enlightenment (or anything close), but it does mark the first actual realization that occurs, and it can be extended and expanded. In fact, it has to be. And there is one other thing we need.

We need to be able to listen to a teacher's instruction and take it in deeply. It is not simply a matter of understanding it intellectually; it has to grab us by the short hairs, so to speak, so that we naturally just "listen up." Their particular way of teaching has to not only get our attention, but also help to keep us awake during the extended learning process -- that kind of thing.

Do I have to remind you that any teacher we are likely to find will be a human being? Any faults they have will be their faults, not ours. In summary, a dharma teacher does not have to be a "high lama," since anything beyond our own sense of awareness, we are, obviously, not aware of anyway.

What they do have to be able to do for us, and here is the point of this blog, is to show us, practically speaking, how to take our particular bunch of obscurations and work through them to greater clarity. That is the dharma teacher's job, their only job.

All of the many dharma practices are about one and only one thing, recognizing the true nature of the mind, or preparing to do that. Once we have done that, we are, so to speak, "good to go," able to handle things for ourselves from that point onward. So, in some way, the perfect teacher for us is something of a mechanic, someone able to successfully manipulate and point out to us the true nature of the mind, not what we expect or "think" is the true nature, but the actual true nature. And this is something we have never seen and are unaware of.

To accomplish this, teachers are sometimes required to use everything, including the kitchen sink, to

discourage us from how we now think, and to enable us to abandon our expectations (such as they are), and to get in synch with how the mind actually is. This is easily seen in Rinzai Zen, where the master gives koan after koan, until the student gives up trying to impress and gets in line with how the mind actually is. It is no different in Tibetan Buddhism, same result, but a slightly different path and method.

As for the devotion we have for our teacher, a few words. I know we are scared of that word “devotion;” perhaps it is too churchy for us. Maybe we can start out using the word “appreciation” for what the teacher is doing for us. Just as we cannot repay our mother for cleaning our little bottoms for how many years, in a similar way, there is no way to repay our dharma teacher for standing by us. I cannot not forget (not ever) when my own dharma teacher said to me “I think that indicates that we will be inseparable, life after life, until you achieve awakening.” The “you” he referred to was me.

So, it was just a hop, skip, and a jump from appreciating my root guru to feeling real devotion for him. Who else, aside from my own mother, has cared for me enough to volunteer to see me through to awakening? I can’t think of anyone! Yes, I feel devotion to such a being as that -- pure gratefulness.

So, I suggest we stop thinking of dharma teachers as only “holier than thou,” and appreciate their willingness and ability to guide us through the practices we need until we are out of the woods, so to speak. There is no way we can repay them and they don’t ask us to. Working with us is what they naturally want to do. In a sense, this is why they’re here. They

can bridge the gap between what we “think” and reality.

STRANGE THINGS HAPPEN

November 9, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I share this image of the Statue of Liberty, not because I feel this way, but because it is being passed around today by some who do. It seems we all are in a bit of a shock from the sudden loss by Hillary Clinton. Instead of retaining the presidency and perhaps gaining the senate and the house, we lost all three in one fell swoop. I probably should keep my mouth shut, but I have one bit of insight that I will share at the risk of ticking some of you off. If this rubs you the wrong way, I sincerely apologize.

It has to do with a little internal insight about Donald Trump, call it a mini vision, that I had shortly after he entered the primaries. The main reason I even dare to tell it is because I had a similar vision years ago when Bill Clinton first ran for the presidency.

In that event, I was standing at the kitchen sink, looking out of the windows, and washing dishes. Into my mind came the word "Clinton," which then clearly mentally re-arranged itself into the word "Lincoln," along with a burst of warmth and well-being. Of course, the letters didn't match, up but I did not focus on that. This was an intuition that impressed itself on me, an impression that proved true (at least for me), because I liked President Clinton, overall, and his presidency was a fairly happy time for the country.

Anyway, it happened and was not just a passing thought.

Oddly enough, I had a similar vision about Donald Trump early in the primaries, when he ran against those many republican candidates. This vision also arose in my mind, unprovoked, and also impressed itself directly. Even though I never cared for Donald Trump, it was a very positive (even happy) feeling that Trump would be elected and that perhaps great things would happen for our country. Since I do not like Trumps behavior and opinions, I didn't know what to think at the time, and I wondered why it came to mind so powerfully. Strange things are happening.

I did try to express my positive (albeit unusual) vision and feelings about Trump to some of my family and friends, but mentioning it did not fly with anyone, so I soon dropped it, and even kicked myself for sharing the thought. However, after seeing Trump's sudden victory yesterday, to my shock, I remembered that Clinton intuition and vowed in the future to be true to my original impulses and intuition from now on, come hell or high water. As Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche said, "First thought, best thought."

So, I am telling myself that these little visions, like the old saying, "Coming events cast their shadow," are worth my paying attention to, rather than pushing out of the mind. As for the warm and happy feeling about Trump in that impression, I can't say, and that is why I tell this story here, in case there is some truth to it. Could it be that, somehow, what is about to happen with Trump's presidency will have (in the long run) a positive effect on our country and ourselves, if not

from Trump himself, perhaps from the changes that he sets in motion.

I do know that I breathed an involuntary sigh of relief that the election was over and gratefulness that I did not have to put up with all of the surrogates (both sides) any longer. After all, I was a Bernie Sanders fan, not particularly a Hillary Clinton supporter. She was just the best choice, compared to Trump, IMO. It is not that I feel Hillary was awful in some way, but rather that I feel that the Democrats (and liberals in general) have been in dead-end mode for a long time, and not just because of the stalemate that the Republicans invoked in the last eight years. Both sides of the aisle have become too similar, IMO. I can relate to the slogan "Let's Drain the Swamp!"

Anyway, I share these thoughts not to upset anyone and not to point fingers, but in the hope that the ascension of Trump to the presidency (which is a fact anyway) may serve to break the deadlock in which we have been for so long. Otherwise, I can't explain the warm feeling that the Trump vision gave me. Please don't excoriate me for posting this. If you do respond, please be polite to all concerned. Many of us are a little sensitive just now. Thanks for listening.

WHAT DHARMA TEACHING REQUIRES

November 10, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I want to clarify my last dharma blog, where I spoke of “dharma mechanics,” what a student needs from a teacher to reach “recognition” of the true nature of the mind. Recognition is the goal of all preliminary dharma practice.

We tend (and seem to like) to look up to our spiritual teachers. We grant that they are whatever they seem to be or what we can see that they are, which is my point. Even a little reflection tells me that I can’t yet see beyond myself, beyond my own particular curtain of obscurations. It is obvious that my teachers are beyond my own awareness by a significant degree; otherwise, they could not instruct me, but there is no way that I can say how much or if it even matters. I just don’t know, because, by definition, I can’t see beyond my own obscurations.

A teacher may be a little more aware than I am or a lot more aware, but my guess as to what that is could only be just that, a guess. As Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche used to say, “Your guess is as good as mine.”

The point here is that the teacher/student relationship is not about a comparison of awareness, i.e. where we are as opposed to where our teacher is at. A miss is as good as a mile, so awareness is not how we can

measure a teacher, although we may have some vague sense of it. And what does matter?

What matters is whether the teacher has the skills to manipulate a particular student successfully so that the student can learn to recognize the actual nature of the mind. It all comes down to that. Whether our teacher's awareness is a foot higher than ours or the equivalent of Mt. Everest would be lost on us because, as mentioned, we can't see beyond our own limitations. We have to take their ability on trust.

Perhaps this is why many lamas and Rinpoches are so humble, and continually insist on pointing out that they have little to no realization, etc. We know that's not true, but there may be another truth wrapped in all this, which is that it is not important how much realization our teacher has, as long as they have what is called "recognition," the authentic realization of the true nature of the mind. That is enough.

As all of the great teachings point out, the key event that separates the Preliminaries from the more advanced dharma practices is called "Recognition," the moment when the student recognizes for the first time (ever) the true nature of the mind; this is considered the first actual realization on the path.

My point here is that as long as our teacher has achieved "recognition," the authentic realization of the mind and how it works, this is what they need to be able to guide a student to the same result. The student may even be potentially brighter than the teacher, in the long-term, but they currently have no idea how to achieve recognition. This is where the teacher comes in, and why I call the teacher,

irrespective of their degree of realization, somewhat of a “dharma mechanic,” with no intended disrespect.

I want to point out that it is not primarily the degree of realization that our teacher has that comes into play with a student like ourselves; All we need is to have the nature of the mind pointed out to us. Our success in gaining recognition depends on our teacher’s skill at working with us, helping us to bring the weight of our obscurations down through purification practices, and then guiding us until we see through (and beyond) the obscurations of our self, until one fine day, our view is transparent enough that we can see to transfer our identification from our self and made-up expectations of what we think the mind should be to what it actually is. When that happens, presto! That is Recognition. Our teacher’s job is done.

All of these words may seem too many and pedantic, much ado about nothing, but it is good news for those of us looking to find a dharma teacher that can actually be effective in leading us to recognizing the true nature of the mind. The point is that we don’t require the likes of the Dalai Lama or the Karmapa as a teacher, but can get by with one of a great many lamas and rinpoches who HAVE achieved basic recognition of the mind’s nature. Indeed, that is very good news for us.

THE FRESHNESS OF THE MOMENT

November 12, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Well, I have to tear myself away from the election and look at something else for the moment. When I was younger I would very often go down to the local bakery when they opened and get a loaf of bread that was still warm. That is how fresh it was. To me, this idea of freshness is very important, something of the present moment.

Over the last many years, I have tried each day to write a blog for my Facebook friends. More important to me, I don't plan out my themes, but take them directly from the well of the mind unformed. I don't claim these little essays are the best thing since sliced bread, but I do maintain that they are fresh from within the mind.

I don't intellectually (not often) pick a topic conceptually and then write about it. Rather, I try to give voice to a feeling or urge coming up within me, that as it surfaces, it takes a form, and that becomes the blog. In other words, I feel like getting something out of me and that something grasps around for a form as it surfaces. Whatever it grasps on to, that form becomes the blog. Of course, you can conceptualize or understand it once it is written, but for me it has more life than something just put together from a concept.

Years ago, I had a garage mechanic that I took my car to for repair work. He would often say to me “I will do the best I can; more than that I cannot do.” I feel the same way about my daily blogs. I put everything I have into it and I don’t overwork them. I simply write them directly in one sitting, clean them up from typos, etc. and post them here. They are the best I know how to do.

Of course, what I write about is repetitive, the same general idea expressed over and over again, in slightly different form. Once a good friend of mine, a Zen Rishi, said that I should remove all the repetition from what I write, to make the blog shorter, especially for those too busy to read a long post. Of course I thought about what he said, and for a long time, but my mind (the mind that speaks to me) was not comfortable with that. There is wisdom in repetition.

And, when I look at how I learn, I read everything I can on a topic, the same stuff, over and over and over, many repetitions from many different viewpoints. So, all I came up with is that my writing is for those who have time (or who take the time) to read them. And yes, they are repetitive, but as Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche said when someone asked him why his writings were so repetitive, he responded “My writings are like the song of the sparrow, always the same.” I agree with him one-hundred percent. Can you hear the song?

My goal in writing is not to leave great literature behind, but instead to provide a guide to learning the dharma that actually makes enough sense for readers to remain interested. I understand that there are many different kinds of readers, and those who can tag onto

my style are just that. The can make sense out of what I write, at least enough sense for it to impress their memory to last long enough to see by. It is the seeing that is important.

To me, the past is dim and gets dimmer with time. As the bard said "It's not dark yet, but it's getting there." Words that make sense are just that, words that you can feel in your bones, and their impression, like little lamps or torches, give light that we can see to live by. The better words are crafted, the better they stick in our mind and last, the more light they give.

The light of words is like a lamp or torch, something to see by; words are nothing in themselves. It is the light we take from words and language that we use to see by. The light given is not the words themselves; they are only there to allow us to see for our self, something, whatever we are ready to look at. The words themselves cannot see farther than the limits of language, but they can cast light beyond language in which we can see by full extension farther into the mind.

Don't mistake the words and concepts of language for the reality. Words are nothing in themselves but pointers, references, that point beyond themselves to the sense they make, which by definition, has to be an experience that we must have. It has to make sense.

Words are heat and light, like rubbing two sticks together to make sparks and fire, fire by which to see the reality. Language is a torch by which to "See," and nothing else. It is the Seeing that is important, not what is seen, the fact that we see, and by Seeing (not

by what is seen) that we know the true nature of the mind. Here is a little poem I wrote.

VERBAL FALLOUT

The half-life of words,
Is brief.

Prose is like carrying,
Water in the hands.

Poetry,
Like drinking,
From the faucet.

I'M JUST SAYIN'

November 13, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

What follows are some comments about how our spiritual expectations (and assumptions) are not our friend, trying to take as real what is pure conjecture on our part. I do it all the time. It would seem that the danger of conceptual reification, taking our own contrived expectations of what we expect (what we think) spiritual progress is supposed to be like for the reality itself, perhaps cannot be avoided. And please, let's be on the same page here.

We can't help but have some idea of what enlightenment or even greater awareness is supposed to be all about from what we read or hear -- a half-baked idea of what realization might be like. However, we soon forget that this concept we hold in mind is something we made up, a sheer guess, and fall into using it as a standard to measure any meditation experience we have against. This is reification, taking for real what is just conjecture.

The problem is that, because we cannot (by definition) have any true idea of what greater awareness is actually like, much less enlightenment, we have to take all this on spec. Yet, we can't help but think or expect something, so it is a case of the blind leading the blind from the get-go. We make something up and then follow it.

In other words, what we end up with, of course, is whatever we have been able to cobble together by reading, thinking, talking to others, and listening to the teachings. It is entirely made up, purely a product of our own imagination and whatever we have managed to construe along the way.

This can be a serious problem and it confronts every student of the dharma. Since any realization (and the practices that invoke it) are ineffable, beyond words, even a reading of the most succinct, accurate, and telling pit-dharma texts cannot but point in the direction of what cannot be expressed in language. What are we to do with that? For starters, it has been important for me to get a grasp of the full extent of the problem.

We practice dharma, perhaps with great diligence and effort, and we measure any results that appear against whatever we have imagined (or think) they should be or could be. These are our expectations. By definition, those expectations cannot be true or we would already be enlightened and the question would be moot.

The point here is that eventually, somewhere along the line, we have to stop fixating on our expectations, give those up, and learn instead, to begin to grasp the true nature of the mind as it actually is, at which time we cease to think dualistically. And that is no small task. It's like the old quote from Charlton Heston about guns, that "...you can have my gun when they pry it from my cold, dead fingers." This is not dissimilar to the kind of death grip we have on our various fixations, especially whatever expectations we

have built up -- what we “think” we should expect spiritually. We “think” we know. As if we knew!

It would be funny (and it kind of is), if it were not such a serious obstacle. And here’s the kicker. Not only do we have to let go of all these expectations that we have made up, but the actual reality has to eventually turn out to be the dharma in our own words, “our” take on the dharma, not all the book-learning and teaching we have absorbed. The dharma is way more personal than that, and this fact is worth some real reflection.

Eventually, if we think about it, we have to turn away from the books, teachings, words of others, and instead just start grasping the dharma entirely in our own language, so to speak. We make it our own. In the end, the reality will always be the dharma as we have come to know it, not as we read about it in books. There is a translation involved here. The actual dharma (when realized) will be through our filter, not through anything more external that we heard or thought. We stop taking our dharma clues from the outside in books and teachings and instead take them from within ourselves.

In other words, we must eventually transfer away from this locked-grip we have on whatever we have been expecting greater awareness to be all this time, and begin to shake hands with the reality of what the mind is actually like, stop being led by books and “ideas,” and lead ourselves through actual realization. This mental transference is the heart of what the Tibetan Buddhist Pointing-Out Instructions are all about, instructions that lead to recognition of the true nature of the mind. It is a little like brain surgery, this fiddling with our take on the mind by our teacher in order to

enable us to transfer from our habitual fixation (what we “think” the dharma is) to realizing what it actually is. Realization marks the end of fixation. This transference has to take place in order for what is called “Recognition” to occur.

As mentioned, “Recognition” marks the end of reification, expecting, fixating, etc. and the beginning of actual dharma practice.

LET THE DUMMY SPEAK

November 14, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

In the Bible, from the Book of Genesis 1:27, it is written “God created man in his own image.” That would be a problem in Buddhism, since it is non-theistic. It has no god, either up there, down here, inside or outside, only “what is.”

The slightly terrifying thought, at least it was for me, is that we are exactly like the ventriloquist Edgar Bergen and his dummy Charlie McCarthy, only half the time we have it backward. In our case, the dummy is doing most of the talking and we have become the listener. Our Self is the perfect example. Most of us actually listen to our self and take ourselves seriously. Can we?

It is clear from the Buddhist teachings that what we call our Self is something entirely made up of our attachments, our likes and dislikes, whatever we currently are fixated on. Basically, our attachments are the glue that holds the Self together. Lose our fixations and the self becomes transparent. We begin to not only see through it, but, more importantly, we start to see beyond it into the nature of the mind itself.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. There is this little problem of reification to negotiate first, the fact that like stick-tights, we think up stuff, fixate on it, and without realizing it becomes attached. We begin to

reify it. “Reify” means that we treat something that is not real as if it is real and actually exists. And it’s so EASY to do, by now almost second nature.

As mentioned, the Self is a perfect example of the dummy controlling the ventriloquist. Not only do we let our self be our personal secretary, remind us of our appointments or that it’s lunch time, but we also respect our self, and of course love our self, and, heaven forbid, we are told to always BE our self. In other words, the Self looms larger than life.

We somehow manage to forget that we created the self out of whole cloth, so to speak, a perfect collection of our attachments, what we like and dislike. Like iron filings clinging to a magnet, this walking collection of attachments that we call our self is something we have come to depend on. In other words, we are Self-dependent.

Of course, we are told to trust our self, have faith in our self, and so on (see the list below). If all the above is true and makes sense, then perhaps we should pay more attention to what makes up our self, to our particular likes and dislikes. The Buddhists do just that. They sort through the Self like the old game of Pick-up-Sticks, removing attachments until there is nothing left. By “nothing left” I am speaking of the attachments, not the stuff our self is made up of. It is the fixation on what the Self is composed of that Buddhist practice works away, not what makes up the self or the function of the self, itself, if that sentence can be understood.

To clarify, the Self is like a movable feast, something we form early and carry through our life. When we are

young, our Self may fixate on a new bike, a little older it's our partner, and so it goes. This makes it easy to understand that, although the function "Self" persists, what it is made up of (bike, wife, possession, etc.) is not permanent. It is ever changing and we leave all those possessions behind when we die, but not our urge to attach.

While our personal Self's things (attachments) are left behind, the desire to have attachments persists between lives and at rebirth continues. This is not what the Hindus call the "Soul" (a permanent being that goes from life to life), but rather a collection of attachments, the fixations or desires that when they arise, automatically draw a Self around us each life, like a coat of many colors

We will always have a Self, but we can have one without the fixation, without being so attached to it that it obscures the mind. And of course, if we remove the attachment to something that itself is damaging, like crack cocaine, that won't work. In that case, we would have to remove the cocaine too.

The goal is to remove the fixations the Self depends on, so that the Self can gradually become transparent; we can see through it. Every Buddhist practitioner has to come to terms with their Self, before any advanced practices can be successful. Until then, the Self is too opaque and obscuring to clearly see the nature of the mind. The Tibetan Buddhists have a series of very explicit practices to bring the Self into line. They are called the Common and Extraordinary Preliminaries. They are preliminary to realization and its practices.

Just for fun, please consider:

Self-centered, self-interest, self-determined, self-examining, self-reliant, self-admiring, self-assured, self-confident, self-identity, self-reflection, self-promotion, self-contemplation, self-examination, self-observation, self-questioning, self-reflection, self-scrutiny, self-searching, soul-searching, self-analysis, self-awareness, self-consciousness, self-recognition; introversion, self-absorption, self-centeredness, self-concern, self-involvement; self-actualization, self-discovery, self-exploration, self-fulfillment, self-realization; self-knowledge, self-revelation, self-image, and self-perception.”

THE TWO TRUTHS

November 15, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I am thankful. It is such a privilege to be able to share the dharma with those of you interested. Nothing in this world is more effectual, expedient, and profound that I know of. I find it amazing that Samsara and Nirvana are what is termed “connate,” two sides of the same coin. You can’t have one without the other. We transform Samsara through realization of the dharma, one person at a time. And it works so perfectly, so efficiently; the dharma is the pivot on which everything turns, the differential for clarity itself.

This blog is about the “Two Truths” and what they represent in Tibetan Buddhism. “If all roads lead to Rome,” then all suffering leads to the dharma. We can run to the East, run to the West, and to all points in-between, but sooner or later we will end up with the dharma. It’s the only way out. I learned this the hard way, very, very slowly. After all, I was an astrologer, a very thoroughly-trained astrologer of many years. I was working with clients, one-on-one, and doing my best to help them improve their life situations. To me, in the beginning, Dharma was just another spiritual discipline, not unlike astrology and the other oracles out there.

But I eventually learned that as much as astrology could be of help, it never really steered folks out of what Buddhists call Samsara, this cyclic world of ups

and downs we are all in. When I asked the Tibetan lama I have worked with for over 33 years about astrology (all the lamas I have met use astrology), his response was that astrology was one of the limbs of the yoga, but not the root. And he added that the dharma is the root. How to understand this?

I gradually grasped what Rinpoche was saying, but it took a while. He meant that astrology was what the Buddhists call a “Relative Truth,” another word for relative might be dualistic, having a subject in here and some object out there. Samsara, this world around us, is relative, as opposed to absolute. Dharma itself, at least what are called the preliminary practices, is also a relative truth, but these beginning practices lead to more advanced dharma practices that are called “Absolute Truths,” absolute because they are non-dualistic. Examples of absolute practices are Insight Meditation (Vipassana) and Mahamudra (or Dzogchen) Meditation.

These words, “relative truth” and “absolute truth,” although used by modern Buddhist scholars are, IMO, an unfortunate choice of terms. For most of us, like the theory of relativity, they are hard to understand. “Relative” is reserved for Samsara, this world of experiencing up and down cycles (not to mention bewilderment and confusion), while “absolute” is used for the realized mind and any realization we might have. Even that is not all that clear to me.

Another approach is to substitute the word “dualistic” for relative and “non-dualistic” for absolute. This suggests that with relative truth, we are of two minds, me in here and you out there, but any interdependency is unclear. Correspondingly, the

word “non-dualistic” suggests that we have realized the connection between the inside and the outside, the two are seen as one, and we stop seeing double. Perhaps that helps.

The best way I have come up with to understand the practical difference between relative and absolute truths is this analogy. Imagine this world we live in as a sphere (should be easy to do) covered completely with water. On this we are sailing our little boat of personality. Relative truths (like astrology, tarot, I-Ching, and so on) are useful for showing us how to sail our boat across the sea, moving (perhaps) from an uncomfortable place (that we happen to be in) to a more comfortable (better) place. Things like astrology help to set our sails. In other words, we are relatively changing our position in life. Astrology can do that, as well as Tarot and other spiritual oracles. Relative truths have something in common with the old chestnut “like rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic.” While perhaps helpful, their effect is temporary; we are treading water while waiting for the inevitable.

In other words, relative truths like astrology can very much help us to improve our “relative” position on the globe, moving from here to there, but they cannot show us how to exit (or transform) what the Buddhists call Samsara, these endless cycles of ups and downs. They do not provide realization. We can’t get off the merry-go-round.

Absolute truths, in this analogy, like the more advanced dharma practices mentioned above, would help us to move from endlessly traveling on the surface of the globe to moving in towards the center,

from which we can see more of everything clearly. Not a perfect analogy, but for me it was helpful. Over time, I came to understand what Rinpoche was saying, that relative adjustment only offers relative safety and comfort, which is helpful, yes, but not a permanent solution.

Dharma has been hard for me to learn, but after a while I began to grasp what Rinpoche was sharing with me about the difference between relative and absolute truths. Of course, I still do astrological readings, because like aspirin, they offer temporary relief, which we all need sometimes. But for those who want more than short-lived relief, in my experience, only the Dharma will suffice. I do my best here on Facebook to share the basics of dharma practice. As mentioned in the analogy, every step toward the center is a step toward realizing the nature of Samsara, the true nature of this relative world we all live in.

Of course, we can do both, seek relative relief through astrology (or therapy) and also at the same time begin to learn about dharma. I post here on Facebook to help folks get familiar with dharma principles.

“I THINK I’M GONNA CLEAN MY ROOM”

November 16, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

That's a line from a great tune by singer/songwriter Dick Siegel, one of my favorite musicians in the world, and he lives right here in Michigan. I can't find that song on [YouTube.com](https://www.youtube.com) to play for you, so I will include another great song by Siegel at the end of this blog. Enjoy the tune. The following blog is perhaps a minor point, but I found it useful.

My mom used to tell me that it was time for me to clean my room. Boy, I hated that. Something that many don't realize is that it's probably time for all of us to clean out our Self. Like my messy room, the Self has a lot of things I have outgrown and could remove, if I stop to think about it, whenever that would be. We carry around a ton of stuff that we used to fixate on, but probably no longer care about, yet still have a mental lock on. We are holding on to it and it clouds the mind and zaps our energy. All that which we have closed our mind to about adds up.

Do I really still hate my fifth grade teacher, for example? Our Self is filled with outmoded fixations that have yet to be liberated. So, it's way past time that we clean out the Self, but just how do we do that?

However, the Self is not some place that we can just go to and clean house, rummage around and the like, but we can clear stuff out on-the-fly, so to speak, as it

come up. There's the nasty real-estate lady who, when we first came to the town we now live in, always gave us a hard time, but it's been 36 years since then. I put a mental-lock on her long ago. I "unfriended" her in my mind way back when. Today, when I sometimes see her at the grocery store, the old resentment still comes up. Do you think it's time that I remove the mental lock and liberate that energy? I think so.

Anyway, you get the idea. Our Self is filled with outmoded fixations, ones that we have not even thought about for years, but when they come up, we still honor them, and without thinking. By exercising just a little awareness, watching these old fixations come up, examining them, and if we no longer really care about them, just cut them loose. Realize that they are no longer important. If I do this even a little religiously for a while, I manage to liberate a lot of energy, energy that I could enjoy doing something else with, now that I am no longer in fifth grade.

I checked this out and was surprised at how much energy I have locked up in judgments, fears, likes, dislikes, hatred, biases, and so on, when I am already long past caring about most of them. I could care less, but my habitual response is still on automatic, going off like mousetraps every time one of them is triggered. We can remove the trigger through being mindful and gradually remove the reaction itself. In the process, we can save a huge amount of energy by simply exercising a little awareness throughout the day.

As the Buddhists point out, the Self is the sum total of our likes and dislikes, whatever we have managed to fixate on over the years. Sure, there is a natural

process of removing fixations; it's called "forgetting," and that works too. It may be why older folks (like me) start to forget things. We find them too hard to remember, or too painful.

