

Dharma Blogs

2016 Winter



by Michael Erlewine

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INTRODUCTION

This is not intended to be a finely produced book, but rather a readable document for those who are interested in my particular take on dharma training and a few other topics. My thanks to Patti Singleton Williams for helping me to gather this all together. These blogs were from the Winter of 2016, posted on Facebook and Google+.

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rites of passage: the ring pass not

January 5, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

OK, we'll let the smoke clear out from yesterday's excursion into a bit of politics. Regardless of our politics, one climactic point that will come up for each of us is facing whatever responsibilities we fall heir to, sometimes called the "Ring Pass Not." As an astrologer, the nexus or vortex for this life-changing event comes due when we go beyond our first Saturn Return at around 30 years of age.

Whether we are aware of it by name or not, we all go through this, so I find it helps to be aware of it. I was fortunate enough to be instructed on this inner change by an expert esoteric teacher, an 82-year-old Rosicrucian initiator, before I turned thirty, so I was somewhat prepared for what happens. I am not sure anyone can be totally prepared for it.

One thing I learned about early-on is like the old Bible phrase from the Book of Isaiah," which states, "There is no rest for the wicked" and "The wicked are like the troubled sea when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up dirt and mire." That description is a little heavy, although the Buddhist concept of Samsara is similar, turmoil continued, and no rest, ever, by definition.

And by no rest, they mean here no real sleep or peace too. Ignoring Samsara only deepens its ruts and mires us more. Awakening, awareness, enlightenment really isn't the option we may like to

think it is. Rather, it's only a matter of time until the exigencies of life will literally force us to respond, wake up, and become more aware.

As mentioned, I learned this long ago, when all I wanted to do at the time was to be left alone to doze on and not to be constantly disturbed by the increasing responsibilities that life demanded of me. I would kind of wake up just long enough to take care of the squeakiest wheel, and thus buy myself enough time to go back to ignoring it all and doing what I thought I wanted to do, which was like: dream on. The fact is I just couldn't keep my head above water and didn't even realize it.

What I eventually found out was that there is no back door to life, no way out except through the present situations we face, whatever they happen to be. God knows, I spent more time ignoring my responsibilities than taking care of them. Ultimately, it was easier to just learn to respond and do what I had to do rather than to be eternally delinquent, as was my habit.

In other words, there is a bell curve to life, and if we fall behind the curve of the present moment and become delinquent in our debts and responsibilities, the accumulating demands on us pile up and soon outpace our wish (or ability) to sleep on and just ignore them. Finally, I was forced awake by everything around me to which I had not responded appropriately.

And, as pointed out, reluctantly I finally turned away from trying to sleep-on in my youth and began to respond (albeit begrudgingly) to life. It was exactly like when a new baby is born: it has to start breathing and

never stop as long as life lives. What does the doctor do to the baby who won't take that first breath? Slap it on its butt, that's what, to get the breathing started. Once started, the breathing does not stop until we die. If it does not start, of course we are dead anyway. Our ability to respond (responsibility) is like that.

My point here is that this need to become more aware (and eventually to be enlightened) is not some religious option or new-age whatever. We refuse or put it off at our own peril. Little gaps of awareness, like coming up for air, may get us through life when we are younger, but sooner or later, life demands awareness from us full-time, as in: waking up. The legal system does not protect the juvenile past a certain point. The Saturn Return at thirty years is exactly like that. Suddenly we are forced to respond to life's demands, ready or not.

Perhaps the Zen Buddhists point this out most clearly, when they suggest being fully awake not just sitting on the cushion, but every minute and hour of the day. Like: Wake Up! But it seems that no one points out that we HAVE to do this, ready or not. In other words, once started in developing awareness (when we are over thirty), there is no going back. It is an ever-increasing recursive activity that is practiced until it reaches an incendiary moment when our awareness bursts into true clarity and begins to feed on the thoughts of the mind itself. Then there is rest, and also clarity.

Now, the kicker is that if we balk at making this transition, if we get caught in the vortex of not responding, what can be a fairly swift transition can instead stretch out like — forever — the rest of our life. It

is very, very painful to go down this way. Sometime we just have to soldier-up and take charge of our responsibilities, at which point things clear up rapidly.

However, getting to that point is the challenge, but one that is inevitable for each of us, no matter how long we put it off. My philosophy has always been: “go to meet your maker,” rather than be tracked down and forced to go. I wrote a whole book about this based on my own very difficult time of transition at my Saturn Return. It is called “Astrology of the Heart,” and is a free read for those who identify with the problem:

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

FASCINATING -- THE BUDDHIST CONCEPT OF “SCENTING”

January 13, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I want to continue looking at what there is of us that continues to exist after we die. Yesterday, we looked at the Alayavijnana or Storehouse Consciousness, what Freud would have called our subconscious. This Storehouse Consciousness is beyond our conscious grasp, but nevertheless it influences our actions and contains the various karmic residues that we have accumulated.

In the last couple of episodes, we left you with the idea that, according to the Tibetan Buddhists, our regular consciousness is not anything permanent like we might hope, you know, a “soul” that flits between births, and also that our Self and personal memories (as we all know) decay and are gradually forgotten. And they certainly end at death. I have always found that statement... concerning.

To repeat, the teachings point out that beneath our regular day-to-day consciousness is a subconscious layer called the Alayavijnana (Storehouse Consciousness), which we don't have conscious access to, except through our intuition or whatever.

It is that Storehouse Consciousness that contains all of the remains of our experience, the karmic imprints (good and bad), and it has a much longer half-life

much greater, than our normal memories. In fact, it is the Alayavijnana that persists beyond death, whereas our personal memories, Self, and persona all are left at death's door, a residue epitaph. In today's blog, let's look in a little more detail at just what the Storehouse Consciousness contains.

VASANAS

The teachings say that what is contained in the Alayavijnana (Storehouse Consciousness) are termed Vasanas, which are defined variously as subtle karmic imprints, latent tendencies, past impressions, wishes, desires, habitual tendencies, and so on. In particular, it is important to note that in all of this our "intent" is recorded, as well, I imagine, as any recording of merit that we may have accumulated.

My dharma teacher once taught that every single thought we have is either, at heart, beneficent or maleficent. I had to check it out and I examined my thoughts carefully for some time, and he is right. Often, even what I think is rather funny has a mean edge (or not) to it. This is something easy for us to check out, and the result for me was kind of sobering. I am not as nice as I think I am.

Another approach is to say that the Storehouse Consciousness contains "Bijas," basically karmic seeds. Yet another (and even more fascinating) description is the idea of what is called "scenting," that the Alayavijnana holds nothing but stains and smells that color or perfume what otherwise would be pure. It seems that the architecture of whatever about us that is NOT pure, whatever is bent and stained, is preserved in the Storehouse Consciousness.

The great Traleg Rinpoche has this to say about “scenting,” in his pivotal book “Karma, What It Is, What It Isn’t, Why It Matters:”

“These impressions, or psychic energy deposits, that carry over are termed Vasanas. In traditional literature, a Vasana is described by the analogy of putting something very smelly, like an unwashed pair of socks, into a drawer. If we were to leave it for months, upon opening the drawer, we would most likely be overwhelmed by the smell. Even throwing them out and doing our utmost to remove the smell seems to have only a marginal effect – the next time the drawer is opened, the smell is still there... the so-called perfume of the Vasanas.”

That description by Traleg Rinpoche is pretty graphic, as is his above-mentioned landmark book, which I highly recommend. Vasanas are latent tendencies, karmic imprints, past impressions, desires, wishes, habitual tendencies, and whatever contaminates or colors our mind. And, as mentioned earlier, Vasanas record our karmic “intent.”

As to what is called “Scenting:” Just as smoking impregnates the clothes worn by someone who smokes, so that we can smell a smoker in a room even if they are not smoking, in a similar way, Vasanas, like a cheap perfume or incense, leave a karmic stain on whatever they encounter. They stink up our life. Vasanas are sometimes defined as “Imprinted-volitions-of-mind,” so it is here that our intent is captured and recorded. I would imagine, but I have not had it confirmed, that any merit we accumulate is also registered in the Storehouse

As to those threaded stories of experience we all carry in our mind that we call memories, some are stronger than others. But memories in general are still relatively fleeting and they don't normally extend beyond death's door. There is a deeper storehouse of life impressions that we don't have conscious access to and, even if we did, they wouldn't represent anything coherent. As mentioned, this is called the Alayavijnana or Storehouse Consciousness, and it contains what are called Bijas or the seeds of our actions, seeds that will sprout and expand as opportunity arises.

In one sense we could call what is stored there our karmic stains, including just how they can repeatedly stain our otherwise pure thoughts. I tend to think of the Alayavijnana more as a karmic toolbox, much like a cosmetic kit, filled with all of the many ways and habits we can stink up ourselves with, but in seed-like or freeze-dried form, ready to expand instantly and shape our thoughts.

VASANA REMOVAL

And this perhaps explains why the removal of these karmic grooves is said to be so difficult, because we are not trying to erase a single stroke of karmic imprint, but rather a deep-down stain or groove that bears our particular signature. Each groove is the compounded result of thousands or hundreds of thousands of the same action on our part, each underscoring more deeply the action before it. An example might be: if every time we run into a certain person that we don't like, we wince and have "bad" thoughts, that imprint further underscores the groove

or track laid down previously, and it gets ever deeper and “serious-er.”

We can't just undue one layer of that kind of karma with one stroke; the entire groove or mold must be worked out and removed. Vasanas are logo-like iconic forms, pressure-molds that can shape our future actions based on past impressions, a mold or form that can manifest the same bad karma again and again until the mold itself is dissolved. These are stubborn stains, but they can be removed and eliminated from our karmic toolbox.

We all know how hard it is to change our habits. It is the same with removing Vasanas from the Alayavijnana. It takes time and practice, but it can be done. The first step is not to double-scrub our mental self clean, but rather to simply stop recording any more karma by ceasing those actions that create negative Vasanas in the mind. The teachings point out that this is the most positive thing we can do. As Bernie Sanders might shout, “Stop creating the damn negative karma!”

After that, we can undertake a course of mind training to carefully work on and remove our bad habits. It is akin to removing buried landmines in a battlefield, slow and painstaking. With some work, we can remove existing Vasanas and reseed our Storehouse Consciousness with positive Vasanas or, better yet, no Vasanas at all. We can, with effort, change, our personality and become a different person.

DO NOT GO GENTLE INTO THAT GOOD NIGHT

January 16, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

What we have been looking at in these recent blogs are concepts from a particular school of Buddhist thought called Yogachara (yogācāra), which translates simply to “yoga practice,” although here the word “yoga” does not refer to Hatha Yoga’s asanas or physical postures, but rather to yoga in the sense of meditation practice. Yogachara is one of the two main philosophical schools of Indian Mahayana Buddhism, the other being Madhyamaka.

The Yogachara philosophy is renowned for its incredible meditation practitioners and its concern with what we could call “phenomenology,” actually directly looking at the mind and consciousness, as to how it works and is constructed, through actual experience, rather than by conceptual examination alone.

Yogachara is sometimes referred to as the “mind-only” school, but this easily leads to the misunderstanding that Yogachara practitioners think that everything is just in the mind (and empty) and it’s all like a dream and “What Me Worry?”, when actually the Yogachara practitioner’s intent is to communicate that we look at everything through the “filter” of our personal mind (through the mind only), with all of its obscurations, i.e. “see through a glass darkly.”

Although, until now, I have not formally studied the Yogachara tradition, I have been absorbing it osmotically for decades, since it is ingrained in the particular lineage of Tibetan Buddhism (Kagyu) that I belong to. Therefore, directly encountering Yogachara tenets has been something of a revelation to me, but also a sort of homecoming. I belong here.

And driving all this has been the need on my part to learn more about exactly what happens at death, in the bardo states, and then beyond that to some kind of rebirth. After all, I am getting old and will be facing this experience, probably sooner than later.

Of course, what I want to know is just one piece of a much larger puzzle. And to understand that one piece requires grasping where it fits in with the pieces that surround it. I am trying to get the picture, and have been kind of thinking out loud here and sharing my thoughts with my Facebook friends, although there seem to be fairly few of you who are that interested in these conundrums.

As you may know, I have been working hard at sorting out my belongings these last months and passing them out here and there, kind of an introduction to the time when I will have to leave my Self, with all of its warts and blessings, and venture out beyond what I now know. I can't believe that many of you, if you are getting older, are not wondering about some of these same things. You are so quiet.

The thought of leaving my Self, family, friends, life, and body behind and just shoving off into the bardo is a little challenging. And, once into the bardo, comes the moment of complete blocking out (as the Tibetans

describe the turning point in the bardo experience), and then waking back up and somehow entering into a new body, where I will have to create a new Self all over again. All I can say is wow!

It reminds me of the experience when I get on an airplane. There is absolutely nothing I can do, except lean back and try to enjoy the ride because I am in other arms than my own. Actually, I am one of those folks that easily sleeps on a plane.

And so, I am looking at a lot of scenarios and concepts just now. In particular, since my Self is getting ready to go nowhere, I have been looking into what the Yogachara practitioners call the Storehouse Consciousness, which effectively acts as our subconscious. And I am intrigued that this vast storehouse of all our memories, karmic imprints, and, I guess, everything else, operates much like one of those UPS Power Supply, battery-backups, that prevent my computer from losing whatever it has in RAM when the power blacks out. A UPS Backup holds our memories in store, until the lights come back on.

Sounds a lot like what I am wondering about with death and the journey beyond. This Storehouse Consciousness (Alayavijnana) functions like a UPS Backup System, by faithfully preserving whatever it has recorded of “me” and piloting it through the bardo and on into the next life, where it immediately is available as a palette to paint a new Self in just the colors I am most used to.

So, I won't be the “me” you sometimes read here, but hopefully I will be some kind of new “me” all over

again, with at least some of the qualities that I have managed to develop and hone over the last 74 years. I can say this:

The more I study and have real insights into this whole “rebirth” scenario, the more confidence I gradually am acquiring about all of this. And although we each have to face that moment when our consciousness blacks-out, the rest of the experience (as defined by the teachings) we apparently take with some considerable kind of consciousness and ability to think and maneuver. So, I apologize for my concern over all of this, but I do see, pardon my image, light at the end of the tunnel.

And one other analogy that occurred to me while studying all of this, and then I will let you go.

The Alayavijnana (Alaya Storehouse) is like a kind of bank account, into which we are continually making karmic deposits and withdrawals. If our intent is not pure, then that puts an angle or a bit of attitude on an action or experience, and that angle (and its blueprint) is deposited in our karmic bank account. When ongoing life situations arise that resonate with our karmic deposits, a particular karmic blueprint springs to life and puts its spin on our actions, which then tend to be repeated. And the results of each action are themselves recorded and some sense of recursion sets in. It is a real hornet’s nest IMO.

We are constantly depositing and withdrawing from the Alaya Storehouse. As we work on purifying our actions through various mind-training practices, less and less is deposited, and what is already there begins to be used up. Finally, when we are

enlightened, there is nothing remaining in our bank account. It is perfectly empty and cleared out.

With that, I will try to give you folks a break and write about something else, but no promises!

WESTERN ESOTERICISM: THE VORTEX

January 17, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Well, I have to tear myself away from examining the Yogachara tradition in Tibetan Buddhism and blog on something else for a change. I am certain that my recent preoccupation on death, the bardo, and rebirth stems from caring for our dearly beloved dog Molotov who is very, very weak and requires attentive care now 24x7. So I have to consider all these things, like death, every day. Anyway, let's give it a rest and look at some Western thoughts that actually address the same material, only very differently.

You are not a "real" astrologer unless you have some crazy-ass diagram that you made up to explain something or other of cosmic dimensions. Sometimes I fear astrology is little more than thousands of astrologers, each hoping to get another astrologer to listen to their particular theories. I am no exception and I may be the rule itself. Over the years I have drawn out scores and scores and scores of diagrams, including over 13,000 tarot-like cards related to astrology. I have studied what is called Esoteric Astrology for a great many years, originally under the tutelage of a wonderful Western teacher, a travelling Rosicrucian initiator by the name of Andrew McIver. I know that few of you can stomach this very abstract approach to knowledge, so I will see you next blog, but I want to put some feelers out for those chosen

few who can. Here is one diagram I created. I call it the Vortex:

This “vortex” diagram has two main parts, the sphere-like ball which is technically called a “torus,” and a vertical channel that represents what we could call our concept of linear time. The torus circulates life, by convection. It should not be lost on you that this diagram cycles, repeats itself over and over. In fact it should be diagramed as a spiral, but that would make it much more difficult for you to see, so I am keeping it simple.

We can safely say that this is an esoteric teaching, if only because very few of you will bother to understand it conceptually, much less realize it fully. As a crazy astrologer, I am mostly used to being thought of as a “little out there.” I would prefer to be thought of as a “little in there.” The vertical channel in this diagram also represents the chakras, the order in which they are formed, and their eventual opening and each stage of that opening, but that would take referencing my book “Astrology of the Heart,” which can be found here for those who follow the path of heart:

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

The vertical channel, from bottom to top, in the center of the sphere is the order in which the orbital cycle of the planets are experienced, i.e. the return Mercury in the first three months of life, Venus in less than a year, Earth in a year, and so on through (and including) Saturn.

The larger gray area, the basic channel of form, belongs to Saturn. In fact, we could say that this entire diagram is about Saturn and its return to where it was when you were born, your Saturn Return. This return takes place around 30 years of age (29.4 to be exact, heliocentrically).

Note: When it comes to the dharma, the “soul,” and the heart, I ALWAYS use heliocentric astrology. Why? Because the traditional Earth-Centered (geocentric) astrology is just a snapshot taken from Earth’s view of the Sun, with the Earth being embedded deep within the heliocentric solar system. Thus, we all experience the actual return of Saturn to its natal position in its orbit around the Sun at 29.4 years of age, although because of Earth’s perspective or slant on the solar system, we may experience the Saturn Return (geocentrically) at quite different times from one another.

I like to measure what actually is happening in space, not just our personal (geocentric) perspective on it all, although I include that too. Copernicus pointed out to the world that everything does not revolve around us here on Earth, as we like to think. In other words, we orbit the Sun, and not vice-versa. Astrologers never incorporated this fact, not yet anyway. Astronomers did.

Saturn is featured in this diagram because it governs form, including our physical body and the rules that govern form. In esoteric astrology, the return of Saturn to its natal place in orbit at around 30 years of age is something of a big deal, and that return is considered as a climactic event, a great life-passage point. If we want to hail the Saturn Return, down to

simple language, we might say: our bodily form reaches what we call the Prime of Life, and then begins to disincorporate or fall apart. In other words, there is a middle or "turning point" in life. I believe anyone of us over thirty is privileged to that information, courtesy of life experience if we will bother to notice. Well, Saturn governs that experience. It is important that you grasp the nature of Saturn, so consider this an introduction:

Saturn or Chronos rules time, form, and the physical in all its aspects. Saturn IS limitation, and thus the great "limiter." Saturn (sometimes called Satan) has been said to be the prince of the material world. Saturn is certainly the very narrowness that makes the way felt, the raceway or spillway through which course (Jupiter = the course or path) the waters of life. Jupiter is the pathway through which the blood courses, literally the "way we go," but Saturn is the course-walls of the arteries, the resistance that allows pressure to build to something definite, to real "feeling."

Or we could say that Saturn is like a wood shaper that is adjusted to produce a certain piece of molding. Any wood presented to this shaper has no alternative but to pass through, and then only where it conforms to the desired or possible shape as set by the limits. All other wood is shaved away. In this analogy, Saturn is that limiter and we are the wood.

Eternity or truth dictates the limits, and Saturn is the shaper or test of form. When we talk about "getting straight" or "getting in line" or "in tune," we are talking about getting within the control that already is. In this sense, Saturn helps to determine the shape of things

to come. All of these Saturnian laws working together: form.

So, Saturn is most simply the system of natural laws, the functioning of which determine what is possible in this material world (such as the law of gravity) — the laws that hold things in place, the walls that make homes possible. Saturn is the laws that govern the forms things take, as well as (simply put) the form things take.

The forms things take is only the form things are taking (the process). Saturn represents those laws to which we will be physically determined. Saturn is the form to which we each must submit before our evolution or unfolding may take place. In esotericism, this is called “rounding the nadir.” Without that form completed, there can be no unfolding.

Saturn is the laws against which we may ram our head, until such time as we learn, by feeling our way, to walk around or even to build upon them, to count on them.

Saturn is literally where we are bound to learn. It is simple: We don't break nature's or Saturn's laws; they break us if we go against them.

And yes, Saturn is the test of a lifetime and equally a lifetime of test. We are subject and tested by these laws until such time as we learn to use these laws in our own behalf, and put them to use working for us. We rise above Satan or Saturn in proper use and obedience to the physical laws. "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's." Handling Saturn is the province of Jupiter, the lawyer and guide through Saturn. Jupiter always handles the law.

Saturn is where we come to grips with our self and first learn of spirit. It shapes the end to which we are tending, but also affects how we tend to get there. "Call what carriage as you may your hearse," for Saturn holds us together as much as it may appear to hold us back. Anyway, that is the general idea of Saturn.

There is not room in even a long blog to go into too much detail and, as mentioned, very few take to this kind of esoteric approach, so I am sparing you. The idea, simply, is that: just as we take on form (put on the clothes of the physical) until we reach the prime of life (around 30), so do we take off form (deteriorate) sometime after the age of thirty. We begin to divest whatever we have accumulated in terms of physical beauty, and what-not. We take off our clothes, but are simultaneously freed -- born to spirit. The Saturn Return is what the Christian evangelicals call being "born again," although their use of it is relatively recent, a couple thousand years, at best. Obviously, Saturn goes back much farther than that.

So, in this diagram, the vertical channel represents that process, from the bottom up of entering the channel of form (Saturn), starting with Mercury completing its orbit at three months, Venus at seven-or-so months, then Earth, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn.

While Saturn represents the form of life itself, Jupiter represents the course or path we take through form, Mars represents the emotional drive that pushes all this forward, and so on. Earth is not shown here, because the whole diagram represents our Earth existence.

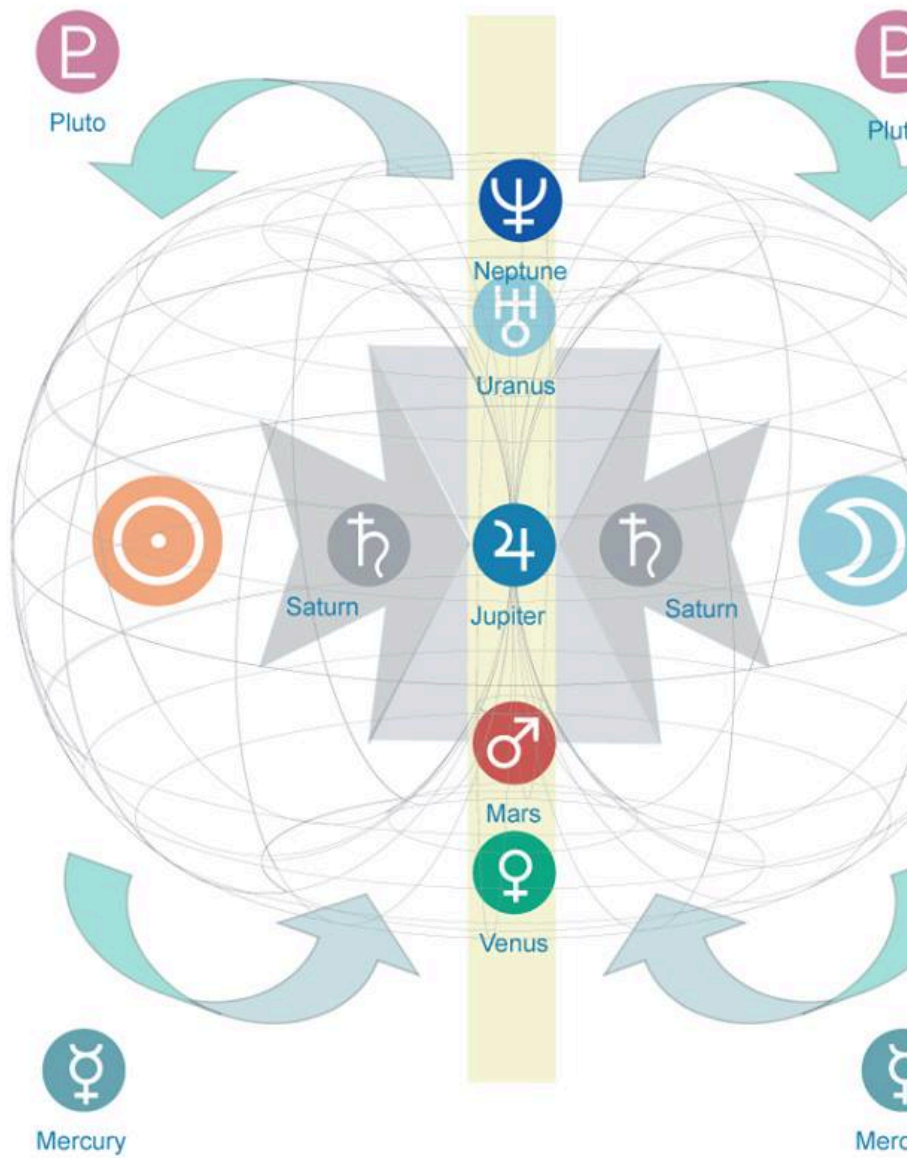
Now, what happens after our Saturn Return, the next planets beyond Saturn (Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto) are called the transcendental planets, the planets beyond form or Saturn. My first teacher might say “Transcendental, the planets “beyond teeth,” beyond the physical.

And the mystery of the Transcendental Planets, I find, is very seldom understood by modern astrologers, although they would not agree with me, I am sure. These outer planets are not stations that we go on to, after Saturn. They represent what happens beyond Saturn. Uranus marks our breaking through Saturn and glimpsing beyond, Neptune our eventual acceptance of our own mortality (that there is no linear “beyond,” and Pluto represents that we will do this all over again – rebirth. I like to say that the three outer planets (Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto) are like those old Burma Shave signs I would see as a kid along the highway, which follow one another on the road, and complete a sentence, only the sentence here would be something like: “This is the point of no return, so turn back, and return.”

As mentioned, I can’t get very subtle in such a short presentation of what is a vast and crucially important topic, like our life, how it forms, how it ages, and how it repeats. In particular, the understanding of the meaning of the outer or transcendental planets is a new take on planetary order, crucial to grasp with the mind, and important to realize. It is covered in the above-mentioned book, “The Astrology of the Heart,” my work on Saturn, with an introduction by astrologer Steven Forrest.

Esoteric Planets

The Vortex



THE PATH OF ACCUMULATION

January 18, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

After my recent journey into some of the ideas behind Yogachara Buddhist philosophy, I realize that removing karma already set in motion is going to be very difficult. And so I cast around to find ways to avoid creating karmic traces in the first place and for ways to purify our actions, so that we are not recording so much karma all the time. Here is one classic Tibetan technique that I have been using for years that is easy to do, if you can learn to use it.

The Two Accumulations: Merit and Awareness:

Time and time again, when the Rinpoche I have worked with for over thirty years has been asked by a student why their practice is not moving forward, the answer from Rinpoche is: because they have not yet accumulated enough merit.

It does not take much awareness to realize that the accumulation of merit by each of us is crucial to any kind of spiritual development. So, what is merit and how do we accumulate it? To help point this out, I will introduce you to what are called “The Two Accumulations.” And rather than jump up and down and wave my arms to get your attention, I simply will say: understanding the two accumulations is important beyond any words I could put together. This is a brilliant technique that works like a charm.

The two accumulations are said to be Merit and Wisdom, often translated as Skillful-Means and Awareness, which are the terms we will use here, and they go together like hand and glove. It is my opinion that if you can understand what is being presented here, realize how to use it, and then take the time to learn it even a little, you will have one of the most invaluable tools for enlightenment that exist. And it is so easy to grasp.

For example, if I use skillful means (with language) to describe the “Two Accumulations” here in this blog, the result should be that you become more aware of what I am presenting, than if I am sloppy and unskillful about it. In other words, skillful action is meritorious. The Zen Buddhists are all about skillful means (and its resulting awareness), because they recommend it for every action we take, day in and day out. Just look at the Japanese Tea Ceremony. But we could just as easily watch an expert fisherman tie flies or master chess players play chess. Any repetitive skill or action will do.

And the process is not only iterative, but rather it is recursive: the more carefully and mindfully we act, the more awareness or merit results. And these two accumulations feed on one another. Given more awareness, we can better see how to be more skillful yet in our actions. And acting even more skillfully with our actions results in still greater awareness, and ad infinitum. The process can start out slow, but because each half of this equation reinforces the other, it eventually reaches incendiary proportions. It becomes blue-white hot, like the tip of a blowtorch. Our mind eventually bursts into light.

With all the talk about the dharma being secret and whispered from mouth to ear, the reality is, as the Tibetans point out, that most techniques are “self-secret.” They are hidden in plain sight and rinpoches all over the world point them out to their students. Whether they are grasped and realized is another matter. Ignorance is not just “not-knowing;” ignorance can also be willfully ignoring what has been given or shown to us.

Merit is not something that accumulates somewhere, like money in Scrooge McDuck’s money bin. Merit accumulates as Awareness, and greater awareness makes acting skillfully ever easier. It brings more light. And one result from increased skillful-means is that less and less karmic imprints are recorded.

The Tibetan Buddhists are big on repetitive actions, like saying 100,000 mantras here, and doing 100,000 prostrations there, etc. But the point of repetition is to become increasingly skillful with every action we make. Every practitioner who repeats a mantra knows that, with skill, the mental space in which the mantra is reciting gets clearer and clearer, i.e. there is more and more awareness.

And, as mentioned, with more awareness we can see to do each action more and more skillfully, creating even greater awareness and there you go.

I don’t need to remind you that enlightenment is not something we will find at the live-long end of time, but as the Tibetan Siddhas point out, “realization” arises in the midst of experience, right in the middle of time. Skillful execution of each moment creates the increased awareness of expanded time.

REMOVING MICRO-KARMA

January 19, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

According to many authentic dharma teachers, what's important (and this is expressly pointed out by the Ven. Traleg Rinpoche) is that we should do our best to prevent recording negative karma to the Alayavijnana (Storehouse Consciousness), which is essentially our subconscious, because, once recorded, it is so difficult to remove. And, unfortunately, in my experience very few people are aware that we are recording negative karma not just once in a while, but pretty much all the time, even if it is only what we might call "micro karma."

I have mentioned this before in these blogs, but it still is a hard lesson to follow, the time my personal dharma teacher, a high rinpoche, pointed out that our every thought is either beneficent or maleficent. Just like the present nanosecond is an infinitesimal moment bridging the past and the future, so is the line between beneficent and maleficent is essentially non-existent, i.e. no neutral-ground. If we will examine our thoughts carefully, we may be surprised at how unkind many of them are. And certainly, those that are not beneficent are faithfully recorded as negative karma in the Storehouse Consciousness. Our conscious mind must be tired from riding out all this micro-karma.

And, as mentioned, these thoughts don't just happen now and again; most of us have a torrent of them all day long. Basically, the teachings say that any thought or impression that is not a direct valid-cognition of reality is stained either with maleficence or is reified to the point that, while it may be beneficent in intent, it too does not reflect reality. And it is clear to me that all thoughts that miss the mark of directly reflecting reality are recorded as either "good" or "bad" karma. I don't want to beat the drum on this any further; instead, I would like to describe a very useful technique that can prevent karmic imprints from being recorded.

This is a technique that I myself developed, but one that was presented to my dharma teacher, who acknowledged that this was a valid form of practice, so I will briefly present it here. It is a variation on an essential Lojong technique called Tong-Len. I call it Reaction Tong-Len or just Reaction Toning. Its virtue is that it is portable, easy-to-do, and something we can practice all day long while we are doing our daily activities. And, best of all, it works!

While most of us manage to stay away from large karmic actions like killing, stealing, and the like, our mindfulness does not usually extend to the moment and to what is happening in the micro-seconds. In other words, we SHOULD sweat the small stuff.

As we go through our day, we probably manage to skirt the big karmic issues, but most of us walk right into the micro-karma; we never even see it coming. I am talking about our minute-to-minute reactions, every last little wince and shrug we suffer all-day long without being mindful or aware that they are

happening. So much takes place along the borderline or edge of our awareness, and most of us just ignore it all.

It could be as simple as bumping into the not-so-friend at the office, the one that does not like us. We may put on a happy face, but we struggle to suppress our true reaction, which is some kind of mini-shock to the system, an almost undetectable cringe or wince, but one that is dutifully recorded as karma in our Storehouse Consciousness.

Our moment-to-moment involuntary reactions record more karma than everything else put together. And the worst part is that we can actually do something about them, with only a little practice. The best part, IMO, is that that this is a fail-safe practice, one that our familiar old Self cannot rationalize or wiggle out of. This fact alone makes it invaluable. Here is the practice:

We can't control what life throws at us each day; we all know that. However, we can control how we react to what we have to go through, and it is very simple. All that is required is to gradually become aware of our own reactions each moment. I don't like your big nose or the color of that scarf you are wearing. That's an example, and not a flattering one. It's not a big thing, but it is a "thing" and we do it constantly, thousands of times each day, make judgment, prejudice, bias, and the like. And each instance is recorded as karma that we alone create.

You may call me a name or do something mean to me, and that is your problem. Yet, how I react to you is my problem, regardless of whether I have cause to

react negatively or not. I have the choice to just understand where it's coming from and let it go. I don't have to lock it into karma. In other words, I don't have to add insult to whatever injury comes my way. It's your karma if you intentionally say something hurtful, but it's my karma if I respond in the same manner, openly or inwardly, or if I take it to heart and feel hateful in return. And this is just the tip of the iceberg.

We are deluged every day with the onslaught of our own reactions, and their karmic residue amounts to what is a very big deal. For one thing, our reactions serve to cloud our mind, constantly, with their demands on our consciousness, reacting, cringing, cowering, etc., not to mention anger and lashing back.

And the beauty of reaction training is that when we examine it, we have absolutely no one to blame but ourselves. We can't slough it off on someone else. Yes, they may have intentionally done something to hurt us, but our response is unequivocally ours, and no one else's. The practice is simple:

We begin to be consciously aware of when we react. Instead of suppressing or ignoring each reaction (or remaining entirely unaware), we acknowledge it, and we acknowledge it as 100% our own. It is OUR reaction.

That's it; that's all we have to do. With that awareness and acknowledgment, we begin to be aware of and tone down our reactions and, with time, we cease to react. And best of all, we cease to record our reactions as karma, because we are no longer

reacting to whatever it is. In summary, the best way to remove karma is to cease creating it.

This is a VERY easy practice and one with almost immediate results and most definitely great long-term benefits. I have presented this technique much more thoroughly in a little free e-book called “Tong-Len: The Alchemy of Reaction,” which you can find here. Just scroll down:

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

For the die-hard printed-books readers, it is also available on Amazon.com.

MOONBEAMS OF MAHAMUDRA

Translated by Traleg Rinpoche

January 21, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The book “Moonbeams of Mahamudra” by Takpo Tashi Namgyal (1512-1587) is the classic meditation manual for Mahamudra Meditation, including its unique combination of instructions on Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) and Insight Meditation (Vipassana). Although I learned to read a little Tibetan a long time ago, it was never good enough to tackle a book like this. So I have been, up to this point, dependent on the English translation by Lobsang P. Lhalungpa in his book “Mahamudra: The Quintessence of Mind and Meditation,” as published by Shambhala Publications, which is an excellent book. Until now, this translation is all that I knew. I am sure that many readers here have had the same experience.

I don't have to introduce readers to the Ven. Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche (the 9th Traleg Tulku), one of the highest lamas in the Karma Kagyu Lineage, his incarnation going back to Saltong Shogam (one of the Three Men of Kham), a student of Gampopa. His untimely death a few years ago was a shock to all of us.

Over the last forty or so years, I have had the good fortune to meet many Tibetan rinpoches, most of the Kagyu order, and have many of them visit our dharma

center here in Big Rapids, Michigan, and, of course, take teachings from them. This includes Traleg Rinpoche and his wife Felicity. Of all the great teachers that I have met, none has studied Western philosophy, psychology, and literature to the degree that Traleg Rinpoche has.

So, I am more than happy to suddenly have two excellent translations of this classic text. My point in posting this mini-review is just to briefly point out how, in my opinion, they differ. If I have to come up with one word as to that difference, it would be that the Traleg Rinpoche translation is more integral. It is very elegantly written, so that everything coheres quite naturally. If you have read Traleg Rinpoche's other works, then you are aware that he really knows (and enjoys) the English language, much as the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa did. This book proves that.

The great many quotations in the book from the original sources read like the poetry they are. The prose commentaries are equally elegant and easy to read. In fact, the book is quite magical in the way that it expresses the meaning of this very detailed text. It is a pleasure to read and understand. If you ask me if we need another and newer translation of this great classic, my answer is that indeed we do. This book is a wonderful addition to those of us studying or practicing the Mahamudra tradition.

In a nutshell: I always found this book, in the earlier Lhalungpa translation, very difficult to grasp. I would work at it. The same book in Traleg Rinpoche's translation is simply laid open to my mind, especially the translations of the original-source quotes, which

are now are sheer poetry. What a brilliant adventure this new translation is!

Incidentally, the last time I saw Traleg Rinpoche was in 2004 at the inauguration of a new shrine-room at Thrangu Monastery in Kham, Tibet. I can never forget when Traleg Rinpoche arrived at the monastery. People were lined up along the road as far as one could see (I am told for five miles), all with white scarves which they piled on Rinpoche's car. The car carrying Traleg Rinpoche had to stop every 100 feet or so to remove the scarves, because the driver couldn't see the road.

The previous 8th Traleg Rinpoche was the abbot of Thrangu Monastery in Kham, Tibet and one of the main teachers of my own teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. When Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, Thrangu Rinpoche, and the young 9th Traleg Rinpoche fled Tibet in 1959, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche carried the young Traleg Rinpoche on his back. They spent weeks, nearly starving, hiding from the Communists, as they slowly made their way to India.

Photograph of the Ven. Traleg Rinpoche (left) and my teacher the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche (right). Sorry, but I do not know who the photographer is. Not sure where this photo was taken, but it looks like perhaps it was at Karmé Ling, our three-year retreat center in Delhi, New York.



TRYING DOESN'T DO IT; DOING DOES IT

February 9, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Unfortunately, thanks to the late 1960s (and all of the 1970s), we collectively suffer from a misguided idea of what “spirituality” is all about. We have learned to separate the spiritual from organized religion, so many don’t practice a religion but still consider themselves spiritual. But for much of modern society “spirituality” remains more of a label than something they actively identify with. We know what it means, or do we?

Is spirituality something we ever actually have or accumulate, or is it rather a process and a way of living, a path, as in: we do things spiritually? We like to imagine that we live “spiritually,” whatever that is. IMO, the most Buddhist of the Western poets has to be Shakespeare. He defined spirituality (to my taste) in his 13th Sonnet when he wrote: “You are no longer yours, than you yourself here live.” In other words, spirituality is a moment by moment mindfulness, rather than something we can acquire once and for all and then forget about it.

The Buddhist texts are rife with phrases that point out that no matter how many titles we may have, no matter how much practice we have done, when we are not practicing mindfulness, our mind immediately reverts to being perfectly ordinary once again. True mindfulness is not an occasional foray into clarity

attained by practicing dharma, but rather an eternal vigil of wakefulness – awareness. Getting clarity once in a while by sheer effort of practice must finally give way to “being there” all of the time. And here is my point: there has to be a transition from making endless effort in “trying” to be mindful into the state of naturally being mindful all the time. And this does happen, but just how?