I no longer care about my tricycle or first bicycle any longer. It used to be an important part of my Self, but it is axiomatic that the Self quite naturally discharges and forgets about what we no longer care about. We are constantly replacing outmoded fixations with new ones, and all quite naturally. Still, there is a whole barge-load of grudges that I could care less about, old fixations that I drag behind me on which I'm still fixated, but have forgotten to remove. They too can be liberated, one by one.

If you are like me, when I start to pay even a little attention to these old fixations that I no longer care about, I discover they are obscurations that I no longer have to afford. I can just consciously let them go. Here's an example:

Take the blues-singer singer Janis Joplin. I never liked her voice, because to me it was made up and not her real voice. As a blues singer myself in the old days, I knew where Joplin pulled most of her stuff. So I guess I judged her harshly.

That aside, I did spend a late evening in October of 1968 sitting around with Joplin in the Grande Ballroom in Detroit. We sat way at the back. There was a large round pillar, with a kind circular couch all the way around it. Janis Joplin and I sat there and drank whisky, talking. If I remember right, she drank most of the whiskey, since I hate the stuff. We were getting to know one another. And there was the

interview I did of Stanley Mouse, the famous rock concert-poster artist, about San Francisco in the 1960s, and Joplin came up. To quote Mouse:

“And the firehouse... the Diggers asked if they could fix a car there, cause’ it has a big garage. Also ‘Big Brother and the Holding Company’ used to practice there and Chet Helms brought over Janis Joplin. And she auditioned for the band one afternoon, and they came up after and they said, ‘What do you think?’ I said, ‘It’s either great or horrible (laughs).’ It was one of the two.”

Michael Erlewine: “(laughs) Right.”

Stanley Mouse: “And then that night police showed up at the door and said we’ve got reports of a woman screaming in here.”

So, perhaps that’s more story than you wanted to hear, but last night I was watching a documentary on Janis Joplin, and I realized that I did not have to hold on to my opinion of her singing so closely anymore. And I just let it go. That is what I mean by “cleaning house” with the Self.

Or, is it just because when we are young we can afford all manner of grudges, because we have the energy? As we age, and our energy wanes, these same fixed opinions start to drag on us, pulling us down until we feel less and less. By exercising even a little awareness as these hard thoughts come up, we can recognize them for what they are, and ask ourselves if we really want to carry around this or that old grudge for the rest of our lives. Is it worth it? We

are not even the same person we were when we first hardened our heart about this or that.

Mostly, our Self automatically processes fixations in a convection-like manner, pushing the new fixations to the top and gradually dropping the old stuff that we fall out-of-like with. But, as pointed out, there is this residual backlog of fixations that we have managed to lock our mind about, yet by now probably have outgrown and no longer care about. But there they remain, like those floaters that just won't go down the drain. I don't mean to be vulgar, but there you have it.

It takes energy to freeze-frame our judgments and then cling to them. Not only are they fixations, like all elements of the Self, but we then proceed to carry them as grudges way past their natural expiration date. As mentioned above, all of this hardens the heart and clouds the mind. I have to ask myself, do I really care about this or that judgment anymore? Will I carry it to the grave? My point is that all of this adds up (and ends up hurting me) way more than anyone else. Is it worth it?

Here is a Dick Siegel song I love, called "Angelos," a song about an Ann Arbor cafe that I have been to many times.

http://www.dicksiegel.com/mus.../s/angelos_eggs_ov_er_easy_live

LSD: “LIGHTNING IN A BOTTLE”

November 18, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I took the title of this piece from that old saying “Try to Catch Lightning in a Bottle,” and yesterday morning I had no idea I would be writing about LSD in today’s blog, but here it is. And I’m not just talking about drugs, but rather meditation, too, and Insight Meditation (Vipassana) in particular. How are LSD and Insight Meditation related? The answer is interesting and has to do with “Realization.” I will start with LSD.

Back in the late 1950s (and throughout the 1960s) my generation tried out many drugs. While I found some of them, at best, “interesting,” none of them became (for me) a habit. However, from the whole lot of them, only the hallucinogens made an indelible impression on me, LSD in particular.

Back in the beginning (I took acid in 1964), we were warned that LSD could permanently alter our mind, and that the changes it brought were perhaps irreversible. This, of course, was scary at the time, mainly because we assumed that what was meant applied to our physical brain, nerves and connections, and so on. Rearranging that switchboard sounded threatening, especially if it could not be rewired back to its default settings. And it gave us pause that the changes caused by LSD were rumored to be irrevocable.

Of course, that did not stop some folks from trying it, particularly those of us who felt we had nothing to lose. That's how confining the crewcut, straight-jacket mind-mode of the 1950s seemed at the time. So, many of us took acid with baited breath and a certain amount of trepidation, thinking of ways we could possibly tell the difference if our mind was permanently changed. How would we even know, if it was "we" who had, in fact, changed? I puzzled on that one.

As it turned out, the various effects of LSD were not as subtle (or even of the same type) as we had feared or imagined. More important (much more important) was that the rumored "irrevocable change" that LSD brought was not physical (as we assumed), but rather mental, and I don't mean like a "mental-hospital." And this is where the link between hallucinogens like LSD and Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism is unmistakable, which is what sparked this essay. It has to do with what the Buddhists call "Realization." The irrevocable change of mind that LSD enabled was not some physical/medical effect, but rather a form of realization, and I don't mean the kind of experience we have with marijuana.

Back then, "Realization" was something I had never thought about, mainly because at that age I didn't have many realizations. Yet, realization is what LSD could provide and, yes, like all realization, it was irrevocable and indelible, but not as we feared. The Tibetan Buddhists make much of the difference between understanding, experience, and realization.

For those who don't know the difference, in a nutshell, understanding is what we think it is, understanding

conceptually or intellectually what has been presented. “Experience” in this context involves experiential immersion beyond just thinking about something conceptually. And experience is cyclic; it has ups and downs, and it goes around and around, and (basically) never ends. We are up one day and down the next, high one week and in the dumps the next, etc.

Realization, on the other hand, is not cyclic. It does not go up and down, but like turning on a light switch, once it is turned on, realization can’t be turned back off. And a light switch is a good example. Once we “realize” how to turn on and off a light switch, we don’t forget. We don’t have to be shown over and over how to turn on the lights. We just turn them on. That is a crude example of the difference between experience and realization. Realization is prized by the more advanced meditators.

My point is that LSD was capable of bringing us to realizations, spiritual realization of one kind or another. And like all realization, once turned on, they do not turn back off. You can’t walk a realization back. It changes you, but not as I originally thought LSD might change me, as something chemical (in my brain), so that suddenly I might be unplugged forever. Albeit, the realizations on LSD can be hard to assimilate.

LSD changed me by introducing realization into my life so that I realized things I never had before, and subsequently never (ever) forgot them. So, LSD did irrevocably change me, but it did so through realization, not some kind of brain impairment. And yes, all of this sudden realization on LSD freaked

some folks out for a shorter or longer length of time. It freaked me out, for sure, but I got over it. I normalized, but it did take time. I realized things about life I had never imagined, and that I was unprepared, but ultimately very grateful for.

And it took me a decade or so to integrate what I realized on acid into my life so that I could LIVE it, so that I could walk the talk. There was a HUGE gap between what I first realized on acid and the state of my life, i.e. where I was at back then. This kind of radical adjustment is hard work and takes a very, very long time to assimilate; at least it did for me. When we “realize” something, it changes everything, but implementing that change into our day-to-day habits can take much longer.

Now, please note: I am NOT suggesting that anyone run out and take LSD. What I am pointing out is that LSD and Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism share something in common, and that is realization. And having walked both paths to some extent, I can say from experience that both acid and dharma practice have the same result, “Realization,” but there is one big difference.

The difference is that with Buddhism, realization comes at the end of vigorous preparation, so that when realization finally arises, it is stable and we are ready for it. On the other hand, with acid, the realization comes at the beginning and all at once; and it took me decades to stabilize and integrate my realizations on LSD into my habits and reality. Realization via Buddhist practice is (relatively speaking) much faster and infinitely more stable than dropping acid.

Now, lest I give you the idea that I consider myself a realized being, forget-about-it. I'm not. What I do say is that, having been introduced to Insight Meditation by an authentic teacher, I have had a taste of realization, enough to compare it to the realizations I invoked through LSD. And note that "realization" (as defined by Insight Meditation) is not enlightenment or anything close to it, but just the beginning of realization. All realization, while permanent, can also be extended and expanded. It's what you once you realize anything, deepen it. And that is what I have been doing for many years. I only wish I had found the Dharma and my teacher early on, like way back then. I will paraphrase all this with an analogy.

Realization on LSD, for me, was like a patchwork quilt in that it produced real insight, but also with many of the quilt panels still missing. On acid, I did manage (all by myself) to cobble together a quilt of realization, but I was unable to fill in those missing gaps. Not ever. On the other hand, with traditional Vajrayana Buddhism (Insight Meditation), the quilt of realization is complete, with no panels missing. The dharma offers a complete graduated path that, with an authentic lama as a guide, will take us to realization (from start to finish) with no hiccups – no missing gaps. That alone is invaluable beyond imagination or any description I could provide.

I write this, not to encourage drug use, but for those of us who did take acid way-been-then and who may still be puzzling how to fit it all together. There is a way; I do know such a way and that is studying and practicing Insight Meditation as taught by the Karma Kagyu Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, and it has worked for me to fill in those missing holes in my

gestalt – my life view. Sorry to bring up drugs, but I find this comparison interesting and hopefully useful to some of readers.

SELF-REALIZATION OR REALIZATION OF THE SELF

November 19, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Buddhist Realization is said (in the teachings) to be inexpressible, unutterable; it cannot be put into words, so of course that makes it difficult to express, if even possible. Nevertheless, “realization” is so crucial in dharma training that it is important to have at least some understanding as to what it is about.

How does spiritual realization differ from our everyday learning experience in life? When I try to define this, even to myself, it is (as we might expect) hard to put into words. I would have to say something like: with unrealized day-to-day learning, there is a sense of uncertainty, of conjecture, that is always present; we are not certain, while with true realization, that is absent. And what IS present with spiritual realization is a clarity that what we are seeing, as far as it is revealed, is absolutely correct -- the truth as it is.

There is a certainty about realization that is otherwise absent in our normal “dualistic” thought processes, “dualistic” meaning having a subject and object, like that I am in here and you are out there. In dualism, you and I are independent (dualistic) and not interdependent (non-dualistic). With spiritual realization, we clearly know (beyond any doubt) that we are fully immersed, and to the exclusion of any self-consciousness or second thoughts.

The part of us that has always been hanging back from 100% commitment, perhaps in watchfulness or out of fear, is in the act of realization now gone. We are all in, so to speak, fully committed. That in us which always wondered, looked, and asked, is in realization answered, seen, and knows, not by an echo, reflection, or response, but by finally going to see for ourselves what is to be seen. As the German philosopher Hegel wrote:

“We go behind the curtain of the self,
To see what is there,
But mainly for there to be something to be seen.”

Realization is an act, and not something that happens to us passively. It is the going ourselves to see and the going beyond. As the pinnacle teaching in the Heart Sutra so clearly says:

“Gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate, bodhi svaha.”

“Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone beyond going
beyond, enlightened, so-be it!

Once spiritual realization is sparked and takes hold, it goes on and on recursively until enlightenment is reached, but that first spark can be hard to come by, but once it takes place, it remains available to us from then on, but can (and has to) be extended and expanded in scope by practice. In traditional dharma practice, at least in the Karma Kagyu Lineage in which I train, we practice what are called the Preliminary Practices until we reach an event threshold called “Recognition,” at which time realization is present.

In the Vajrayana Buddhist teachings, “Recognition” is said to require an authentic teacher, one who has achieved Recognition and can point out to us the true nature of the mind so that we actually get it. The dharma teacher who first points this out to us is called our Root Guru (Tsawi Lama) and the recognition of the true nature of the mind is a realization, not just an experience, much less anything conceptual.

From the moment of first recognizing the actual nature of the mind onward, it is all about realization, in particular extending, deepening, and expanding our realization, which serves to further stabilize it. And, since any realization is permanent, in that sense there is no backsliding once we have it. Our view of the mind is permanently altered by realization. I am reminded of a quote from one of my early teachers, Iotis Wilder, a Christian Unity minister, who would say:

“The Word of God has to do one of two things, either it must die or it must grow and spread. Well, the “Truth” cannot die, so it will grow and spread.”

In a similar fashion, this is true of realization. It has to either fade away or grow and spread. By its very nature, realization is permanent. It cannot be walked back, so it can only “grow and spread” or, as the Buddhists say, be extended and deepened. Called “Kensho” in Rinzai Zen Buddhism, “Recognition” is a key turning point in Buddhist practice that, once taken, can only be extended and deepened.

And a brief word about another term, “Self-Realization,” which should not be confused with “Realization of the Self” as we have been discussing

realization here, at least without some clarification. “Self-realization” should not be used to mean “REAL-izing” the Self, as in reifying the Self, solidifying it, making it still more-real, but rather it can be used to mean realizing what the Self actually is and its limitations.

Strengthening (emboldening) the Self, reifying it, only adds to our obscurations, thickening them. If we want to use the term “Self-Realization,” that is fine, as long as we realize the contents of that Self to be something with no true existence, something that we have created solely out of our fixations. With this correct use of the concept of “realizing” the Self, the Self becomes increasingly transparent, so that we can begin to see through it to the nature of the mind itself.

There is nothing wrong with having a Self; we all have one. It is natural. However, since the Self is our own creation, we have to be careful not to let the tail wag the dog by taking our Self too seriously. After all, it is a product of our current fixations, and if continually reified can become our own little Frankenstein.

As for my writing so much about Recognition (the moment when we first recognize the true nature of the mind), I apologize. To me, all Buddhist practices lead up to Recognition and then beyond it toward enlightenment. Recognition is THE key turning point, and its importance needs to be grasped.

‘A ROOM WITHOUT A ROOF’

November 20, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian spiritual philosophy differ one from another. The Hindu and Christians agree that there is an eternal “soul” that survives death and the Hindu view is it that soul is eternally the same “One” who remains intact from birth to birth.

In the Buddhist view, there is no eternal Atman or eternal “soul,” but rather, what passes for soul is the persistence of a interwoven mass of consciousness-related threads or tendencies, each of limited (and different) lengths of existence, that braided together make up the rope of our lives; and this can easily be mistaken (and often is) for a permanent soul.

In the Buddhist view, we do have something like a “soul,” just not a permanent soul; there is no “One” outside or above what and who we ARE, someone watching over us. In other words, in Buddhism, WHAT we are IS who we are. And what we are is capable of becoming aware of itself through all our changes, but is not separate (does not separate itself) from all of the interwoven complexity that is us. There is no “Oversoul” that skims the cream off the top of our existence, so to speak, or that touches down intermittently like a tornado from above and then retreats to the sky. As the song “Happy” by Ferrell Williams says so brilliantly, in Buddhism we have “a room without a roof.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6Sxv-sUYtM>

This is why Buddhists say they are “non-theists;” they don’t need to separate out or posit an over-lord (who resides above us) from whom and what we are. Any intelligence and awareness that is present in us also belongs to us, not to something greater that lords it over us and that we can never quite reach, although, of course, we could each have greater awareness than we do now, but we will have to work for it. This is, of course, what dharma practice is all about, awareness and eventual realization.

Who and what we are, what happens at and after death, is crucial to understand. If we don’t reincarnate as the same soul from life to life, as the Hindus suggest, just what of us does persist and move forward? What is rebirth and how does it differ from reincarnation? What or who is reborn?

Those of you who have read this far, don’t you want to know the answer to these questions? What do you think happens after death and is it worth discussing here? Or, if you know, share your thoughts about what happens here with us.

AFTER LIFE, THERE IS THE AFTERLIFE

November 21, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Since there is interest, let's continue with the discussion of some of the major forms of afterlife as viewed in Tibet and India, particularly "Reincarnation" and "Rebirth." What I am sharing here is not my personal experience, but rather the results of study and trying to clearly understand what happens at death and who/what transmigrates to another birth and how. You are welcome to join me, but it may be somewhat of a bumpy ride. Here goes:

Reincarnation is the Hindu belief that the Soul is eternal (permanent) and the same unchanging soul reincarnates from body to body. Of course, Christians also believe in the idea of an eternal soul, but not in reincarnation; rather, they believe that physically we only go around once, after which it is heaven, hell, Limbo, or purgatory.

On the other hand, the Tibetan Buddhists believe (in particular, the Yogachara view) that, instead of an eternal soul, we have a persistent soul-like entity that takes rebirth, but one that is impermanent and not eternal and unchanging. We change.

Instead of the single "eternal soul" of the Hindus, the Tibetan Yogacharan view is one of an impermanent entity, loosely made up of four of the five aggregates (Skandhas) and many arising karmic traces, the

threads of which are sort of braided together like a rope, creating a continuum that might look like it is eternal or endless, but in reality is but a series of threads (each of limited duration) plaited together so that it could be mistaken for a continuity. Most of us make that mistake.

With Tibetan Buddhism, the idea is that all that currently makes up our current personality or Self, our likes, dislikes, biases, and prejudice (whatever we have fixated on during this life) is left at death's door. We enter the bardo without what physically makes up our Self, the result of our particular fixations, but not the habit of fixating. This alone is something of a liberation. If everything that makes up our Self (our fixations) is left behind, what is it then that moves from life to life?

In the Tibetan view, as mentioned, what transmigrates is not a permanent soul, but rather a collection of karmic traces and imprints that are stored in what is called the Storehouse Consciousness or Alayavijnana. You might as well learn to pronounce the Sanskrit word "Alayavijnana," since its sound is meaningful and worth the effort to pronounce: "ah-Lie-ah vjj-nah-nah."

The Alayavijnana (Storehouse Consciousness), which is said to persist through all our rebirths and future lives, is the result of our karma and its residual traces, the literal results of all our actions, great and small, from killing, lying, stealing, etc. on the high end to every little wince and reaction we have on the lower end. It is all dutifully recorded as karma and placed in the Alayavijnana, which is like a karmic database.

As I understand it, all of these karmic traces are stored and remain in the Storehouse Consciousness for the length of time dictated by their individual intent and to the degree that they deviate from reality, the true nature of the mind. In other words: karma. They don't get recorded all at once, and they don't re-arise all at once. So, we have a relatively infinite amount of these karmic traces all bound together like packets, each with their own expiration date, after which they are subject to being triggered, at which time they arise and affect our life here or somewhere down the line of our rebirths.

As they say, Karma burns twice, once when it goes down (and thus further obscures our inner vision) and a second time when the karma eventually ripens and re-arises as a delayed response to its original cause, when its term limit as a latency expires, so to speak. Therefore, the Alayavijnana is a seething mass of activity, like several Grand Central Stations all interacting at once, with the rush of karma, great and small, coming and going all the time – the veritable control tower of what drives us.

And this whole interactive mass of karmic-traces slowly moves into the future, following us like some great river-barge as we go from life to life. The teachings say that the Alayavijnana will follow us (and last) until we reach enlightenment, at which time all of the karmic traces will be exhausted and the Alayavijnana cleared and empty.

What is most interesting to me is that the Tibetan Buddhists say that, while we do not have a permanent Self or Soul (as the Hindus and Christians believe), we do have something that amounts to an

“impermanent” self, just one that is not eternal. In other words, something does persist of us from rebirth to rebirth, and here is a key point: Otherwise, there would be no point in dharma training whatsoever, because there would not be anyone who could benefit from meditation and mind training, i.e. no “one” to train!

Now, that idea suggests that, while our “entity” is not a permanent “eternal soul,” we do have something that is bunched together enough that it animates us from life to life, and that mass of our karmic impulses in the Alayavijnana reanimates a “person” that can benefit from learning and growing in awareness. Perhaps we don’t have an eternal “Soul,” but we are something similar to a soul, in that we can learn and profit from training. And that fact is important. In any case, it is what we have.

I should add that the Tibetan caveat (as to our not having a permanent, eternal, and non-changing Self) is that it is obvious that if we had a Soul that was non-changing, then it, by definition, could not be changed or improved. It could not be taught. You can’t salt the salt, so to speak. This fact, the Tibetans point out, is BETTER than having an eternal soul. The Yogacharans explain that if we lack an Eternal Soul, it is not something to be ashamed of, not a defect, but rather just the opposite, a plus. By admitting change, we can change, adapt, and become enlightened!

SIDEBAR: A spin-off from the Hindu concept of an “Eternal Soul” is another Indian concept, that of the “Watcher,” an unchanging (eternal) presence that watches our “Soul” (the one we don’t have) on its journey through the flesh. I have no idea to whom the

Watcher reports with what it sees or watches, but I include it here because it is another twist of these same ideas. I have not studied it.

Now, what I get from all of this is that while we may not have what amounts to an eternal “Soul,” what we do have, pardon me for being obvious, is what we have now and already know well – this life we are currently living. Whether what we have is an unchanging eternal soul or a slowly changing impermanent soul-like-something, the fact remains that what we see and experience right here and now is not some shabby second-rate experience. It is what it is, and precisely that.

To continue with the Tibetan Buddhist description, at least that of the Yogachara View, this barge-like collection of all our karmic traces and desires that follows us through time is the Storehouse-Consciousness, whose contents, when triggered, arise to reanimate us at rebirth. These latent desires and karmic obligations are the fuel that drives our succession of rebirths until they are eventually exhausted at enlightenment. Karma ripens and triggers whatever soul-like entity we are that can be affected. As mentioned earlier, it is the control tower.

At rebirth, we don’t continue with the same personality or “Self” we left behind at death, because that was the product of another time and place, another (birth and death) life-situation. What we call our “Self” is made up of a particular environment, parents, genes, circumstances, and is based on fixations -- our likes and dislikes. In other words, our personality is “personal” to a given birth, but perhaps the Self (previous or reborn) is animated to a marked degree

by the collective karmic traces that are still ripening and arising from the Alayavijnana. When one physical vehicle dies and is abandoned, our unfulfilled desires apparently immediately begin to look for another.

The Yogacharan view is that this transmigrating impermanent consciousness that we are, driven by desire, is hungry for experience. And its lack of training and compulsion for existence allows it to latch onto just about any sort of womb it encounters. It could be a human form, but apparently, it could also take rebirth as a fly or a microbe, if we are desperate enough to take refuge in form.

The consciousness or entity we are may be vast, but the means of expression via rebirth can be limited to the physical opportunities offered by any particular bodily form. If human, then the human form, and if a fly, the physical limitations (and expression) of a fly. This idea is key and should be carefully considered, IMO. It explains a lot, and is why the Tibetans consider all life (all sentient beings) as precious, because the fly has the same potential as we are do, the same consciousness; it is just limited by the physics of being a fly. Such lower rebirths are the result of our compulsive desire to take on form and live.

This is getting long, so I hope to finish it tomorrow, but would like an interactive discussion here, if there is interest.

AFTER LIFE (Part II)

November 21, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

This is the conclusion of the article posted yesterday.

I once asked a very high rinpoche what kind of personal qualities persist from rebirth to rebirth. I am not sure whether he was kidding me, but his answer was, "Things like a predilection for hot sauce." Anyway, to sum up where I think we are with this:

The Tibetans do not accept that we have an eternal soul or "watcher" that is above it all, one that cannot be modified by time and experience. The Tibetans go on to state that if such an eternal soul were the case, then it would be changeless, train-less, not teachable, and unable to learn in any way, a kind of permanent wallflower to life -- inert. What we have instead, so they say, is a semi-permanent soul that, made up of our ongoing desires and shaped by our karmic traces or residue, tracks us from life to life.

The Yogacharans do point out that what does persist from life to life in the Storehouse-Consciousness (our entity) is longer-lasting than what we consider (in this life) as long lasting, if that can make sense. It is long-lasting enough to encourage us to believe that it is permanent in nature, and that fact has become a real problem for us. This belief on our part in an unchanging Soul is called "eternalism." On the other hand, the current scientific-materialists are called, by

the Yogacharans, “nihilists.” Nihilists believe, like the old Schlitz beer commercial, that “You Only Go Around Once” and that physical and spiritual activities are not separate. In other words, when you go, you’re gone.

The Alayavijnana (Storehouse Consciousness) does not last forever, and eventually is exhausted, but it lasts, relatively speaking, for a very, very long time. In other words, it has apparently lasted through innumerable lifetimes up to now, so it’s no flash in the pan. We speak of our Sun as eventually fading out, but yet we go on living with no imminent fear of that. While perhaps not permanent, I suggest that our particular Storehouse Consciousness is long-lasting enough to be depended on for at least the foreseeable-future.

The relationship of our particular set of karmic traces (as stored in the Alayavijnana) to what is demanded by the particular set of circumstances at any rebirth needs to be clearly understood. Perhaps we can all agree that at death we have no further use of the particular collection of likes and dislikes (fixations) that make up our Self from this life. According to the Buddhists, they are abandoned when we die, left at the doorstep.

It is not totally clear to me as to the influence (or effect) the basic desires, fears, and what-not that created our Self-fixations in this current life will have on our next life. Yes, the “persona” we draw around our self at rebirth will be based on the circumstances, parents, etc. of our new life, but certainly some of the “desire” and karma stored in our Storehouse

Consciousness from previous lives must influence our personal fixations at rebirth -- our new life.

The great Indian poem, the Bhagavad Gita, as translated by Sir Edwin Arnold reads:

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

This is an example of the Hindu view that the Soul is eternal and a "persona" or personal self and reincarnation is like putting on a new coat. The Yogachara view is not totally different, since in that view we draw around ourselves a new persona based on the result of our karma as contained in the Storehouse Consciousness. The view here may seem less rosy than the Hindu "Ātman," but it's as rosy as the karma that we have is rosy. And because of the ability for us to change, ultimately it is a lot rosier. We can transform ourselves, which with an "Eternal Soul" we could not.

The sticking point, which I mentioned above, is the difference between an unchanging Soul (Hindu belief) and a changeable aggregate of karmic traces (changeable "soul") as suggested by the Yogacharans. In the case of the Hindu approach (which I am not so well-versed in), the Soul somehow maintains an unbroken consciousness from life to life, i.e. the same person show up. I have no idea how the

Hindu view deals with the bardo, the loss of consciousness there, and the rebuilding of it, etc. Perhaps one of you reading this trained in the Hindu view can explain it.

In the Tibetan Buddhist view, the bardo realms are (or can be) a perilous journey, including a complete blackout (and loss of consciousness) sometime shortly after death, followed by a reawakening and then, driven by our karma, an insatiable desire to take another body that, apparently, leads the bardo entity to grasp at the first available womb, thus: any port in a storm.