I find it helpful to note that the texts say that there is an end to “trying” to be aware, making efforts to remain mindful and awake. Meditation only takes that kind of effort in the beginning, but without knowing how to progress, that beginning can take forever. Constant effort can be a tough go. Just as in the beginning, where we can’t get into the groove of meditation (we don’t remain present without real effort), there is a point later on where we break through and don’t have to worry about slipping back. The groove keeps us from falling out. And from that point onward it is effortless in that sense. That point is termed by the Tibetan Buddhists “Recognition” of the true nature of our mind.

This brings us back to conceptuality, all of the ideas we have managed to think up about enlightenment, realization, or whatever we want to call it. It is ironic that our own conceptions eventually become the main obstacle to any realization of the dharma. First, through study and the teachings, we form all of these conceptual expectations about our enlightenment that are not based on any actual realization on our part, and then, in order to actually realize what the concepts refer to, we have then to take apart all of those expectations because the concepts themselves obscure the reality. First we build them up; then we

tear them down. Expectations invariably are disappointing, compared to the reality. Otherwise they would be the reality.

So, it's great that we have become interested in the Dharma and get all fired up. Since we have no realization, we have no choice but to cobble up an idea as to where we are heading, what is realization or enlightenment, and so on. We literally make it up based on what we have read and have heard from teachings, teachers, peers, and the like. By definition, we don't yet KNOW what we are talking or thinking ABOUT. We are just thinking and talking about it.

The longer we read and practice, the larger the mass of this conceptual image in our mind becomes. We can develop very sophisticated concepts about dharma and its paraphernalia. We should know (by definition) that our expectations are errant, off the mark, but most don't or soon forget that fact. Otherwise we would already have realization, again by definition. At some point in our practice, this made-up conceptualization (our made-up ideas about enlightenment) is no longer helpful. On the contrary, since our expectations are not properly aligned with the reality of the nature of the mind itself, we have two distinct tracks going, only one of which we are aware of, i.e. the conceptual one we imagined. The reality up to that point has escaped us.

Yet, our increasing conceptual expectations eventually become more of an obstacle than a help... AND... we perhaps begin to sense there is something more, something beyond and more real than our tiring intellectualizations, i.e. that we are off-track or on the wrong track. This can be a very delicate and even

dangerous point in our practice. How do we let go of our conceptualizations and somehow begin to grasp the actual reality, how things really are? We have studied and learned all about it, but have yet to realize it.

It is like taking the training-wheels off our first bike. There has to be a switch-over point in these two tracks by means of which we let go of our expectations and begin to grasp the actual nature of the mind itself, i.e. we get it. The Tibetans call that point “Recognition” of the mind’s true nature.

This, of course, is where the lama or personal dharma teacher comes into play. It is their responsibility to carefully point out to us the true nature of the mind, so that we can make the switch. It is like spiritual brain surgery, a very, very delicate operation that few can manage, i.e. to “Pick up on one and leave the other behind,” to quote the Lovin’ Spoonful, from their song “Did You Ever Have to Make Up Your Mind”.

Of course, the moment we reach what the Tibetans call “Recognition,” which is nothing less than the recognition of the true nature of the mind, our conceptual apparatus and expectations vanish like a puff of smoke, instantly. It’s like finally finding the doorknob in a dark hallway. It’s like when my GPS system says “You have arrived at your destination,” the “destination” being that we have finally brought our expectations in line with reality, the way things are.

Getting to the point of “Recognition” is what all the hullabaloo is about. Recognition is not enlightenment,

but it marks the end of conceptual guesswork and the beginning of actual realization.

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← For

WHAT'S WORTH DOING?

February 18, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Like most of us, I have done many things in my life. If I have taken a slightly different route than others, it would be because I was turned off by public education early on, tuned it out, and spent those twelve years during school hours working in my mind at whatever my after school interests were.

During my early years, we lived out in a rural area of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where my parents built a house, with no other houses around or at least near. And that house was right between two very large farms. At the back of our lot were fields of alternating crops: corn, tobacco, wheat, and alfalfa. I used to find Indian arrowheads in the plowed fields right behind our house.

From the time I was about six-years old what I did was study nature. I basically had my own little natural history museum, and I collected everything to do with nature. So, while other kids were learning at school, I was thinking about and studying natural history. And the point of my relating this bit of personal history is to say that what I did learn from all of those years is how the laws of nature work, and the fact that while we can twist, bend, and break society's laws, we don't break nature's laws. I took note of that.

As the years passed, I became more and more unwilling to give up the time that I spent with what interested me by spending it on regular schooling or anything else. I was more than content and fascinated by Mother Nature and her laws. Of course I was a kid, had four brothers, did kid things, and all of that. But at the same time my fascination and interest in nature never waned.

When I reached my later teens I was the same. In the end, I finally just wandered away, never finishing high school. Later, even without a high-school diploma, I was accepted as a freshman at the University of Michigan. But to the sorrow of my wonderful parents, after three weeks it was clear to me that college was just more of the same kind of education and I dropped out in favor of just monitoring my own mind and interests. I never tired of that.

I consider myself a phenomenologist, someone who is interested in examining the structure of consciousness itself. The bottom line is that following my own mind (and where my interests led me) became all that I did, much to the chagrin of my family and friends. To many folks, I was a lost cause, and they would say things to me like that I will be working at the carwash or McDonalds the rest of my life, but I was too happy just being me to care.

I found small jobs that could just support me. I worked about a half hour a day cleaning toilets (as an example) for a business complex and had a glorious 23-1/2 hours to do just as I pleased, and I did. I liked and needed that. Turning my back on what society would have me do was a risk I took, but doing anything else seemed impossible for my

temperament. I have followed my muse most of my life, and it is too late to turn back now.

In the early days, I lived on a shoestring and luckily found a woman who wanted to marry me and felt the same way. Together we lived on next to nothing, even after we began to have a family. We never felt deprived. Fortunately for me, my interests eventually led me to doing something that the world actually valued. In fact, all of the businesses I founded were based on my passions, things that I loved to do, call them hobbies or whatever. I made sure of that, because I would not do anything else. In following my mind's eye, I have been very stubborn. And here comes the pitch.

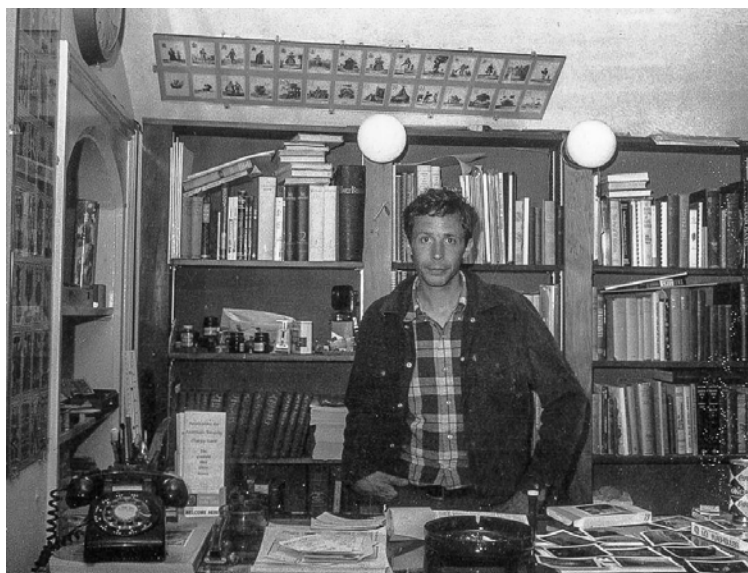
In all of that, the many interests and accomplishments I have undertaken, I tried to be useful, to do something not only of interest to me, but something of value for others too. My interest in nature and its inspiration led me to spiritual inspiration in general, then to astrology and the mystic traditions, and finally to the Dharma.

Of all the things I have studied and practiced, the Dharma has been by far the most valuable and useful. I am not one for organized religion and I don't consider the Dharma a religion, at least as I have learned it. The Dharma is very similar to scientific natural law, but includes taboo areas that scientists avoid, like anything spiritual, etc.

The reason I endlessly blog here is that once I began to grasp the dharma teachings, I realized how valuable they were, like "where have you been all my life?" I was so overcome with the continued results

that I want to share what I have learned with others. If I can do this, so can those of you interested.

[Here is a photo of me back in the late 1960s, taken in Circle Books, Ann Arbor's first metaphysical bookstore, started by my brother Stephen Erlewine and our friend John Sullivan. I helped to physically design and build how the store looked, did most of the astrological charts, and also taught at the store.



NEW BOOK: KARMA AND THE ALAYA CONSCIOUSNESS

February 21, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I did not grow up thinking about rebirth and living beyond this one life. And it did not take me very long in my Catholic upbringing to have more doubts about heaven than belief. As a young person trained in observing nature, the fumbling of the priests and nuns at the Catholic school I attended did not compare to the certitude and swift action of Mother Nature. My eyes were already open.

In the late 1950s and on into the 1960s, the idea of rebirth (much less reincarnation) was just a bit wishful thinking. I didn't see how I fit into the Tibetan scheme of things. The mere idea seemed too good to be true. Then, in the early 1970s (with the so-called New-Age frenzy), ideas of rebirth were bandied about, but still mostly by psychics and out-of-the-body kooks. I had no memory of ever having lived before. All that Eastern talk about life after life seemed to me like just foreign concepts, a bridge too far. I didn't dare believe it.

Of course, that was before the teachings of the Tibetan Buddhists weighed in on my generation (not to mention LSD) and taught us otherwise, that in fact it was nonsense to think that we have anything other than an endless series of births before us. For

the brightest and most definitive beings I have ever met (the Tibetan Rinpoches and lamas) had no doubt about rebirth, it was time for me to have a little rethink, which I did.

By 1974 I had met the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and no less than His Holiness the Rangjung Rikpe Dorje, the 16th Karmapa, all up close and in-person. These were not New-Age dreamers, but along with a western Rosicrucian initiator (in his eighties who became my first personal dharma teacher), the most present people I have ever met. These Tibetans were more convincing than the Schlitz beer commercials of the time (1971) that “You Only Go Around once!”

I tend to blog on a particular topic as part of a series over time, but not necessarily sequential as to dates. The very fascinating subject of karma, its so-called half-life, and how it persists into our next lives is worth understanding, especially since we will all go through it one day. The Alayavijnana or Storehouse-Consciousness, where our karmic imprints are stored, is also important to understand because, if we can grasp how it works, it can affect how we go about lessening the recording of karma on a day-to-day basis.

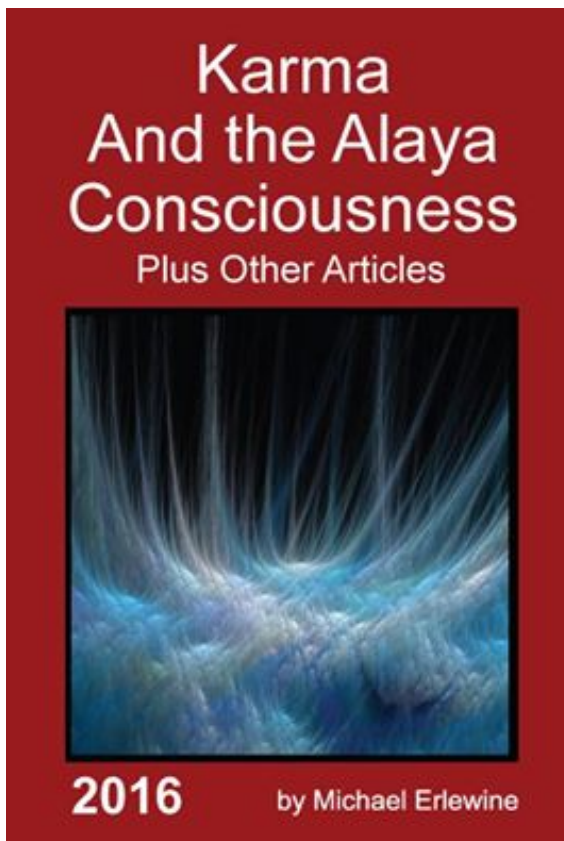
For those who want to read what I have written on karma and the Storehouse Consciousness (Alayavijnana), plus other articles (29 articles in all), I have gathered them together in a free e-book and a printed paperback.

Here is the book as free e-book:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Karma%20Blogs%20V1.pdf>

This book is available on Amazon in paperback for those who prefer to read printed books, at cost, which is \$6.

http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_noss?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-keywords=erlewine+alaya



TAKING A CHANCE ON LIFE

March 1, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Sometimes we just have to take a chance. As I liked to joke to myself, I can decide to go and meet my maker, rather than be hunted down by fate. I am reminded of a time, long ago, when I had a kind of awakening experience. It was 1967. I lost all fear or shyness and I wanted to know what others were thinking or doing. I could play too! So, I would make appointments with famous people or just walk into their office unannounced. Now, for sure, many of these folks were too up-tight to allow someone they did not know to address them directly, but others were open, as I was.

I remember one time when I just decided to take the train to Chicago to see my hero, history of religions expert (and practitioner) Mircea Eliade. I had spoken with him on the phone. Of course, I never called ahead, and that day he turned out not to be there, so I ended having a heart-to-heart talk with philosopher Hannah Arendt.

Or, one day in the middle 1960s I walked into the office of the famous economist Kenneth E. Boulding. I had no appointment and had never met him. He welcomed me and took me into his private office where we laughed and cried together, and even read each other our poems. The thing that he told me that I

most remember was that we have to learn to fail successfully, referring to old age and death.

My point here is that every once in a great while we have to throw caution to the winds and just roll the dice. Believe it or not, in my opinion, learning sitting meditation is like that. Meditation training is not the benign practice that it is often made out to be. Far from it! Deciding to learn sitting meditation as the Buddha taught is like throwing down the gauntlet, inviting the challenge of our own limitations to confront us, what the esotericists call directly invoking the ring-pass-not.

I am reminded of Frank Herbert's novel "Dune," in which the huge sandworms (Shai-Hulud) are called forth by setting down a "thumper," a device that pounds the sand to create a sound that draws the worms. If you can, please hear me when I say that attempting to meditate is like that.

Our goal may be to allow our mind to rest (or whatever we made up or imagined), but before that can happen, we have to learn to deal with everything that has prevented our mind from naturally resting up to that point, i.e. all of what we have ignored or denied. Attempting to meditate, no doubt, is asking for it. It is the "thumper."

This is why I can't say much when someone tells me how blissful they feel from their half hour on the meditation cushion. Whatever they are doing in there is not the meditation that the Buddha taught, but rather some form of relaxation therapy, which I have no quarrel with. I like to watch movies for that.

However, formal Buddhist meditation is not initially relaxing, but just the opposite. There is a reason that the Buddha's teaching is called the "Lion's Roar." To the exact degree that we attempt to learn meditation, an equal and opposite force will arise to challenge us, usually in the form of thoughts, distractions, interruptions, and so on. We can't "try" to meditate. According to the Buddhists, we can't even meditate. We can't even try to stop trying, so to speak. We just have to let go. Get my point?

U-M Folklore Society

**THE FOLK MUSIC REVIVAL IN ANN ARBOR
(LATE 1950s-EARLY 1960s)**

March 21, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Ann Arbor was one of several main centers for the folk revival in the late 1950s. In 1957, freshman students Al Young and Bill McAdoo founded the University of Michigan Folklore Society. Bill McAdoo went on to record for Smithsonian-Folkways and today Al Young is the Poet Laureate of California. Although oriented toward the campus and students, the Folklore Society was also a natural interface between the university folk and the townies – music. As a high-school dropout, I had no trouble integrating and being accepted in the folk circles. No questions were asked. We were all just ‘folk’ and it was a culturally rich scene.

And the University of Michigan was not the only campus with a folklore society. Folk music was popping up on campuses all over the nation and we were interconnected by what came to be called the folk circuit, a constant stream of folk enthusiasts that traveled from campus to campus playing and sharing folk music. The circuit went from Cambridge to New York City to Ann Arbor to Chicago to Madison to Berkeley and back again. We were hitchhiking or piling into old cars and driving the route. Musicians like then unknown Bob Dylan would hitchhike into

town, hang out, play a gig or two, and be off down the road. And well-known folk singers also came to Ann Arbor. I can remember sitting around the MUG (Michigan Union Grill) for hours on end with players like Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, and many others -- on and on. No one was that famous then, except perhaps for Baez.

Folksingers like Ramblin' Jack Elliot, groups like the New Lost City Ramblers, and the Country Gentlemen were regular visitors to Ann Arbor. This was before anyone was well-known. They didn't spend money on fancy motels; we put them up. They stayed in our houses, where they slept on a couch or in the spare bedroom. And we all hung out together and played music or sat in the Michigan Union Grill (MUG), drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes all day. If we were not inside the Union, we were out on the lawn by the long low wall and walkway out to State Street, playing our guitars and practicing. Once we got past just strumming, we learned Carter Family Style picking, and songs like "900 Miles," "Jimmy Brown the Newsboy," and "The Cuckoo"; Later it was Travis-Style Picking (we called it 3-finger picking), and songs like "Freight Train" and "Railroad Bill."

Whatever music and culture the traveling players brought with them really had a chance to sink in. They shared themselves and their time with us and us with them. They were just folks like we were, only better players. We felt we could perhaps be like them if we worked at it.

Of course, Ann Arbor had its own players. The president of the Folklore Society was Howie Abrams and the society spotted folk musicians like Mary

Silber, Al Young, Dave Portman, Peter Griffith, and Perry Lederman. And we put on festivals and events. For example, the folklore society raised money to bring Odetta to Ann Arbor where she gave her first college performance. And a young Bob Dylan gave an early performance as part of a small folk-music festival in Ann Arbor put on by the U-M Folklore Society. I don't remember, but I am told by those who do that I helped put on one of the first Dylan concerts in A2.

I can remember sitting in the Michigan Union with a very nervous Dylan drinking coffee and smoking while we waited for the review of Dylan's performance the night before to come out in the Michigan Daily newspaper. It was something like 10:30 AM when the review surfaced and it was positive. With that good news, Dylan gathered up his guitar, grabbed his backpack, and proceeded to hitchhike on out of town. And when Odetta sang at the Newport Folk Festival in 1960, Al Young, Perry Lederman, and Marc Silber hitchhiked to Rhode Island to see her. There was also a subtle change taking place.

Folk music in the late 1950s and early 1960s was part of what is now called the "Folk Revival," and those of us who were part of it were very much aware of the need to protect and revive our musical heritage. Dylan and Baez were not writing their own tunes back then, but rather reviving and interpreting songs that harkened from other generations. What made you a good folksinger in the later 1950s and early 1960s was the ability to authentically reproduce, reenact, and revive a particular song. The keywords were "authentic" and "revive." Folksingers went to great lengths to locate and reproduce the most authentic

versions of a song. Writing our own songs only came years later. Back then, we were busy rescuing this or that part of our cultural heritage from oblivion. We were on a mission, that, and growing up.

Folk music at that time was mostly White folk music with maybe a peppering of Black country-blues artists or a virtuoso Black singer like Odetta. They were the exception, but were treated like the rule: revive them too and be authentic. When we heard the country blues, we wanted to revive and sing them as authentically as we could too, ebonics and all.

It was not too many years ago that, while giving a young White musician voice lessons in the blues, my first suggestion was about the song he brought that day to sing for me. It was “Mississippi Mud,” complete with the lyrics “It’s a treat to beat your feet on the Mississippi mud.” I pointed out to him that it might sound better if he dropped the Ebonics. I doubt that this young man even knew the song was written in Tin Pan Alley and not by Black Americans. Some folks have to learn the blues. That young man today is a well-known blues singer in New Orleans. He learned.

So, it was somewhat confusing to folk enthusiasts in Ann Arbor in the early sixties when we eventually found out that the modern city blues not only didn’t need our reviving, but were alive and well, just playing at a bar in another part of town, where they were perhaps separated by a racial curtain. We didn’t go there because... well, just because... another insidious effect of racism.

But in fact, blues, especially city blues, was very much alive, still seminal, and very, very available. It

didn't need us to "revive" it. In the early and mid-1960s, young White Americans began the trek to the other side of the tracks, and not only took the trip downtown, but eventually the journey to Chicago and other places where electric blues were being performed most every night. Ann Arbor played a very significant role in introducing White America to city blues. Our city was only a short drive from Chicago, and the great blues players visited here often.

I can remember harmonica-great James Cotton and his entire band staying at our house for weeks on end. Each night we would drive to a gig like the Chessmate along Livernoises (near 6 Mile Road) in Detroit. While Cotton and his band played, I would sometimes sit in the tiny back room and talk with John Lee Hooker, while we waited. And then came the blues festivals.

The original two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals (1969 and 1970) were landmark events and the three succeeding Ann Arbor Blues and Jazz Festivals (1972, 1973, 1974) just opened it all up to a still wider audience. And the ripples of that early Ann Arbor blues scene are still expanding. More on that in another post.

Last Fall (2015), I saw a notice that "songster" Marc Silber was coming to play a house concert just north of Detroit. I had not seen Marc for over fifty years, not since he left Ann Arbor (the U-M Folklore Society) and headed out West to California where he became a well-known guitar maker and repairman, also opening a famous repair store in New York City, "Fretted Instruments."

Although it was a journey of over 200 miles from where I now live in Michigan, I dropped everything on that day last spring and made the journey to Birmingham, Michigan to a house in the suburbs. Some friends of the host were there. But otherwise, there was just myself and Stan Werbin of Elderly Instruments, another Michigan folk treasure. I had not seen Stan for about as long as Marc. And we were in for a treat! As founder of the All-Music Guide (which is in Ann Arbor), here is a review I wrote of that concert for liner notes on one of Silber's recent CD albums. It says it all:

"I was not disappointed. In fact my mind was totally blown by what I heard. I have heard a lot of folk music in the last 50 or so years, but nothing as pure and unadulterated as what Silber laid down yesterday. He did what I have never seen done until now. Using his own arrangements, but fueled by his very deep respect for the music, I heard guitar renderings that were, to my ears, perfect, ever so subtle, and absolutely so true to the tradition. It was never even this good back in the day!

"Silber is a just a perfect fingerpicker, with the lightest touch, the most delicate chords, just impeccable playing, and all of this right before my ears. He added nothing that shouldn't be there to the music, and took nothing away that should not be taken away. It was perfect. I never expected to hear anything this good again. Not ever!"

Later last year, I helped to bring Marc Silber to Michigan, where he was featured at probably the best music gathering that is held every year IMO, the "Lantern Gathering" up near Lake City, Michigan

three days, four stages, and over 110 groups playing mostly folk music. Over the years, I have brought some other guests to the “Gathering,” folks like my friends Steve Coleman (legendary alto sax player) and Karl Berger (legendary vibes player) and founder of the Creative Music Studio in Woodstock, New York. The Harvest Gathering started out as just a private gathering of musicians who had played at the major Michigan music festivals, which got together after the festival season. It was there that they played with and for one another, but over the years, non-musicians heard about it and started to show up too, until today a couple thousand people come out. Anyway, it was a treat to have Marc Silber grace the stages there and offer a workshop in American roots music.

So, for those of you younger Ann Arborites, you can be proud of the folk heritage of this city, which started in the late 1950s and continues to this day with the incredible national treasure “The Ark,” one of the finest and oldest folk venues in America, still going strong. My band, the Prime Movers Blues Band, played The Ark a number of times in the mid-1960s. In fact, the Arks brilliant director Dave Siglin told me that the first time he set foot in The Ark was to hear the Prime Movers play, back when the place was still up on Hill Street, not far from the big rock at Hill and Washtenaw. Dave and Linda Siglin (now retired) have done an incredible job running what I see as the most integral and pure folk venue in the country, over 50 years. Their daughter Anya continues on as Program Director, along with Executive Director Marianne James. Here is a video interview I did lately with the Siglins about the history of The Ark.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I5xTLcXLOB4&list=PL5xDr8mWUwrySqSqxXAJ4ZUiUNntkacmd&index=6>

So, there is a little something for those interested about Ann Arbor's folk heritage in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Years later, I served on the Board of Directors for both The Ark and the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival. I am the official historian for the later. I will try to write something about the blues festivals in A2 another day.

[Photo by Michael Erlewine, 2015]



A BIT OF A “THINK”

March 14, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I have had me a bit of a “Think” these last couple of weeks. Actually, I surprise myself at how much like a tortoise or a snail I am. When something unexpected or unwanted takes place, I kind of pull in my head for a while like a turtle.

It's not that I am in denial so much as, like I pointed out above, I have to go off and think about it, as if time could just stop. Of course, time does not stop, I do, but you could fool me. When these sudden changes come, and they seem to more frequently with age, I have to let things settle out before I can look around or say much. Anyway, I usually don't know what to say, because it takes me a while to get the picture clear in my head, much less put it into words.

And no, I don't have to share everything with everyone, but it seems harder to hide things than to share them, so I find myself sharing them. Be that as it may, I am feeling better about things. I had what the doctor called a little “event,” which has not clearly been diagnosed as this or that, but was enough to bring me up short and remind me once again that I can't just put my life on automatic and ride it out. I have to drive. It's just as well to wake-up a bit, no?

For a while there, I was, well, more or less speechless, which for me is unusual. I could find no direction anywhere. It had just vanished into thin air. It goes to show how much of my life-map and itinerary are a product of my own imagination and expectations. I expect.... things to continue... on. As if!

This is why I joke about my Humpty-Dumpty Self. When I am upset or experience shock, what I call my Self just shatters like broken glass. It takes time for me to pick up the pieces and put "me" back together again. You know the refrain... "All the king's horses and all the king's men could not put" Michael back together again.

I'm working on it, but you know: things are never the same again and if there is any real change, how do we know that who we are now is the same person as who we were before, especially if it's our self that has changed? It's that old Heisenberg principle. Anyway, not to worry. I'm back, or at least in the vicinity. I've got myself more or less put together again, at least in Mr. Potato Head fashion. Now I just have to figure out where I'm going! LOL

A KARMIC MISS-TAKE

February 16, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

What I am going to present here may seem trivial, but it's not. In fact, IMO, it is crucial to full understanding of the dharma. Oddly enough, it has to do with a common analogy used to describe the results of various Buddhist purification practices to remove whatever obscures the clarity of the mind. Sometimes this type of analogy suggests concepts like that we are wearing dirty glasses and that these Buddhist practices help us to remove the dirt from our glasses so that we have greater clarity and can see the actual nature of our mind – something like that.

It's a good analogy, in that it is true that we must learn to remove our obscurations (what obscures our mind), but the method of removing the obscurations pointed out can be misleading. In other words, in actual practice very little is removed, as in actively removing karma that we have created, as in purifying it and taking it away. The point is that we don't purify our obscurations by removing what we have already done, bit by bit.

Rather, what is purified is ourselves, so that we no longer are accumulating karma, rather than removing the karmic mistakes we have already created. The point here is that we don't remove (at least easily) the results of our bad actions. They remain and ripen to our discomfort. Instead, we purify ourselves so that

we no longer need to create further karma of that type. However, the karma we have already accumulated up to that point remains and continues to ripen, at which time it removes itself. Once a karmic imprint ripens, we are done with it.

Remember the old saying “Karma Burns Twice,” first by being recorded and further obscuring our mind, and second when it ripens and takes its toll as we must work through it.

We don’t dodge the results of our karmic actions through purification practices that remove them before they ripen. Purification is not like an eraser of our past misdeeds. Instead, purification erases our tendency to create that kind of karma in the future, rather than to remove karma that we have already recorded. That’s the fine-print here.

It may seem like a small point, but to me it is important to understand the nature of purification, that we can’t undo what we have done, like putting the toothpaste back in the tube. What is possible is to purify ourselves from the tendency to record that form of karma from now onward. In other words, we don’t get a free pass for what we have committed.

The Alayavijnana or Storehouse Consciousness, where all of our karma is dutifully recorded, is not a write-many medium, meaning that we can re-write our karmic history. It is a write-once medium. In fact, high lama teachers like the Ven. Traleg Rinpoche point out (in his book “Karma”) that our karma seldom even ripens in our current life, but lasts beyond death and comes back to haunt us in our future lives. That’s how deep it is embedded.

These kind of statements are above my pay grade, but if we accept them, it makes it clear that the karmic results of our actions are not easily erased, much less erased before they have time to ripen. They ripen and eventually take their toll. No amount of purification will remove the karma that we have already recorded. Yes, perhaps at some very high level of realization, that karmic residue is vacated. However, if I read the teachings right, most karma ripens in time and directly affects us.

In summary, we remove the tendency to create karma by various purification practices, not the karma we have already recorded. Purification affects our life going forward and is not some spiritual form of the “grandfather” clause. We don’t get a pass for good behavior. There is no “Get Out of Jail Free” card.

I find this concept a little sobering, but it does point out just how we can go about purifying ourselves so that we cease to record this or that particular type of karma. In the next blog, I want to share with you the easiest way I have found to do that.

AIR-CASTLES

March 30, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Old age and its restrictions does what I have been unable to do all those younger years, holds my feet to the fire of life and forces me to face reality, whatever we can agree that is.

What bothers me most with my own experience is that, try as I might (and serious as I can be), it was still not convincing enough for me to come to my senses, dharmically, at least most of the time. How discouraging.

When I count the times when I do manage to grasp the dharma, it was not by my dharma practice-efforts alone, but rather by the sheer exigencies of life, forcing me out of my bubble and right to the ground or close enough to, as they say, actually get religion. In other words, it took outside events, very heavy life-events, to get my attention enough for me to get really serious about the nature of life. That does not speak well for normal efforts of a lesser kind, like trying to practice dharma, while on a busy schedule. I certainly am not saying to give up your dharma practice, but instead wake up to what it takes to attain realization.

In other words, the takeaway from all this is not very encouraging for modest efforts at dharma practice, which many of my own have been. The fact is that it took what I would call “drastic” events to get my

attention so that, as they say, I could turn away from my enchantment with the external world enough to really double-down on dharma practice. It suggests that anything (at least for me) less than that just gets brushed aside and overlooked. It doesn't penetrate.

The fact that it took some relatively earth-shaking events in my personal life to break the lock-step and deer-in-the-headlights stare I fall into, is enough to make me stop, think, and take another look at the wisdom of surrounding myself in creature-comforts to the exclusion of reality or what is important. What is it that I am trying to do with my life?

I'm not about to go out and jump off a cliff, just to have some kind of wakeup call that is dharma-related. But the question is what can I do? I keep flashing on that moment I spent with the great Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, when he pointed at a poster I had designed for his speaking event in Ann Arbor, the woodcut of a Tibetan Dragon flying in the clouds, with its four paws each clutching a pearl. Trungpa then proceeded to say that as long as the dragon holds all four pearls, one in each paw, he can fly, but if he drops even one of the pearls, he falls to the ground.

The four pearls refer to the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind toward the Dharma" which, if kept in mind, turn us away from our usual distractions and toward the dharma. What are those precious Four Thoughts? They are:

(1) Remembering that this human birth I have is precious. It should be used for something of value.

(2) Life is impermanent, as fragile as a soap bubble.

(3) Karma's Cause and Effect is inexorable.

(4) This cyclic world of existence is inherently undependable.

Those are the four thoughts that, if we hold them in mind, will help us turn away from our usual mundane distractions and toward the dharma. I guess that what I am realizing is that the Dharma and its practice is not a hobby or part-time job. I am either into it or I'm not. Why kid myself? What are my priorities?

ANN ARBOR ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITY: 1970s

Chögyam Trungpa

March 25, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[You have all heard this before, but I am posting it over in Ann Arbor Townies Only, so it goes here too.]

In the 1960s, spiritual teachings and teachers from the East were still in rather short supply around Ann Arbor. It wasn't until the 1970s that Ann Arbor began to have many visiting spiritual teachers: yogis, gurus, swamis, etc. You name it, they turned up, and many of us checked them out. Yet it was not until 1974 that I encountered the "real-deal," and a double-whammy at that. It was February 12th, 1974 that I first met the great Tibetan siddha Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who founded Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado that same year. I had read Trungpa's books, particularly "Cutting through Spiritual Materialism," and was enthused to see a small flyer on a bulletin board announcing that Trungpa was coming to the U-M Campus to speak. I called the number on the flyer, looking for more information on the visit, and ended up designing the poster for the event and being Trungpa's chauffer for the weekend. What a life-changing event that was!

By that time I knew at least some of the Buddhist lingo and had been trying to meditate for years, but I

doing was correct or not. A lot of us were playing at meditation back then, but we never shared what our meditation was like. For some reason, it was an unspoken rule that our personal meditation was considered too private to talk about. What a mistake that was! I spent years doing what I thought was meditation, without any feedback from a living practitioner who actually knew. We might give each other the high sign or a thumbs-up when asked about it, looking back it seems many of us just didn't know what we were doing. As it turned out, I was not doing it correctly, and so little to nothing was the result. Of course, years later I found out from the Tibetan lamas that in Tibet they talk about beginning meditation practice all the time. There is nothing secret or private about it at all. It is expected. They even debate it!

So I was geeked that a real Tibetan lama who spoke good English was coming to town. As it turned out, meeting Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche provided me with a deciding moment. I have told this story many times, but if you don't mind, I will tell it briefly once again. As acting chauffeur, I was to pick up Trungpa Rinpoche at the airport, and all I had was a beat-up old Ford station-wagon, one that, when you turned the key off and removed it, continued to sputter and belch smoke for another ten seconds or so. Some of you must know what I am talking about here. It was what we call a beater.

But there I was at the airport (and early too) in my Sunday best (which since I never went to church was not much), but I was enthusiastic as all get out. Let me tell you, I was pumped. I was there waiting at the gate and the plane was a little late. The passengers slowly filed out, but no Rinpoche. Then way at the

back I saw this short Tibetan man in a suit and he was smiling and at me! And suddenly there we stood, eyeball-to-eyeball, even a little too close for my comfort. I am sure I mumbled something, but what I saw was this very tired pair of eyes staring into mine, and with a yellow tinge to them at that.

Then Trungpa, still looking right at me, rolled his eyes up into his head until all I could see were the whites, and they stayed there for an uncomfortably long amount of time. When at last they rolled back down, I found myself looking into perfectly clear eyes with no tiredness or yellow. Suddenly here was this incredible being staring right into me, and friendly too!

Traveling with Trungpa was Larry Mermelstein, who later became the head of the Nalanda Translation Committee at Naropa Institute, in charge of translating so many valuable texts from Tibetan into English. By that time, I was already in some kind of contact high as we made our way out of the terminal, into my station wagon, and headed back to Ann Arbor where Trungpa would stay at the house of Donald S. Lopez, Jr., professor of Buddhist and Tibetan Studies at the University of Michigan.

I carried Trungpa's bags into the professor's house, where a small welcoming committee was doing just that. My job as chauffeur was done for the moment and I probably should have left, but I hated to leave, so I kind of hung around at the back of the room taking this all in. I was very intrigued by Trungpa Rinpoche. Before I knew it, everyone present had decided to go for a tour of the U-M campus and suddenly they were heading for the door, while I

scrambled to get out of the way, hoping I would not be noticed.

Suddenly, Trungpa Rinpoche said he was tired and that they should go ahead while he took a nap. I waited until the rest filed out and began to follow suit, when Trungpa motioned to me. "Michael, you stay here with me." This was like too good to be true, and he motioned me into a small room that turned out to be the professor's study and had me sit in a straight-backed chair that was there.

Meanwhile, Trungpa Rinpoche proceeded to completely ignore me while he went over every inch of that room, picking up and examining all of the various statues and knickknacks that were there and, at the same time, drinking a bottle of saké. I sat there like a bump on a log and hoped I was not disturbing him. Like a turtle coming out of his shell, I gradually relaxed and realized that Trungpa was totally occupied in every moment, delighting in everything that was there. I had never seen this kind of focus being exercised in my life, and that was my first lesson right there. My natural inclination in that kind of spot would be to do nothing but fidget, which is exactly what I was doing.

After a while, Trungpa finally got around to examining me and suddenly there he was right in front of me and looking straight at me again. He then proceeded to give me a series of instructions, never telling me what it was he was doing. But it had to do with watching my breath and breathing in and out, deeply, like we do when a doctor uses a stethoscope. And this next part is hard to describe, so you will just have to take my word for it.

I was breathing in and out, as directed, but Trungpa Rinpoche was concerned with my out-breath, the way I was breathing out. He told me I was not letting the breath go out far enough, but somehow holding back. By now, I was nervous for sure, and I sat there trying to exhale as hard as I could without actually fully exhaling. I was just too nervous and simply going through the motions.

Then he said to me, "Let the breath go all the way out... Don't worry, it will come back!" And with that I exhaled, and all of the way out too. And here is the unusual thing: at the same moment I let my breath go, in the back of my mind (and at some higher level) all of my fears of death and dying that had haunted me all my life arose like a swarm of darkness and just evaporated. Gone.

While today I am still not anxious to die, I no longer have the kind of dread and fear that I had before those instructions. Of course, later I was to find that Trungpa Rinpoche was teaching me basic Shamata (Tranquility Meditation), the cornerstone of all basic meditation practice. I guess what I am trying to communicate here is that doing ordinary things with Trungpa Rinpoche end up being extraordinary. I must have spent an hour and a half with Trungpa Rinpoche, after which he did go to take a nap, and I hit the road.

We had one more significant exchange on my way out of the professor's house. As Trungpa walked me to the door, he pointed to a copy of the poster I had made for his talk that was on the wall. It was a woodblock print of a Tibetan dragon flying in the clouds, while each of its four feet clutched a pearl. I

include part the poster here. "Do you know what this represents?" he asked? I told him I did not, but that I just loved the image and thought it might be appropriate for his talk.

He went on to explain that the dragon, which in the Tibetan and Chinese cultures is perhaps the most important and positive of creatures, could fly, but only as long as he held those four pearls, one in each hand. If he dropped even one of them, the dragon would fall from the sky. Of course, I took this in.

Later, I understood that the four pearls that the dragon held were what are called in Tibetan Buddhism the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma," sometimes called the "Four Reminders." And those four thoughts have always been key in my understanding of the dharma. Here Trungpa was pointing them out to me and making it clear that we must hold all four thoughts in mind at once to maintain our awareness. The Four Thoughts are something one encounters at the beginning of Buddhist study, but also just before learning the highest form of meditation, called Mahamudra. They are profound and so much already a part of each of us. Trungpa was pointing something important out to me.

There are other stories of Trungpa's visit, perhaps for another time. I will never forget the last thing that Trungpa said to me. I was trying to tell him that he was the first person I ever met for whom I had no personal resistance or criticism. He turned to me, took my hand, and said: "Well, Michael, we are both married men and we are about the same age." And then he was gone.

That weekend with Trungpa Rinpoche was the beginning of a 42-year romance with Tibetan Buddhism, although I did not end up working with Trungpa's students in Ann Arbor. For one they all had to wear suits, and someone has to die to see me in a suit. And second, they all drank too much. As a local musician in Ann Arbor, I had already been through my drinking days. I did hook up with another branch of the same Tibetan lineage as Trungpa and my wife and I have run a meditation center for the last 30 years or so.

The second part of the double-whammy I referred to earlier is meeting His Holiness the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, the head of the Karma Kagyu Lineage, in Ann Arbor later that same year. This is the lineage I have belonged to since that time. That could be another story sometime.

[Top half of the poster I designed for the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche back in 1974. The event was held in Rackham Auditorium.]