It is stated in the teachings that those who have had extensive dharma training can afford to not-be in such a hurry to take rebirth and re-animate; apparently, like a credit check, they have the luxury of examining different sets of parents, including their habits, qualities, and even their relationship until they find a womb that they feel comfortable in. That's the idea. And it is said that what are called in Tibetan Buddhism "reincarnate lamas" or "tulkus" are those who have the discipline to more carefully choose their incarnations, while the rest of us cannot help but jump on the first available bus, so to speak. With Tulkus, the word "reincarnate" is often used instead of "rebirth" to show that, in some respects, their consciousness must be more continuous than most of ours.

Some of this is above my pay grade, folks, but I find it fascinating nevertheless. My curiosity is probably driven by the age-old fear or "wondering" about death, as Shakespeare put it so well in Hamlet's soliloquy:

“But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover’d country from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?”

“Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action.”

Of course, I want to know what we all want to know: what lies for us beyond death and how can we best prepare for that journey. Sure, without thinking, we have been indoctrinated into the concept of the “Eternal Soul” by the Christians and can’t help but want something like that too, something that lasts forever and is above it all. And we don’t like the idea of losing control or consciousness – getting our feet wet.

The Tibetans tell us we do have something that persists beyond and between lives; otherwise all of this would be a non-sequitur. If we were not an entity, we could not benefit from the dharma and its practice. As mentioned, they also say that nothing is eternal; everything changes, but change itself, and even that varies.

I can’t say that I fully understand this subject. My fallback position is to remember that whatever is the case with all of this, here I am nevertheless, conscious and somewhat aware. No, I can’t remember who I ever was before, although when I

was younger I sometimes would encounter parallel universes that, like passing trains, would mutually co-exist for a day or a part of a day, and then separate again. And I almost didn't know which train I was on. That alternate universe was more real than a vivid dream, and the whole experience a bit scary at that.

I'm afraid I don't have someone I can just phone up and ask about all of this. If you want to study this, I suggest the book (his last) by the Venerable Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche called "Karma: What It is, What It isn't, Why It Matters." It is brilliantly clear.

THE AFTERLIFE (POSTSCRIPT)

November 22, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I have given you the gist of what I understand about the afterlife and rebirth in the previous two sections. All of what I shared there is what is called inferential valid cognition, pulling things together conceptually through study and reasoning. I don't have any (or very little) direct valid cognition through experience or realization of these things. So, this blog is just a little clean-up after the party.

The Buddhist view of our afterlife, it is said, walks the fine middle-line between no connection at all between births (nihilism) on the one hand (i.e. no rebirth) and the Ātman or permanent soul (eternalism) on the other. How are we (who are not philosophers or even skilled dialecticians) to know which of the three theories is the reality? Or is it that whatever we believe to be true, IS true, which I doubt?

Whatever the case is, most of us cannot remember our past lives; at least I can't. What we have is what we have here and now in this moment and this life. We can't see very far into the past or into the future. And if what we see here in the present does not satisfy our curiosity on this question, then we remain unsatisfied and curious. It's no wonder that we wonder.

I can see where it is perhaps a benefit that we can't remember the particulars of our last life. It gives us a fresh start, at least to some degree, subject of course to the directives of the karmic tendencies we bring with us from past lives via the Storehouse Consciousness. Without that karmic hangover, we would not be able to progress at all and dharma would be wasted on us. There would be nothing to correct. We are creatures of karma all the way until we are enlightened and that by definition.

I see no reason why we should not at least learn "something" about the process that we go through in the transmigration from death to rebirth. Through karma, whatever we do now in this life (or have done in past lives) is the "cause" of the effect that will be our next life. And what we ARE now is the effect (or karma) caused by any previous existence we have had. We are told that we have no reason to further reify whoever we think we are, have been, or might eventually be, i.e. that we ever will have "permanent" existence. Nevertheless, most of us can't help but feel that we exist "enough" just as it is. Regardless, we seem to be here nevertheless. All of this makes me examine just what "existence" is more carefully, which of course dharma study demands anyway.

If semblance and seeming is all we have ever been from eternity up to now, then that amounts to "reality" as we know it for us, as "real" as it gets, has gotten, and will get – all that we CAN know as "real." If it has always been impermanent, then it has never been different. We wouldn't (and couldn't) tell the difference anyway.

In other words, let's not be imprisoned by a view. Science does this to us all the time, as scientists struggle to get it right, declaring this or that as a fact for a time, and then change their mind as they change their perspective. It is the same with all the different views of life, death, and afterlife. I keep coming back to the fact that, after all is said, I am still right here now. This moment is as real as things get, even if it still is some kind of illusion. The same goes for our future lives, however they will work out. To me, it all seems real enough.

I don't know exactly where I am going or what parts of me go and what is lost and left behind at death, but I am comforted by the fact that I'm here now and, more important, can change and do something about it. The universe somehow conspired to produce me, just as I am. As the old Billie Holliday song sang "They can't take that away from me." So, now is always a good place to start. It's not like any other place could work any better.

I can't remember where I came from or who I was in past lives, and I certainly can't see into the future, that is, unless you count the fact that the "truth" IS the future, because it alone will last until then. Everything else, but the truth, will be soon forgotten. For me, the dharma is the truth (or tells the truth), so the dharma is my future as well as the pathway to it.

FRESH

November 23, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[We are hunkering down in this first blast of winter for Thanksgiving. Two of my grandkids are here and my daughter Anne. I will be making the stuffing, the mashed potatoes, and whatever else needs helping. Margaret is making pumpkin pie and apple crisp. I wish all of you a Happy Thanksgiving time.]

A word about freshness. What is fresh? Fresh is like the fresh air that (hopefully) fills our lungs each minute every day of our lives. I believe spiritual “freshness” is every bit as important to sustain our inspiration. But where does it come from?

Well, like the air we breathe, it comes from the present, from the “Now,” this moment, and not from the Then or the When. Gather round this present moment friends, because, it is as close to a pure oxygen vent as we will ever find. Everywhere else is stale in comparison. In fact, our endless dependence on fresh air to breathe is more than just an analogy as regards spiritual inspiration. Like air, spiritual inspiration is also found in the immediate moment. How is that done?

We can plan and plot a course to enlightenment or at least greater awareness, much like a ship’s captain plots a route through the shoals and bends of a river, but a map does not a journey make, without travel.

Just as the fresh air we breathe is found in the present moment, spiritual inspiration is the same. It is not found in the there and then, but always in the here and now. Well, we are here and it is now, so where is that inspiration?

Of course, the answer is that it is right in front of us and has been all the time. I know. That answer is not helpful. “Unwavering attention is the body of meditation” is what I recite each day in the Lineage Prayer of the Karma Kagyu Lineage. Like the nursing mother guides the child to her nipple, in the lineage I train in, an authentic teacher is capable of guiding us to point in the here and now where inspiration flows. And it is flowing all the time, day and night, 24x7.

The dharma practice or technique required is what is called Lhaktong (Insight Meditation), a particular form of Vipassana Meditation used by the Karma Kagyu Lineage as part of Mahamudra Meditation training. And just as we all wait for atomic fusion to be practical, which can run on something as plentiful as H₂O (water), the fuel that drives Lhaktong is also ubiquitous (and abundant), simply everyday “thought,” the same thoughts as you and I are having now.

Lhaktong feeds on thoughts and is a method that helps us use all available thoughts as a window (and eventually as a doorway) to an endless source of inspiration, thoughts that, like one of those brilliant young blue stars in the heavens, can serve to light up the night sky. Lhaktong lights up the mind.

In other words, the same thoughts that at times drive us crazy, with proper use, are the means to brilliant

clarity; like waves are to the ocean, thoughts are to the mind. Thoughts are simply the mind in motion.

By learning to look at thoughts directly, looking directly through them (like a window), rather than to just examine their content (what they are about) as we usually do, we can be shown how to rest in their nature which, as we discover, is the same nature as the mind itself.

Realizing the nature of one thought is realization of the whole sea of thoughts, because, while the content of thought varies, the nature of thoughts does not. All thoughts share a common nature. Waves and the ocean are both just water. Touch one, touch all. This, then, is the benefit of learning Lhaktong, this particular form of Insight Meditation.

A FLY ON THE WALL
November 24, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The animal realm is, according to the Buddhist texts, a realm of bewilderment. Many of us love “dumb” animals, I know that I do, and for me they may be easier to love, sometimes, than humans. Animals never fail to make me smile inside.

However, how do we compute the Buddhist statements that every sentient being, every last animal and microbe, has been our mother (and our child) in a past lifetime? What could that possibly mean, or should I just let it slide by, in one ear and out the other? How could they possibly mean it? And I wonder, what is your takeaway from this?

As I read the texts, they all point out that conscious beings like ourselves, and consciousness in general, take on different forms as dictated by our karma, and I don't just mean human forms. The same consciousness that drives our life, drives the life of that fly on the wall. The only difference, apparently, is that the limited physical form of the fly can only express so much, but that means that you or I one day could be driving that fly, yet unable to say anything or do much else, other than just buzz around. Now, that is a hard concept for me to get my arms around.

According to the Yogacharan teachings, our desires at death don't just vanish along with our personal effects, as do the fixations that make up our Self.

Sure, the things we fixate on in this life are left behind, but, if I understand it right, not the “urge” to fixate that focused on them in the first place. After all, that is the whole point of karma.

We still yearn. And we hunger to live and have a physical body to express ourselves, and feel naked without one. Apparently that drive to take form is so strong in the bardo that any womb seems like a refuge. We just can’t say no, and we end up taking rebirth as a fly or a worm because it’s there and available. They have a “Room for Rent” sign on the door of their womb. As the Yogacharan teachings say: we seize at the earliest opportunity to have a body, any body in a storm.

Apparently, with some mind training, we can wait through the bardo, have more patience, hold out for a higher rebirth, ignore the temptation of a lower rebirth, and not just jump ship at the earliest opportunity. Why else do you think that the Tibetan Buddhists are so careful not to step on bugs or gently brush mosquitoes from their arms, while saying mantras? It is not just because they love insects, but something more than that.

“They have been our mothers.” This is what many, many Buddhist texts say, which means that these sentient beings are wayward consciousness, just like us, only they have drifted too far from the shore of the human form. Some careful thought about these facts points out how little control we have of our destiny, but at the same time it makes clear that control is possible, and that is encouraging. We may be flotsam and jetsam floating through eternity, but we can

change, alter our direction, and learn to take some control in the future.

We may appear to be a victim of circumstances, merely a loose end, but we can reorient and learn to drive the car that is us. The mind can be trained or, to put it more accurately, we can realize how the mind works and work with it. We, whatever “we” are, can learn, but we actually have to do just that.

There is a lot to think about here, but thinking ultimately depends on the sense it makes, and “sense,” by definition, is an experience, not a concept. In the end, we must leave off at thought and finally take the plunge into experience, and that means the sense world – living it. Ultimately, we have to get to know for a fact what we have been, up until now, only talking about.

So, here we are, all standing around the swimming pool, trying to figure out how to take the plunge. I have mentioned above, the plunge into experience, i.e. living life in the flesh, not only in the mind. But, for the moment, consider that an analogy. What I really want to point out is that spiritually we each also have to find our way out of being caught up in this dualistic, relative Samsaric existence, and take the plunge into the realization of absolute reality, what is called the true nature of the mind.

Like turning a glove inside out, realization is transformational, turning this Samsaric world we know all too well, into Nirvana, without blinking an eye or moving a muscle. We have all seen the Zen series of ten woodblock prints of the ox-herder, or where they say that before enlightenment the mountains were

mountains, then they were not mountains, and at realization they were mountains again, but with a difference. That is the transformation I am pointing at here, that Samsara and Nirvana are connate, two sides of the exact same coin, separated only by realization or lack thereof.

My teacher once said to us. Every thought, word, and deed is either beneficial or maleficent. Perhaps not apparent at first glance, if you examine carefully enough, you find every action either beneficial or maleficent, no matter how slight an edge it may have. Our comments, etc. may well be said in fun, but at heart some of them are not really funny. That kindness or maleficence speaks louder than words. It is karma, no matter how finely we slice it, and it is dutifully recorded as such.

SELF-IMPROVEMENT

November 25, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Yes, it is one of those holiday Limbo times, Black Friday and all of that. Grandkids and leftovers are the order of the day and more family is coming. I probably will settle in and watch a movie. I am sure you are not in the mood for discussion, but here are some thoughts if you find the time.

One thing we learn from studying the Yogachara philosophy and the Alayavijnana is that the Storehouse Consciousness is not fussy about what is stored there. What is stored is our karma and karmic traces, and not just “bad” karma, but “good” karma too. Since the Alayavijnana is eventually emptied when we reach enlightenment, this suggests that everything is stored EXCEPT that which is not karmically tainted. In other words, when we get it right, there is nothing recorded, no stain. Why? Because at enlightenment, the Storehouse-Consciousness is totally empty, so only “karma” is being stored there, karma being something not in alignment with reality, whether positive or negative.

If only karma is recorded (good and bad) in the Alayavijnana, and not what is “not-karma,” this then suggests that the Storehouse Consciousness can be purified (and emptied) simply by no longer recording karma, thus letting the karmic residue ripen and die out, i.e. by purifying ourselves. To me, this is an

important conclusion, because it means that my actions in the present can control what kind of karma triggers my next rebirth. In other words, my karma is changeable (by no longer recording it) and thereby so am I. In other words, I can improve myself.

And my understanding is that we don't purify our karma by somehow working on the karma we have already recorded (although apparently it too can be changed), but rather by simply NOT recording new karma. This idea supports the virtue in not spending a lot of time attempting to re-work the past (therapy), trying to get those stubborn stains out of our past karma, because they are for most practical purposes, indelible. They will surely ripen and at that point they will be finished. Therefore, it is more practical to purify our actions so that additional karma is no longer added to the Storehouse Consciousness or is not added in such great quantities.

We control the future by controlling the present, and not by trying to change the past or attempting to rationalize it. I am not suggesting that we should not feel remorse or regret for past actions, but rather that obsessing on the past is like throwing good money after bad. It is unfortunate that we have been unskillful in our actions, so that karma has been recorded in the Alayavijnana as something that will ripen to our detriment. However, we add insult to injury if we then also spend our precious present on that same past, rather than fashioning a new future by purifying our actions in the present.

We drive the car of our lives not from the past, but from the present. That's where the steering wheel is. One of the pith instructions from the great

Mahasiddha Tilopa is “Don’t Prolong the Past.” This is his advice to us. Trying to change the past is like attempting to put the toothpaste back in the tube or the water back on the waterfall. It’s not that some small success may not be possible by attempting to rejigger the past, but it is like carrying water in our hands. Most is lost because the past is already recorded. It’s a done deal. Better than attempting to scrub out those stubborn stains is to not stain ourselves in the first place or not add more to it. That, as I understand it, is the Buddhist position.

Personally, I find it sad that our Western society spends such an inordinate amount of time trying to “therapy” the past, when a much easier solution is to learn to control the present through our actions, which, by definition, allows us to create a new and more useful past. A “new” past that we can positively identify with makes it easier to forget the old past we are stigmatized with. By purifying our actions, cleaning up our act, we seed our next rebirth with clarity and assure that our “Self” is something more transparent rather than opaque, allowing us to see through it into the true nature of the mind.

MINING FOR WORDS

November 27, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

On any given day, you can find me out at the very edge of language (where writing barely manages to make sense), busy rearranging words and grammar to express reality, or trying to. The borderline, where sense threatens to be non-sense, is always where all the action is. As for working words as I do, it's like putting together a jigsaw puzzle; every once in a while one of the pieces fits so that a better picture appears, extending or deepening what I realize. Aha! Things become clear.

Poets do this best and, although I love it when I'm permitted to write poetry, it seems for me that prose is mostly where I find myself. It seems I like the endless churning of prose, like panning for gold. However, when a poem does come along, that is special. The following poem has been posted before, but it fits here too:

VERBAL FALLOUT

The half-life of words,
Is brief.

Prose is like carrying,
Water in the hands.

Poetry,
Like drinking,
From the faucet.

And words are more than just a part of language. Yes, language contains words, but words also contain and hold together language by their perpetual refreshing and sheer persistence. Just as an ocean is made up of drops, language is made up of words in active use. A body of language, yes, but one made of many words held together by a network of grammar, but mostly through their own activity.

According to the laws of cybernetics, any system, in order to remain coherent, has to circulate at least enough information for it to hang together. The cybernetics of language dictates that to be a “Living Language,” a language must constantly alter itself repeatedly in an endless recursive circle (cycle), one whose product always has to make sense. And there are dead languages out there, like Sanskrit; it has no native speakers.

Language, almost a replica of the Alayavijnana (Storehouse-Consciousness), at least working in tandem, is like a great ship persisting through time. Certainly, Shakespeare understood this only too well, crafting his words so that they could (aerodynamically) last in time. Only words that are crafted most perfectly are “true words, words with a future; true, because they will last until then.” Shakespeare’s words have.

And of course, words have to make sense, but the whole of what makes sense must be constantly refreshed, while like the International Space Station,

ever-changing under slow rotation. The price of a living language is endless renewal, redeeming words that have flat-lined (and almost been forgotten), coming up with new words that we just make-up to fill the gaps in our understanding (to keep the mind open), and mostly the constant rearranging or juxtapositioning of words that we already have in an endless game of living Scrabble.

And language is a major part of what holds the Self together. The “I” in me is many things, a virtual-Self that is at heart, of course, no-one at all. That being said, this “Self” is still real-enough; ultimately, it too is a product of language, concepts so tightly wrapped and spun, that we can live off the sense of gravity (reality) they produce; call it our “seriousness” – taking ourselves seriously. As they say, “Nothing is forever,” but that “nothing” has been enough all this time to distract me to the degree that I have built castles in the air all around it. Language is ingrained, ingrown, and recursive.

We all know that we aren’t going to live forever, and even forever is not forever, but apparently its close enough that here we are right now, together for a time.

In Western esotericism, what in the East is called the Alayavijnana or Storehouse Consciousness, is called “The Monad.” It is the great ship of what drives our virtual-Self that sails through the mind from life to life. Back in the mid-1960s, I wrote this poem about The Monad. It is one of what I call my “mantra” poems, in that, if recited out loud, properly, a hologram-like truth arises. It was written just for me, so there are words in

it that I just made up or used in a special sense, but it marks time, nevertheless. See if you can enjoy it too.

EVERLASTING LIFE

What will in words not wake,
Clear sleeps,
And clear, sleeps on.

What wakes stands watch to see that sleep as sound.
What wakes will serve to set asleep,
Inset a sleep with standing words,
That wake,
If ever, last.
And on that last,
In overlay,
Our life.

Yes,
To lay at the last a life that ever lives,
To ever last that "last" of life,
And in ever "lasting" life,
Everlasting,

We have a life that lives at last.

THOUGHTS WITHOUT A THINKER

November 28, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The term “virtual Self” suggests that perhaps somewhere out there is our “real” Self, waiting to be discovered. I’m afraid that’s not so. The Self, “itself,” is virtual, and not a stand-in for something more permanent that we might prefer. Instead, question who it is that is wanting something (or someone) more real. Behind the virtual-Self is nothing, whatsoever, other than the basic desires that drove us to creating our sense of Self in the first place -- the thirst to exist.

In other words, our virtual-Self, driven by our desires and their resulting fixations, comprises what we commonly call the “Self.” In fact, our attachments are the glue to holds this Self together. We may like to think of our Self as whatever it is comprised of, i.e. what we are attached to or have fixated on, like that bicycle when we were young, our spouse and kids when we grew up, and on and on. However, the personal attachments we each have are like the persona or coat we put on. The real question is who is wearing that coat of attachments? If you want a “true” Self, it’s not an entity or Soul, but perhaps a desire to be that.

Our drive, urges, and desires are what cause the fixations that eventually lead to drawing around us our particular coat of attachments, commonly called the Self or persona. As mentioned, I prefer to call it our

virtual-Self, because that is what it is, and not an existing entity. Unlike personal attachments, which we leave behind us when we die, our basic desires (our continuing urge to fixate) travel intact from birth through death to rebirth. It is these continuing desires that deserve our attention and eventually we need to realize what the Self is.

We may like to think of our virtual-Self, a composite of our desires, as having a moustache or wearing a wig, but the teachings I have read (mostly Yogacharan) point out that while the sum total of our desires attract (like metal filings to a magnet) a persona that we draw around us, that alone does not add up to our being an entity or "Soul." As much as we may want to be a soul with permanent (eternal) existence, the smart money says no. Everything about us is permanently "impermanent." Get used to it, because we already are used to it. It has never been any different and we are doing OK, no?

What's missing? If you say a "Soul," well, you are just saying that. Most of us already assume (and believe) we ARE a soul, and it would take some real work for us to think otherwise. Very few opt for that.

It's no different than when too many dark dust-devil thoughts swirl in, blinding us for a day or two. We can't help but think at times that they ARE us, when they're not, because nothing is permanently us. As a line my dear daughter May wrote in one of her songs, "Trouble ain't built to last." They are just passing thoughts that we can't help but fixate on, until the sun comes out from behind the clouds and we're happy again. In truth, it would be hard to find anything that

we finally ARE, except “nothing in particular.” And we already are that.

Is it any wonder that we astrologers can't help but watch the planetary kaleidoscope, with its ever-changing patterns, with one configuration replacing another every few days? Hardly time to catch our balance. I love this song written by my daughter May Erlewine, called “Wait for the Weather to Change,” which says it a lot like it is. Give it a listen. I do.

AS ABOVE, SO BELOW

November 29, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

“As above, so below,
But after another manner”

This is a familiar quote in Western esotericism, but I challenge you to explain to me that second line, “After another manner.” What does that mean? It’s a rhetorical statement, folks, which means that I am going to attempt to tell you what it means. And I have to put on my astrological hat for this one, since it is the most appropriate language to use here.

The phrase “As Above, So Below” is clear enough. Like those nested Russian Matryoshka dolls, one within the other, this quote points to the astrological suggestion that what happens writ-large out there in the heavens is simultaneously acted out down here on Earth, in complete detail. We all get that.

That second phrase, “But after another manner” took me a while to realize; this refers to a shift in orientation, as in: a little change in our inclination (attitude) can change everything. We instinctively look to find the similarities between the heavenly planetary aspects and their synchronous reflection here on Earth. But we fail to grasp how such a transformation involves our inclination, our attitude -- how we are inclined to life (or not).

Good Lord! I spent years and years writing and lecturing to my fellow astrologers that the key to understanding the various astronomical coordinate transformations (what they mean) is the angle of orientation, which is powerful enough to see the world differently, or at least from another angle. We are all about the “As above, so below” concept; what we fail to see coming (which is the big surprise) is our change in attitude, how a transformation also results in a change in our inclination – how we are inclined.

I started out in the early-1970s transforming star coordinates (by hand and calculator) the star maps as used by astronomers (Right Ascension and Declination) to the coordinates familiar to astrologers, Ecliptic Longitude and Latitude. The angle of orientation-change is 23-degrees and change. This took weeks and months and in 1976 I published a series of large printed maps, titled “Seven Star Maps.”

I then went on, but few followed, to transform it all into Galactic Coordinates and then Supergalactic Coordinates, to help give the big picture, but that was a bridge too far for most folks. So, I came closer-in, too close it seems, and transformed our birth moment (the same time, planets, etc.) into Azimuth and Altitude, what I termed “Local Space.” This technique became a popular method of relocation (link below).

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/The-Astrology-of-Local-Space.pdf>

The concept that drove all this coordinate transforming was, as mentioned above, that it is not enough to look for nested systems, such as that what happens up in the heavens is reflected in some way

down here on Earth. “Above and Below” was all fine, but “After Another Manner” pointed to a change in angle or attitude as we move from one dimension to another.

Yes, we change, but the greatest part of change is the change in our attitude, the way we view things – the angle of inclination. In other words: how we are inclined. Are you inclined this way or that? This is what we seem to fail to anticipate when we fathom the future, that we will change in attitude or inclination toward life.

In other words, I studied not only how the heavens and the Earth were in synch with one another, but equally as important, the change in our inclination that takes place in most transformations. That is the part that is not usually considered, and it affects everything. We may not be “inclined” such as we used to, etc.

For those who actually want to read more about this kind thing, I suggest an article I wrote years ago called “Cycles or Circles, Centers, and Circulation”

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewtopic.php?f=311&t=79&sid=7cfcde506432c87a6c90a4c5c57014dd>

Another, but more embracing view can found in the book “The Astrology of Space,” which is here:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-boo.../The-Astrology-of-Space.pdf>

PHOTOGRAPHY AS MEDITATION

November 30, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[Here are some comments I made in a conversation with another photographer that might interest some of you. I have had to tweak the originals to make it have more clarity, so I will just list the general questions and my answer.]

I read your article with interest, but I have a different take on the topic. For one, I am not a professional photographer, and that by choice. Nevertheless, I do a lot of photography just because I like to. That being said, I don't find that the better I get at photography, the harder it is to please myself (as you suggest), and perhaps I can explain why I find this so.

The key to my approach to photography is "process," the full immersion in the process of photographing, rather than just focusing on the photos (and any expectations) that result from doing photography. Provided that it is done properly (and provided that I am immersed in the process of shooting photos), then the photos that result, however repetitive they may appear (or be) as to subject matter, have a freshness of the moment that satisfies me.

Of course, I am pleased if others enjoy my photos, but the person I am trying to satisfy when photographing is me. If I don't like it, I don't want to show it to you, even if it is a stunning photo. A "happy accident" of a

good photo or one that works because of some gimmick, doesn't do it for me. I consider all photos impressions, and I too want to be "impressed" by any photo I take, you know, have it imprint my mind, so to speak. Otherwise, why bother?

If you have ever smelled a flower whose scent penetrated your brain beyond your ability to stop it... that is how I like a photo to satisfy me. With photos, it is the freshness and ability to impress itself into my consciousness that is important, and (for me) that always comes from attention to the present moment, and not from any amount of preparation, although I have done my homework. Of course, in my case, I learned to mix photography with a specific form of meditation, so that should be kept in mind.

We have run a Tibetan Buddhist meditation center since the 1980s, so I have over 42 years of meditation training of one kind or another. I mix my photography with what is called Insight Meditation, such that the two are the same thing. In other words, photography for me is a form of meditation (and I don't mean just "relaxation"); I can meditate (Vipassana) by using a camera, as well as sitting on a cushion or by other means. What I am describing is not just relaxing in the beauty of nature, but rather a very specific method of traditional meditation that is "mixed" with the photographic process until they are one and the same, so please take note.

The particular type of meditation I use with photography is called Lhaktong in Tibetan, and it is a special type of Vipassana Meditation that is part of training in Mahamudra Meditation. In English this is called Insight Meditation, of which there are many

kinds. As mentioned, the technique I use is specific to learning Mahamudra Meditation in the Karma Kagyu Lineage. Anyway, one of its virtues is that it is non-dualistic, meaning that it requires full immersion in the moment to the exclusion of self-consciousness. I find that when fully immersed (and resting in that immersion), whatever I photograph has, as mentioned, a certain freshness that (at least to my eyes) is satisfying, no matter how many times I photograph the same subject. I am impressed (imprinted) by it, but, of course, others may find it ordinary. That is why I believe we must photograph to touch ourselves first, and others second, if they can respond.