CHÖGYAM TRUNGPA



Speaking on: **Meditation and Intellect**

ANN ARBOR LOVE STORY

HOW I FELL IN LOVE AND GOT MARRIED

March 22, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[I ran this once before, but I am suing it for another venue, so I thought I would post it here again. Love stories are never old.]

Ann Arbor has always, for me, been a romantic place. Not sure if others feel that way about the town, but I certainly do. After all, it was the one place in all the world that I fell in love with a woman and married her. I guess I had been looking for her ever since I was in Tappan Junior High School, or before that when I was going to Catholic school at St. Francis of Assisi, just across the street.

Through all my early years, despite all the other interests and activities I had going on, deep within me, there was this search to find my life partner, the woman that I would love and who possibly could also love me. I am not always that easy to be around.

And I can't forget all those late-night walks around Ann Arbor when I was unable to sleep, just walking the streets, hoping against hope, to run into "Her." Well, as it turned out, it wasn't quite that easy. It took time for me to settle down and even be ready for marriage. Here is my story. I am sure there are those reading this who have a love story too. I don't think

there is a law against telling these stories. Here is my story.

As a musician about town, there were always women who wanted to get to know me, but I grew tired of dating, one-night stands, and short flings. I wanted someone that I really loved and to be with her for the rest of my life, you know, the traditional marriage -- a partner. And that is apparently a lot to ask from the universe. Anyway, she sure took her sweet time in showing up, but she finally did and I am thankful for that.

I was thirty-years old and still no serendipity. I thought that perhaps I had first to build a nest. For many years I had slept on a tiny mattress that I had specially made. It was so thin, little more than a pallet on the floor, and very, very narrow, not built for two. But then in the January of 1971, for no reason I know, I found myself getting rid of the mat in favor of a real mattress, in fact, a waterbed, something I didn't need, so who was it for? I'm sure I didn't know, but it was some kind of ritual all the same. Or was it a case of coming events casting their shadow?

As mentioned, I had kind of reached the end of trying to get together with this woman or that -- flings. I was serious about getting together with a partner and had more or less given up short flings in favor of more permanent or serious relationships. My latest attempt was with very nice young lady and we both did our best to put something together. In the end it did not work out well and we did our best to remain friendly, but it was not easy. That great love I yearned for and wanted to feel was still not there. That's just how it

was at the time of this story. And I am getting to what happened next, the good part.

I used to play music on Monday nights, just myself and my old Wurlitzer piano, at a place called the Odyssey Bar. It was at 208 W. Huron Street in Ann Arbor, just off Main Street. If I remember right, Wednesday was "Wine Night" at the Odyssey and they served this cheap Boone's Farm stuff, but we drank it just the same. So, once in a while I would wander down on wine night to hear a band I liked called "Buddies in the Saddle." And way up at the front was a big long table, sort of reserved for the local regulars; at least all my friends would sit there. It was set parallel to the stage-front.

So there I was, sitting on the far side of that table from the stage, right in the middle of wine night, but drinking orange juice. My love of alcohol was an on and off thing. I never drank all that much and when I did, I was often sorry. Anyway, I knew most, but not all, of the people at our table that night, but certainly not the dark-haired woman sitting across from me to my right and perched on an old piano. But she had apparently noticed my orange juice and made a point of calling me out on it, and loudly, so everyone could hear. After all, this was wine night.

"Drinking orange juice? What are you, some kind of pansy?" Well, that got my attention for sure, and she probably had no idea that as a performer I had no qualms about speaking up in a group or that I was not as shy as the orange-juice guy she thought she was teasing. I could be direct too, so I got right in her face, but in a friendly way. I probably made her squirm a bit and wish she had just left me alone. I can't remember

exactly what she said in response to my challenge, but the last part of it was something to the effect she wanted no more conversation with me and that "this is the end of it!" And then something really strange happened, something that has occurred only once or twice in my life.

And that is, as I responded to her ending our conversation, I suddenly could hear my own voice speaking in the silence of my mind as if I were listening to myself talk, as I said out loud to the woman: "This is not the end; this is just the beginning!" As I spoke, I found my own words ringing in my head and took them in as almost some kind of cosmic message. "What was that all about?" I thought, and then dropped it. Nothing much else happened that night.

Instead, it all happened about a week later at a favorite Ann Arbor bar called "Mr. Flood's Party," a place that I often performed at. They had a high (but small) stage that looked out over the room, and nestled right near and under that stage was a long booth, one that could seat a bunch of people, but you had trouble getting out of because of the length and the fact that it was a cul-de-sac.

So, I was sitting in Floods having a beer with a group of friends. I was kind of wedged in there at the back, and all was good until the woman I had been having that relationship with walked in. Now, as I mentioned earlier, I guess we were not getting along and I could tell from the look she gave me as she came through the door and spied me sitting there that she was not too happy with me. Worse, there I was, stuck at the far end of the booth and surrounded by friends. She

had me in the perfect spot to perhaps take me to task in public, which I assumed she might be about to do. And she quickly sat down at the end of the table near the door, blocking my only exit. I was trapped.

Well, I couldn't have that, so while everyone's attention was on this woman, and before she could settle in, I climbed over the back of the booth and was out of there, heading deeper into the bar looking for a seat and hopefully more friends, pleased that I had escaped what could have perhaps been a bad scene, coward that I was. However, as I quickly saw that all the tables were full and the only open seats were a few barstools.

As I moved along the bar, in front of me I saw that dark-haired lady that had teased me at wine night about my drinking orange juice. She was sitting on a barstool, and there was an open seat right next to her. Any port in a storm, thought I, and quickly slipped onto the seat beside her, saying something like, "Hello you nasty old woman," to remind her who I was and what she had tried to do to me last week. She smiled.

Yet, it seemed that my sitting down with her was OK and we were soon trading small talk. It turned out that her name was Margaret. And then the most amazing thing happened. She told me that she already knew who I was and that we used to live just down the street from one another on Division Street, and would at times pass each other walking from here to there.

When she said that, I remembered seeing her one day while I was carrying some stuff from Circle Books (the metaphysical bookstore up on State Street where

I worked) to my room on Division Street, and back, about two blocks away. To get there, I would cut through the corner of the First United Methodist Church lawn at Huron and State.

And there, sitting on some low steps at a side entrance to the church was this same young lady. I remember that when our eyes met that day by the church my heart went out to her, and perhaps that feeling was returned. I don't know. It was just something a little magical that had happened in passing. As you know, I was always hoping to meet the "One."

Anyway, sitting on that bar stool in Mr. Flood's Party that night, it all came back to me. And when I realized who she was, I looked into her eyes more intensely and one of the most profound moments in my life just spontaneously arose. In a flash, I was somehow looking through and beyond her personality and deep within her mind. And I was struck to the heart by the purity and innocence I saw there, despite the attempts on her part to appear tough and world-wise.

She seemed so completely vulnerable and open to me. To my surprise, all I wanted to do was to protect her, to endlessly care for and love this woman, and shield her from the sorrows and sufferings of what I knew life could bring. I had never felt this way about anyone before, not even close.

At the same time that I was overcome with feelings of wanting to care for this girl I had just met, I also had a metaphysical revelation as I tend to do. I am always having these insights and visions. For all these years I had been looking for someone just like me, but of

course a woman -- some other "One." There was me over here (this One) and I was looking for my counterpart (another One) over there, who would love me like I loved her. And this is a little hard to explain, so please bear with me.

Then, in that moment at the bar, I realized for the very first time that in all the world there was no other "One," but as the Greek philosopher Parmenides had pointed out so long ago: "Being Alone Is." There had never been two, but all along only one. My idea of "alone" and being alone, which I had held close all those years morphed on the spot into a new concept, that of "all one," almost the same word. I got it. This was a realization and not a passing experience.

It became clear to me that all dualities resolve into one, sooner or later. So, there was no independent being, "me," over here and then another independent being, "her," over there. Yes, there were two persons, but only one being. As Parmenides said, "Being alone is!" Well, being alone was all I had ever known, but this being "all-one" was new to me, and more than welcome. And in that moment, for me, at long last the two became one, or as the poet wrote "The dewdrop slipped into the shining sea."

I can't expect to be understood here; I can only tell it like it was, as I remember it. Anyway, in that moment when I looked into her eyes, all of this just happened, and without thinking. I write down it here in words, but in reality it just happened. I finally understood that the idea of the "two" that I carried around all my life were already one and always have been so. And it was Margaret's person through whom I realized this apparent eternal truth.

And to take a note from the movie "Jerry McGuire," she had me from that first moment of insight into her purity. I was gone, no longer looking or able to honestly continue in good faith to look outside myself for some mysterious "other," for I had just realized that there was (and could be) no other "One." It was a logical impossibility. But here 'was' Margaret, and it was she through whom I realized this truth. I took this as a good sign and just naturally responded with my entire being. My heart changed.

And I felt that unless someone like me, who could see how precious she was, cared for and shielded her from the harshness of life, she, like some rare flower, might be lost in the struggles life brings. I could not bear the thought of this and, in that instant (and probably for the first time in my life) I put someone else's welfare above my own – Margaret's.

I guess, at least for me, that's what love is. There was no way I could just have walked on by her in my life (as I had with other relationships) and just leave her there. Not possible. And it was already too late for that. For the first time I felt personally responsible for another human being and, as mentioned, I was more concerned with caring for her than I was for my own comfort. And that was news!

You might say that it was love at first sight, from that very first moment when I looked deep within her mind (or my mind) -- whatever. And for me, that was it. I was hooked. I had already and without question just said "I do" or "I will" to her in my mind, but she didn't know it yet. In truth I was as married as I have ever been from that night on, and not three months later when we actually held the ceremony.

Anyway, later that evening Margaret and I left the bar together and, for the most part, have never been separated since. As mentioned, we got married a few months later and have remained so for going on 45 years. Lest you get the wrong idea that marriage for me is just a dream, it's not. It is hard work, but what they say about death and old age fits here: it beats the alternative. At least that is my view.

I share this to point out what I have come to know love is and how it happened. So that's the story of how I fell in love and got married. I was thirty years old. She was twenty-three. I met Margaret March 26, 1971 and we were married about three months later. We had only \$200 for a wedding and had it outside under a 200-year-old oak tree, with a couple of hundred friends. We made our own food, which was nothing more than French bread, potato salad, and beans. Our dear friend Tecla Loup made the wedding dress, the heart-shaped wedding cake, and was the maid of honor. My English Bull Terrier Manley was the entertainment, swinging like a propeller on a rope from a limb of the oak tree. We didn't stand on ceremony, but we did have one. It was great!

Today we have four grown kids, three daughters, a son, and one dog. And we have eight grandkids.

[Here are some shots of Margaret I took on video back in 1971 soon after we were married, when the two of us ran a greenhouse in the middle of winter in Ewart Michigan. Isn't she lovely?]



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ANN ARBOR THE ORACLE: A WISHING STAR

March 20, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[Just my opinion, but a view of a home town from one who grew up there, not just as a city, but what is Ann Arbor all about?]

Most of us have a town where we came from. Ann Arbor Michigan is my home town; I grew up here. In the 1960s, Ann Arbor was very different from the overly-caffeinated and sophisticated city it is today. For one, it did not used to take me 20 minutes to drive across town, but that is beside the point. Back then, Ann Arbor appeared much less sure of herself (or was it just me growing up?). It seemed to be overly self-conscious and perhaps playing second fiddle (a weak sister) to other college towns like Cambridge, Madison, and Berkeley.

Ann Arbor had not yet found its place in mainstream America and what it lacked in bravado, it made up for in introspection and a quiet humility. What I did not fully grasp back then is that Ann Arbor is fecund, a fertile place, indeed a womb. It is pure feminine.

In the 1960's, Ann Arbor's innate receptivity and 'femininity' might well have been mistaken for passivity and naiveté, not that there was not some of that also present. Ann Arbor in the Sixties was not fully aware of itself, a city yet to awaken to its full

mission, but busy nonetheless taking a direction that time would reveal as significant. And it took a while.

Most city names are feminine, but that is not what I mean by saying that Ann Arbor is “feminine.” There are two kinds of sculpture, one made by adding clay until we have a form, and the other by cutting away stone until we have a form. Ann Arbor is definitely of the second variety. It reveals rather than posits; it is passive rather than active, passive enough to give and actually allow birth.

At the time, growing up in Ann Arbor (and never really knowing any other city), I was only dimly aware that my home town was more ‘passive’, more giving (as in ‘giving way’), and generally just more receptive and understanding than many others. I might better say that I felt that other college towns (like Berkeley or Cambridge) were in some way more aggressive or just ‘on their game’. It was natural to assume that Ann Arbor was busy bringing up the rear. It is now obvious to me that it had not yet fully found itself.

Exactly when Ann Arbor did find itself (in the contemporary sense), I cannot say. I was too busy finding my own self and that happened in 1967. In 1980 I moved about 180 miles northwest to Big Rapids Michigan where I live to this day. As near as I can tell, Ann Arbor became an “adult” somewhere after I left town, perhaps I did too. Certainly, Ann Arbor is confident and sure of itself today, and I am not just talking about students walking right in front of your car either. They always did that.

My best guess is that Ann Arbor became aware of its feminine qualities the same way I discovered my own

gentler side, gradually, but certainly, by surrendering to surrender. In time, the passive qualities of the town have become a power, not a defect or liability. It is my opinion that this fertility, this receptivity that Ann Arbor has in such high degree is very rare among cities. At least in this regard, to me Ann Arbor is very special indeed.

And I sometimes wonder just how many of us there are still out there, those who lived in Ann Arbor beyond our college years (not that I went to college), and were somehow unable to be all that we could be while living there, and yet blossomed almost as soon as we left the town. This has always puzzled me and perhaps every town is like that. 'A prophet is never known in his own country' kind of thing, but is immediately recognized from the outside. I don't have enough data to even make a guess at this.

Or, is the deep receptiveness and anti-macho quality of Ann Arbor Michigan something that makes traditional superficial success more difficult-to-impossible to achieve in this town, yet at the same time builds strong habits for responding and accommodating life. This I wonder.

It is interesting that my first real business (incorporated) was formed in Ann Arbor, Matrix Software. I chose the word "Matrix," not for its mathematical meaning, but because it meant "womb," a place where something could be born. In lieu of my remarks here, I find this fact fascinating. An article written about my company for "Red Herring Magazine" pointed out that Matrix Software was the second oldest software company still on the Internet, second only to a little company called Microsoft

Or, am I just a little crazy when it comes to the “meanings” in life. My point here is that Ann Arbor has always seemed for me to be a sacred womb from which good things come. Whether this just works for me I cannot say. I can only say it is true for me.

After all, how do towns come to be located where they are? Is it only because this road is connected to that road, is connected to another road? Or does the natural world have springs of spirit just as it has natural springs of pure water flowing? I like to believe in the later take on this, that land has indwelling spirits that also speak to us or for us, an oracle.

It is my belief that Ann Arbor is such an oracular place. At least in my life, it has functioned like an oracle, that rare vortex through which the universe has spoken directly to me, albeit not in words that I have always immediately understood. In essence, Ann Arbor has been a wishing well for all my hopes and dreams.

In ancient Greece they had oracular places, why not here in America? What great female spirit indwells in a city christened after two women named Ann and a stand of bur oak? The Anns’ arbor -- Ann Arbor. Tree Town.

“When you wish upon a star,
Makes no difference who you are,
Anything your heart desires,
Will come to you”

ANN ARBOR'S KEY BOOKSTORE

CENTICORE AND MENTOR RUSSELL GREGORY

March 23, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

All bookstores are not the same. And just so you know that once upon a time Ann Arbor had one very special bookstore, I offer this post. As I kid, I worked up on campus in some of the college bookstores, stocking shelves or driving a delivery truck, Follett's and Wahr's on State Street. And of course, there was Border's, a general bookstore, which we watched grow from one or two rooms on the second floor into a behemoth and then implode, but in my book (pun intended) there was a single unforgettable bookstore in Ann Arbor that you should know about.

Every college town probably has a local bookstore where everyone who is 'anyone' with an education hangs out. In Ann Arbor, in the late 1960s (pre-Borders), that was Centicore Books, originally on Maynard Street, but relocated to South University. Somewhere I read that the official title was "Paper Back Bookstore and Centicore Modern Poetry Shop."

It is the South University period of the bookstore I am writing about here. Sure, as mentioned, there were other useful bookstores in Ann Arbor, but this particular one is where both the students and professors bought their books and, more important, hung out. Centicore was the place where you might

run into Andy Warhol, Norman Mailer, or John Cage when they were in town. Centicore was “The” place we all went.

And what made it that ‘place’ was a single individual, Russell Gregory. He didn’t own the store, but he made the store what it was and everyone knew it. Gregory had more knowledge about books and literature than any of us, most professors included. And he was not simply a walking inventory of book names. He had read them all and could talk to you about them with real intelligence. Literally everyone in Ann Arbor who read in depth knew Russell and sought him out.

And Gregory not only read books, understood them, and could guide any of us to where the best parts were, he also was a poet and writer (journals and essays). It was not enough for Russell to hold forth at the bookstore, he also had years of weekly get-togethers at his home at which all were welcome and great discussions took place. While the above is remarkable, that alone was not what endeared Russell Gregory to me.

Russell Gregory is a living Transcendentalist, just like Whitman, Emerson, and Thoreau, the only one I have ever encountered. He not only carried that lineage, but was able to project it into your consciousness and: what a view!

Russell Gregory in the Centicore bookstore, pointing out which books on a topic were important and why, was valuable in itself, but Russell after hours or off in a corner of the shop actually reenacting the mental landscape of the Transcendentalists, empowering you

in its vision, is quite another. His ability to make that unique American philosophy actually come to life and live again or live-on was striking. A better word might be “stunning.” Gregory’s sense of local history, his sense of “place,” was profound.

I am not talking about imparting the history of people, or their times and places in a bygone era, but rather a sheer transport into those mental and spiritual realms. In other words, you are there and those thoughts live again in you, here and now! Russell had that power and he shared it with those who could receive it, whenever possible. I would say Russell Gregory lived for those moments. He was there for that.

Personally, he was about as polite and careful in his dress and mannerisms as a human can be and yet he was also able to show you just enough of the edge of what he did not like for you to be guided. He was no stranger to opinions, just very careful to deliver them in such a way as to be useful and not offensive. I wish I had that talent!

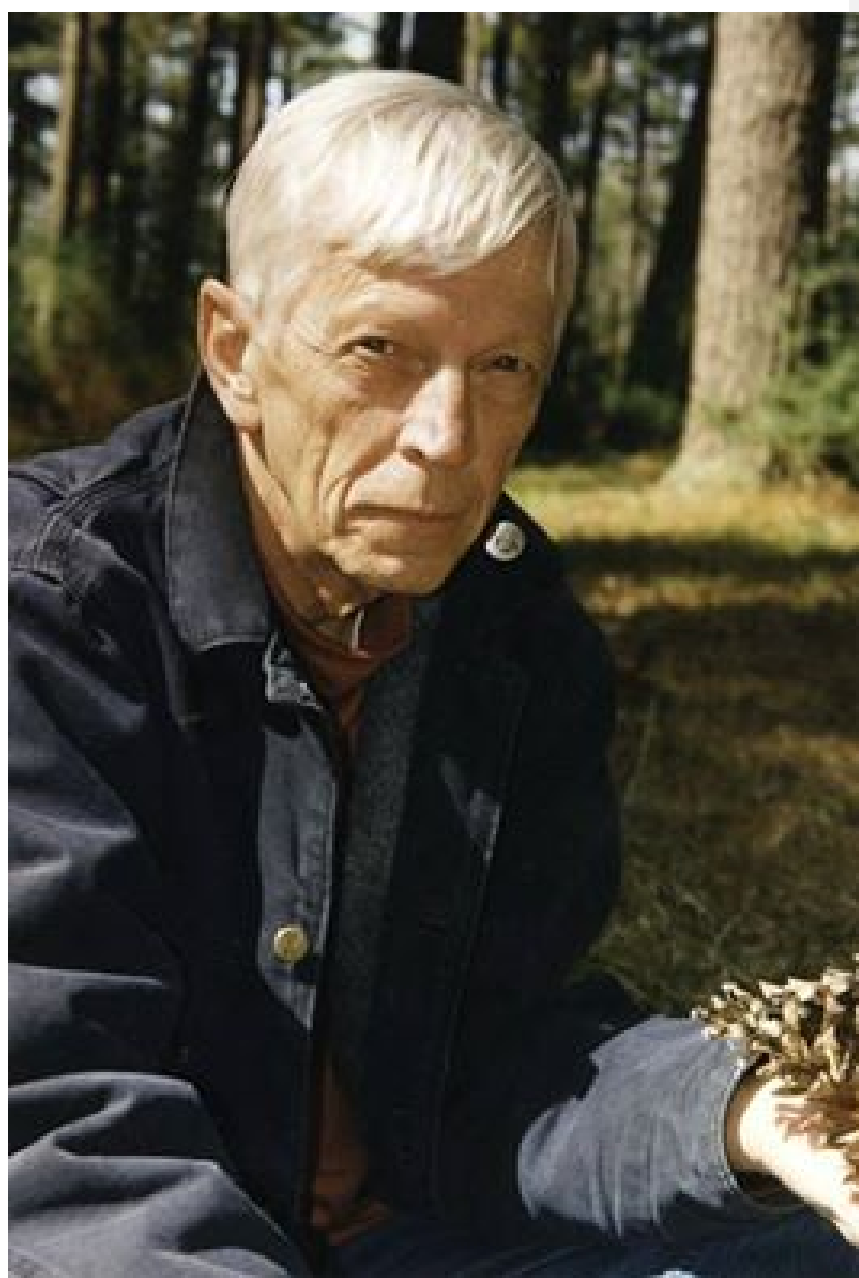
In time, Centicore and the 1960s went the way of the world and two brothers named Border took over and launched a completely different kind of bookstore in Ann Arbor. Russell eventually left Ann Arbor and moved back closer to his roots in Ionia, Michigan, where he served as the editor of the local Ionia newspaper for many years and I wish I had time to research what he did with that newspaper. I am sure it was remarkable. Gregory also worked part-time at Schuller’s Books in Grand Rapids, still guiding readers to the best of the best and I am sure occasionally empowering lucky souls in uniquely American ideas.

Russell, in a word, was a life initiator, flagging you down when you were going nowhere and taking you between the clock-ticking seconds and into a pristine world of ideas beyond time and space as we know it.

I can remember one time I was being a little assy and chided Russell for not writing any poems recently. He turned and looked me dead in the eye and said: "Michael, these days my best poems are walking around Ann Arbor." Enough said. I got the point.

Russell Gregory was a mentor for me. Anyone else here remember him and care to comment?

[Photo taken of Russell Gregory by me some years ago at "Sailor Pines," a virgin stand of pine in N.W. Michigan.]



AXEL HARVEY

(February 6, 1940 – February 20, 2016)
February 22, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I am very sad to report that astrologer Axel Harvey passed away early Saturday morning, February 20, 2016. Axel was one of the finest astrologers that I have known and a friend.

I can't remember when I first met Axel, perhaps in the mid to late 1970s. When I first published in Matrix Magazine (journal on programming techniques) in the late 1970s, Axel Harvey was a part of that, including contributing a number of highly technical articles. I know he came to visit our center in the 1980s and was featured at one of our conferences.

There are all kinds of astrologers, but very few that have all the qualities that to me an astrologer needs. Harvey was an astrologer's astrologer, at least in my book. When we wanted to talk astronomy and the technical, Axel was all about it. Yet, he was always very down to earth and we laughed at the same sort of things. Harvey was comprehensive in his intellectual grasp, both as to the history of astrology and modern technology. He also had a big heart and was not afraid to show it. Harvey and I were about the same age. We had remained in touch via Facebook these last years. Harvey had a brilliant mind, a kind heart, and was a compassionate soul.

I personally feel the loss of this great being, and my world is just a little bit lonelier without him.

OM AMI DEWA HRI

Here is an interview I did with Harvey many years ago.

A conversation with one of Canada's foremost research astrologers.

Axel Harvey is one of Canada's leading research astrologers. He is currently co-editor of the very fine journal *Considerations*, but many of us can remember his contributions to the little journal *Correlation* back in the early 1970's. He is one of our finest technicians in the spirit of Charles Jayne and L. Edward Johndro. Michael Erlewine took this chance to talk with him during his visit to Matrix after the UAC convention of 1986.

Erlewine: You have just returned from the ACT conference as part of UAC.

Harvey: Yes. In fact, ACT (Astrological Conference on Techniques) was a major factor in getting me back into astrological organizations at all – probably because ACT is not really an organization. It's more of an event.

ERLEWINE: Right; and planned that way, too. It doesn't have a hierarchy. You had a special experience at UAC regarding your fellow Canadians, isn't that right?

HARVEY: I was badly burned by some astrological

organizations that I won't mention the names of, in the early 70's. Events were OK, but organizations were something else. So I went to UAC in San Diego, and met a whole bunch of Canadians there. They made me feel very proud and obviously not the same Canada that I started to do astrology in, in the middle 60's. I think they're ready to promote some serious astrological work.

ERLEWINE: So, you felt some kind of kinship with your fellow Canadians.

HARVEY: Absolutely. Well, I always did. I'm ready to get back into some kind of serious action. I'm thinking more in terms of doing things with people. If you want to organize something, if you want to publish something, if you want to get a meeting with people together, you have to have an organizational base. True. And you have to have it locally, I suppose. You see, I've always had the feeling-I know- that Canada's a very astrological country.

All you have to know is that Manley P. Hall, Edward Johndro, Firebrace, Ada Muir, Paul Clancy, and Lois Roddin came out of Canada. I think that's an impressive list. But also, there's the French factor there. The French-Canadian astrologers are all steeped in a slightly different tradition. You know, the French astrology which is more...well some of the interpretation techniques are different. It's much more of an event- or materialistically-organized astrology. But this is different. At the same time, all these French-Canadian astrologers are bilingual; they're all reading English and American books. So, they have a view of the astrological world which no one else has. I guess their main fault is that they are such anarchists

They don't speak to anybody. It's part of the French-Canadian temperament.

ERLEWINE: Tell me more about that, because the truth is a lot of Americans don't think of Canadians as all that different than themselves. Maybe you should describe some of the differences. I tend to think of Canadians as just like Americans.

HARVEY: The fact that you talk a different language makes you think about the world differently. And French astrology has been separate from English astrology since people stopped writing Latin.

ERLEWINE: Are the French-Canadians reading a lot of French astrology?

HARVEY: Well, of course. That's what they read mainly. Well, Balbault and Volguine, and some of the less well-known French writers. Yes, in that sense I'm a typical French-Canadian astrologer. I'm going to all the traditions, and that's unique. There's no other place in the world with that particular mixture of French and English astrology.

I'm not saying that the French-Canadian astrology is superior, or anything; it just has its own unique cultural mix and therefore its own outlook. But it's never gained the sort of social momentum to be able to support things. I hate that work, but it's a necessary fact of institutions. One thing that has made English astrology so strong is that they have their institution. You can rely on the *Astrological Journal* to be there.

ERLEWINE: It sounds like you are getting some signal — an inspiration or perception that a French

Canadian institution may be being born.

HARVEY: Well, I don't know if it will be that sudden. But I've felt this way about French-Canadian astrology ever since I knew astrologers. What's different now is there's a strong, but different astrological community in Eastern Canada-as strong as the English astrological community. And as long as they were just by themselves, the English-Canadians were just like Americans. Now there is contact being made: French-Canadian astrologers giving workshops to English-Canadian astrologers. And that's like a new marriage. Some kind of fruit is likely to be produced.

ERLEWINE: How did you get into astrology?

HARVEY: I guess that's a long story. I always give people the simple story that when I was doing my masters in history at Toronto, I happened to be doing a seminar on 18th century France, and I did some research which involved Henri de Boulainvilliers who was quite an important man at the end of the 17th century – the first taxation economist, a scholar, and an astrologer. As a historian, I had to admit that there was very strong evidence that this guy did quite weird predictions. As a matter of fact, he had to attend court in Paris, and he didn't like to. He wanted to go home to his farm. So, he started predicting when people would die. And they did. That did it. For a while, he got what he wanted.

ERLEWINE: People came to him for that?

HARVEY: Sometimes they came to him. But he was just volunteering this information, knowing that it would be extremely obnoxious and get him sent home

where he wanted to be. At least, that's the story about it. Anyway, that's what first got me interested, because astrology didn't even exist for me before. I was 23 or 24 then. But I slowly (very, very slowly) accumulated knowledge about astrology. It wasn't until I had Saturn beginning to go down in my chart—from the top down. At some point I lost everything that was dear to me: job, woman, apartment, etc. And I holed up. I did my crab act. And I hit the astrology books. But, OK, that's the simple story.

Then I never stopped. From that time on I was studying 20 hours a day – you know the way people always take off. But there were other influences around me. There was a French-Canadian astrologer, who has since become a very popular maker of annual fortune books, and I used to go and pester him around that time for information. He got fed up. He said, "I'm going on holiday, I'll give you my books". And that's how I got the books. He went on holiday and lent me his books, which I was reading 20 hours a day until I got my own.

Montreal has always been astrological. From time to time, one generation might not know that the previous generation even existed and they'll say, "Oh wow, astrology's really developing fast in this city". I was going through an old library—a rare book library—and I found an ephemeris done in the middle of the 19th century for local mean noon Montreal time. Which means it was worthwhile for somebody to publish that ephemeris in the middle of the 19th century. So I figure it's always been a fairly astrological community.

Fortunately, I didn't—I couldn't—stay stuck in just one school or one line of thought, because of the nature of

the ethnic mixture in Montreal. There were these French-Canadian astrologers doing very old fashioned, divinatory French astrology. There was, of course, a strong North American influence. There were a couple of Germans, doing very rigid cosmobiological sorts of work. And there was at least one Englishman, Michael Pym, who was a very technical, pure, siderealist of the Anglo-Irish sort. I think he was into things like the vertex, solar apex, and all the more technical things. He had a big influence on me. I wish I knew where he was today. Michael Pym, if you're out there, drop a line.

ERLEWINE: How did you gravitate to the niche that you have in my mind, of a very high degree of technology? How did you get into the details of it? There aren't many astrologers who do it.

HARVEY: Maybe it was sort of a reaction. Maybe even a neurotic reaction. I'm a historian by training, and in a way history is very close to traditional astrology, because you're dealing with unique cases. You have to explain a country, which is just as complicated as explaining an individual. And really, in spite of what modern historians say, it's not terribly technical. It's more of an art than anything else. But you have to know tons and tons of facts. It's sort of a "mountain of nuts" approach: you have all these facts and then you try to digest them and come up with some intelligent digestion. Mathematics is completely the opposite. There are no facts in mathematics. It's not an art in the way history is. You just figure things out. And you could do it with a couple of pipe cleaners, or an envelope and pencil, or whatever. And I find that very restful. I especially did then because it was such a completely different sort of intellectual

exercise. That's one explanation.

The other explanation was that there were simply things that I didn't understand. Writers, even technical writers like good old Alan Leo, have a lot of sound technical information in some of their books. But one cannot understand them. You have to translate them into modern terms. At least, I find that I do. And in the course of understanding all these things, I became a mathematician, I guess. It was more from an inner predilection-an inner need for a change from the kind of intellectual work that I was doing.

ERLEWINE: And you also were a counseling astrologer?

HARVEY: I think I used to be a counseling astrologer when I was least competent to do it. Because I'm fairly certain that I've done some harm to some people at some time. I started counseling immediately. My clients tended to be my own age, so I saw a lot of people who wanted to know who they were and what they ought to do. And maybe most of my work in the first ten years or so, was involved with that. Now I'm seeing more people who know what they want to do and they want to know when to do it. They're seeing me more as a technical consultant. They don't have time to do elections, or directions and transits-or whatever-related to timing in what they have to do.

HARVEY: I liked your interviews in Astro*Talk with Charles Harvey. For one thing, it made me feel better about Geoffrey Dean.

ERLEWINE: There were some nice things about

Geoffrey in that. Well, aside from being very nice in person, Dean can be a bit of a monster in print. Have you met him?

HARVEY: Never.

ERLEWINE: He's not a very large person and he is very animated, not at all like he sounds from his letters and such.

HARVEY: He's animated? He looks so Saturnine.

ERLEWINE: That one picture of him in Recent Advances is really unfortunate. He doesn't look like that at all. He looks kind of Irish-almost elf-like. He's about my size (a little taller, maybe) and he's a backpacker; a woodsman who loves nature and photography. That's one side of Geoffrey. He can be very pleasant to be with. On the other side, he's got all his pride wrapped up in those miles of photographs and xeroxed documents. No one else I've ever known measures themselves by quantities of xeroxes they have produced. "Look, this is how many miles of letters I did. This is how many..." etc. He measures correspondence by the pound. I've always found this fact humorous.

One other thing about Geoffrey that I witnessed during his visit here is very interesting on a personal level: One evening, he launched into the most Neptune-like astrological speculation in the kooky, traditional astrological style (the most blue haired old lady style of astrology). As off-the-wall as you could imagine.

HARVEY: Seriously?

ERLEWINE: Absolutely! “The bigger the front the bigger the back” is a macrobiotic statement, and in this case it is, in fact, true. He said the craziest things. Most people believe he doesn’t have a bone of that kind of astrological stuff in his body. Well, he does. He’s got the same crazy astrology stuff in him that you and I do. In other words, he’s an astrologer. And I would have never known that from his writings.

I like Dean personally, but I do not always like him in letters and such. He can be insulting and appears terribly prejudiced toward whatever he’s currently orientated to. And as Charles Jayne insisted on pointing out, he can be unfair to people and ideas. And yet he’s done wonderful work. But in some sense he’s not a fair person, and to that degree, he is not a good editor.

HARVEY: Other people have accused him of being anti-American. I think that’s true.

ERLEWINE: I haven’t heard that. I have heard statisticians declare that he’s got early 20th century statistical ideas. He’s not modern. All the statisticians I’ve known (some of the best in our field) that have read him, just go “Arghhh” over his concept of statistics. Rupert Sheldrake would be wasted on him.

HARVEY: Yes, this is my impression from talking to statisticians too.

ERLEWINE: But apparently he’s a prodigious worker. A tremendous worker.

HARVEY: I’m sure grateful for that book. What gets

me the most about him is his discouraging tone. There's nothing wrong with having prejudices. We all have prejudices. But he's so discouraging. I mean, he could say the same thing he's saying without being so discouraging. And he's also raising all the sorts of hackles that don't need to be raised. He's making people fear that if astrology becomes more rigorous then it's somehow going to be imitating some other discipline. You often read criticisms of Geoffrey Dean that say, "Look, astrology doesn't have to become like sociology, or physics, or whatever". I don't think that's his real point, nor is it any sort of real point. I think that astrology is going to become rigorous. And there is going to be a way of making a hypothesis and finding out whether or not it's true.

ERLEWINE: Your Journal Considerations is one of the best in the field. How did you and Ken Gilman happen to start it? When did that happen?

HARVEY: Considerations is Ken's creation.

ERLEWINE: But you're the co-editor.

HARVEY: He was looking for something to create. I think he was ready to create, and he did it. And he asked me if I'd help him. I remember clearly, he asked me on the phone, he said "Will you help me do a magazine, if I do it?" And I said "Yes". But he meant will I send him an article now and then, or give him some ideas. So I sent him a letter full of ideas, none of which I think we've implemented yet. But it turned out that he wanted an editor. I went and helped him out. I keep on going down and helping him out.

ERLEWINE: How many years have you been

publishing now?

HARVEY: We're now nearing the end of Volume 3. So we started in November 1983.

ERLEWINE: What kind of articles are in Considerations?

HARVEY: We try to have a mix. We have some very technical articles about directions and rectification techniques. We have more cosmological articles, like those by Charles Jayne that we published, and others. We had a good series by Bruce Scofield on Meso-American astrologers. I think we'll have more Mexican and Meso-American astrology.

ERLEWINE: What do you and Ken see as the goal?

HARVEY: I think our goal is to keep astrology open. There's a tendency, I fear to push astrology into one direction or another. I think it's great that schools exist. That tendencies exist. That there should be a group more inspired by Charles Jayne. A group more inspired by Dane Rudhyar. That's great. But what I don't go along with is when these groups say "OK. Astrologers should now go our way". I think that will weaken astrology.

ERLEWINE: Good thought.

HARVEY: The school should go this way, or the group, or whatever. They can be as exclusive as they want. You need to have connecting boxes somewhere. We hope to be one of the connecting boxes.

It would be nice to have an organization, because then you can get your hands on a bit of money. But then you also get politics. For instance: Geoffrey Cornelius is probably one of the most brilliant young astrologers, and he has had to step down from being editor of Astrology.

ERLEWINE: Why?

HARVEY: Apparently, it's because some committee or another wants to oversee the editorial policies of the Journal.

ERLEWINE: How come people like Charles Harvey don't do something about this kind of thing?

HARVEY: Oh no. This is the Lodge. The Astrological Lodge of London. Charles is president of the Astrological Association.

ERLEWINE: Aren't people over there as aware of Geoffrey Cornelius as we are here? I'm sorry to hear that he's resigning the editorship.

HARVEY: It's the sort of thing that happens in political organizations. Rare is the organization that leaves its hands off. It would be nice to have institutional backings and have editorial freedom.

ERLEWINE: Let's go back to the early Correlations, and talk about some of the articles you did. That magazine was very important to me back then, and I'm sure I'm not alone in that opinion. Simply the fact that the things that interested you were technical.

HARVEY: That's right. That was the heart of the first

Correlations.

ERLEWINE: That was wonderful. When did that begin? Who was responsible for doing that? I thought you lived in England with all the other Harveys, and you didn't.

HARVEY: It began in 1969 or '70. And it did run through many things. It was a little insert in the Astrological Journal.

ERLEWINE: I remember.

HARVEY: One sad thing is that there's a new series of Correlation. The Correlation that exists now has got its own Vol. 1 number 1 etc., and it has no relationship to the old publication. They always talk about the new Correlation as though they are doing their best to suppress the memory of the old one.

The old one was sort of a forum for anybody who was interested in the new, the...

ERLEWINE: It was technical.

HARVEY: It was technical, but it wasn't just technical. People would write in with ideas. Sometimes quite fascinating, but crazy, ideas about magnetic fields and...well, different ideas. The Astrological Journal, then and still now, was pretty traditional and they were into horoscope techniques. Well, the Journal itself wasn't modern, so I guess some people in the association decided that there ought to be a forum for people who are into more modern things. And they made it that little separate insert and called it Correlations. I don't think it had many issues. I'd be

surprised if it has much as a dozen issues, over all.

ERLEWINE: Perhaps not, but it had a great effect.

HARVEY: I guess so. That was the first journal, that I know, where we started to talk about computers.

ERLEWINE: Sure. And calculating techniques and you had all these crazy things...different things you'd draw...all sorts of things.

HARVEY: Some of my theorems about the geometry of magnetic fields and how they could produce things that looked like Gauquelin curves...