To repeat: the key to the close-up photography I do, in my opinion, is unwavering attention (and immersion) in the process of photography, allowing the mind to fully rest in the process itself. I find, when in that frame of mind, the results take care of themselves and have (as mentioned) a certain impact and freshness in the mind.

A QUESTION ABOUT IMPROVEMENT TO EXPECTATIONS

The operative word in your response, for me, is “expectation.” Since I do a lot of focus-stacking, often over 100 layers for a single image, I have a lot of time for immersion into the entire photographic process. The more I am about the process, the more the results seem to improve (satisfy), so yes, there is improvement in the resulting photos, over time. However, if I concentrate primarily on the results, instead of the process, they don’t improve (satisfy) as much. Merging with the process, and allowing myself

to rest in that seems to allow my mind to open, and for more and more of what is “beautiful” about the subject (more compositions, angles, etc.) to appear. The “beauty” in what appears through immersion in the process is “a way in,” a way into what I could only call a more timeless, unified, or non-dualistic state, which (somehow) rubs off, like a fine perfume, on the resulting photos. Hard to put into words, but that is the general idea.

QUESTION ABOUT PROCESS

Perhaps the word “process” is getting in the way here. By “process,” I don’t mean tedium, rote, or mechanical. Instead, I mean something like getting “in the zone,” not as you may be using the word “process” to mean “mundane” or rule-ridden. Let me approach this from another angle. When I go out to photograph (in the studio, it is much the same), it usually takes me some time before I synch with the moment and I have found the way “into” the mind once again. This happens when something beautiful catches my eye, after which (usually) that moment of insight (or deeper immersion) opens up the floodgates, and more and more I can suddenly see the beauty in everything. Call it “getting in the mood,” but it is a very repeatable technique. That is what I intended the word “process” to mean, the process of photographing rather than any expectations as to results. I may not have communicated it well enough.

QUESTION: ARE THERE TIMES YOU FAIL TO GET IN THE ZONE?

Days when I don't make the zone? Sure, but not so much. It's not linear. The main reason I photograph IS the zone. I don't have clients to satisfy. However, it is not quite as simple as that, either. To make a long story, short: years ago, during what was a hard time for me (and my family) financially, I took to nature photography (which I had done as a kid) as a way to get away from the day-to-day worries of that time. For six months straight, unless it was raining, I was out before dawn watching the sun come up, soaking wet, and crawling around in the fields doing close-up and macro photography. Six months straight.

During that time, something happened with my meditation training and photography, such that, along with seeing the subject through the lens, I realized that the process of "Seeing" itself was as important as any object I was looking at or any resulting photo I was getting. In other words, the results of my photography depended on how I went about it, how I handled the process. Like the elaborate Japanese Zen Tea Ceremony, every step in the photographic process was gradually cherished, until the process of taking photos became the resultant aim and the resulting photos just a byproduct.

I was also "realizing" the process of Seeing (and finding rest in that), and not just in looking at the bug or plant I was photographing. And when I did, I achieved a sense of luminous clarity that I previously had been unaware of. I soon became addicted (so to speak) to the vivid clarity, such that if I wanted this particular clarity all the time, I had to grab a camera and go out and photograph. I did just that, and for a while that was the only way I could be clear. It was similar to needing eye-glasses in order to see clearly,

only I needed to be peering through a highly-corrected lens at anything at all, while, at the same time, being completely immersed in the seeing itself, as much or more so than what was being seen and photographed.

In fact, after I discovered what was happening here, this mixing of photography and Vipassana, it took me more than a year to separate the new-found clarity from the process of photographing, so that I could achieve this clarity in other things that I did in life, i.e. get the same kind of joy and concentrated clarity I was finding in photography.

Again: all of this is hard to put into words, but I am doing my best. The particular clarity of Insight Meditation is a form of “realization”; it is permanent, so it is not often that I don’t reach the zone. I just have to relax and immerse into it. That is my approach to photography.

Here are a bunch of photo-related free e-books that I have put together in recent years. You can look through them here on this site, one by one, or scroll through them at the following link:

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

“MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING”

December 2, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[As we slide into winter, here I am, shuffling the deck as to what I will do with all the “indoors” time that is looming. We might just pack up and head south for a ramble through the sunshine states; I don’t know, but I’m considering it. The problem is that I don’t like to travel, but I love the sun and the fresh air of open windows. How are you folks that are also in the winter belt doing this year? The election didn’t help my mood, either.]

The above blog title is just a little reminder to us from Shakespeare that he gets it. Grasping at something (especially intellectually) is understandable in the beginning, but this becomes a problem when it comes to the more advanced forms of meditation. Trying to get a purchase, a place to stand on in the mind, is just reification rearing its ugly head once again. This deep-set obsession we have with covering our nakedness, which (ironically) is also what we are peering to see, is like trying to climb out of the middle of a deep lake. Multiply this by society and we have everyone trying to climb out of the lake on each other’s backs. At best, it’s a futile gesture, as we sink. To use an analogy, in the more advanced forms of meditation, learning to relax and float is mandatory. Conscious effort can only take us so far.

With that said, here we are, caught between the devil and the deep-blue sea, between a rock and a hard place, as the old sayings go. The past and the future don't really exist, so we're confined to this present moment, the only oxygen-vent in a breathless world. And even this very moment of "Now" is not THE solution, but rather a portal or "Star Gate" through which we can, with training, extend ourselves to realize the actual nature of the mind itself. And it is only in that complete extension that realization exists. As I like to say to myself, "Eternity is always found... just in time."

In other words, we can't see beyond "what is," but, if we "Look," we CAN realize the full extent of what is. Because realization is beyond words, we can't talk about it or, to re-phrase, we can only talk ABOUT it, yet not talk "it." However, what is most amazing is that it can be realized to its full extent.

Reading about dharma can be good and articles like this are meant to be read. But ship-to-shore communications endlessly beckon us to shove off from a life limited to suffocating concepts and push out into the depth of greater realization. I love the old Christian phrase "Go to meet your maker." The dharma version of that might be something like "Realize the true nature of the mind." It can be done and it is higher than Mt. Everest and more solitary and pristine, because nobody goes there or has EVER been there. Yet, it can be realized. As the Tibetans say, "E-MA-HO!"

Since "Realization" is beyond language, we can't talk about it. Of course, we are free to try (I do), but it just can't be done. Some things (like death) can only

happen in person. It is the same with realization; we each have to go there alone and “See” what can be seen, realize what is to be realized.

I wrote this short fun-poem a couple of days ago:

EMPTINESS

Realization ...
Makes nothing,
Of something,
And something,
Of nothing.

STARGATE

December 3, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

We are used to looking out, not in. We don't even know how to look in, or not very well. And it's really neither, either in or out, that is important, but rather more like "through," as in the Beatles song:

"I'm looking through you,
Where did you go?
I thought I knew you,
What did I know?"

So, it's not looking "at" that is important, but rather looking "through," much like we would look out a window or, if you must, through a keyhole. The objects to be seen in this world are a means to an end, and not an end in themselves, i.e. not just something to be seen "out there." Objects seen as ends-in-themselves are just another sign of our habitual reification and dualism, you know, the "I" and the "them."

In other words, the "them" we look at out there is in fact meant to be a means, not an end, a means to an end as opposed to being an end in itself. This is a simple mistake or misunderstanding. We objectify things as an end in themselves, when in fact they are little more than the means to the end of clarifying our mind as to its own nature. We stop short of realization of this fact.

In the more advanced methods of mind training, like Insight Meditation (Lhaktong in Tibetan), we learn to stop taking what is seen as an end in itself, and begin to see “through” our habitual act of objectifying everything. In other words, instead of reifying or objectifying, we learn to see through the objects of our external world much as we use windows to see through, rather than at. To repeat, visible objects (and mental objects) are a means through which to see clearly, and not something intended just to be seen as an object. We are short-sighted, myopic. We don’t get the big picture.

Something for another blog would be that language is more than just a means to communicate. It is a habitat in which we very much live, a container or starship through which we travel through life and time. Language is our starship, and words and phrases are star-gates to the mind itself.

And StarGates are not meant to be “passed through,” but rather they are the means to realize the nature of the mind itself, that there is nowhere to pass-through “to,” only the realization of the fact that the place we are trying so hard to get to is right here, as in perfectly present. So, hopefully you can see the problem that, in essence, we are trying to get here, where we already are. The Tibetans use the word “Realization” and the pointing-out instructions are so that we can realize the nature of our own mind, here and now, rather than continue to shine ourselves on as we do.

This is why we study and train in Insight Meditation, to have this particular insight. Make sense?

HUMANITY'S HABITAT: LANGUAGE

December 4, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I would like to mention language as something more than just a means of communication. Language is also our virtual world, a world we spend more time in than “reality,” whatever that is; we don't know reality or we would be enlightened. So, it is wishful thinking to think that we are living in the real world, when all we have done is endlessly buffer ourselves from reality. And that, by the way, is a definition of Samsara. It's ironic at best.

We may laugh at the younger generation and their video games, spending untold hours in a virtual world. Where do you think they learned it from? Take a guess. It is sheer ignorance (or arrogance) to imagine that we don't also live in a virtual world, our own living video game, one at which we may not even be that much of a player. We have been “virtual” our entire lives, and the game we play, among others, is “language.”

Language is exactly like one of those interactive web-based video-games our kids love, a common interface shared by all, one that we dress up in as we please or can. And language, for the most part, is many steps from reality, a reality which we could not even describe, because we know so little about it. Anyway, that's the thesis here, that much of our life is virtual and that language is the main game we play.

Billions of people are all doing the same thing, drinking their morning coffee, going to the bathroom, breathing in and out. Talk about common karma; we can't help but generate results that are similar, because we ARE similar. This flood of commonality has swept all humans together down the course of history. And a common language is our boat. I don't mean we all speak the same language, but we all speak "language," and that is the virtual reality in which we not only are totally immersed, but spend almost all of our time in. We don't get out much anymore or ever.

In other words, language is the ship of state on which we all sail, our little joystick of words and phrases held tightly in our hands. We are wrapped in language, tighter than a mummy and just as old. We not only can't get out, we have no intention of getting out. Language is the vehicle we drive 24x7, the game we love to play, and, for us, something way beyond just a means of communication. It is our lifeboat and as close to an eternal Soul as we will ever get. It is our gyroscope and compass. And it is part and parcel of Samsara.

We would have to deconstruct our fixation on language to realize the actual nature of the mind, or at least learn to see through it, to use language as it was meant to be used, as a window into the mind itself. Instead, we hover just beyond reality, living virtually, and take that for life itself. The transformation of languages as a means to realization (instead of an end in itself) would have to take place. Of course, that is what Insight Meditation is all about and why I practice it.

The problem is that we are near-sighted, not far-sighted. We look, but only close, or too close to see all that far. And we are altogether too self-conscious, and have made a habit of resting our inner gaze on ourselves much of the time for lack of a better target. We can't see through or beyond our Self and we don't even try. It's not just that the Self is somehow opaque and we can't see beyond it. We are habituated to allowing our gaze to fall short and rest on the self in reflection, rather than to see through it. We would first have to want to see through it, and then, second, learn how to do that. It can be done.

Just as a mother dotes on her child, we can't take our eyes off ourselves, perhaps because, when it comes to the Self, we are entirely our own creation, at least as to what the self is made up of, our particular fixations. In a way, it's our own little Frankenstein and we love it.

In other words, what we "think" supersedes reality. After all, that is what dualism and the Samsaric world is all about, the veil of conceptualization that entraps us. We are inside our conceptualization, not out, and it obscures the true nature of the mind. Our relationship with our Self can only be described as incestuous, being in love with our own creation.

If this little blog is a little top-heavy, I apologize, but language (and its role in life) is something worth considering and being aware of, IMO.

THE LENGTH OF LAST

December 5, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I would like to offer a short series on the things that last, an enduring topic that has fascinated me for decades. And I am not talking about ordinary memories, although some of them do indeed persist. I am talking about the mind itself and the half-life of what's in it. If you have a little time to spend with me here, I may be able to introduce you to some thoughts that I have found invaluable and we can chat about them.

As we all know, the mind can be amorphous, even cloudy. Not everything in the mind is clear and shining. There are dark areas too, of course. But there are also things that shine like the sun in the firmament of the Mind. How does that work? What lasts and what is "lasting" about?

I am very much an advocate of the idea that things that are made well tend to last longer than things that are just thrown together. When we study what lasts (and what lasts longest), sooner or later we discover there is a word for it, and that is "religion." Religion comes from a Latin word "religare," which means to tie or bind-fast, thus the things that are made or bound to "last."

In other words, religions are concerned with the things that last longest, so obviously "eternal" or absolute

truths would be in that category. When everything else breaks-up and ceases to hold its form, those long-lasting truths are still there; they shine. We can depend on them to be there in the future. They will last until then. There is even an odd use of the word in shoemaking, where the word "last" is what holds the form of the shoe together over time.

This is why we can safely say that the truth is the future, if only because it will last until then. That is why it is the truth. Everything else fades away. For me, the archetypical analogy for duration would have to be the stars in the sky, some brighter, some not, some fading, and some that will be there virtually forever. Truth is like that. Truth lasts and what is most true lasts longest.

Just as in the heavens we have certain bright stars like Polaris (the North Star), a pole star upon which we can depend to guide ourselves on the sea at night, so too, within the mind, are objects that shine bright in the night of the mind. We can also see to guide ourselves by their direction. The Tibetans even go so far as to say that we can place things in the mind that will last. That is what mind-termas (hidden mind treasures) are.

It is just a skip and a jump to the conclusion that if we make something with great care and time, it will last longer than something made thoughtlessly. This is what the Buddhists call "Skillful Means." That "skill" is our means to make something of value that lasts. We know this is true with fine instruments like violins and guitars. Craftsmanship counts; "skillful means" shows.

And I love to point out how great minds like Shakespeare placed his written work into the mind and there it remains, shining today just as it did hundreds of years ago. We have yet to unravel his words. Just try reading him; he will entrance you before you can fathom him. Shakespeare is not done yet. Of course, some things last just a short while.

I can see no reason why our every thought and action does not come under the same umbrella as far as value and duration are concerned. I believe this is what is called "karma," good or bad. Those stubborn stains that we create shine as darkly as those good things we do shine brightly. Once we grasp (or rather, deeply realize) this, we step much more carefully through the cow-pastures of life. No more bull-in-the-china-shop knee-jerk reactions, hopefully. Every intent counts.

I am not the only one to cling to the light, to those things we can most depend on, that last longest. Everybody does. After all, that is how we get around in the darkness of time, by following the bright stars in the mind, the ones that last long enough for us to see to be guided by. They are like lamps or torches.

In my case, it seems that the dharma and natural law are in a race for my attention when it comes to lasting, and since in the end they are identical in nature, I switch back and forth between them almost randomly. I could go on for hours with this topic. That is how important it has been to me.

(To Be Continued)

MUSIC LASTS TOO

December 6, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Those who have studied Tibetan Buddhism are familiar with what are called “Terma,” dharma teachings or truths that have been placed in the earth as hidden treasures of knowledge, to be found at the appropriate time in the future by a treasure-finder called a “terton” and re-vitalized.

And in this article, specifically, I want to look at “Mind Treasures,” concepts or teachings hidden in the mind itself, which can be found by those among us who have the required ability and training. This too is part of discovering dharma and a fascinating one at that.

Need I remind readers that every last idea, invention, and even every single thought and word in the history of the world has originated from the Mind, so the mind is not exactly empty, although emptiness (of a different kind) is said to be an attribute as to its nature.

As to “terma,” though much has been made of pulling hidden scrolls out of rocks, from under ground, out of water, or even from the mind itself, don’t imagine that when we find such a treasure (terma), it is good to go, just as it is. Hardly.

It is important to understand that not only does it take a very special person (a tertton) to find such treasures,

but once found, these teachings can take years to absorb and realize, before they can be shared with the world. Sometimes, I think of mind-treasures as freeze-dried dharma, to which we must add the water of realization to vitalize them.

But what about the outskirts of dharma, the various great arts of the world that certainly have considerable truth and beauty in them, as well, but are more secular. It is one thing to place something in the mind, a dharma teaching that will be found somewhere later in time or that perhaps can be found by learning how to properly search. As mentioned, these are called "Mind Treasures" (Mind Terma), but what about things that are fashioned so perfectly in real-time by artists and experts, such that, like diamonds, they too naturally resist time's ability to wear them out of existence? What does it take to stop or inhibit time? There is truth to the arts and literature as well. And does music qualify as terma? Does it too defy time?

For example: I am reminded of the songs of rock-n'-roll legend "Little Richard." Although he re-recorded his hits for decades, there was only really a period of about three years in the late 1950s when he was white hot. No one, IMO, has ever successfully imitated Little Richard as far as intensity, any more than they have Jimi Hendrix or, for that matter, Bob Dylan. Why is that? What is so unique about these musicians?

All of these artists worked so energetically (and so perfectly), by intent or otherwise, that they managed to place their music deep in the mind, way beyond where you and I can even listen. Chances are that we

probably never will dig them out or get under and behind them. They go deep and we don't know how to care enough ourselves to reach that depth, so there they sit, brilliantly spinning-tops (like twinkling stars) inset into the firmament of the mind. Perhaps the Dharma (by definition) is the perfect differential, but everything made is made either well or less than well. And some of this shines.

Being a musician myself, and loving music deeply, of course I consider it an art form, one with deeper and shallower layers. I will give some examples here, and post links to some articles for further consideration. Below are some notes I wrote that were printed in the biography of the great jazz guitarist, Grant Green, for the book "Grant Green: Rediscovering the Forgotten Genius of Jazz Guitar" (2002). They relate to this discussion of how things last. Here are a few:

GRANT GREEN: THE GROOVE MASTER

"All that I can say about Grant Green is that he is the groove master. Numero uno. He is so deep in the groove that most people have no idea what's up with him. Players like Stanley Turrentine, Jimmy Smith, Kenny Burrell, and many other really great soul-jazz artists are also groove masters. But the main man is Grant Green. He is so far in the groove that it will take decades for us to bring him out in full. He is just starting to be discovered.

"To get your attention and make clear that I am saying something here, consider the singing voice of Bob Dylan. A lot of people used to say the guy can't sing. But it's not that simple. He is singing. The problem is that he is singing so far in the future that we can't yet

hear the music. Other artists can sing his tunes and we can hear that all right. Given enough time... enough years... that gravel-like voice will sound as sweet to our ears as any velvet-toned singer. Dylan's voice is all about microtones and inflection. For now, that voice is hidden from our ears in time so tight that there is no room (no time) yet to hear it. Some folks can hear it now. I, for one, can hear the music in his voice. I know many of you can too. Someday, everyone will be able to hear it, because the mind will unfold itself until even Dylan's voice is exposed for just what it is -- a pure music. But, by then our idea of music will also have changed. Rap is changing it even now.

"Billy Holiday is another voice that is filled with microtones that emerge through time like an ever-blooming flower. You (or I) can't hear the end or root of her singing, not yet anyway. As we try to listen to Holiday (as we attempt to grasp that voice), we are simply knocked out by the deep information there. We try to absorb it and before we can get a handle on her voice (if we dare listen!), she entrances us in a delightful dream-like groove and we are lost to criticism. Instead, we groove on and reflect about this other dream that we have called life. All great musicians do this to us. IMO, Billie Holiday is the best woman singer I have ever heard.

"Grant Green's playing at its best is like this too. It is so recursive that, instead of taking the obvious outs we are used to hearing, Green instead chooses to reinvest -- to go in farther and deepen the groove. He opens up a groove and then opens up a groove and then opens a groove, and so on. He never stops. He opens a groove and then works to widen that groove

until we can see into the music, see through the music into ourselves. He puts everything back into the groove that he might otherwise get out of it. He knows that the groove is the thing and that time will see him out and his music will live long. That is what grooves are about and why Grant Green is the groove master.

“I hope that some of what I have written here will help blues lovers push off from the island of blues out into the sea of jazz. You can always head back to the solid ground of blues if you can’t get into the jazz. Blues and jazz are not mutually exclusive. Blues in jazz has been a thrilling ride (groove) for me and I have found a whole new music that satisfies much like the blues satisfy. I listen to groove music all the time. If you find some great groove tunes that I have not mentioned here, drop me a line. I want to hear them.”

Below is a link to an article I wrote on “Groove and Blues in Jazz,” for those interested.

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

Also, an article I wrote, “Making Blues Time,” which could be interesting to some of you.

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

(To Be Continued)

MUSIC MIND

December 6, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

It is clear to me that many classical composers (and other forms of music too) reach what I can only call various levels or “depths.” IMO, the depth of a Bach is different from that of an Eric Satie, although I very much love the music of both of these composers. Of course, both were inspired (whatever inspiration is), but to me, Bach penetrated the mind with his craft very deeply with such works as the “Trio Sonatas” for organ (1730), and especially in his later keyboard works like the “Vom Himmel hoch” variations (1747), “Musical Offering” (1749), and especially “The Art of the Fugue” (1750).

I know we can’t measure these things, but we do anyway, at least personally. To my mind, Johann Sebastian Bach and William Shakespeare are two minds that embedded their work in the firmament of the mind very deeply, deeply enough that my ears are still eager to exhaust their influence on me.

I could go into minute detail about modern popular music, of which I am a little bit of an expert, but we would only be comparing apples and oranges. We each have those artists that affect us deeply. Rather than agree to disagree as to our respective favorites, what I hope we can talk about is how works of art have been embedded more or less deeply in the collective mind throughout history.

In my understanding, this is possible thanks to inspiration, which determines the degree of penetration, and secondly the craftsmanship necessary to secure a hold therein. Obviously Shakespeare and Bach had plenty of both, as each is deeply embedded in our cultural memory.

If we use the analogy of the fixed stars in the night sky, then the likes of a Shakespeare or Bach are certainly among the Named Stars, and perhaps each is even a pole star in his own way. If we look for a Buddhist slant to all of this then, although William Shakespeare as a man is deceased and has moved on to whatever rebirth he has engendered, the written work that he has left behind has, in some way, a life of its own. It has not only served as the ultimate reference for the English language, but Shakespeare's work continues to very much affect the living language as it is spoken and thought to this day. It certainly has affected me as much as (more) than any other English writer.

This has been a reoccurring concept for me, but it has recently sparked due to some Yogachara statements to the effect that "Language" as a vehicle is closely linked with the Alayavijnana, the Storehouse Consciousness. And the Alayavijnana itself has an ark-like or boat-like connotation in that it follows us through our many lives and is not exhausted until we attain enlightenment, at which time it is empty of all karmic traces.

Unfortunately, aside from those comments about the similarity of the storehouse consciousness to language, I have been unable to find anything more detailed. Perhaps some of you folks know. There is

no doubt that language, like the Alayavijnana, has all kinds of things embedded in it and both seem to share a convection-like motion or quality. Are they just similar or are the two actually linked to one another, and how?

Language is common to a group, although each of us has our own take on language, while the Alayavijnana is very much an individual-based affair, although individuals from the same country, race, religion, etc. all have their individual Alayavijnanas headed in roughly the same direction, thus group karma, etc.

Why is this so interesting? For me, the whole idea of transmigration from lifetime to lifetime is more than just a passing interest. Having studied various religions and spiritual traditions, I can't help but attempt to learn how they approach death and the afterlife... the next life. Certainly, they don't appear to agree, and yet here we all are, not growing any younger. At what point is it worthwhile to look into this? Or should we each take pot luck and see what comes. As for me, I am curious... by nature.

Fear of the unknown is popular and understandable. So, to know more about the unknown, we inquire as we can. The Buddhists seem to bend over backward with detail about death, dying, the afterlife (bardo), and subsequent rebirth -- a veritable smorgasbord of concepts. It's not like any of us can go and have a peek at what's after life, so we are very much dependent on the word of those who know. The way I do it is to very carefully observe and test the dharma teachings on things I can know, and by implication extend my trust on those that I can't know. So far, I have moved from "You Only Go Around Once!" to

concepts of rebirth, which for me, is a very long way. I never bought into the Christian concept of “Heaven” that I was raised in.

I am not only interested in rebirth, but as you can read, also the various half-lives of art or any endeavor. Not only how long, but how do things last? And how can we make things last longer?

Well, language is part of the mind, and written work is part of language, not unlike the Lyle Lovett verse “I said, me upon my pony on my boat.” Language is a creature of the mind and Shakespeare is like an ark embedded in language, which is embedded in the mind. Like planets around the Sun, writers like Shakespeare attract us by their specific gravity and we orbit them for a while or for a lifetime.

It would be too much to mention “beauty,” and what that is. I can remember when I was a teenager, driving my old 1951 Ford Victoria Hardtop across town on 7th Street in Ann Arbor, tears running down my face at the song playing on the radio. It was “Will I See You In September” by the Happenings, and I had just broken up and would not be seeing her that September. What is it about some songs that we cannot hear them enough?

That tune (and time) I can explain, but there are others that no matter how many times I listen, I am still trying to absorb or take in something that I can’t get enough of. What is absorbed by my listening? It’s like some trace mineral that my system needs.

And it’s not just old 45s from the 1950s, but beauty in whatever form manages to catch my eye. As

mentioned, trying to explain “beauty” would be difficult, if even possible. There is the world around me, and in that world are clues, sounds or sights that take me out of my day-to-day ordinariness and sweep me inside (or outside) into another dimension, that of beauty.

Poet Gerard Manley Hopkins calls these clues “Inscapes,” a word he made up, because they take us within to (or toward) the eternal and reduce us to silence and peace in the blink of an eye. It is my opinion that we find inner rest not only on the couch at the end of a hard day (or in a glass of wine), but throughout the day by way of inscapes (and in nanoseconds) all day long, moments that bring micro-relief that adds up over time and is enough to keep us sane.

My point here is that, although we like to focus on the fixations that bring about the attachments of the Self, the problem is not only one of fixation, but also of approach/avoidance (reactivity) of all kinds, reactions in general. We are deeply, deeply embedded, not only in language, but in the things of the mind in general. If we like to think that our politicians are all bought and sold, then we cannot begin to describe our own addiction to language and the other fixations in the mind. It is not as simple as the Self’s fixations.

I close with an excerpt from an interview of Psychologist (and Tibetan translator and meditation teacher) Daniel P. Brown, where he addresses the First Noble Truth of Buddhism, the “Truth of Suffering.” Daniel Brown, whom I consider has some actual realization, states:

“The first noble truth in Buddhism is in Pali dukkha, which is often translated as ‘suffering’. It’s not a very good translation.

“What it really means is that, if you look at your experience, moment by moment, if the mind likes something it moves more towards that to make more of it; if the mind doesn’t like it, it moves away from it to make less of it. So incessantly the mind is moving towards things and moving away from things; it’s reactive. The first noble truth is ‘reactivity’. It’s built into how we process events moment by moment. And what these meditation practices do is minimise and ultimately eradicate that reactivity. And if you eradicate that reactivity moment by moment so it just doesn’t occur, then there is no basis for suffering.”

SPIRITUAL FUSION

December 7, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

In “The Mind” and in our mind are many things. Not only are all things impermanent, they thereby also have duration; they last only so long and then they cease lasting. It’s like how I used to spin quarters on the kitchen table. The more perfectly I would spin the quarters, the longer they would spin. Everything we do, each action we take, has a duration based on how well it is done – execution. This is what the Tibetan Buddhists call “Skillful Means.” Skillful Means is often paired with the word “Awareness” (sometimes called “Wisdom”) and the two are connate, i.e. the reverse or reciprocal of one another, like a reversible T-shirt.

The more skillful the means, the greater awareness that results and vice versa. The greater awareness that we have, the more we can see to use even more skillful means in our actions, in what we do -- ad infinitum. Skillful Means & Awareness are called by the Tibetans “The Two Accumulations” and they are recursive. They feed on one another. And that “feeding” increases exponentially until it becomes incandescent and we are enlightened. This works like the charm that it is.

The “Two Accumulations” work exactly like the description of Groove Music I wrote about a couple of blogs ago, this idea of recursive reinvestment, which comes as close as I have ever seen to the mythical

perpetual-motion machine. If there is a magic method in dharma practice, the “Two Accumulations” is it. And it is simple to understand.

Greater awareness allows us to see and act more carefully, and more careful action (termed “Skillful Means” by Buddhists) is more effective, producing increased space or room (greater awareness), which then allows us to act even more carefully, and so it goes, recursively, one part feeding on the other.

Once the technique of the “Two Accumulations” is mastered, it becomes second nature, and its results improve exponentially, and as the old saying goes “it’s straight on ‘til morning” to realization.

So, reading this post in one ear and out the other is not recommended. It’s not like there are a lot of these kind of tools laying around in our dharma toolbox. The “Two Accumulations” is almost unique in its ability to power us through whatever we encounter. It can be used by anyone, at any level and, if done properly, not only fuels itself, but does so exponentially until it becomes incendiary and what can only be called “spiritual fusion” results. And that is a very desirable result.

I have explained how it works as best I can. Now it’s up to you to test it out and see if you can work it. Use what awareness you now have to act more skillfully, carefully, as the Zen monks do in the traditional Tea Ceremony. Skillful action brings with it increased awareness of what we are doing, and then use that awareness to be even more skillful yet, etc. It’s recursive. You get the idea. Try it out and see what happens.

[Photo of the “Queen of the Night” (night-blooming Cereus) by me. The flower, typically a foot long, blooms one night and is gone. Its fragrance penetrates the mind beyond any attempts to stop it.]

NOTHING IS GOING ON

December 8, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

This could be fun. We read that great meditators like Tibet's Jetsun Milarepa spend many years in solitary retreat. What on earth goes on in such a meditation retreat? What does one do there?

It is unfortunate that the English language has about one word for meditation, which is "Meditation," while the Tibetans have scores of words. To make things worse, the popular connotation of "meditation" in English is that it is about contemplating "something," like "I am going to meditate on world peace," when what we mean is that we are going to noodle on the thought. That is not what is meant here by meditation. Meditation in Tibetan Buddhism (at least in the more advanced practices) include that, but focus more on what is called non-dual or direct meditation on the mind itself. We may not be able to do it yet, but we should at least know something about it, because it is in our future. There is no back door.

At a certain point in dharma training, the traditional advice for meditators is to seek solitude, not so much as a need to be alone, as it is a need to concentrate on letting go, which sounds like an oxymoron. The way I remind myself of this is to say that meditation is about letting things go, as in "letting things go on." It's not as if I could stop them if I tried, so it's more about me allowing the mind to naturally settle out as it

already is. I'm the one who has to make the adjustment. When we get to the stage of solitary meditation, we can already concentrate well enough, but becoming absolutely "still" (as in letting things finally settle out) was never before seen as a primary concern in itself. And now, suddenly it is.

And the natural response to the onset of this condition is to need all the quiet we can find, not in order to do anything or even think "about" something, but in fact to do nothing at all and simply rest in "not-thinking." As the great Sharipa said:

"Look! Look! But do not look at anything.
Meditate! Meditate! But do not meditate on anything."

Perhaps it is as simple as finally learning to be and to be still, beginning to seek stillness for its own sake or to see in our doing nothing, something of lasting value. In short, we find that advanced meditators don't meditate on anything. That would be dualistic. They meditate on nothing at all. They don't even meditate on "nothing" (as in meditate on "emptiness"), because that would still be something. The traditional texts just say "do not meditate." At that point, non-meditation IS meditation.

Everything that demands our attention is an interruption from just doing nothing, from letting things be. "Nothing" is going on here and it requires our complete attention, or as the Buddhists say, "unwavering attention." We can be quite busy doing nothing. In other words, doing nothing does not interrupt anything, but doing something may have interrupted nothing. And nothing is not anything; it's not even nothing. In other words, doing nothing can

be interrupted by something, which is not even anything in itself. Do you get the idea or are the words too crazy for you? Sorry about that.

Meditation always has to stop just short of being something. In other words, we don't meditate on anything, which does not mean that we meditate on nothing. Even "Nothing" is still something. Meditation, then, is not meditation on anything. This why it is called non-meditation.

It takes time to go through this learning process and everything else, by definition, is a distraction. I find myself being impatient with everyone and everything, but not in an impatient way; it's more like waiting for the interruptions to cease or die down, so that I can get back to doing nothing once again. I am perhaps listening to you, but at the same time I am monitoring nothing. Eventually, perhaps I will be able to talk with you and do nothing at the same time. Here's hoping.

"If Muhammad does not come to the mountain, the mountain must come to Muhammad." If we don't naturally seek the solitude of meditation, sooner or later, it seeks us out, and overcomes us in the middle of whatever we are about.

Just as all roads lead to Rome, all meditation eventually leads to what is called "non-meditation." We just end up there, no matter which way we go, east, south, north or west. And it comes in on us as the tide comes in, slowly, but surely. We gradually wake up to the fact that we have stopped meditating on something and have begun to meditate on nothing at all; thus we have entered the state of non-meditation. Why? Because meditation on something

is ultimately just another obscuration. We have to stabilize the practice of non-meditation. And non-meditation, while not requiring (or allowing) effort, does require time, and lots of it.

We read a lot about “transmigration,” a somewhat mysterious term that usually describes how we can get from one life to our next rebirth, but that is not the only way this term can be used.

We can also transmigrate within this lifetime through re-identification, transferring our identity from one view to an alternate view. In Tibetan Buddhism, the transfer from dualistic fixation to non-dualistic identification (which we are examining here) is something that happens in the process of meditation training, deliberately at first and then, later, by learning to let go quite effortlessly. And it is a one-way street.

We have to learn to deconstruct our deep-seated habit of reifying and interpreting everything dualistically, and acquire the habit of direct realization, which is non-dualistic. This process is usually gradual and proceeds at its own pace but, as mentioned, it does take time.

And there is no sharp line of division between these two views or states of mind. They co-exist together, one superimposed on the other, not unlike how dreams can assert themselves onto reality for a time after we start to wake up.

Or, it’s like waiting for the fake snow in those little snow-globes to settle out, once they are shaken. “Nothing” cannot happen until everything is at rest

with us. Only then can nothing happen, if that makes sense. Perhaps, a poem I wrote years ago can say it better:

MEDITATION IS NOTHING

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

When meditation,
Naturally occurs,
There is no place in the world,
That you feel comfortable,
Try as you might.

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

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

Nothing is going on.

LANGUAGE MAKES SENSE

December 9, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

We have all seen science-fiction movies of space stations, where a virtual sense of gravity is created internally by a series of massive wheels spinning in opposition to one another, much like a gyroscope.

Is there a gyroscope effect using language? What gives us a sense of specific density, a gravity of words, phrases, and Ideas? We know now (I hope) that the Earth revolves around the Sun, but what do we revolve around in the swirling convection that is language? And does conceptual thinking also have an up, a down, and a center of gravity? It does, and language ultimately revolves around the sense that it makes.

We all have a moral compass that hopefully “glows in the dark and points North,” and an internal gyroscope that keeps us upright and somehow directional. With the mind, everything is directional and points this, that, or some other way. Language itself is all about meaning, and meaning itself (our words and phrases) are but pointers or references to something beyond themselves. All meaning (the meaning of our words) has to do with the sense it makes. In brief, words have to make sense or they are non-sense, but the sense-of-words are not the words themselves. The words are only pointers, references, to or toward where that sense can be had. Language can, at best,

only point the way and words are not themselves the sense they make. As pointers, they take can only us half-way.

Finally, WE must “make sense,” the sense that words can but refer us to, by actually living. Sense is always an experience we must have personally, regardless of which of the five senses we use to have it. This, then, is the use of language, to make sense, to lead us from the abstract virtual-world of conceptions to the physical experiences of the sense world itself. We can't just put our toe in the swimming pool forever. We have to get wet. As I like to say to myself, “I have to KNOW what I am talking about.”

Shakespeare said it so well in Hamlet's soliloquy with the simple phrase “To be or not to be, that is the question.” We can talk a blue streak, but ultimately we have to put our money where our mouth is. And being “smart” is not the same as being intelligent. A wound smarts.

As mentioned above, the gravity of the specific density of words and phrases can be misleading. Language by itself (without grounding in the senses) is little more than a murmuration of words, drawing empty patterns in the mind. As mentioned, language itself is all pointers, references that although they may seem to point every which way, can finally only point in one direction, the direction of sensual experience. Language has to make sense.

No matter how sophisticated or intellectual our language may get, the point of it has to boil down to something that makes sense to us, and the senses are “sensitive” and anything but intellectual.

REVERSING SAMSARA

December 11, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

This unenlightened state of mind we find ourselves in, with its seemingly endless cycle of ups and downs, is what the Buddhists call “Samsara.” Like a hamster wheel, Samsara finds us in the midst of an unending round of varying experience, with little to no rest. We may be up for a day (or part of a day), but we are sure to be down tomorrow or soon enough. The Buddha dharma is a method or path to end these vicious cycles once and for all.

When I was first learning about the dharma, I came across what are called the “Four Noble Truths,” which I will list here:

- (1) Suffering Exists
- (2) The Origin of Suffering.
- (3) The Cessation of Suffering
- (4) The Path to the Cessation of Suffering.

When I initially encountered the Four Noble Truths, I had a problem with the word “Suffering.” As I was less than twenty years old at the time, I was not suffering. In fact, the world to me was a wondrous place, filled with adventure, and everything seemed so fresh and fascinating. As I got deeper into studying and practicing Buddhism, I kind of stayed away from considering overmuch the Four Noble Truths, all

because of that word “suffering.” I was almost ashamed that I was not suffering; far from it.

It was not until I came across a Western dharma teacher named Daniel P. Brown, a famous psychologist but also a practitioner and translator of Tibetan texts, that this word “suffering” got an overhaul. After listening to Brown, I could see immediately that he had some realization, and was not just being conceptual.

It was Daniel Brown who pointed out to me that the word “suffering” was perhaps not the best translation as it is used in the Four Noble Truths. A better word, so he said, would be “reactivity,” so we would have the First Noble Truth read “Reactivity Exists,” and on down through all four of the truths.

Brown went on to point out, something that is commonly pointed out in the dharma teachings, that the Self we maintain is almost in constant reaction, trying to get closer to those things we love and get away from those things we dislike. Now, Brown’s interpretation I not only could accept, but it made perfect sense. If there is one thing I knew was true about myself, it’s that I react and am sensitive to almost anything. That was easy to see. With that in mind, the Four Noble Truths become:

- (1) Reactivity Exists.
- (2) The Origin of Reactivity.
- (3) The Cessation of Reactivity.
- (4) The Path to the Cessation of Reactivity.

Suddenly, this simple truth about the Four Noble Truths rang clear to me and I understood that this truth of reactivity also perfectly described the nature of Samsara, which is the word the Buddhists use to describe the unenlightened state, with its ceaseless ups and downs, in which we endlessly wander in an attempt to be happy.

Samsara is often described as this cyclic world of ups and downs. And Samsara has no city limits, such that you could drive out of it and on into something better. There is no linear escape. Aside from remaining in Samsara, our only other choice is to transform Samsara into Nirvana through realization, i.e. realize that Samsara is already Nirvana. Otherwise there is no way out. That realization is a real stretch for those of us caught up in Samsara.

My first dharma teacher, back in the 1960s, used to say “Michael, this is hell. We have to build our heaven out of a small corner of it.”

This transformation (or reversal) of Samsara is very difficult for most folks to even get their mind around and conceptualize, much less begin to realize. There are all kinds of popular phrases that are misleading, such as “emptying out Samsara,” as if it was a swamp to be drained. Another is “getting beyond Samsara,” a linear analogy suggesting we could somehow just distance ourselves from it and reach a better state. It appears to be an error that many religions make that the “here and the now” is bad and the “there and the then” is good, a simple dualism, but one that forever separates us from the reality. Samsara is not a place we can shut out or up-and-leave, because it is a state of mind, a state of our mind.

The Buddhists are very clear that Samsara and Nirvana are connate, two sides of the same coin. You can't have one without the other. The upshot of this is that we literally have to make Nirvana out of Samsara. In other words, Samsara is not changed. It is our view that changes. There is nothing we can do to get out of or away from Samsara, because it is not a place, but rather a state of mind, one that only we can transform through realization. And no one can do it for us.

In other words, we don't empty Samsara and then set about to develop realization and reach Nirvana. All that is required to "empty out Samsara" is that we stop recording more karma. Do that and we automatically reach realization. It's not like building a house, where first we clear and prepare the land and then we build the house. With dharma, when we clear the mind of its obscurations, enlightenment is what remains, what is uncovered. It's already here, and it has always been there. We just have never realized it.

Nirvana is the reversal of Samsara, Samsara turned inside out. And we can do this without changing a hair on our head. It is the mind that we change, not the situation.

TRANSFER OF IDENTITY

December 12, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

“Transmigration” and “Transfer of Consciousness” are terms that are bandied about when talking about the transition from one lifetime to rebirth in other. Different religions approach these terms, differently, so it can be easy to misuse a term like “transmigration” that was developed for a different spiritual approach.

There are a number of religions that believe in life after death, whether it be an afterlife, reincarnation, rebirth, heaven, or what-have-you. They all are concerned with how consciousness transfers or migrates from one life to the next. However, they often don't agree on what is transferred and just how that happens. Although I have read about other approaches, the only one I have seriously studied is the approach that Tibetan Buddhism takes, which is called “rebirth.”

“Transfer of Consciousness” sounds pretty serious, but it's not brain surgery were talking about here. A more traditional word might be “Transmigration,” which suggests moving from one state of existence to another. And transmigration is not limited to the bardo and rebirth. It can happen right here and now, in the life we are currently living, and it does. So, let's talk about transfers.

The most obvious and common form transfer takes is the transfer of identity between dualistic thinking and non-dualism, i.e. the transformation of Samsara into Nirvana through the process of realization. In that process, we have to detach ourselves from our habit of identifying dualistically with the world (I and them) and begin to instead identify non-dualistically with what is. There is a transfer of identification, but perhaps not “identity;” In Tibetan Buddhism, personal identity (the Self) is just what does NOT transmigrate. The two states are different; one is attachment oriented (Samsara), the other is not (Nirvana).

And it’s not hard to find the crossover or leap-over point, the threshold between the two views. In Vajrayana Buddhism, it is called “Recognition” (རྟོགས་པ་ “ngo shé pa” in Tibetan) of the true nature of the mind. And to make it crystal clear where that takes place, there is an entire set of dharma practices most do before the arising of “Recognition” called “The Preliminaries” and another (and different) set of practices for after recognition, which is a form of realization (Vipassana, Mahamudra, Dzogchen, etc.) Thus, there is little room for mistaking the crossover point between the two states. It is obvious.

And, as mentioned, there is a distinct point in our practice when we begin to cross over and the recognition of the true nature of the mind can be like a flashbulb going off, but it is usually followed by a gradual stabilization of what is realized that is more like the Sun coming up. I can’t think of anything more sacred than this transition, which only takes place once and, when realized, is irreversible. Of course, after “Recognition,” we can sit on it and fail to develop it, but we can’t walk it back. That’s the difference

between spiritual “realization” and ordinary spiritual “experience,” which we all have. The first is irrevocable, while the second is transitory.

While the spark of recognition burns through us like the fringe of a field fire, eventual stabilization of that realization can take years. And all that time we are stuck, like one of those mountain climbers on a sheer rock-face, crawling, grip by handgrip, between two worlds, our habitual dualistic view and the non-dualistic realized view, in other words, between Samsara and Nirvana.

And all that time, both worlds are still very much with us, even though after Recognition, our heart has already made the transition toward realization. Like the rock climber on the sheer cliff, we are stuck midway between the two and, because of our precarious position, unable to make any sudden moves. The stabilization of realization is usually gradual. Slow and steady wins the race.

In other words, “Recognition” is what marks the point of no return to Samsara. All of the many preliminary practices (ngondro, Lojong, etc.) help to prepare us for “Recognition,” the recognition of the true nature of the mind. Of course, Enlightenment is the eventual final result, but the moment of “Recognition” is what tips the balance in its favor and puts us finally beyond the point of turning back toward Samsara.

REVERSING SAMSARA

December 13, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

If Dharma is the differential, the essential path to enlightenment, what good are all “The Arts” like music, poetry, graphic art, etc.? While there is a pure Dharma, dharma is also a part of great music, painting, poetry, etc. As the Zen Buddhists freely point out, there are many dharmas. “The Arts” also have a timeless component and manage to thwart time to some degree. Regardless of what type of dharma we practice, transformation of this cyclic world of ups and downs (Samsara) and our eventual enlightenment is our goal

If we have any kind of spiritual practice, we know by now that enlightenment is not something like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, not something we get from just kicking the can down the road, as in: waiting forever.

As the great Mahasiddhas say, “Realization arises in the middle of experience,” meaning, not at the end-of-the-line one fine day, but right here and now. Expecting realization someday is problematical, when it can only come now. If we don’t know how to do that, we have to arrange to learn how, which is why I practice and train with the Tibetan lamas.

I never bought into the “pie in the sky” of my Christian upbringing. I joke to myself that eternity always comes

just in time, in the nick of time, through the gaps and openings that are naturally there. We need to understand, as they say, that Samsara (this cyclic world of ups and downs) and Nirvana (realization) are “connate.” By connate, it is meant that Samsara and Nirvana are two sides of the same coin. You can’t have one without the other, and most important, Nirvana is nothing other than realized Samsara.

If that is understood, experienced, and finally realized, then it is clear not to look any further for realization than right here and now. There is no place to escape to. As The Bard said:

“Hey, Mr. Tambourine man, play a song for me.
I’m not sleepy and there is no place I’m going to.”

In other words, “Start where you are.” As the Zen teachers point out so well, pay attention to process, to the details of life and find ways to give up expectations, which are a sure-fire way to delay, waste time, and keep realization at bay. I am reminded of the old road sign “Slow down and live!” It’s all about the process.

It is so hard to do this by yourself, all on your own, but each of us has to face that. In the beginning of dharma practice, we don’t know what we are doing and no one can hold our hand enough or often enough, it seems. We are practicing before we really know how to practice and may even feel silly or hypocritical going through the motions or practicing for such a short time each day. Yet, we have to start somewhere, and here is the point:

If we understand that the whole dualistic enchilada of Samsara has to be transformed and realized, of course we will have to start with one tiny corner and it can appear like a hopelessly impossible task. However, with each step of the process of dharma practice, we are only going in one direction, that of ever-greater confidence, assurance, and awareness. The key thing about Samsara and Nirvana being connate is that it is like turning a glove inside out. Like any inversion, there is a continuous line of transformation that is always present, fresh, and obvious with even a little awareness. Look for that.

In other words, what we need, by definition, will ALWAYS be at hand, always exactly right there, in motion, waiting for us to recognize it. We don't even have to search for it. Everything we need arrives to our attention as if by special delivery. It's right in front of us now, at the very threshold of our awareness – the front door, so to speak. So forget about the past, the future, and any short cuts. Just relax in the present, be alert, and pay attention. Once this is understood, that is an enormous advantage. Enormous!

KARMA-CHAMELEON

December 14, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[Before my blog, some late-night notes: Its 3 degrees above zero here and dropping fast. Snowstorm coming in the morning and high winds. I tried to sleep but didn't make it across the bar, so I'm back up again until I get tired. Actually, I am tired, but I just can't sleep. One thing I hate is to lie there looking up at the ceiling, not that I look at the ceiling. I always sleep on my right side, so I just look out into the room, but not for long. I would rather be up and doing something than lying there. What shall we talk about? Let's see...

Well, I had another MRI today and then had to go to the dentist as well. I have not been blogging about my health lately because it is just too boring and it has been dragging on for almost a year. I am getting better very slowly, but no sooner do I reach a level playing field, than something else springs loose.

Last week or so, my back went out from some dumb exercise... or some exercise I was doing dumbly. When you can hardly walk for back spasms, you don't move around much. At my age, I think it is a myth (or wishful thinking) to image that I'm going to get back to where I once was, because just like you can't step in the same river twice, there is no such thing in my future as "as I once was," or that phrase finally becomes accurate... "I once was." The operative

phrase is “the new normal.” LOL. I would be unhappy if it were not for how interesting the dharma of it all is.

So, what to do when I’m tired, and tired of doing things as well? I can check Facebook one more time (I leave FB on day and night, but I don’t spend that much time on it). Or I can take a last look at the few forums I read (and post to), all of them are about photography. Or I can go back to bed and hope to catch the sleep train out. Or I can post a blog for tomorrow.]

BLOG

‘Tis the season, and like the old Christmas tune “Up on the Housetop,” says:

“Ho, ho ho!
Who wouldn't go?
Ho, ho ho!
Who wouldn't go?”

Well, when it comes to concepts of transmigration, going from life to life, “Who” will not be going, whether he would or not. If we carefully examine who we are, taking away everything that we will leave behind when we die, like un-layering an onion, we are left with nothing. Nothing that we can put our finger on will be reborn.

So, if “Who” is not going for rebirth, what is? A correct answer would be “everything else,” but that is a little too vague to be of much help here. “Who” will not be going, but a “who” will show up at our rebirth, only it will be some other “who,” and not the “Who” we think we are now.

More powerful than the collection of attachments we have now that we call our Self or “person” is the “collector,” the force that pulled all of this stuff together in the first place -- our desires.

As for transmigration, migrating across lifetimes, it's not “Me” with a capital “I” that migrates, not like taking a train ride from here to there. It is more like that the conditions and desires that came together to form “Me” at birth in this life are left behind (and dissolve at death), yet these same desires that made me now, go on to form another (and quite different “Me”) in the next life. Everything that makes up the new “Me” differs (personally) from life to life, but the particular urge or mass of desires to be “Me” remain the same, subject to my karma and what I have learned in the preceding life.

The inner urge or desire to live is different from what that desire pulls together from the specific conditions available in the next life. Using an analogy, the urge to go shopping and buy something is the same (or similar) from life to life, but what I buy depends on what kind of shop I go into. I can't buy cake in an auto shop, etc.

The deep-seated desires that resulted in the personal “Me” of this current life, with these conditions, my particular parents, this environment, etc., at death perhaps remain unsatisfied. Those same desires, that residual karma, continues beyond death, transmigrates, and is reborn in a next life. In that rebirth, the desires and motivations may be the same, but the conditions, circumstances, and situation in which we are reborn can be (and usually are) very different.

So, those continuing desires within us pull around themselves (like a magnet attracts iron filings) a new persona from what is available circumstantially, parent-wise, environment, etc. at my rebirth. In other words, the “Me, Myself, and I” of this life does not reincarnate in a rebirth, but my innate desires and karma forms a new “Me, Myself, and I” or Self, using the same old urges, but based on the particular circumstances and the environment into which I am reborn.

We make do with the type of body we are reborn into, taking advantage of its particular circumstances, parents, opportunities, limitations, etc. We are a desire-chameleon, that pulls around ourselves the kind of Self based on what is possible in our particular situation, but is driven by our inner karmic desires.

Here is a fun poem about this that I wrote years ago.

WHO YOU ARE

If who you are,
Is who you will be,
And who you will be,
Will be,
Who you were...

Then:

Who you are,
Is not who you are,

Or,
Who you will be.

So, who are you?

FRIENDS

December 15, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I should write something about friends. At my age you lose a lot of friends, but not just to death, but for all kinds of reasons, like they're just not that friendly anymore, or they have kind of gone away in there and reconnecting is like trying to find a light switch in the dark. And others are so down on their luck (in their own minds), that they don't want to be reminded of old friends and better times. If we are lucky, I imagine we all have a few friends left, which is as many as we need, probably. But even some of those friends sometimes dry up and blow away.

If this sounds like I'm complaining, I'm not... just talking about a fact of life. For myself, I believe in the expanding-universe theory of friends, which is: The universe is expanding and the distance between friends (while still relatively the same) is now farther than it once was (due to the expansion), i.e. I am still closer to these old friends than to other folks. In other words, I remain the same relative distance to my old friends, compared to anyone else, but all of us are farther apart. Make any sense?

But there are exceptions to that rule. There are some (very few) that remain just "good old friends," the same as ever. They too are fighting off the waves of time as I am, treading water in the endless surf of change, and when we meet (in person, by phone, or

email), we are as friendly as ever. Nothing has changed. And we really like each other for just what we are. I think the key is that we both still have a sense of humor. How can you age without one! However, life does get attenuated... a little thin at times. You just have to suck it up and keep going. What choice do we have and it beats the alternative.

And there are a few friends that I am just thankful for the kindness they have shown me all these years without complaining. I know that they know and they know that I know... how things are for each of us and the world in general. But the exigencies of life are not about to drown out our connection like some white noise. The connection with very close friends (and family) is stronger than what life can throw at us. I can think of one, maybe two, and possibly a few more. I don't know for sure because I haven't seen some of them for a while. But, there you have it; that's what she wrote.

I can't say exactly what a friend is, but we know each other when we meet. The friends I've had for forty or fifty years I now can count on two hands... or by now, maybe one hand. And I also feel I have a lot of my virtual friends here on Facebook, friends that are actually friends too. You all know who you are. I know who you are.

Here is a nice, emotive, poem about how I view friends by John Burroughs that says it just about right.

WAITING

Serene, I fold my hands and wait,
Nor care for wind, nor tide, nor sea;

I rave no more 'gainst time or fate,
For lo! my own shall come to me.

I stay my haste, I make delays,
For what avails this eager pace?
I stand amid the eternal ways,
And what is mine shall know my face.

Asleep, awake, by night or day,
The friends I seek are seeking me;
No wind can drive my bark astray,
Nor change the tide of destiny.

What matter if I stand alone?
I wait with joy the coming years;
My heart shall reap where it hath sown,
And garner up its fruit of tears.

The waters know their own and draw
The brook that springs in yonder height;
So flows the good with equal law
Unto the soul of pure delight.