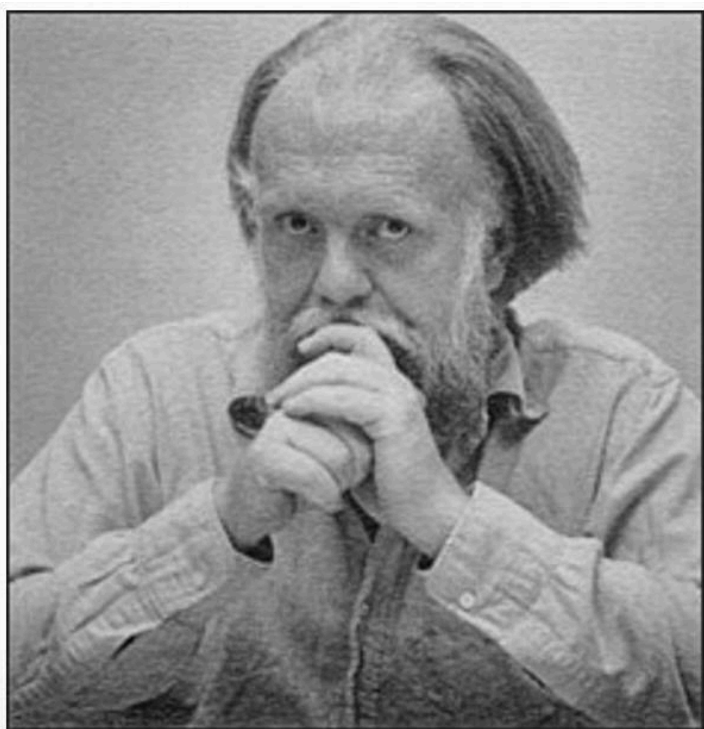
ERLEWINE: That was very inspiring to me and to others who were feeling there was no one else out there that had an interest in technical-in the calculation. That was the first publication in which I can remember seeing anything of that sort. And your name was in it a lot. You always were doing these crazy little articles, and I figures maybe you were the brother of Charles Harvey. It was the first modern technical journal that I can think of. Obviously Charles Jayne had done some wonderful things in *In Search*. However, it didn't have that "hi-tech" quality. Even though there wasn't much hi-tech then, it was the highest-tech around.

HARVEY: The language was modern. That's what made the difference.

ERLEWINE: It was also the use of diagrams and...

HARVEY: Well, the new *Correlation* is much more scientific. They're into verification. It seems to be

taken up in a large part by Michel Gauquelin and Geoffrey Dean. And academic control: the titles very often are something like “A Failure to Replicate” this, or “Negative Results” of that, and it’s all very depressing. It’s not a question of either going with the G. Deans and the M. Gauquelins, or going in some other direction. I feel that in my work I’m going to go in their direction and I’m going to come through it and be positive. It’s a matter of being a harder thinker. And making sure what’s worth finding is found. There’s no point in being scared away from this kind of rigorous thinking. We’re only beginning to find the rigorous way to think about astrology. And it’s going to be very rigorous, and very scientific, and it won’t hurt horoscopy one bit. It won’t hurt experiential astrology one bit.



BACK-TO-BACK ECLIPSES

March 7, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

You wouldn't know from reading this blog that I have been an astrologer for over 50 years. I don't write that much about astrology here, although I certainly could and sometimes do. As my dharma teacher, who like all Tibetan lamas uses astrology, pointed out to me years ago, astrology is one of the limbs of the yoga, but not the root. Dharma is the root.

Astrology is another of those "relative" truths; it can help us to get from here to there in life, to better position ourselves, to get oriented, but it is not a substitute for dharma. This is not being pejorative to astrology, but simply to say, as Rinpoche pointed out, that astrology is one of the limbs on the tree of the yoga, while dharma is the root.

Astrology, like all relative truths, offers us a differential through which we can work to better adjust or position ourselves. And like all relative truths, astrology is provisional, preparatory, a form of purification or realigning that gets us into the right attitude or orientation to move beyond the preliminaries, but to where and for what reason?

Beyond the relative truths is what is called, for lack of a better word, the "absolute" truth. I know, it sounds kind of absolute. A simpler way of saying this is that beyond dualistic concepts (relative truth), is non-dualist truth. Keep in mind that our whole beginning

eliminating what Shakespeare called the “pale cast of thought” from our lives, so that we can experience reality directly, without the middle-man of unnecessary thoughts and concepts.

Purifying ourselves from dualistic thinking is a process of collapsing our double-think until we are capable of direct seeing, what is called Insight Meditation. What a relief!

Anyway, until that time, such events as the forthcoming double-eclipse time (back-to-back eclipses) are useful times for change and working with it. We are coming into one of those double-eclipse times, often a time period that marks and facilitates change. Let’s look at that for a moment.

Tuesday March 8, 2016 at 8:54 PM EST we have a solar eclipse, a New Moon that ushers in a two-week intra-eclipse period that lasts until March 23, 2016 at 7:02 AM, when we have a Full Moon, and a Penumbral Lunar Eclipse.

Of course it’s interesting that the New Moon Eclipse falls on a big voting day and the next two weeks of the intra-eclipse time will perhaps decide the primaries. Double-eclipse times like we are entering are traditionally prone to having visions occur, if we are sensitive to them.

Forget about visions of the movie or comic book variety, where a picture appears in our head. Visions are intense experiences of absorption, when our conceptual mind is over-flooded with direct knowledge. Visions are not grasped in their entirety, but rather are just taken in and absorbed over time. It

can take weeks or months to unwrap a vision. They remind me of when I was young and would here a new song on the radio that was to become very important to me. I would listen to that song again and again and again, and still be absorbing something afresh from it. Visions are like that.

Anyway, New and Full Moons are times of influx or change, imprinting, taking it in, and eclipses of the Sun or Moon, as the Tibetans point out, are times when the inner winds & channels come most into alignment. They are days, as the Buddhist put it, of observation, when it pays our attention to set the day aside and just observe our mindstream.

So, we are entering two weeks of intra-eclipse time, when visions or imprinting of deep change can take place, if we can receive and be aware of it. The change will be there. How we respond or take the change, and what we do with it, is up to us. I have written about eclipses and their visions for years. Below find a free e-book and a couple of videos on these eclipses times, for those interested.

Free e-book “Vision of the Eclipse,” 83 pages
<http://spiritgrooves.net/e-Books.aspx>

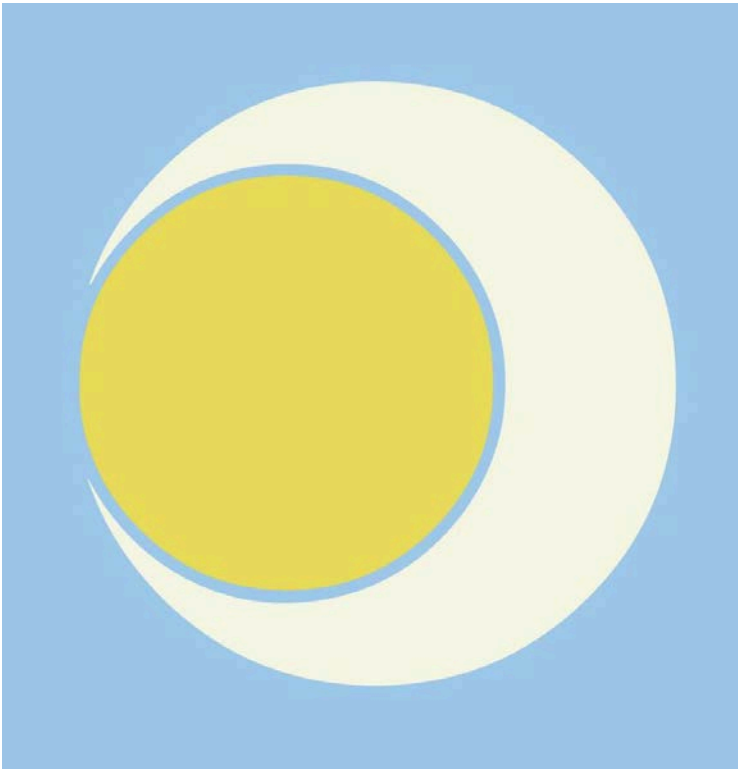
“Eclipse Winds & Channels”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tT6_77YK130

“The Vision of the Eclipse”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPINsRxltxA>

For those of you who want paperbacks, “The Vision of the Eclipse” is on Amazon.com at cost.

http://www.amazon.com/Vision-Eclipse-Astrolog.../.../ref=sr_1_1...

[Design by Michael Erlewine.]



BEYOND POLITICS

January 27, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I have shared my political views, but even more important to me than the forthcoming election is what I believe is the long-term solution to all of this, which is first changing how we think and then going about changing history. Of course, I am talking about first knowing our own minds.

Meditation and mind-training is a sensitive issue in this country, not because it is taboo or politically incorrect, but rather because most folks have no real idea what meditation is or why we should value it. This is understandable, but how could anyone know what meditation is without first experiencing it, and that is a Catch-22. At best, the public assumes that meditation is some kind of relaxation therapy. And this makes sense because basic meditation is even called "Tranquility Meditation," therefore it must make us tranquil or calm, right? That is about as far as most people get because very few folks can successfully meditate, and this is why.

The problem is that Tranquility Meditation is just the first step in a two-step process, and America as a society has never gotten beyond that first step. In fact, most beginning meditators (much less the public) have no idea there even is a second step. The intention of the Buddhists is not that we should learn

to do Tranquility Meditation and that's the end of it. Not at all.

The reason we do Tranquility Meditation is to calm us down enough to undertake the second step, which is called Insight Meditation. It's not the best analogy, but Tranquility Meditation is something like that shot of Novocain that the dentist gives us to desensitize us before something more important takes place. Tranquility Meditation calms us down so that we can successfully practice Insight Meditation. The analogy that I came up with is that of trying to thread a very fine needle with shaky hands. Tranquility Meditation is intended to remove the shakiness, so that we can thread the needle. Threading the needle is the main object here, Insight Meditation, but many are not even aware that this second form of meditation exists.

As mentioned, Tranquility Meditation is most often a first step on the way to learning Insight Meditation. But watch that first step! It seems few people get beyond it or, as mentioned, even know what that second step, Insight Meditation, is all about, and that's a problem. The public can perhaps understand what "tranquility" meditation is all about, even if they revert to "relaxation" as a touchstone. However, there is no way (that I know of) to even vaguely imagine what Insight Meditation is about without actually experiencing it. Yes, it is that different and it is unlike anything we have ever known.

As someone who has actually, with help from my teacher, experienced and learned Insight Meditation, all I can say is Wow! It is not imaginable because, by its very name, "insight" is a breakthrough experience, and so it is. And of course, as all the texts say, Insight

Meditation is ineffable, beyond words. It cannot be described, but only experienced. I would agree with that 100%.

In fact, I agree with that so much that I often sit around and rack my brain as to how to better introduce Insight Meditation to those of you who have not yet experienced it.

We all prioritize our time one way or another. Just how we spend our time determines its ROI (return on investment), material or spiritual. I have worked in the business world (AMG, All-Music Guide, All-Music Guide, Classic Posters, Matrix Software, etc.) and also in spiritual endeavors (astrology, Buddhism, esotericism, etc.), so I have a foot in both camps. In my opinion, and it is my considered advice, that the tip-of-the-top of the priorities-pyramid in my book is to (at whatever cost) learn to recognize the true nature of the Mind. Everything else follows from that.

I am sorry to say that it took me most of my life to come around to this view. Hopefully, you won't have to wait that long.

ANN ARBOR'S EDEN FOODS

BLESSINGS OF THE 1960s:

March 25, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

"Mighty oaks from little acorns grow." It has taken 47 years, but that aphorism has proved itself true regarding natural foods. There certainly was nothing very natural about Ann Arbor food back in the early 1960s. And I am so tired of ne'er-do-wells telling me that "The Sixties" was a mistake and has brought the country nothing of real value. Are they serious?

A topic for another article would be the fact that while the establishment banished the Sixties children and closed the front door to their inner circles, they left the back door open via the Internet and programmers like myself just walked in and took over the means of technology. Now, that's a hoot all by itself, but I digress.

I keep waiting for someone to set the record straight, but as Dylan says "It's not dark yet, but it's getting there." So, as we can find the time, let's those of us who were there count the blessings of The Sixties, one-by-one, while we can. I am going to start off with food and my connection with Eden Foods. What would Ann Arbor (or for that matter, the whole country) be like without Eden Foods and natural-food

concepts that became companies in the 1960s. I was very much there, so allow me set the stage here for a moment.

Diet, like family backgrounds, is very hard to change. In the early 1960s, when I was still (at least in my mind) a wannabe beatnik, I was not into natural foods or whole foods, much less organics. I would eat about anything. My mom brought her five sons up on a regular American diet, whatever we can agree that was.

It was only in the later 1960s, after the onset of what we now call "The Sixties" that my interest in WHAT I ate stirred, and I can't remember just how that went down. I do remember reading (and re-reading) "The Mucusless Diet Healing System" by Arnold Ehret, with his emphasis on fasting and the value of alkaline over acidic foods. Certainly I went on all kinds of raw-foods diets back then, mostly my idea of salads, and probably more so in the summertime. Even today, I still believe the best first step when I reach a food crisis (and it seems I reach these all the time) is to fast from eating for a day (or part of a day) and see what's going on with me.

And it's not like Ann Arbor was already "green" or obviously into healthy foods back then. Sure, Ann Arbor had restaurants and they were mostly run by Greeks, but they didn't serve actual Greek food, but just the same old mashed potatoes, meatloaf, and olive-drab peas kind-of-thing. And Ann Arbor also had a handful of good German restaurants, but there is nothing healthy about that food either.

I can't remember when I first fell in with the Eden's crowd. For one, they weren't even a crowd yet back then, but just people like myself coming together. I knew Eden Food's original founders Bill and Judy Bulduc early-on, just as folks about town. I believe they were astrological clients of mine. As for Tim and Pattie Redmond, who also helped found the company, they were friends. In fact, I married Tim and Pattie Redmond, something I used to do now and again back in the day, and they are still together!

I'll bet I knew most of the natural food-folks in Ann Arbor at the time. There were not that many. It probably got more real when Eden Foods asked me to pick the exact date and time for their company's incorporation and opening. As mentioned, I was an astrologer-about-town, even back in the day. And the date I picked turned out to be November 4, 1969. I guess it was propitious, because Eden Foods is still going strong. I am told that Eden Foods is the only large natural-food company that is not today owned by conglomerates, and this probably is thanks to the tenacity and vision of Michael Potter, their current CEO.

Originally called Eden Organic Foods, it was first incorporated as a non-profit corporation by entrepreneur Bill Bulduc, and was kind of a loose natural-foods co-op with a retail store at 514 East William St. in Ann Arbor, which was little more than a small upstairs apartment as I recall.

I also was asked to design a poster for Eden Foods, which promptly became the logo which they still use today, you know, those four little sprouts in a circle. I include it here. For the record, the inspiration for that

logo came from my love of the incredible simplicity and beauty of Japanese art, and in particular Japanese funereal crests. I was struck by the utter understatement and clarity of Japanese family symbols. Anyway, that's where Eden's logo came from.

And while I don't want to lean on the horn, I owe you younger folks at least a tiny reminder of how hard-fought the fight has been to bring healthy food to the table in this country, almost forty-seven years later! Back in the 1960s, there were no natural-food restaurants, Whole-Foods stores, or anything like that.

Sure, we had health-related stores, sometimes even called "health-food" stores, like the one that was down on N. Ashley in Ann Arbor, but there was no real food there, just rows and rows of vitamins and supplements, mostly for older folks. I could never find anything there I wanted to have. To me, they always seemed like a throwback from the 1950s or earlier. In late 1971, Julian Moody opened Applerose at 404 W. Liberty and it actually had some natural foods. It was wonderful, but it lasted only about a decade.

One friend of ours was Ken King, who founded Frog Holler Organic Farm back in the early 1970s and began producing organic, pesticide-free, food for the Ann Arbor area.

The company is still going today. And King was also co-owner of Indian Summer Natural Foods Restaurant in Ann Arbor, where we would go mornings to have their incredible natural-grain

pancakes. And it was there that my friend Dana Wilkinson made yeast-free loaves of bread each day.

In the early 1970s, for a while, there was also the Rainbow People's weekly neighborhood grocery program, where for a few bucks you could get two grocery bags full of produce hauled in from Detroit's Eastern Market. Margaret and I subscribed to that and it was a good thing. I believe my friend John Sinclair helped to get that going. And of course there was the 4th Street Coop and all of the inexpensive (at one time) food. You could find something healthy to eat on their food bar.

My point here is not to put down what was there back then, but rather to point out that just as babies take time to grow up, new ideas and approaches take just as long, sometimes until the die-hards die off, but perhaps nothing takes as long as changing our eating habits, unless it's losing weight.

So, way back then Eden Foods was just a tiny store with a new idea run by people we knew, our friends. I can very much remember macrobiotic dinners and cooking classes, where we would go to someone's home, learn to cook a macrobiotic dish, and then all sit down and have dinner together. For me, it all kind of started there.

And I will spare you what little I know about the many changes Eden has gone through, changes of ownership, location, etc., like their move down into the basement of 211 S. State Street, where my old alma-mater bookstore Bob Marshall's Books used to be, and so on.

At some point Michael Potter, currently the CEO of Eden Foods, came into the picture. Potter is a piece of work, and that's a compliment. To use macrobiotic terminology, Michael Potter as a person is very "yang," something macrobiotic folks seem to prefer. He is tough, bright, and not about to be pushed around by the exigencies of life. Michael has been a leading force at Eden for many years. I am proud to call him a friend.

Somewhere around the fall of 1974 Potter made his first trip to mainland China, one of at least a dozen trips he has made, something that American businessmen just didn't do back then. That was a brave move, to actually go over to Communist China and connect with the Chinese, eyeball-to-eyeball, and he did the same with the Japanese. Potter has always had real vision and stick-to-it-ness.

By the early 1970s, there was a core group of us that were all about macrobiotics. Teachers like Mishio Kushi and Naburo Muromoto would come to Ann Arbor to teach, and examine us. I can remember having a consultation with Mishio Kushi in his room at the Bell Tower Hotel. When he was all done, about all he said was "Don't eat squash!"

Keep in mind that there was no tofu back then. Sure, you might find some overly-processed soy curd at an oriental grocery, but who knows what was in it or how it was made. We learned to make tofu ourselves, at home, and it is quite a process, boiling the soy beans, mashing and straining them, pressing them into curd, and all of that. And we pounded sweet rice into Mochi too.

We also made our own pickles by fermenting daikon and all kinds of vegetables. There was no tamari in the stores, so we had to import it in little wooden kegs and casks and store it in the basement. Once again, Eden got it for us. In fact, our damp Michigan basement at 1041 N. Main Street in Ann Arbor was full of all kinds and sizes of wooden tubs from Japan. There was Mugi and Hatcho miso, and other kinds too, plus tiny kegs of omeboshi plums, twig tea, and so on. We were our own bulk-food store. My wife reminds me that I also had a little touch of the survivalist back then, and tended to hoard food.

And we made our own Tekka, a macrobiotic condiment. Raise your hand if you know what Tekka is? We would go out in the yard and dig up Gobo (Burdock root), and so on. We still make Gomasio, roasted sesame seeds with seaweed, about once a month. And we would import seaweed from the east coast and then dry it in the side yard like clothes on the line. See insert.

The takeaway here is that the above foods were not all that we ate. Maybe at first, when we were purists, but today we eat almost everything, but with an attempt at least to balance the foods we eat, so they work together to keep us healthy. That's macrobiotics in a nutshell: balance.

Of course, personally, I have found myself dropping certain foods from my diet in order to stay alive, so to speak. I gradually realized that certain foods make me sick, like sugar. I don't eat sugar in anything but natural fruits at this point, and dropping sugar was one the best choices I ever made. I immediately felt stronger and better, because every time I ate a bunch

of sugar my body would go into a kind of swoon or shock until I recovered some hours later. I don't mean I would pass out, but I could feel my body struggling with the sugar-high, and that didn't seem worth it. Easy solution: stop eating the stuff. I honestly believe refined sugar is a poison.

And caffeine too. If I drink coffee or eat chocolate, I don't sleep, etc. And in my house we don't eat processed foods anymore. We make everything we can from scratch. I could go on, but you get the idea. What we do eat are whole foods that we like and that are nourishing too. I probably eat too much popcorn these days, but it is relatively harmless. "Relatively" is the operative word.