The stars come nightly to the sky;
The tidal wave unto the sea;
Nor time, nor space, nor deep, nor high,
Can keep my own away from me.

-- By John Burroughs

SHAMANS AND SOCIETY

December 15, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

In the next few days I want to present some fascinating material about spiritual journeys, but I want to begin by making sure you understand something about shamans and shamanism. Let's review what a shaman is in the literature of the world.

The word origin of Shaman (pronounced SHAY-men), from the Siberian Tungus language, means one who "knows," one who has attained some degree of spiritual realization, awareness, in particular awareness of the other worlds, the next life stage or planes.

Shamans are unlike other soothsayers or spirit adventurers in that a vocation as a shaman is choiceless; it just happens. Shamans are a natural organic occurrence in all cultures. All societies have them and shamanism is not really something that can be taught. In other words a school or course to teach shamanism is an oxymoron.

TRADITIONAL SHAMANS AND "CORE SHAMANISM"

We should distinguish here between what is called traditional shamanism and the contemporary popular derivative called "Core Shamanism." Traditional shamanism is a vocation that chooses you (there is no choice), while core shamanism is an avocation, a

popular form of spiritual practice which anyone can choose to study and learn to use. Core Shamanism is, in a word, a sanitized form of traditional shamanism, stripped of most of its authenticity (not to mention the dangers and risks), something that almost anyone can sign up for, study, and eventually practice. I find few similarities to actual shamanism.

Both forms of shamanism exist in the world today, so it is meaningless to say that traditional shamanism is the only one to be used and the other simply an imitation, although there is some truth to that assertion.

It is most important to understand the shaman's spiritual crisis. The traditional shaman does not choose to be a shaman. Shamanism of this kind is the result of a series of psychological visions or experiences whose very nature estranges one (at least for a time) from conventional society and the normal way of seeing things. The shaman is somehow, against his (or her) will, thrust outside of how everyone else sees life, and into a space and view that is markedly altered and mostly non-communicable to the society around them. They become invisible because society lacks the experience and capacity to see where they are at.

The shaman, usually through a personal psychological or spiritual crisis, has become aware of the inner sequence of the life processes typically hidden from society by their very obviousness, processes that have somehow become "self-secret." This propensity can come about through having a near-death or life-changing experience, mind-altering drugs, or somehow becoming psychologically

separated for a time from conventional societal consciousness.

NOT THE SAME AS THE VISION QUEST

The shamanic experience has some similarities to the Native American vision quest, but, unlike the vision quest which is generally voluntary, the shaman's own internal psychological chemistry and life changes thrust the future shaman beyond convention and into an altered state of consciousness until such time as he (or she) can manage (often through what is sometimes a life/death mental struggle) to find a balance, stabilize, and return to normal society. The shaman cannot communicate what he (or she) sees to others, because society is not able or prepared to understand it. It is as if the shaman and ordinary folks live in two different worlds. Shamans are often viewed by society as a little bit crazy. Society in general (by the very definition of conventional) has not had the experience needed in order to understand the shaman's view. The shaman by virtue of his unorthodox experience is just "out there" on his or her own.

Unlike organized religions, shamans act alone and are "self-chosen," rather than appointed, in that the intensity of the shaman's own internal experiences separates him or her temporarily or permanently from the other members of society. They are outsiders not by choice, but by the nature of their own inner experience and awareness, permitted to see and experience realms of the psyche the average person does not.

Typically, shamans may take years to stabilize the vision or mental experiences that they are thrust into, often struggling against mental unbalance and even madness. The shaman can be distinguished from a madman because he (or she) learns to control and understand what has been experienced. He or she masters those altered states of mind and rejoins society, but with a permanently altered view. The shaman always exists in conjunction with and in contradistinction to his society. Since shamans are defined in relation to the societal conventions they live in, without that society they have nothing to be measured against. Shamans are the original outriders, literally defining the edge of conventional time and mentality.

A ONE-WAY STREET

Shamanism, like the more advanced Buddhist mind training techniques like Vipassana, Mahamudra, and Dzogchen, involves actual realization rather than spiritual experience that comes and goes, which means you can't walk it back. It is generally agreed that once a shaman, one is a shaman for life.

As mentioned, there is no going back and, no matter what other career or work the shaman may undertake, the function of shaman always takes precedence and is their heart function within the society. It just happens.

In other words, shamanism is not an avocation, something one chooses. We do not choose to become a shaman, but the very intensity of our own inner experiences determines a vocation as a shaman, and to what degree we are a shaman.

As my teacher used to say, “We are all initiates to life, but the question is: to what degree?” Although in some societies, shamanic powers can be “inherited” or run in the family, in those cases it appears to be more a product of sharing a similar mind-set and training, with the parents initiating the children.

However, as pointed out, most shamans are “called” or chosen by their own internal experiences and awareness. They come to know what others do not know and cannot know. And this change in view is permanent – a realization. They cannot forget what they have seen, and it is this knowledge of altered states that makes them valuable to society.

All societies have shamans or their equivalent, because shamanism is something that happens to one, rather than something that can just be learned or passed on. In any society, there are always a few members whose personal inner experiences are such as to separate them, at least for a time, from the group. Knowledge gained from this separation then gives shamans an alternative view of life that makes them of use to the community. They alone understand other members of the community who become estranged for one reason or another and their shamanic experience allows them to communicate with those souls who also fall through the cracks. It is pretty much axiomatic that the shaman can only help others in those areas where he or she has personally had a similar experience or realization.

SHAMANS ARE NOT PRIESTS OR MINISTERS

As pointed out, shamans acquire special knowledge or abilities through their own life-changing

experiences, and they are distinct from the rest of their society by the very intensity of these spiritual experiences and the realization that can arise from them. In this sense, they are more akin to the mystic. The shaman, as author Mircea Eliade puts it, “is the great specialist in the human soul; he or she alone ‘sees’ it, for he or she alone knows of its ‘form’ and its destiny.” The shaman knows the story or journey of the soul. In a very real sense, the shaman wakes in these realms, while society sleeps. They are the watchmen and protectors of the community soul.

Shamans are to be distinguished from priests or ministers and other members of organized religion who work cooperatively with one another to inform and shepherd the entire society. For the most part, shamans are independent, solitary, depending only on their own internal experience or revelation, and they seldom work in groups or attempt to convert all the members of their community to their view. Instead, they assist the stragglers in a community, those who, for one reason or another, have fallen out of the conventional mindset, and are somehow temporarily spiritually estranged.

Shamans acknowledge other shamans, but seldom group or come together. You would not expect to see a shaman conference, at least of the traditional variety. They are for the most part loners, and their knowledge is personal to themselves; it serves to separate them from their particular group or society. The idea of a shaman convention is pretty much an oxymoron.

SOCIETIES AND BROTHERHOODS

Shamans also differ from secret societies or esoteric brotherhoods in that they typically are not part of any particular lineage or organized group, and, as mentioned, do not attempt to shepherd or initiate the entire society, but, instead, only initiate or work with those like themselves, those who have the propensity to sustain ecstatic (out-of-the-body) experiences, that is: those who find themselves in an altered state of mind. In other words, shamans guide and inform particular members of their society who are in spiritual flux — those who have somehow fallen through the societal cracks.

As mentioned, there is no attempt on the part of the shaman to convert the larger community to his or her vision, a vision which in the shaman's view is a calling, an exceptional state of mind. Shamans are psychic healers and stand watch over society to protect the integrity of the human psyche. They are the shepherds of the human soul in its journey through time.

THE SHAMAN IS NOT A DOCTOR

Although many shamans are also healers of physical ailments, medicine men or women, this function is distinct from their role as a shaman, at least in this material. The shaman is primarily a doctor of the soul, not of the body, and administers to the psychological and spiritual realms rather than to physical symptoms. The Medicine Man is very much a vocation on its own.

Although the shaman may also use various medicines and can be a healer or doctor of the physical body, he or she is primarily a healer of the psyche, a master of

ecstatic (out-of-the- body) experiences. The shaman works on the psychological and subconscious level, seeking out the soul of an individual in distress, identifying with them, and directing them away from their current struggle or mental suffering to the next level or stage: the so-called afterlife. He or she is an intermediary between the visible and the invisible (or not yet visible) worlds.

The work of the shaman does not pertain so much to our physical death at the end of life, but to the many smaller deaths we each die in life, climacteric events (rites of passage) in life that find us dying to one phase of life and struggling or not-yet-born into the next phase. One seeks out a shaman because one is temporarily lost and the shaman somehow can see both the realm in which we are leaving and the new phase which we are about to enter.

That's my introduction, not so much to shamanism as to help prepare you for what I will try to present over the next day or so. The takeaway here is to understand that we don't all share the same life view. Some individuals have a different view based on their experience and particularly their realizations.

AS DHARMA AND SCIENCE CONVERGE

December 16, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I could (and wish I had time here to) go on about the shamanic tradition, but I have other fish to fry, so to speak. By invoking shamans, I wanted to draw our attention to the fact that they possess an awareness of the confines (or lack thereof) of conventional life that others do not. They have gone beyond the pale and lived to tell about it, and they do.

Shamans can see things we do not, because they have seen them and we have not, and cannot, unless we also somehow go beyond the conventional limits of the mind and manage to return to society. I am sure we all do this a little bit, but mostly we do not. That's the definition of conventional. As my first dharma teacher used to repeatedly say to me "Don't say 'Nobody knows'; just say 'I don't know.'"

Why I described the alternative view of the shaman is so that I can now begin to point out how the world can be so different depending on the development of our faculties, and how the increased clarity and awareness that comes with advanced dharma practices like Vajrayana Vipassana meditation and Mahamudra meditation shape the world of the practitioner differently from the norm. We see what we are capable of seeing and no more. Our capabilities are not fixed, but can be upgraded and enhanced.

And, to a remarkable degree, science and Buddhism are beginning to parallel one another.

In my quest for information about Buddhist Yogachara philosophy and the Alayavijnana, I have plowed through a great many books, dissertations, and articles on the topic, most of them way over my head. For one, I don't know Sanskrit and unfortunately I am not comfortable with too much conceptual thought. And although these scholarly works have merit, I am at heart not a scholar. I am a practitioner, but the more I practice, the easier it is for me to read some of these more scholarly writings. I gradually have begun to know what they are talking about.

Anyway, in my search for more information about what happens at death and after life, I came across the works of William S. Waldron, Professor of Religion at Middlebury College in Vermont. Waldron is, for me, a breath of fresh air. Although he too can be difficult reading, Waldron has passed my test for basic understandability, enough that I can at least recommend him to some of you here. I am not saying you will not have to work a bit (I had to), but I can say that that effort is worthwhile. Here is a paper by Waldron that I found very enlightening. He offers all his major work as free downloads – a man after my own heart! A link to one of his works is given at the end of this article, but before you try to read that work, I suggest you first continue with my brief introduction here to see if it all makes sense to you.

First, a little once-over concerning what is called “Dependent Arising,” also called “Interdependent Arising” or “Dependent Origination.” From the “Majjhima Nikāya, the Middle-Length Discourses of

the Buddha,” the Buddhist concept of dependent arising is presented this way.

“When this is, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this is not, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases... Apart from conditions, there is no arising of cognitive awareness.”

What we habitually associate with a “subject that acts” is seen in this view as a product of dependent arising, the coming together (interaction) of the sense organ and an “object.” An object that has enough “difference” to impinge on the sense organ of the eye causes an awareness to arise, provided that we have enough attention to notice. In other words, awareness is a process that takes place (it arises), rather than an entity that acts. “WE” don’t “SEE” the apple as much as apple-seeing arises and takes place. It is the old duality/non-duality question. In other words, awareness is not subjective as we habitually think (as in ‘I see the apple’), but a product of the interaction between a sense organ like the eye and the surrounding world. We objectify by habit, not by necessity. It is our habitual assumption that we (the subject) see the apple (the object), when in fact they are co-dependent. It just happens when certain conditions come together.

To quote theoretical neuroscientist Christine A. Skarda (“The Perceptual Form of Life”):

“What is objective acquires its objective status only in relation to what is subjective.”

In other words, an object requires a subject in order to objectify it (dualistic), otherwise they are inseparable (non-dualistic). This is why Awareness is said to take place at the “interface of the ‘Self’ and world.” We know by now that the borderlines (where things come together and meet) are where things differentiate and get interesting, where we can see a difference. The co-evolution and circular causality of awareness is tempered by the recursivity of what is called “relative truth.” It feeds on and re-enforces itself. Our habitual preoccupation with the Self guarantees a long life to look forward to in Samsara.

The eye, as anthropologist (and polymath) Gregory Bateson has pointed out, traces outlines, responds to and draws out distinctions, differences, rather than what is the “same.” Waldron points out that to be seen by our eye, an object in the world has to have enough “difference” to be distinct, thus a patch of snow in a snow storm (figuratively speaking) would be invisible.

To be visible, objects have to have edges and outlines. Science tells us that the eye traces outlines by default. But there is more. Regardless of how distinct an object may be, if our faculty of seeing is “not sensitive enough,” and is beneath the threshold of the particular difference in the object, it remains invisible. For example, we can’t see in infrared or ultraviolet light, but some critters can and do.

As Gregory Bateson wrote “Difference being of the nature of relationship, is not located in time or space.” Thus our world, effectively, is virtual. Period. As William Waldron writes, “It is not the ‘world’ that determines the perceptions of an organism, but rather

the perceptual capacities of the organism that determines it's 'world.'" This is what this blog is about.

Waldron goes on to point out that our world is not just a reflection of what we call "objective reality," but rather...

"Its 'cognitive domain' as they call it – is defined by the range of its possible interactions, which in turn is determined by the organism's sense faculties, or more precisely, by the implicit categorizations built into the responsive structures of those faculties."

Which leads me to this question: If what is seen and experienced depends on the state of our faculties to respond and draw out difference, then this suggests that the degree of our mindfulness and awareness dictates what can be "seen," to use an objectifying way of phrasing it. In other words, someone skilled in Vipassana sees a different world (or sees the world differently) than someone skilled only in Shamata, or than someone with no mind training at all. This is a major point of this article, that our capability helps to determine our world – what can be seen.

And it is more than just not seeing a block of snow in a blizzard. Waldron then goes on to point out that the organization and recognition of the differences that exist allow us to see something as distinct. Yet it is not as simple as reading our sense impressions like we would read the water meter, but rather is a product of mentally organizing difference and contrast into patterns that are at least one step removed from pure visual sense stimulus. Thus, almost from the get-go, we are remanded to a virtual world, prophylactic-ally protected from the actual reality. Or, to put it another

way, reality is, for us (and has been) “really virtual,” which must be an oxymoron.

Like a silkworm wraps itself in a cocoon, strand by strand, language itself is a virtual firewall in relation to direct sensual experience. We no longer have direct access to our own senses. They are buffered by conceptuality and organized mentally for us over millennia until we cannot conceive of anything otherwise. Waldron writes “we have no pure sensation... We no longer see and touch a purely symbolic object, a ball; we now see and touch something with a name and a function, a ‘ball’.” And Terrence William Deacon states ““We are not just a species that uses symbols [language; the symbolic universe has ensnared us in an inescapable web.” And again, Waldron “We not only see, but we are aware that we see.”

And perhaps my favorite point (among many favorites), Terrence Deacon writes, “It is a final irony that it is the virtual, not actual, reference that symbols provide, which gives rise to this experience of self. The most undeniably real experience is a virtual reality... its virtual nature notwithstanding, it is the symbolic realm of consciousness that we most identify with and from which our sense of agency and self-control originate.”

I just want to make sure we get the import of the above quote. What Deacon is saying is that the one thing that most of us believe is MOST true is the truth of our own Self, and not the senses or any of the more supposedly physically real parts of life. Of all things, the Self is without a doubt the most virtual and non-real part of us, our own little dummy or

Frankenstein, totally created (at least as to content) by our own fixations and attachments, positive and negative. This is irony carried to the 10th power. LOL.

So, here is an article by William S. Waldron, "The Co-Arising of Self and Object, World, and Society: Buddhist and Scientific Approaches."

http://www.middlebury.edu/media/view/440122/original/waldron_co-arising_of_mind_and_world0.pdf

I hope some of you have the time to read it carefully and work through the language, for it pays great dividends and is inspired.

THONGDROL: LIBERATION THROUGH SEEING

December 17, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Most of us have heard of the Bardo Thodol, “Liberation through Hearing,” commonly called the Tibetan Book of the Dead. Fewer have heard of “Thongdrol,” “Liberation through Seeing.” Thongdrol is most commonly used as a term for the display of immense thangkas (Tibetan sacred paintings), where the cloth paintings are so large that unrolled they cover a hillside. They are said to alter the mind upon seeing, so here is my story and take on that.

I’ve been beating around the bush with myself about this for years. I have kind of said it in blogs, but just as often I dodge and weave about it too. And perhaps I embroider around the edges of saying it, but have not even been totally aware myself as to its importance in my life. But I just found the Tibetan word for it and it all came home to roost.

Even this is a tiny story. This morning I wrote my last blog on transmigration and the Storehouse-Consciousness, putting it in very direct language and pointing out how relatively little I know about it. In fact the last line in this blog (which I will publish tomorrow) is this:

“I have read all I can read and am practicing as best as I know how. It’s time to put the books aside, take

hold of the steering wheel, and let the rubber find the road.”

Then, within a few minutes, thanks to a link from a dharma friend, I found this incredible short video of H.H. the 17th Karma (and others) talking liberation through art and seeing. Here is the link, which is a five minute watch, so do yourself a favor and experience what I did.

<https://vimeo.com/106809581>

After seeing His Holiness the Karmapa pointing this out, it flashed in my mind and many things just came together. No sooner than I signed on the one focus, than this one opened up. Imagine that! So, here is where I am at this very minute:

The word is “Thongdrol” and it means “liberation through seeing” – simple as that. Hopefully all of us have had a few spiritual turning points in our lives, some of them (to me at least) were kind of major. Of course, there were some acid induced (and not induced) epiphanies a good 50 years ago, and they started the ball rolling.

But the one that means the most to me, that changed me utterly the most, is less than ten-years old and it was pure dharma. Of course, that’s not really fair, because the dharma practice that went before stretches back a good forty years, anyway. Still, the turning point, which is the point of no return for me, was relatively recent. And it did not happen sitting on the meditation cushion as I had always imagined. Quite the contrary, I was outside in the woods and

meadows crawling around on my belly in the wet grass of spring and summer, just about dawn.

I have written about his period of change many times, so I won't rehearse it here because, for most of my readers, it is no longer news. So what is new and why am I writing about this again?

As mentioned, it was coming across that Tibetan word "Thongdrol," "liberation through seeing," and instantly realizing that is exactly what happened to me and I have been trying to hide it from myself, because I didn't know how to accept it, how to name it, much less explain it to others. Now I do.

"Liberation through seeing" is just what happened to me. Of course, I am not saying I am liberated, but rather that this event was liberating and it happened solely through seeing the beauty of what is. And of course it is hard to put into words because it is a realization and realizations, by definition, are beyond words – ineffable.

And what is noteworthy about it, and why I relate it to you, is that after about 32 years of fairly intense dharma practice, with little results (and a few complaints), this particular event resulted not on the cushion or even in the shrine room. And here is the point. It happened in the midst of what since I was a small kid I most loved, which is Mother Nature and all its critters. To make a long story short, I was raised in Lancaster, Pennsylvania outside of town in a house my family built that was wedged between two large farms. There was no other house around, at least in distance as measured by a little kid.

Since I was the oldest child of five boys, to some degree I was always on my own. I can't say I was lonely, but I had to entertain myself. I had no one to look up to, at least around home, other than, of course, my parents. The only thing that was readily abundant was nature, and since Lancaster is nicknamed "The Garden Spot of the World," I had natural history all around. So I did that.

My mother was a fine arts painter when she was not taking care of her kids, and she would meet with local artists as she could. When I was about six years old she took me to a meeting out on a farm, owned by a woman name Phoebe Dodge. Mrs. Dodge was a dyed-in-the-wool naturalist and she took an interest in me, and served as a catalyst (or booster rocket) for my inherent love of critters and nature. And so it went.

Now, fast forward to this particular breakthrough some years ago, which was a very difficult time for me because I had just been laid off (along with, I believe, a great many other folks) from my job as a senior consultant for NBC. Suddenly I was out of a job, which at my considerable age was no small thing. So, I drowned my sorrows not in drink, but by re-entering in true sincerity the world of nature that I knew as a child. I dove into that and did not want to think, but just immersed myself in the outdoors, initially armed with a camera, to give me an excuse to be out there doing something.

For some six months straight, if it was not raining or whatever, I was out in the meadows watching the sun come up. I was crawling through the wet grass on my hands and knees taking close-up and macro photos of small critters. Somehow, at that time, these tiny

natural worlds that I could see by looking through macro lenses (in their perfection) were deeply soothing to me compared to the actual more-troubled world that, for the moment, I would just as soon forget. What I saw through the lens was awesome and I threw my everything into it, if only because I didn't care about much else just then. I was singularly focused.

And here is the point of this story. Apparently, re-finding my natural love of nature, coupled with the intensity of my innate ability to concentrate through these pristine camera lenses, and in lieu of what was going on in my vocational life, was a kind of natural mixing of the mind and just what the dharma-doctor ordered.

Maybe something snapped, but nothing was broken, and certainly there resulted a breakthrough that took me some time to fully realize. All of my many years (decades) of fairly-diligent dharma practice responded to the love of nature, the purity of my intention, and the intensity of my focus, like freeze-dried food does to water, because something just blossomed, just as a flower opens.

In a rather short time (those six months outside), I realized (for me) the essence of Vipassana (insight meditation), and immediately all of the Shamata (tranquility meditation) I had done for over 30+ years also fell into place. It just lined up. I found a clarity and luminance that I could not even have imagined properly, and it never went away. I have it, pristine, to this day. This is what is called a realization. They don't go away. However, there was one caveat, at least at the beginning. I could only have this clarity if I

was looking through the camera lens at these miniature natural worlds – tiny dioramas.

Instead of sitting on my well-worn meditation cushion, which was at home and un-sat on during this period, the camera and lens replaced the cushion as the means through which to meditate. Is it any wonder that every next day found me heading out around dawn, armed with my camera, and spending hours concentrated and looking through a lens? If I did not do that, my mind remained just as ordinary as it always had been. I was addicted to the clarity and luminance I have found.

So, there are two thoughts going here. One, my advice if you are struggling with meditation, is to learn to meditate using something you love and can relax completely in. For me, it was nature. And the second thought, which is kind of just for me, is that I should stop pussy-footing around about conflating dharma with photography and just accept and declare that, for me, liberation (such as it is) has come primarily through seeing and not through more traditional means. There, I've said it.

And this makes me want to concentrate more on helping others like me, who may be more inclined to liberate themselves dharmically through seeing in one way or another – nature, painting, music, etc. I have been kind of hiding this realization from myself (and certainly from others), but it is like trying to put the toothpaste back in the tube. It doesn't work.

With that said, I plan to very much organize around this particular approach to dharma, because I actually can stand behind it and declare it. I have the

experience and realization to back this up. This is so much better than my trying to fit a square peg into a round hole, as I have been attempting to do. I don't know if there is a particular lineage for liberation through seeing, but if there is, I am a member of it. So we are up-to-the minute in contact.

WHO-KNOWS-WHOM

December 18, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I have been studying Buddhist Yogacara philosophy and teachings this year and have been on a many-month (or year) mission to better understand death, dying, and rebirth. A main focus has been on what is called the Storehouse-Consciousness (Alayavijnana), the repository of our karma, karmic traces, seed impulses, and what-not. It is in the Storehouse-Consciousness that our every intent and karmic trace is stored, ripens, and eventually arises (or remains available) as karma we must work out and to direct and assist in our creating our next Persona and Self at rebirth. The Alayavijnana will accompany us through all our lives until the point when we are finally enlightened, at which time it will be empty and cease to concern us, Until then, however, it is as close to us as our Self. In fact, it is the mother of our Self in that we subliminally draw upon it.

At this point, I feel I have at least a rough grasp of the situation concerning rebirth and what of us makes it through the bardo to be born again, although I am sure that I am missing some fine points. I would like to go over this briefly with those of you interested, if that's all right. It may be a little unfinished, but hey, that's the way it is.

I am not a scholar by nature, but examine these things because I want to know more. Please feel free

to share with me your thoughts on this topic, if you will. I am not concerning myself here with the steps or levels in the bardo, but primarily with what dies, what transmigrates, and what is reborn. Of course, I would like to start with an analogy.

The human body exists through time because of the endless replacement of cells, a process of constant renewal. Our body looks the same (aside from growth or aging), but it actually changes constantly by the replenishment of cells throughout. The cells endlessly change, but it is the same body, etc. What does this tell us?

In a similar way the Alayavijnana (Storehouse-Consciousness) moves through time from innumerable lives ago to now, and on to who-knows how many future lives. Like a floating barge (a garbage scow?), it follows us up the river of time, constantly being refreshed with our actions, good, bad, and indifferent. Like an eternal stew of our desires and karma, it is forever at a low boil, a convection-driven torus that we are constantly adding to and, subtracting from. Of course, this is below our threshold of awareness.

The scholarly discussions on the Storehouse-Consciousness say that Alaya changes, but at a slower rate than change as we are used to in this life. Because of this slower rate of change and perhaps due to the fact that, subliminally, the Alayavijnana is our constant companion, over time it appears to be the one constant in our constantly changing consciousness. Because it appears constant, it is taught that we identify with the Alayavijnana as

permanent, as the very heart-depth of our Self, where everything comes from.

The Buddhist scholars make it clear that taking this substratum, the Alayavijnana, as permanent, whether as a “Soul,” center of attention, fixation, or whatever, is a mistake, since it is not permanent, but it, like everything else, is in perpetual change, just at a slower rate than what we are used to.

To give an analogy: the Alayavijnana is like a river, ever flowing onward, but always the same river. If we take a photo of it, a snapshot, and compare it to another snapshot taken later, it looks like the same river. However, if we take a movie of the river, we can see the flow and the constant change. It is changing completely every second. Perhaps the Self is like this, always there as our touchstone, but in perpetual change too, and at a rate that is slow enough, like two trains passing one another, that it appears to be standing still. And so the experts say, we take that “stillness” as a sign of permanency, something we can count on, and we do. Of course, we act like we will live forever.

This whole topic has been, for me, a trip, such as finding that the Buddhists don’t agree with the Hindus, the Christians, etc., who believe that we are an eternal Soul journeying through time, exchanging one body for another, but keeping the same Soul. The Tibetan Buddhists say that there is no such thing as a permanent “Soul” and that the Self we think we are is fluid, part of a process and, like everything else, is not something permanent that we can count on. In fact, there is nothing we can count on and yet, despite our condition, here we are. At least that is something.

I trust the Tibetan Buddhists (my teacher) to know the truth, because in every area where I am able to check them out (all the rinpoches), the dharma teachings come through clear as a bell. Thus, in this area of death, transmigration, and rebirth, where I have no quick way of checking the truth of what they say, I take their word for it. The day will come for me when I will find out for sure what the case is, if I can stay awake then.

I have such confidence that I was willing to take a deep breath, perhaps squelch a gulp or two, and live with the idea that everything I know of as “me” will be left at death’s doorstep in a heap, as who-knows-whom moves on and takes rebirth, drawing around itself (like a mask) another persona and a new Self. If death is a bitter pill, I was ready to take it. However, if it is something more, that is better.

And I am so relatively ignorant in all this, compared to the Tibetan masters, that I’m just trying to put the pieces together like a jigsaw puzzle until some kind of image stands out that I can understand. I have been willing to trust myself (on faith) to the inevitable (it’s not like there is a choice), yet I worry about what happens between the end of me (myself and I) in this life and some different “Me” that my karma and desires will create at a future rebirth. As Shakespeare wrote in Hamlet’s soliloquy:

“But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country,
From whose bourn no traveler returns,
Puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have,
Than fly to others that we know not of?”

Folks, regardless of what I think (or you think), this whole life we are living is miraculous and amazing. However the truth finally turns out to be, the whole thing is working, and has worked since eternity, so if we ever do realize the whole enchilada, I know it will be perfect... just as it is.

And I can say that the more I learn, the more comfortable I am with it all. In other words, it might not be as stark and void as I first thought and I am comforted by the thought that, whatever the case, we each have been doing this before, and endlessly at that. And here we are right now, present, just lacking enough realization to go into that goodnight with confidence. As Dylan Thomas said, "Rage, rage against the dying of the light!" Perhaps I don't have to fight so hard, don't have to rage (or fear) anymore.

And another point: As I study more deeply the whole concept of the Self, the Alayavijnana, not to mention "language" and all of the conceptual and mental processes, I begin to see that we are almost hopelessly trapped in Samsara. The picture the lamas paint is one of endless recursion, with the Alayavijnana (and language, etc.) much more than just the passive vehicle I first took it for. Instead, it seems much more incestuous than that, with everything not just being stored, but feeding on itself, reinforcing itself, and in endless self-modifying renewal, i.e. the Self tries to maintain itself at all cost! I believe in Western esotericism, this is called "The Monad."

Perhaps, it is like an endless pot of soup, always on low boil, to which new ingredients are always being added, and the results are always being withdrawn as

sustenance. However you want to spell it, the idea I now have is of a much more ingrown vehicle, wrapped (and endlessly wrapping itself) in its own process as it sails through time. It's like the old phrase "The only constant is change itself." I think the Buddhists make that point clear enough.

Yet another point, which I mentioned in an earlier blog, is the tendency of language, thinking, conceptualization, and mentation in general to virtualize itself, ever moving away from the reality of the senses and toward more complex conceptualization, like a set of nested Russian Matryoshka dolls, stair-stepping away from reality into the virtual. Let's face it, if you examine all of this that I am speaking of carefully, the Self reminds me of an Egyptian mummy, but one that endlessly wraps itself up tighter. We are as virtual as can be. It's no wonder that deep down, we want to be free of what Shakespeare calls the "Pale cast of thought."

And, it is much more complex than I had imagined, and while I am fascinated by it all, at the same time I only need to grasp enough so that I can get a handle on it, and roughly realize the teachings. I am not a scholar and have no interest in following all this out in detail until the last dog dies. Give me just enough realization to set my sails properly, and I am off to wherever I am going. I am not a pedant.

Unfortunately, where I am going is very much dependent on how I get there, so it all circles right back around on itself to now and where I am, right here.

I have read just about all I can read and am practicing as best as I know how. It's time to put the books aside, take hold of the steering wheel again, and let the rubber find the road.

VIRTUALLY EMPTY

December 19, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

“Emptiness,” as used in Buddhism, is totally confusing to most people. To make it worse, the word, even among Buddhists means many different things, depending on where and how it is used. The best I can do here is start with the most commonly understood meaning, and work downward. And, to make it easy, I will spare us the Sanskrit highly-technical jargon and say it simply, although perhaps some of the finer innuendo may suffer. It will be close enough, and as the poet William Blake wrote. “Nothing of equal value was lost.”

Emptiness (Śūnyatā in Sanskrit) comes from a root that means “hollow,” also translated as “void,” “nothing,” “zero, and, of course, “empty.” The Buddhists don’t believe we (or anything) are empty like a glass can be empty. That is just a popular (and damaging) misconception. In early Buddhism, the term emptiness was used to indicate that appearances and phenomena (especially entities like we happen to be) are “empty,” in that they lack inherent existence. In other words, things (and people) are not permanent. We should already know that, but perhaps we don’t like to be reminded that we are mortal. Not only are we mortal, but the Buddhists point out that this Self that we are so attached to also

has no permanent existence. We have no eternal “Soul.” Ouch!

The value of the concept of emptiness, IMO, is that when we start to reify our Self, imagining that we are more permanent (and thus more real) than we are (putting on airs), it can help for us to be reminded that we are not permanent. In fact, we won't live forever. And I particularly like the emptiness connotation as being “hollow,” especially when I get too serious. “Hollow” might be a synonym for being full of hot air. Just kidding.

A more modern interpretation of “emptiness,” as mentioned, is “virtual,” which points out quite clearly that what I call my Self (which I often take so seriously) is merely a construct, something cobbled together from my fixations, my likes, dislikes, and indifferences. After all, attachment is the glue that holds the Self together. At heart, like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, when we take all of our Self's fixations away, one by one, nothing remains but our karma and its graspingness. The Self is empty or hollow of permanent existence. So personally (persona), we are the hollow men and women, empty of anything permanent other than our need to be reborn.

Another image I like is that, since the Self is our own creation (and it walks and talks), it is like the dummy is to the ventriloquist. Only, all too often, I forget who is the dummy, and I start listening to my Self (the real dummy) and take him too seriously. So, this image of the Self as virtual is very helpful, because that is exactly what it is, merely a construct of our mind and not an eternal entity in itself. The Self is not a “Soul,” or so say the Buddhists.

Emptiness is just another way of saying impermanent. If we say that the Self is “empty,” it means the Self is not a solid thing as in a “permanent entity” like a Soul. We all know that we are impermanent. What makes us think the Self is any different, that it is eternal, especially when the Buddhists clearly point out that the Self is nothing more than the sum total of our fixations, all the things we like, dislike, or are indifferent toward.

And the embarrassing part is that if we examine the Self carefully, we find that not only does it change constantly, but what made up the Self when we were six-years old might be a new bike, at 17 it was perhaps our first real girlfriend, and later our wife, our kids, our job – whatever we currently fixate on. In other words, the Self is our own running scrapbook-collection of our attachments, always in bloom, but always with slightly different contents. What makes up our Self today very little resembles our Self when we were 12-years old, and so on. We are continually reforming the Self in the image of our fixations.

And to repeat, the Self is impermanent. It is not a lasting entity or Soul, but is as impermanent as any process that is ever-changing. Change is the opposite of permanency. If something changes, it is not permanent. The only thing permanent about change is that it is impermanent. Change is permanently impermanent.

And so, life goes on, just as we know it. The only thing that we are “empty” of is permanent existence. By now we should all know we are impermanent. That’s part of what death is all about. When we say that the Self is empty, we mean that it too lacks

permanent existence. It is empty of solidity, of permanency, of being an “Entity” or Soul.

We can still be all full of ourselves, and are. In the sense that the self is virtual, like a hollow-man, it is empty. There is nothing there other than the conceptual construction itself. The Self is virtual, made up entirely out of whole cloth, and constructed by none other than ourselves. If we pick the Self apart, like layers of an onion, at the center is nothing whatsoever. In that sense, the Self is empty, empty of anything other than its own fixations. Nothing more. However, there is some permanency to our desires and karmic, apparently enough to migrate to rebirth after rebirth.

If you are looking for solid ground, good luck. The Ven. Chögyam Trungpa used to say:

“The bad news is that you are falling through the air and there is no parachute. The good news is that there also is no ground.”

The brilliant Dharma teacher Daniel P. Brown says that emptiness is “unfindability,” meaning if we look for our Self, we cannot find it. It’s nowhere to be found. I wrote a simple poem about this years ago, which makes some sense to post here.

SEEK AND NOT FIND

If you find yourself,
Then,
You are not looking.

You will never not-find-yourself,
Unless you look.

In other words:
If you don't look,
You will find yourself.
If you look,
You will not find yourself.

That is the nature of having no nature.

Here are a couple other historical uses of
“Emptiness,” that may help, and hopefully will not be
confusing:

In the Prajna-paramita Sutras, which include the
Heart Sutra, “Emptiness” is perhaps best understood
as that all entities (that we assume are real) are only
conceptual constructs, rather than permanent “Souls,”
snapshots of an ongoing flowing process that we
assume are static and thus permanent.

In the Madhyamaka tradition, emptiness means that
what we call a separate object (including a “being”) is
the product of “dependent origination,” which means
that it is a part of an interdependent process, rather
than something in itself with permanent existence on
its own. Like I mentioned above, it is like taking
snapshots of a river and imagining that they portray
an unchanging thing in itself, when they are just
moments in a ceaseless flowing process.

So, there you have a general idea of the Buddhist
concept of “emptiness.” I could go on and on, but
since the word is ineffable, meaning it can't really be

described, I have probably already said more than enough words.

What is missing, what I have not mentioned, is “Compassion,” and that compassion is the product (or byproduct) of thoroughly grasping the nature of emptiness, the fact that appearances and emptiness are connate, two sides of the same coin. It’s not just that the appearances that arise around us are empty, but that the appearances we see portray the emptiness itself arising – hollow or virtual as it may be. Indeed, thanks to these constructs our life it is like a magical illusion or dream.

AN ALTERNATIVE TO SITTING MEDITATION

December 20, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[I am going to be busy with some things I have to do for a day or two, so this article will have to do for now.]

Aside from reading about Buddhism, there is Buddhist practice. When it comes to learning meditation, the traditional type of meditation first taught in Tibetan Buddhism is generally Shamata, which is usually called in English "Tranquility Meditation." This is the place to start, because until the mind can be tranquil (steadied), more advanced types of meditation, like Vipassana (Insight Meditation), can be difficult.

The usual approach with Tranquility Meditation is to train the mind to stay on an object. This is done by taking a simple object (the breath, a piece of wood, a pebble, etc.) and allowing the gaze to rest on the object. The type of object is not important (it can be anything), and the object itself is not examined, i.e. we don't review its qualities. We just bring the mind to focus on the object and let it rest there. If we become distracted, we don't spend any time scolding ourselves for drifting off, but simply (and gently) bring the mind back to the object and start again, and repeat for years if necessary.

By constant repetition, bringing the mind back to an object again and again each time we get distracted

(and realize we are distracted), the mind is trained, just like dog, to hang around home... the object. Like any rote learning task, this takes time and effort. And there is no obvious reward along the way other than learning the technique which, while very simple, can be quite difficult to master.

It's not as easy as you might imagine, because the moment we begin to try, the first thing we realize is how wild and unruly the mind is. It won't just sit, like Fido. Even a dog has to be taught to sit. We can spend years coping with the mosquito-swarm of thoughts that buzz around in our heads the moment we try to concentrate on the practice. Of course, dealing with the mass of interruptions and distractions is part and parcel of learning Tranquility Meditation. That's the whole point, to be able to allow the mind to rest in the midst of what-have-you. It's like when we stir up the sediment in our coffee. That sediment won't settle until the stirring stops. A helpful axiom might be what is pointed out in this little poem I wrote years ago:

THE REST OF THE MIND

You cannot rest the mind,
But you can let the mind rest.
Just let go
And don't mind the rest.

In other words we can't REST the mind willfully (or forcefully) without training, and the training is to learn to allow the mind to come to rest naturally. As the old blues lyric sang "Take your fingers off it. Don't you dare touch it, cause' you know it don't belong to you." I was surprised how difficult it was for me to do such a

simple thing. And it took me a long, long time, like years. There is an alternative approach. I know, because I finally took this approach.

Instead of trying to train our mind to concentrate and focus by rote practice, find an interest, a hobby, or a passion that is already natural to you, something that so fascinates you that you just naturally don't get distracted. And it has to be a subject that has some repetitive technique to it like, for example: fly-tying, playing chess, painting walls, knitting, etc., anything that you are naturally interested in, a discipline that you have already learned.

That is far better than the rote learning of a technique for its own sake. With something we already love to do, we are happy to focus on it. Do this long enough (with our natural concentration) and we get the same results as the more traditional method of learning Tranquility Meditation by rote, and (IMO) in a more pure form.

However, the only problem with this second approach is that although we naturally can concentrate focus in this method, we also need to keep aware that we ARE focusing, yet IMO this is more easily done than wrestling with the problems of the first method. It was through this second technique that I finally learned meditation properly, almost by accident.

So, as they say, we can choose our poison. All of us need to learn Tranquility Meditation. Above are the only two ways that I know to do that. I took the second path, quite by chance, but in my case it was the one that worked for me. Using the first method and trying to drum up interest in an uninteresting technique

(IMO) just never worked very well. It was much easier to focus on something I liked and do what I already liked to do.

I don't think that attempting to learn a technique (like Shamata) by rote (at least for me) was very conducive to meditation. Perhaps we tell ourselves that we will just learn the technique by rote and then lovingly meditate, but I question that approach. Much better (at least for some of us) is to learn tranquility meditation by focusing on something we love to do, something we have already learned that requires focus, patience, repetition, etc.

Keep in mind that the technique of Shamata is nothing more than allowing the mind to concentrate (and rest) on an object. When that is done so that you can rest in that way for as long as you wish, then you have learned the technique. But what is the state of your mind at that point?

If you focus on something you love or care about and bring your mind to rest doing that, you have the added qualities of loving what you focus on, being happy doing it, and are not in a hurry to be done with anything. IMO, that is the best approach, in particular because Shamata is not considered an end in itself, but only the stage or platform for then learning Vipassana (Insight Meditation).

Those are some reasons. Regardless of what they are, the bottom line is that I don't do well doing anything by rote. I never learned to play the piano, never could memorize stuff, or do anything just because someone told me to. Everything in my life has to be spontaneous, to feel right, and to be natural.

I couldn't learn in school, either. I have taught myself most all of what I know, as I felt like learning, not as I was told to do. I am ashamed to say that I practiced Shamata for 32 years just as I was told to do, and nothing much came of it.

There is an old saying "He wrote canzones because he had a will to write canzones and not because love moved him to it. And nobody thought much of him or his canzones." To m, that is humorous.

However, when I took up close-up photography and focused through fine camera lenses at nature (which I love), and went on to stack photos, sometimes dozens of images combined to make a single photo appear more in focus, then, out of that, meditation came quite easily and naturally. I'm just saying...

Without confusing you too much, I must point out that in fact I learned Vipassana first doing that process (lenses and nature), and only after that did Shamata fall into line perfectly. So, once I grasped Vipassana, Shamata was easy. Obviously, it was already there. My job for decades involved very, very technical and concentrated work as a programmer, so I already could concentrate well. I have the ability to focus on a work subject and to be pretty much undistracted, much of the credit because I tend to always be very interested in (and love) what I am doing. That's kind of my point here, the love.

In the long run, it was much easier for me to learn meditation by practicing with something I was absolutely interested in than it was for me to practice just for the sake of practicing, like attempting to rest my mind on just any old thing, like a pebble, etc.

And, if any old thing is fine, then why not use something we love that interests us. Using something familiar, let us learn awareness and trust there is at least some concentration that is already naturally there, which it is when we are working with something we care about. I can do that all day, so right there is the required Shamata. Now, for the Vipassana, but this is more complex.

In my case, as mentioned, I learned Vipassana with a camera while peering through a fine close-up lens at miniature natural worlds and critters. The Shamata was already there, because I was totally there, concentrating, focusing on a subject with extreme patience and love. Multiply that by doing this day after day after day for an entire season, and you have a recipe for a Vipassana breakthrough, and that's what happened.

So, what's my takeaway from all of this? Learning the Shamata technique by rote practice is fine, provided that you realize that blind repetition is probably not conducive to why we learn Shamata in the first place. If the rote learning is stained with effort, boredom, approach-avoidance (on the days we don't "feel" like it), and dullness, we are not really preparing the mind for Vipassana meditation, for which Shamata is the required platform.

Remember that, although Shamata, to some degree, is required to settle the mind, to stabilize it, calm it, none of the major texts that I know say that this form of meditation (Shamata) is any kind of stopping place or end in itself. What they say is that we need a calm mind to effect Vipassana meditation. The teachings say that Shamata will calm our unsettled mind, but by

itself will never remove any of the deeper causes for the unrest. Vipassana Meditation does that.

The analogy I came up with is this:

If we want to thread a very fine needle, but have shaky hands, Shamata steadies the hands so that Vipassana can thread the needle. Vipassana is the sought-for result, not Shamata. Therefore, we need to learn Shamata, but I am pointing out that “how” we learn Shamata may influence how easy it is to learn Vipassana (Insight Meditation).

If we settle for learning Shamata by rote practice, like we would learn the mechanics of any technique that was required, we run the risk of not finding the process altogether agreeable. If this then leads to our avoiding practice or developing an approach-avoidance attitude to sitting practice, or we otherwise stain the practice through boredom, dullness, sleepiness, or try to march through it by rote alone, then that kind of attitude further obscures the mind, rather than clarifying it.

If we want to pursue the second method, the one that worked for me, mixing learning Shamata with something we love (and already have developed concentration through), then we pretty much have the basics of Shamata already learned. We just have to then learn to be aware of whatever we are concentrating on as we are doing it. You know, concentrate on what we enjoy doing, but be aware of what we are doing in the bargain. But as far as calming the mind, that's taken care of, and we are ready to learn Vipassana, which is a whole other story.

I am sure this may sound a little convoluted, but read it carefully and it should make sense. And making sense is the whole reason for language.

WORDS WITH LIFE

December 23, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[I am back from a brief 2-day trip to Lansing, Michigan for some medical testing from a specialist in the field. I am still working to fully recover from a TIA I had last March, and had to go through a two-hour bout of Electro diagnostic testing, called Electromyography (EMG). That consisted of something similar to acupuncture, but very different. Instead of a tiny needle just breaking the skin, this involved placing a fine wire (repeatedly) through the skin (all over) and into the muscle tissue, to probe to find where the nerves meet the muscle and record that. That was part of it, and the second part was electronically setting off nerves so that they fire or spasm, often in sets of five or six. Let's just say that, I am glad it's done and I came out "normal."]

Anyway, while gone, I had a chance to do some reading while waiting around and had some thoughts about reading in general, which I will share here with you.

I don't have to point out to you something I have pointed out to you a number of times before, that reading (and language in general) obviously depends on the sense it makes to us, and making sense is, well, "sensual," involving the senses.

Essentially, all writing (and language) is a reference to the sense world and to physically experiencing something, a call to action. If we are all standing around the swimming pool of life, considering going in for a dip, since language is all about the “sense” it makes, it can but suggest that we do (or don’t) take the plunge, enter the world of physical experience and gather some experience, if only to have something to feel and analyze.

Anyway, what we read out there in the written world is obviously geared for different levels. Sitting around the doctor’s office in a hospital in a city far from home, I had little else to do but to think. And what I thought was that I have become more and more sensitive to the written (or spoken) word. For example:

It is clear that much (maybe most) writing is designed to help us conceptually understand what the author is trying to say. Of course, simple understanding is the bottom line and (in my opinion) the lowest rung of the totem pole, and pretty much stripped of why I read at all, which is to break out of conceptuality; so I have become a critic of reading-for-understanding alone, unless I am following directions and putting together some do-it-yourself thing-ee or other.

These years I find conceptual writing kind of suffocating, prophylactically buffered so that anything more than concepts are dutifully avoided. In this category would be what we could call “meta-books,” overviews, books about a subject, rather than books comprising a subject, if that makes sense. The endless books filled with quotes and footnotes that use other folk’s words as references to describe something that the author is unable or unwilling to try

to say personally is what I'm talking about here. These kinds of books run all around the subject, but never touch it, IMO. I never read them. I yearn for authority and authenticity, etc. I want language to dispense with itself as much as possible.

I want my reading to give me a taste and hopefully cause me to get my feet wet, if not actually plunge me into something (an experience) that I can later reflect on and THEN analyze or conceptualize. Writing that just conceptualizes about almost "nothing" (with no real sense involved) is not my cup of tea. As you might imagine, I am particularly sensitive to books "on" Buddhism or spiritual topics of any kind. I don't want to just stand-back and hear about something; I want to jump in, experience something, and sense it. Give me taste of what you are talking about; give me something to go on, please.

I don't like language that is just conceptually recursive, building an ever greater dependence on itself. Of course, I write a lot here and I do introduce concepts, but I work very hard to load my sentence with words that work to pop the conceptual bubbles and give you a feeling for the topic. No, I don't try to push you into the water, but I may splash some water on you or at least near you. This little poem I wrote has been shared here before, but this is where it belongs, so here it is again.

VERBAL FALLOUT

The half-life of words,
Is brief.

Prose is like carrying,
Water in the hands.

Poetry,
Like drinking,
From the faucet.

I can't seem to just write poetry (wish I could) at will; what you get from me is prose, but hopefully prose that is laced with words juicy enough to give you (at the very least) a sample or taste of what I am writing about.

In my own reading habits, at least these years, I seldom-to-never read fiction. I have read tons of fiction in the past. And, unless I need to learn something very basic, I avoid reading books that are primarily conceptual. They are too claustrophobic for me -- cloying. What I do read are some of the traditional Buddhist writings that are called Upadesha, the "pith" writings of great teachers. They are not poetry (but they can be), but rather they are the pith essence of the dharma boiled down to the equivalent size of poetry, but not quite poetry.

And why I read this so eagerly is for the compactness of somehow managing to mix enough poetry with the prose to fire my synapses and spark my mind. I usually want to get beyond conceptuality and on into the experience of life itself, so these upadesha often (or usually) do just that. They are jumping off points into my own experience of spirit, if only as seen and felt through the lens of these jam-packed sentences.

I have no illusions as to what language is there for, being itself, by definition, conceptually contrived.

Getting language not to point at itself or even just beyond itself, but to somehow lead us beyond words into some form of action is what I intend. Language is not the final word, so to speak, but rather the jumping-off point into experience. At its very best, words and language can act like a sign or signal that is enough to cause a transformation within me, without reading further.

Anyway, that is how I see it. Any thoughts?

PHOTOGRAPHY AS MEDITATION II

December 23, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The doorway to what is considered advanced Buddhist meditation (Mahamudra) involves a combination of Shamata and Vipassana, which in English are termed Tranquility and Insight Meditation; the two are mixed together just so, much like a precise recipe. Tranquility Meditation provides the required concentration and mindfulness and Insight Meditation the leap beyond conceptuality. How can something like photography provide this?

Photography as meditation is process oriented. Much like the Zen discipline of minding every move and moment (being aware of the very process of life), in this approach the “process” of taking photos is more important than (and affects) the resulting photos. In other words, we don’t go out with our camera to take photos, but rather to meditate using photography. We might ask, why bother, when we can just sit on a cushion at home and do all this?

The answer to that question is simply that not everyone is successful at meditating on a pillow. Some of us are more comfortable meditating in the stream-of-life. For these folks, the whole formality of the cushion takes away from what has to be for them a more spontaneous or less self-conscious approach to meditation. Some, and I count myself as one, find it easier to meditate on-the-go, so to speak, off the

cushion and in the midst of the daily stream rather than on a cushion.

If I make too formal a point of things, I can get derailed from my natural monitoring of the pulse of life. My ordinary day can be, if I pay attention, like the beads on a mala string running through my fingers -- haptics. That is sense enough to get a feel of things for me. And I seem to be more at home in the slipstream of life. Too much spiritual formality only makes me more arrogant and I tend to stall out.

Therefore, as mentioned, photography is best approached in my case not by concentrating on the photos that might result, but by going out in nature and focusing on and then embedding myself in the process of photographing as the main event. Just as the Zen monk carefully picks up the teacup and takes a sip, so every step of the photographic process is my cup of tea. This, coupled with the beauty of the nature I am photographing, is the perfect combination, a somewhat demanding technique and the fresh inspiration of Mother Nature. Together, that's the catalyst.

In all this, I am looking through a fine lens at something of great natural beauty. I see what I am photographing out there in front of me, but my mind is actually resting in the process of seeing itself. In other words, I am seeing the "process" of seeing rather than just what is to be seen out there in nature, if that makes any sense. And I am not really "seeing" anything at all, but rather allowing the mind to rest in the process itself to the exclusion of any part of me watching.

As the great Buddhist Mahasiddhas say, “In the midst of experience, realization arises.” But in this approach to photography, we actually have to go there, into the experience fully, and to the exclusion of our tendency to watch everything as from the outside. Like the bobsled rider, who pushes, but then jumps on and rides, we have to leave off watching and allow ourselves the sheer experience of just being present. We have to ourselves get on the rollercoaster of pure experience and take the ride.

It’s like the writer who has nothing to write about unless he gives into living; we have to give up watching life and allow ourselves to be swept away in the current, at least enough to have something to write about. In the photographic process, we have to enjoy the process of photographing in itself, rather than focus on the expectations of the resulting photos. If we can do that, the photos will take care of themselves, improving from the love and attention of the process itself. Take care of the process, and the results will take care of themselves.

The logic here is rather simple. If all we focus on are the finished photos, and fall into viewing the process of taking them as something we have to get through, put up with, a necessary irritation or whatever, then that attitude somehow is transferred (by association) to the finished photo and shows in it. The reverse is also true. If you are totally 100% present and taking your time in each step of the process, that too will result in a photo that reflects the process. It’s not rocket science.

In summary, I am not saying don’t sit on the cushion. I certainly did, and for many years, but in my case the

whole idea of approaching the cushion was like putting on robes and I was too self-conscious as to what I was doing. “I” was going to meditate, etc. Of course, it was all my fault.

Eventually I found that just doing something I loved to do, like nature photography, repeatedly, was the magic charm that allowed my ego to look the other way while my awareness slipped through and got the job done. And it could have been anything that I really loved to do, but in my case it was photography that did the trick.

So, take this with a grain of salt, but know that there is an alternative that is available to you if you run into problems learning to meditate on the cushion. You may not use photography, but rather something you have already mastered and love to do. I know this alternate method works, because I did it.

OPENING THE BLACK BOX

December 24, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[Happy Holidays! Although I am more a Solstice observer, I was raised with Christmas, so I know exactly what it is, especially for kids. At any rate, we are at the turn of the year and I wish each and every one of you the happiest of holidays. We are having a Christmas fresh-snow here and not so terrible temperatures. And best of all, the Sun has turned the corner and begins to move northward again, a little more daylight each day. Enjoy!]

The Dharma is coming to the West, but there are some special considerations that we should keep in mind, if you don't mind. Here in America (and the western hemisphere in general) we know all about using the mind. We are taught to use the mind as perhaps life's greatest tool to appraise and get things done in the world. The list of what we can do with the mind is as endless as the mind itself. So, when it comes to taking advantage of the mind as our Swiss-Army-Knife, we are all up to speed here in the U.S.

However, where we fall short is in knowing what the mind is, which is part and parcel of knowing the mind itself. The mind for Americans is like a black box, something we use all day long as a means, but never as an end in itself. We have never inquired as to what makes the mind tick, much less opened that mysterious black box and looked inside. Heaven

forbid we should go in there. And there is another point.

I don't know how we got here, but somewhere along the line we here in the West collectively assumed that the mind, just as it comes out of the box, is good to go, in fact, flawless. Perhaps it is because babies are so perfect and new, that we assume that the mind of each child, each one of us, is pristine. This is a colossal mistake. While it is true that a child is a clean slate as far as forming a personality or Self, yet the karma and instinct-traces of each one of us have been a long-time coming and are hardly new. You might think we would have figured this out just because even identical twins can be so different, etc. We each have a different pool of desire from which we draw.

So, we have a mind that we don't know, other than how to use it in the external world, and we somehow assume that each mind is a clean slate at birth, even though we have IQ tests and all of that to show our innate differences. Therefore, we are in a kind of double-bind. Like all human beings, we need to know our own mind, and second, as a culture we don't know that we don't know. We assume we already know our mind. After all, it's OUR mind!

It's no wonder that the Tibetans see the West as such a rich field of opportunity. As the 16th Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, once said when asked why the Tibetans came to America, "If there was a lake, the swans would go there." They see the U.S. as fertile ground for the dharma to thrive in, and so it is.

The bottom line is, how do we take this black-box of a mind we have and turn it inward on itself? Like a spelunker, how do we go in there, torch in hand, and look around? It's like the paradox of an open mind, how open are we and, if not, how do we open the mind? If there are the doors to the mind, just where are they? And lastly, where is our torch?

Yes, there are doors to the mind, but up to now we apparently like to keep them closed, perhaps imagining the mind as the basement we hate to go into. There might be boogiemen down there. So, how DO we go into the mind?

Of course, that is exactly what I blog about here, how to realize the mind and, as the New Testament says, "Straight is the gate and narrow is the way." As the dharma teachings endlessly point out, the Sun of the mind is always shining, but the clouds of our impurities obscure it. So, all preliminary dharma practices are about removing the clouds so that we can see the Sun. It's like wearing dirty glasses and we don't know they're dirty because it is all we have ever known. It's that simple.

The doors of the mind are blocked by our own existing obscurations, which have to be removed before we can know, much less realize, the mind. That's why the great majority of preliminary dharma practices are methods to purify and thin out our obscurations so that we can see through and beyond them. In the next blog (or soon), I will share with you the easiest dharma path that I have found.

THE UPSIDE OF HARD KARMA

December 25, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The funny thing about karma, especially “bad” karma, is my response to it. Since hard karma is a party crasher and brings me down, the closer I am to earth (or reality), the better the dharma. This makes it very difficult to just “hate” the bad karma, because it always brings with it an upsurge in the quality of dharma I am capable of maintaining. When I am just about level to the ground, low-down, as it were, my dharma rating soars, so what’s not to like?

Well, there’s a lot not to like about hard times, but the rewards of hard karma are also obvious, like: I’m back! Here I am again, awake and aware. Where have I been all this time? Unfortunately, at least for me, there is a direct correlation between “bad” karma and good dharma. The harder the times for me, the more I get out of them dharma-wise. I wish it were otherwise, that left to my own devices I would come up with good dharma, but I’m afraid it ain’t so folks, at least for me. I am not that well behaved. If the times are too good, I tend to throw caution to the winds, party-hearty (in my own way, of course), put on weight, and lose touch with reality.

And it’s not that I have not tested this thesis. It works just as I described it here, every time. In the last year, various never-ending health concerns have kept me low to the ground and relatively well-behaved,

considering that with every good patch of luck I make a run for a life of ease. It's like reflex testing, when they tap your kneecap with a rubber mallet, your foot kicks out. Give me some clear sailing and I sail right out of reasonableness, back to thinking I'm going to live forever. This has got to be funny, no?

So, come good times or bad, in sickness and health, I am learning to slow down and appreciate each day. But this is common wisdom. The only difference is that right now it is going in one ear and staying there.

I have always found the following traditional Japanese Zen story, sometimes offered as a koan, just a little offensive, but there is a point there nevertheless. It is said that the Buddha told this parable in a sutra:

It is the one where a tiger is chasing a man across a field, who reaches the edge of a cliff and, grabbing a vine, he leaps over the cliff and dangles in the air, while the tiger above is trying to reach him. Then he notices, just below him, another tiger waiting for him to climb down or fall. As if that is not enough, just above him and out of his reach, two rats (one white and one black) are gnawing through the vine. His time is short. In the middle of all of that, the man sees a perfectly ripe strawberry growing on the side of the cliff, just within arm's length. While hanging on to the vine with one arm, he reaches out and plucks the strawberry with the other, and eats it. How sweet it tasted!

THE PHYSICAL KOAN

December 27, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Like the dog on a clothesline, we can run as far as the line runs and then we stop. Ultimately, we are limited by our own conceptualizations and don't even know it. Much of dharma practice is a process of deconstruction, undoing what we've done, rather than invoking anything new. Yet, according to the lamas, it is not like we used to be clear, but have since fallen. That is a Christian concept (Original Sin) or, further back, part of Platonism and elsewhere. In Buddhism, like the lotus flower, we all start in the mud and only gradually open up. And we do this by removing obscurations, a little at a time, revealing the true nature of the mind. We do by undoing, so to speak.

And it's a Catch-22. If we had the awareness, we could see how to remove our obscurations, and if we removed our obscurations, we would have the awareness. So, the physical koan, so to speak, is how to break this vicious cycle, which is identical to the cycles of Samsara. They too go round and round until we manage the escape velocity to pull free of our fixations and stop orbiting them.

Liberation is literally a two-step process, first to whittle down our obscurations so that we can see through and beyond them (transparency), and second, to transfer our identity from our current fixations to being

free of them – letting go and realizing the true nature of the mind.

That's the goal. How to get there is the problem each of us has to resolve. If we examine all of the many preliminary dharma practices, they are all purification practices. By "purification," I don't mean burning at the stake or other ascetic practices. In dharma practice, to purify is to remove the obscurations from our mind's "glasses" so that we can see clearly. This is not so hard but, depending on our inspiration and drives, can take time, quite a long time.

One barrier I found was trying to figure out which, of all the many dharma practices, were what I needed, so let me share with you what I needed to make this work. You may be different, but most of us need these simple requirements.

Since the results of spiritual practice of any kind are something that, by definition, we have not yet had, we tend to make up our spiritual expectations out of whole-cloth. Any dharma practice that we do should give us accurate and regular feedback, with no long delays. And dharma practice can be too abstract, ideas of "universal love and compassion," etc. Of course, I support those as ideas, but I may have only the barest idea as to how to go about achieving them. With that in mind, dharma practice should be enough about us (personally) to hold our attention. And, regardless of whatever sitting meditation we may do on the cushion, this additional practice I will describe has to be something we can do off-the-cushion, while we are going about our day-to-day business, and without having to set a special time aside to do it.

In other words, rather than just being something we do sitting on a cushion, we need a practice (perhaps an alternate practice) that we can do round the clock, on the go, while we do whatever else we do in a day. And it has to be simple, and not too subtle, with no possibility of confusion. And above all, it has to actually work and show results in as close to real-time as possible – sooner, rather than later.

As it happens, I have had the opportunity over the last 45 years to try out many dharma practices, so I have some idea of what works for Westerners and what is perhaps a “bridge too far” and too difficult, just starting out. IMO, as beginners, we are more alike than different. My particular dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, now in his nineties, was wise enough to start me on something that actually worked for me, even though at the time I was asking for permission to do something much more difficult. He very gently told me where he felt was the place for me to start, and he was correct. I am going to present here, for your consideration, a variation of exactly what he gave me at the time.

And this practice meets all of the requirements mentioned above. It is simple and easy to do. It is not abstract and is quite unmistakable in its effects. You can't go wrong. It is both immediate and works long term. It does not require that you set aside a portion of your day for it, but can be done anytime and all day long, with no visible sign that you are doing it. It does not interfere with any other dharma practice you are doing, and can either be done as a main practice or an alternate (off-the-cushion) practice on its own. And, perhaps best of all, it works, and it is easy to

monitor the results. This is the most powerful interactive preliminary practice that I know of.

This article is already too long, so I will present the technique tomorrow, when we have enough space to stretch out. I suggest you wait for that, but I don't like cliff-hangers, so for those of you who have no time to wait, the technique is described in this free e-book.

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../Tong-len%20-%20Second%20Edition....>

THE ALCHEMY OF REACTION

December 28, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

As promised, here is the dharma practice that I find most useful for those just starting out. Anyone can do this. The virtue of this particular practice is that it is totally fresh and in the moment. It brings us face-to-face with ourselves every time. In fact, we can't avoid it, and there is nothing abstract about it. It requires no real effort on our part; in fact, it liberates energy. The technique is based on a variation of the traditional Tibetan Buddhist practice of Tonglen, and this variation was presented to (and approved by) my Tibetan Buddhist teacher of thirty-three years as a valid practice. It works really well and teaches us about the nature of our self as we progress with it.

The technique was inspired by Harvard psychologist (and Tibetan translator and practitioner) Daniel P. Brown, when he pointed out that in the classic Four Noble Truths of Buddhism, the word "Suffering," might be better translated as "Reactivity," thus the first truth would be "The Truth of Reactivity," "The Cause of Reactivity," "The Cessation of Reactivity," and so on.

The point is that our "Reactivity" is important for us to be aware of and the technique I am sharing with you here is called "Reaction Tonglen," sometimes called reaction-toning. It is all about the lessening and removal of reactivity in our life. And it is so easy to do.

WHAT TO DO WHEN WE REACT

And this dharma practice couldn't be any simpler. Once we become aware of them, our reactions become obvious to us. There is nothing abstract about them. They are visceral and sharp, right in our face, and are served up with no effort on our part. We don't have to go looking for them because knee-jerk reactions are involuntary, and each reaction carries with it enough energy to get our attention so, as mentioned, they take no effort on our part whatsoever. It's all incoming. Something happens and we react. And it is the reaction that we want to be aware of, our own reaction.

And by reaction, I don't mean just to the sonic-boom outside the house or the phone or doorbell ringing, but every last reaction, from someone calling our name, all the way down to small reactions like that you don't like the tie I'm wearing or that my nose is too big. Any and all reactions are fuel for this practice.

And when we react, all we have to do is note to ourselves that we have reacted, what we have reacted to, and that the reaction is all ours. It's 100% our own reaction. No one else is to blame. What made us react, something good, bad, kind or mean, accidental or on-purpose, is not important. We can't control the cause. But "how" we react to the cause is up to us. And please note: there is a difference between a reaction and a response.

Here we are looking for reactions only, you know, where we knee-jerk or find ourselves reacting without meaning to, while, of course, naturally responding to an event in an appropriate way is not a reaction, at

least as defined here. In this practice, we are becoming aware of when we react involuntarily or perhaps voluntarily, but in a negative way. We react, duly note it, and then accept that it is our reaction. Don't forget to note it!

In summary, we become aware of a reaction, examine it and acknowledge that it is our own reaction (we reacted), and then we just drop it (let it go) and move on. That is all there is to the practice, but the effect of this practice over time on our mindstream can be profound. And it does not take an eagle's eye to spot a reaction. Catch the ones you can. They happen momentarily all day long, and by the thousands, so our next reaction is due almost any time.

Some of our reactions are to outside events beyond our control, but just as many (or more) reactions come from inside, via our likes, dislikes, prejudice, biases, and on and on. We are full of it. The simple fact is that withstanding all of these reactions each day sucks up an enormous amount of our life energy. We may not be aware of how we twist and turn in the winds of our own negativity, cringing and frowning, wincing (even if only by the millisecond), and we do this (literally) all day long.

By becoming aware of our own reactions, simply noting them (acknowledging them as no other than our own) and letting them go, we gradually begin to neutralize and tone our reactions back. Over time, these involuntary reactions are toned down and gradually replaced with more natural appropriate responses, and we relax in that. The endless wince or cringing (the shock of involuntary reactions) gives way

to relaxation and we learn to respond to the natural shocks that life offers more appropriately. And we save an enormous amount of energy in the process, energy that otherwise is expended. Talk about energy conservation; this is it.

An added benefit of this practice is that by being more able to respond to life rather than just always react, the ring of exclusion (our likes and dislikes) that separates us from others (and the world) gradually dissolves and becomes increasingly more inclusive until we can embrace life just as it is. Here is more reading on Reaction Tonglen.

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Tong-len%20-%20Second%20Edition.pdf>

LIFE GUIDE

December 29, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

As a beginning student, just starting out in the dharma, I had little idea where I was going with practice and that was a real problem. Back when I first began, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, many of the Tibetan teachers spoke little to no English. In a very real sense, they were refugees resulting from the diaspora in Tibet due to the invading Chinese Communists.

In my case, coming from a Zen sensibility, the Tibetan shrines seemed everything opposite from the bare teakwood floors and other minimalist furnishings of the Zen Buddhists. In fact, the Tibetan shrines were more like the Catholic Church I was raised in (and trying to get away from): brocades, statues, vestments, and a language I did not understand – Church Latin. It was a lot to soak up, but that was where I found Rinpoche.

And my particular dharma teacher had us do all our practice in Tibetan, not English, a non-European language with a strange Asian script that I learned to read. This is not to mention that Rinpoche was some 800 miles from where I lived, so I only saw him rarely. Yes, there were some Western dharma students in the Midwest, but for the most part they didn't know any more than I did, and that was very little. And to top it off, somewhere the students I knew had gotten

the idea that we were not supposed to talk to each other about or share anything about our dharma practice, which decades later turned out to be misinformation.

That kind of secrecy turns out to be true only for the personal instructions given by a guru to a disciple in the more advanced stages. In Tibet, whole colleges debate and discuss the preliminary practices constantly. So, there we were, smiling and giving each other the thumbs up, but privately trying to figure it all out on our own.

No, I was not somewhere out in the natural solitude of a cave meditating, but I was certainly as alone as alone can be. Fast-forward 45 years to now and the dharma is much more known (at least known of) and accepted than it was back then. But there is one thing that has not changed all that much and that is the fact that each of us is alone in trying to work our practice. When all the handholding is done, there we are, just out there in life with our dharma practice, trying to figure out how to get enlightened.

And the most challenging part of all is that spiritual achievement of any kind, at least the non-dualistic realization of the more advanced Buddhist teachings is, by definition, not something we CAN know anything about beforehand. As the Venerable Chögyam Trungpa would say, “Your guess is as good as mine.”

Dharma practice has a roadmap, but it is not illustrated. Advanced states of meditation are described in texts, but then those very words are said to be unable to express the results of non-dual

meditation. We can't open up a dharma book and see photos of realization. Our expectations as to why we are meditating are pretty much a shot in the dark, yet they often are all we have to go on. We don't know what greater awareness is like until we have it. So, what's my point?

My point is that there are some very definite hurdles to learning the dharma, not only in the past, but today as well. Some of them are just the fact that the dharma is still very new in this country. Unlike the Tibetans, who are raised and steeped in the dharma from birth onward, many of us are not even familiar (or comfortable) with the concept of rebirth. That concept alone is a huge learning curve for most folks. And the teachings are in Tibetan, and the mantras in Sanskrit, and the list goes on and on.

And here I was, sitting on my little cushion in a corner each day, wondering where this practice was leading or when I would get some results? What is meditation? Of course, I knew "how" to learn it, but what is it? What are the end results of meditation like? I didn't know, because I had never had any clear results. I was still learning and I learned and I learned and I learned, but, still, I never learned.

I could go on and on with these diagnostics, but will spare you. The upshot of what I am saying is that all of this is easier if we have a guide, someone to help us over the hurdles that all of us will experience just starting out. After all, that is what lineage is all about, a chain of friends that carefully practice, certify, and pass on the authentic dharma instructions from generation to generation. We wouldn't dream of doing brain surgery on ourselves, and the spiritual

equivalent requires someone with the ability to actually help us, someone with authentic realization.

“Authentic Realization” is not enlightenment, but simply put, the teacher must have themselves realized how to negotiate the particular impasse we may find ourselves at. They have to have done that successfully and be able (and willing) to help others achieve the same realization, to point out how. There is a lot to the dharma that is purely mechanical, as in: how to do it properly. And there are not enough hands-on experienced dharma folks around to assist all of us that are learning. This can be a problem.

And it does not help if we are shy about asking. I like the Christian saying that we have to go to meet our maker. Here, I am saying that we each have to go halfway, reach out and request help and guidance from someone who knows. We should know intuitively which dharma teachers speak to us so that we grasp what they are saying. Those are the ones to contact. And that is exactly what I did.

Of all the many gurus, teachers, yogis, etc. that I met early-on, it was this one Tibetan Rinpoche that I just “got,” that I naturally responded to; and even after one meeting (for a very short time), I wanted more. Soon after meeting Rinpoche, Margaret and I bundled up our whole family and drove 800 miles on one of the coldest days of the year (the week after Christmas) and showed up at Rinpoche’s doorstep unannounced. We had such confidence in Rinpoche that we just up and went there.

So, I am not trying to tell you what to do; I am telling you what I did and perhaps I am saying that we each

have to do “something,” other than wait forever to be rescued from Samsara. No one is coming to get us, unless we can go and meet them at least halfway. Ultimately, we each have to enlighten ourselves, and that is difficult enough.

There are many kinds of Buddhism. Vajrayana Buddhism, in which I practice, is entirely built around a student working with an experienced teacher, someone who actually knows what we are trying to learn. It's like sitting there with the bowl upside down and expecting to learn; that won't work. We have to turn the bowl upward, reach out, and receive what guidance we can. Without a dharma teacher like Rinpoche, my life would be very different today. He has been my guide.

LIMBO DAYS

December 30, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I used to hate the week between Christmas and the New Year, because everything I liked dried up or just went on hold: mail, business, day-to-day contacts, and all of the stuff that keeps life moving. I'm retired now, so I should stop thinking this way, but this week-long gap each year still feels like lost days to me. Go figure.

And, it's not like I'm waiting for anything special when the new year starts or that I'm at all sorry to leave behind the year that's ending. Since I retired, it's been nothing but a week of Saturdays the year round – like all snow days and no school.

Instead of keeping up with the beat of the business week, as I used to, if I want to sequence time, now I have to create my own rhythm. Of course, I can still dimly sense the work week of the world going on out there, but it is very faint compared to what it used to be. These days, I tend to measure time by Sundays, because there's no mail. If I don't do that, I just sense that time is passing, measured vaguely in days, but no longer by weeks. I kind of like that. And writing a blog for Facebook each day (when I can) is about as much of a calendar-synch as there is for me.

Even though there is little I “have” to do, I tend to resent doing all the things I must do each day like,

brush my teeth, shower, open my shrine, and whatever teleological list of things to do that impinge on me. The fact is that I have more time than ever to do just what I want, yet I don't like that time to be interrupted. For some reason, I like this sense of an uninterrupted span of time, not punctuated by events. That is about as close to eternity as it gets for me. And how crazy is that? I know. I am probably ready for the rocking chair. This little poem I wrote says it all for me, although these winter days I am looking more at my inner sky.

TIME FOR NOTHING

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

What do I do in a day? Mostly my days are taken up with dharma: practicing, studying, and writing about it. It's what I like to do. Aside from dharma, its photography that I like, reading, writing, and actually doing photography is something that absorbs me. And of course, there is eating and figuring out what to eat. With my very restricted diet, nothing is too romantic in the food department. Because of this, food is not as important as it used to be, but still something to consider, and I do. It seems every day is a challenge as far as what to eat. And it's no doubt that I eat to live more than live to eat these days. I am gradually assembling a series of things to eat that are palatable enough, but often just barely.

Another event is daily exercise, which is hard to do when it is icy out or bitter cold, but still very important.

This can be a chore, unless I get into it. As for relaxation, in the early evening I watch some news or a movie or something. As the founder of the All-Movie Guide (one of the two largest movie sites on the Web), I used to be very diligent and focused about movies, as in: please don't talk to me while I am watching a movie. However, that apparently is now history. I don't even watch a whole movie half the time, but am quite happy to watch a bit here and there, and be done with it. I find myself watching the same old movies I like rather than to seek out the latest. And "art" films have taken a big hit. I don't care about them anymore. And to muddy the waters, I now fall asleep watching movies way too much of the time or at least I nod off.

As for reasoning on this, about the best I can come up with is that real life has become more and more like a movie, so that I don't get the bang out of fiction that I used to. I do like documentaries, when they are not too didactical and I don't watch animated films at all anymore. Whatever bit of a connoisseur of movies I once was is kind of out the window. The truth is that I will watch just about anything these days, or even just a part of anything. Again, the reason seems to be that life itself is entertainment enough, even though what I do must appear as monotonous as can be to someone outside of myself.

With all of my health problems this year, I have not been feeling very "outie," so I tend to hunker down and stay put. I am sure that when spring comes, I will feel like getting outside.

So, if I have to sum up what is special about life these years, the big attraction is the clarity and certainty that

comes with Insight Meditation and Mahamudra practice, in general. It is like a bright light in the hallway of life. What was once a separate practice has spilled over from the cushion, years ago, and I find myself doing it much of the time.

It is worth the price of admission.

A STORY -- "YOU'VE MADE YOUR BED, NOW LIE IN IT"

December 31, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I don't usually write about the little stuff, but sometimes what is of minor importance assumes major proportions, which is the case for our new bed. First, we have had the same coiled-spring mattress and box springs for 36 years. If you think it is getting old, you would be right. Margaret can still use it, but for my side, it was too hard for comfort. I fell on the ice a year ago and broke two ribs; after that it hurt to sleep on that mattress, so I would just sleep on the couch in my office. Over the last couple of years, Margaret and I have been making motions to do something about getting a new bed, but you know how this kind of thing works. It never reached the sphere of action.

One of the reasons for that is because it required considerable research and that can take a day or even days to do right. I reached a point where I could not sleep comfortably on our old mattress and took up to sleeping on a couch in my office. Originally, that was also because of health issues and to be with our dog, who was fading fast and needed company and to be let out in the middle of the night at a moment's notice.

After our dog passed away and I was feeling somewhat better, it was time to look into getting a

new bed, so I finally launched into the research project of figuring out what kind of bed would it be. It seems that the smart money and the cool folks were into more recent solutions to sleep rather than the coiled-spring mattresses I grew up with, so I had to look into that, of course.

Well, I knew it would not be a waterbed! We had been there and done that many decades ago. Sleeping on a ton of water (for us) did not ring the right bells, so that was out. And we knew that it would be organic; our kids probably told us that. We were not about to get a new mattress with all sorts of fire retardants, dangerous glues, not to mention prone to dust mites and other micro-crawlies. We were already used to that. And one other thing. We had tried out sleeping on memory foam and ended up flipping the mattress over and using the other side, so there would be no “memory foam.” And this pretty much left us with Latex, and an organic form of that.

It seems that all the trendy environmentally-aware and organically-oriented mattress makers, or most of them, were using organic latex these days, so I studied that. This took some days, and then calling around and speaking with the mattress makers took still more time. We finally settled on one maker and began dialoging with them about putting a mattress together that would suit us. We sleep on a queen-sized bed, and would need what is called a split-queen, because Margaret and I each prefer a different softness for sleeping.

And these latex mattresses have a series of layers, usually three or more, and each layer can be softer or harder and even made out of different kinds of latex.

These layers are then stacked on one another and zipped inside a mattress cover and there you have it, an organic latex-mattress. Like Jack Sprat and his wife, Margaret likes a firm mattress and I like a soft one because I sleep on my right side, so that was all negotiated. And, of course, we had to have a bed frame built (by the same company) to hold all of this off the floor. And before we knew it, we had a mattress ordered and being prepared to ship out by truck.

Now, what was not clear to me in the reading, the chatting, and the illustrations is the sheer weight of a latex bed, over 300 lbs! And each of these layers is like a side of whale blubber that shimmies and shakes when disturbed. We had to hire a person just to help carry the huge boxes inside the house and up to the bedroom. And then there was the bed frame, that was as big as, of course, a queen-sized bed. And it came in a box even bigger than that. After we lugged it all upstairs, we had to sort out the layers and arrange them, like vast layers of tofu on the bed, and then wrestle them all into a cover and try to zip it up.

We literally made our own bed and all that was left was to lie in it, which we did. And we did and we did and we did, for days. And to our surprise, we could not get comfortable in it. As mentioned, Margaret and I each had a side of the bed with three layers of latex, and each layer was different. Of course, there was firm, medium, and softer layers. And on top of that, these layers were of different kinds (brands) themselves, either Dunlop or Talalay.

So, like the princess and the pea, we kept taking the mattress apart and switching layers, not only in our

own layer, but between each other's sides. And each switch was a wrestling match that took a long time, unzipping the cover, unearthing the layers, dragging them around, and rearranging them all over again, and putting the cover back on, etc. Exhausting. And night after night, there was sleep or the lack of it. And each day there was the tearing the whole thing apart and reassembling it. This went on for what seemed like a long time.

And we were grateful that all of this rubber did not, so to speak, have a rubber smell. And what smell it did have in its attempts to off-gas (or gas off), we did our best to ignore, like it was not really there. But in the back of our mind, we both knew that it was kind of there. Then one day, our son Michael came for a visit and, during one of the re-layering bouts, he popped his head into the bedroom to see what the fuss was all about. We were wrestling with the darn thing at the time, and all he did was to take a smell, and without blinking, announce that the "stuff," no matter how subtle, really stunk. And with that remark, the floodgates opened and everything we had tried to sublimate and ignore came tumbling out. The whole thing was a mess. Neither Margaret nor I were comfortable with what by that time I was calling the blubber-bed, and on top of that, there was the smell that we tried not to admit was there. Ouch!

And Michael's comment was kind of the final straw. Within days, and a little more re-layering calisthenics, we knew that the bloom was off the rose. Luckily, the deal was that for \$99, you could pack the whole thing up and ship it back, lock, stock, and blubber, and so we did. We had to hire a fellow to come again and assist with the packing, drag the huge boxes

downstairs, where we would tape them up and put on the labels. And, at last, the truck came and actually hauled them away. We were so happy to see it all go!

So... we are back sleeping on our 36-year-old mattress and box-springs, and happy as a clam... at least Margaret is, until we can figure out what kind of mattress system we want to try next.

I am clear that it won't be latex, and not memory foam, so that leaves something like a traditional coil-spring mattress, but with some sense of organics, like no fire retardants, no poisonous glues to off-gas, and all that. Perhaps some of you dear Facebook Friends have some ideas for us about mattresses that are more-or-less hypoallergenic, coil-springs, and lightweight. I welcome your advice!