As mentioned, Eden is something that The Sixties brought us, and it blessed Ann Arbor first of all, and then the rest of the country. However, the one thing I most remember is the little Eden Foods store and eatery at, I believe, 330 Maynard Street, up near Nichol's Arcade, tucked away in a little cul-de-sac that almost looked like an alley. I believe maybe Tim Redmond ran the place. It was there that they made the one food I have never been able to forget, Eden's fresh-made chapatis.

I would go in there around Noon and they would hand me a large warm chapati that was lightly scorched on the outside from an open flame, but still soft within. And inside would be various steamed veggies (onions, carrots, cabbage, broccoli, perhaps parsnips) bathed in a sesame-tahini sauce, with a touch of salt. This much of the recipe I know from an old friend, Steve Sailor, who actually got up at 5 AM in those

days and began to chop veggies in 5-gallon buckets to prepare for lunchtime at Eden.

I can't think of any meal in my life as wonderful as those Eden chapatis. I wish they were available or that I could make them. I have tried, but it was not the same. As they say, we are lucky if we can step in a river even once!

And before I end this, I should say something more about macrobiotics. I owe you that. In the late 1960s, I was all about Macrobiotic food balancing, and still am today for that matter. Unfortunately, the macrobiotic diet has gotten a bad rap over the years, something to the effect that if you are macrobiotic you only eat brown rice until you die from malnutrition, and yada-yada-yada. What a bunch of baloney that is.

Macrobiotic foods and diet is not about any particular food. It is all about balancing foods to stay healthy. Brown rice often comes into the picture when we are unwell, as a way to stabilize and stop force-feeding ourselves with junk, at least until we can see where and just how we are out-of-balance. When I overeat and get carried away with food or life, I find the best thing is to just stop eating for a couple of days and let the smoke clear. After fasting (at least for me), brown rice (especially short-grain brown rice) is a good food to begin putting back into my system.

For me, Lundberg short-grain brown rice is like the air I breathe or the pure water I drink, a common staple (and stable) food, almost like a wrapper, to which other foods are added. Brown rice is a basic life-food for me, something I always go back to, especially when my health gets sketchy.

Anyway, a macrobiotic diet refers to how we balance foods, and not what foods we eat. The actual foods depend on our locale and the climate, like when it is cold outside I eat more roasted root veggies, oatmeal, etc., and when it is hot outside I eat more yin foods like fruit, and so on. That is the balance I am referring to here. That is macrobiotics; it's not just about eating brown rice, although fresh-cooked short-grain brown rice, if you know how to cook it, is mighty special.

In fact, I am eating some right now as I write this and the high temperature today looks to be a balmy 12-degrees out. On a plate in front of me is fresh-cooked Lundberg short-grain brown rice, steamed broccoli and cauliflower, with small pieces of marinated (and lightly fried) tempeh with a dribble of South River organic tamari over all. I can already feel it counteracting the out-of-whack-ness I have been feeling lately. Is food medicine? Actually it is, and we can learn to be our own doctor, at least preventively.

What do you remember about the natural food movement in Ann Arbor?

[Here is the Eden Foods logo I designed, on an early poster advertising Eden Foods. And no, the photo of stuff drying in our yard at 1041 N. Main Street are not baby diapers, but various seaweed from offshore the coast of New England. This must be in the early 1970s.]

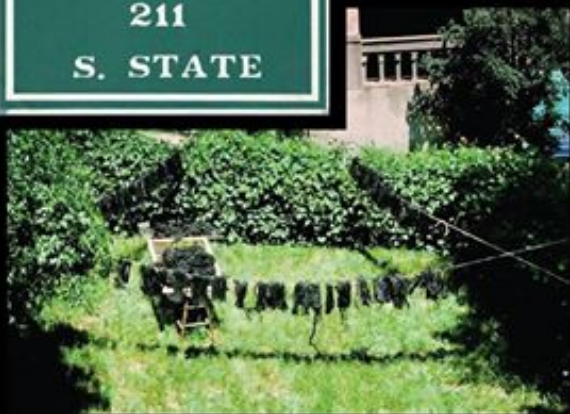
**EDEN
ORGANIC
FOODS**



**211
S. STATE**

BELOW: No, its not baby diapers drying out in the yard, but seaweed shipped in from the coast of New England hanging in our yard at 1041 N. Main Street in Ann Arbor in the early 1970s.

LEFT: The original logo I designed for Eden Foods when, as an astrologer, I was asked to pick the incorporation date for the company, which was Nov. 4, 1969. Here is a poster I did for them back then.



BOOK REVIEW:

KARMA" BY TRALEG RINPOCHE

January 5, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I don't generally do book reviews. In fact, I don't often read books anymore, aside from the various Tibetan Buddhist pith texts and teachings. Yet, as it so happened, I found my way to the book "Karma, What It Is, What It Isn't, Why It Matters" by the Ven. Traleg Rinpoche. It is the last book he wrote before he suddenly left us and passed on. What a shock that he was gone and still so young!

So, this is not just a book "review," but rather a book discovery and somewhat of my celebration at finding it! It is more useful to me than hundreds of Buddhist books that I have read in.

I must say, having read, studied, and at least looked through many hundreds of Buddhist books, I can think of no modern book on Vajrayana Buddhism that put me to the floor like this one. None. This is beyond any expectations I might have had for a modern book.

In the truest sense of the word, this is a seminal book. Often, a single sentence is enough to send me off into deep reflection. I can't explain it, but at least I can tell you folks about it. You can see for yourself, if you wish.

The title is “Karma,” the subjects covered deeply include not only karma but the bardo states, rebirth vs. reincarnation, and a lot of other very direct explanations of questions I have pondered for a long time.

I have had a chance to meet Traleg Rinpoche a number of times over the years. He and his wife Felicity were guests in my home and at our center. I have, of course, taken teachings from him. I last saw Traleg Rinpoche in 2004, in Kham, Tibet, at his ancestral home, Thrangu Monastery, where he is the main tulku (incarnate lama) for that monastery. His incarnation goes back to the time of Gampopa. Traleg Rinpoche was accorded the title Kyabgon by the 16th Karmapa, a title retained by very few lineage holders. In other words, the Traleg tulkus are very high lamas.

Anyway, In Tibet in 2004, Traleg Rinpoche was there for the blessing and opening of the great shrine room, a new gompa that was later destroyed (along with the entire monastery) by the huge earthquake in 2010.

At that time, I met with Traleg Rinpoche in his quarters in Tibet and also watched him teach and lead many hundreds of monks in meditation in the new very large shrine room, where he remained in Mahamudra Meditation for a very long time in front of us all. It was stunning to see and actually be there.

I include a photo taken at the time. Not sure who took it, one of our party. Traleg Rinpoche is sitting in meditation in the center throne. There are hundreds of monks all around him. My own teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche was also present as well as

many from our sangha. I will try to write a blog about all of this soon.

And here is the cover of this book (lower-right corner) he left for us, the last he ever wrote. Wow! What a book, at least for me. I found that it was best if I read this book from the last chapter, backward. The beginning parts are more historical and perhaps (for me) a little bit formal, but as the book progresses, Traleg Rinpoche gets more and more direct until by the end, he offers a torrent of direct meaning and instructions that I simply can't put down. I read it, chapter by chapter, from the back to the front, and by the time I got to the first chapter, I was fully ready to appreciate the history and introductory remarks. And then I read it again and again.

As you see, I can recommend this book with all my heart. I can't promise that you will tune into it as I did, but I can assure you it has what we all are thirsting for within it. It is not just another book on Buddhism. This is pith instruction!

BREAKING THROUGH

March 5, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Insight Meditation, and non-dualism in general, is generally said to be ineffable, beyond words and concepts, certainly beyond dualisms by definition. After all, that's the whole point. So, attempting to describe or express the results of Insight Meditation may be a fool's errand, but if so, I am not the Lone Ranger. There is a whole library of similar attempts in the Tibetan Buddhist literature. Do they help? They helped me. Of course, I didn't KNOW what they were talking about, but it was comforting that they did appear to know.

We live in a world of our own dualisms, the "me" and the "them," the constant drawing of lines, the endless separations, judgments, biases, likes and dislikes, and prejudice. We have painted ourselves into our own corner. It is because of this kind of behavior that the preliminary practices are required. Like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, we resolve the dualistic differences, one by one, until there is nothing left to resolve and our mind comes to rest.

Seeing beyond differences, beyond dualisms, and beyond relative truths, is what Insight Meditation is all about. I have pointed out earlier that all of the preliminary practices, including sitting meditation, are purification practices, working to resolve the

differences between the me in here and everything else “out there,” what are called dualisms.

I like to say that Insight Meditation (and the recognition of the true nature of the mind) are a little like brain surgery, only here the teacher is trying to tweak or snap our mind out of its dualistic habit of separation into unity, or, as Sir Edwin Arnold wrote, “The dewdrop slips into the shining sea.”

The more we purify our dualisms, the closer we are to having the actual nature of the mind pointed out to us. When we are ready, when we are purified enough, all it takes is a realized master to kind of jar or jog us into grasping the true nature of the mind. It’s not like it is far away from us, but rather just too near to see.

To me, it is like those old figure-ground paintings, where you have a painting, and embedded within that painting is another image that is practically invisible until it is pointed out. However, once it is pointed out, you can see the embedded image every time you look at the painting. “Recognition” is like that.

It is the job of the dharma master to very carefully tweak us into seeing the actual nature of our own mind, rather than what we have been fixated on up until now. Of course, we have to be ready or the teacher can point it out all day and we don’t get it. In the lineage I train in, the realized teacher and the earnest student have a very special bond called “Samaya,” where there is total mutual trust. This is an integral part of Vajrayana Buddhism. Let me give you a personal example of that trust.

Anyone who knows me knows I don't feel a need to travel or like to even leave home for the nearby grocery store. I am mostly content right where I am. So, in my once-a-year interview with my dharma teacher, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, the time he suddenly told us to go to Tibet to see His Holiness the 17th Karmapa was a total shock, and he meant right away, within a month. However, I went to Tibet with most of my family within a month. That is an example of the kind of trust that is required. Most relationships don't have that kind of trust or bond. When I think of Samaya, I can't help but remember a line from the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa:

“The bad news is that you are falling through space without a parachute; the good news is that there is no ground.”

Samaya requires that kind of trust. My point here is that once we have mastered Tranquility Meditation, we are ready to begin our training in Insight Meditation. Some lineages teach both Tranquility Meditation and Insight Meditation at the same time, but our lineage does not. I came up with an analogy as to why we do them in succession, first learning Tranquility Meditation and only then learning Insight Meditation. If we are trying to thread a very fine needle, but have very shaky hands, Tranquility Meditation removes the shakiness, so that we can thread the needle (Insight Meditation).

The problem as I see it is that there are many ways to learn sitting meditation (Tranquility Meditation), including books, lectures, teachings, etc. However, when it comes to Insight Meditation (at least in our lineage), we cannot learn it on our own, but require an

authentic realized teacher to point out to us the true nature of the mind.

So, I can't suggest books for you to read on learning Insight Meditation, but rather you must find an authentic teacher (one that you can work with), and that is not an easy task. There are many other traditions of learning Insight Meditation, but they are very different from actually working with a realized teacher – IMO, no comparison.

So, I wish I had better news about how to go about this. We are so used to books and classes, that it brings us up short to have to mix our mind with an actual living teacher. Even finding one, meeting one, asking to be taught, etc., all require bravery and daring on our part.

In my own case, my instruction in Insight Meditation (as part of Mahamudra Meditation) was a product of a small group teaching to advanced students by Khenpo Rinpoche, in addition to personal interviews. It is important to understand that the pointing-out instructions are something that we may have to experience many times, until we get it. I am sure that Rinpoche presented it properly each time, but that is only half the story. It was up to me to somehow prepare myself to receive the teaching, and that took time.

I first began to grasp the teaching during what is called the Analytical Meditation of a Pandita. After years of managing to ignore what I felt was too conceptual, at long last I finally realized something about what was being pointed out. This was the beginning

Next, I spent three years of intense practice, where instead of just putting in time on the cushion, I found ways of practicing off-the-cushion in what is called Post Meditation, i.e. all during the day. This was very helpful, but still not enough to reach any kind of break through.

And finally, thanks to some personal difficulties and misfortune, I was plunged outside the box and forced on my own into what was personally a very hard time for me. However, the result of that hard time was to sober me into enough awareness that I grasped at least a little bit of the second part of the teaching, what is called the Meditation of a Kusulu.

Now, in the first part (the Analytic Meditation of a Pandita), I was aware of what was happening, but the second part, the Meditation of a Kusulu, I was all out, fully extended in the moment and beyond doing much conceptualizing at all. In fact, it took the visit of a close friend of mine, a Tibetan lama, to point out what was going on with me.

Once I grasped that, it took a few years for me to fully respond and sort out what had happened with me. So, at least for me, all of this took time and practice. Perhaps, I will close this series with yet another blog, where I share IMO the benefits of this type of Insight Meditation.

BRILLIANCE

January 24, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Below is an image of Saraha, one of the 84 Mahasiddhas (Indian saints), all of which were lay people, rather than monks. He wrote or spoke:

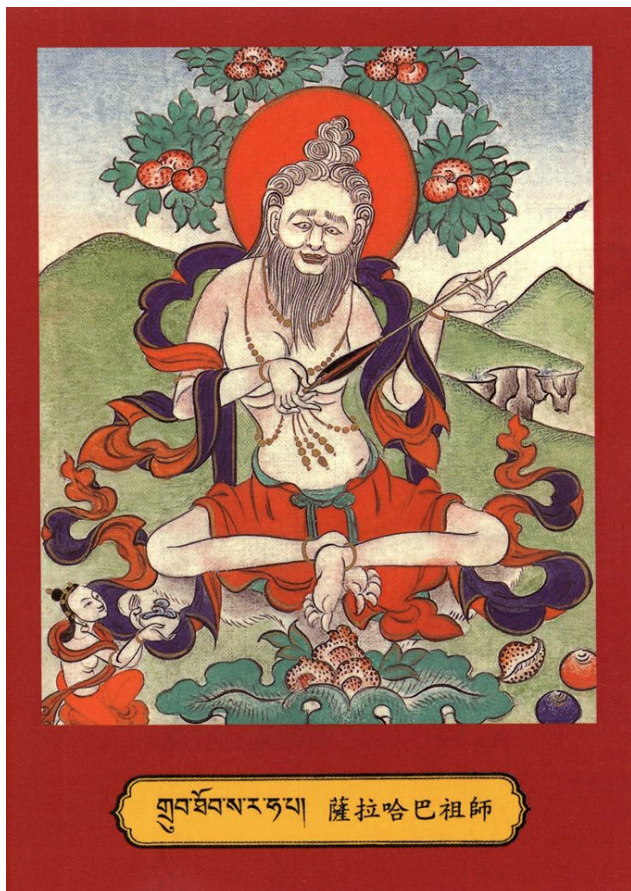
“Analyze your own mind
With total Mindfulness.
Nothing will be revealed to you
If your mind is distracted.”

A quote from the book “Moonbeams of Mahamudra,”
by the Ven. Traleg Rinpoche.

First we learn mindfulness (Tranquility Meditation), so our mind will not be distracted, and then we learn Insight Meditation. When most folks say “meditation,” they are thinking of Tranquility Meditation, which calms the mind, allowing it to naturally rest. Once the mind is calm, then we can do Insight Meditation.

Few really know of Insight Meditation, much less how to do it. And there are dozens of different techniques for Insight Meditation and many are not even similar. The particular form of Insight Meditation that I have learned is from the Kagyu Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, in particular it is part of Mahamudra Meditation.

Insight Meditation is learned through the blessings and instruction of an authentic teacher. By “authentic,” we mean that the teacher has mastered this form of meditation and can point out how to practice it to others. Explaining Insight Meditation defies words. It is, without a doubt, the most useful, valuable, and brilliant tool I have ever known. It lights up my life.



ལྷོ་ཐོག་མ་ཉལ། 薩拉哈巴祖師

“CAN’T TAKE THE COUNTRY OUT OF THE BOY”

February 27, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

There is an old saying that “We can take the boy out of the country, but not the country out of the boy.” What about the same idea, except with Tibetan Buddhism and Dharma in America? Eventually we will have American Dharma, but before that, how do we get the Tibetan culture out of the dharma, and should we even try?

My own personal Tibetan teacher is conservative in this regard. He has had us do our practices in the original Tibetan, rather than through one of the many English translations of Tibetan. When asked why we do it in Tibetan, his answer (not his words) is that we are playing it safe. Should there be something in the Tibetan version (because it has been recited for so many centuries) that rubs off on us, we would not want to lose that quality, however slight.

Rinpoche goes on to say that dharma in English will come not through reading translations of Tibetan texts, but rather when Americans themselves begin to be enlightened and write dharma texts in their own native English, dharma just for Westerners. At the time I heard this, the thought had never occurred to me, that Americans would become enlightened in English. How forward looking!

Meanwhile, like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, most of us are gradually picking through the Tibetan Dharma, removing what is culturally Tibetan, and leaving what is dharma. But, like Pick-Up-Sticks, when we finally remove the last Tibetan stick, there will be nothing left. That's not how the dharma arises. American Dharma will not be some idea of a "secular" dharma. No, it is bigger than that.

"Secular" dharma, a dharma without the culture it occurs in, is not what I am suggesting here, but rather I am looking at a dharma arising within American culture rather than one in Tibetan trappings. A purely "secular" dharma would be something like a "sanitized" dharma, dharma without any spiritual or "religious" overtones. That's not what I am talking about here and I personally don't believe secular dharma exists or ever could exist, and here is why.

We may not want to get down on our knees before any religion, but I seriously doubt that we can become enlightened without prostrating before the shock and awe of the actual nature of the mind itself. The nature-of-the-mind itself is humbling and awe-inspiring to the extreme. It would be just another (and a serious) obscuration that would paint enlightenment as something somehow secular, as if a "secular" Dharma existed or was even desirable. That is foolish thinking.

The dharma is not a "belief" system, not something we believe in or on, any more than we "believe" in the law of gravity, that if something goes up, it comes down. We don't have to take the dharma on "faith," because we can try it out on the spot. The fact and function of the dharma is fully present; it is there to be tried and tested, and we are encouraged to do so. In

fact, we must try it out. Without knowing for ourselves by testing the truth of the dharma, we will never progress.

In other words, dharma is not a religion, and if “Mother Nature” is awesome, then the nature of the mind (from which all of nature and the natural world arises) is awesome, and doubled-down awesome at that. It is ridiculous to imagine that there could be a dharma that is a stripped-out version of Samsara. That dog won’t hunt. Pure Dharma is Samsara realized. It is all about realization. That is true. However, dharma is not some neutralized or sanitized non-spiritual rendition of reality. As they say, natural appearances are not only themselves empty; they are the emptiness itself appearing.

In other words, there will never be a “scientific” dharma, because science itself is a subset of dharma, and dharma not only includes what we call science (like a mother does a child), but also, all that is spiritual within us as well. “Science” will first have to widen its arms to include all that is spiritual, etc. In this case, there is no way to throw the baby out with the bathwater. The dharma is the essence of spirituality itself.

I hope this has not been too abstract. If it has, I apologize.

COSMIC RAY INCREASE

January 28, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I don't blog a lot on astrology these days, although I have studied astrology for over fifty years and am considered an innovator in the field. I was the first astrologer to program astrology on home computers and make those programs available to my fellow astrologers. The company I founded, Matrix Software, which is still going today, is one of the two oldest software companies on the Internet according to an article done for Red Herring Magazine. The only software company older than Matrix is Microsoft. And I am more than just a computer mechanic in the history of astrology. I have contributed a number of new techniques worth considering.

IMO, modern astrology is thoroughly mired in the past with little to no recent innovation that interests me. Although the greatest proportion of my Facebook friends are astrologers, they don't comment much here and have remarkably few real questions. Astrology is somehow "content." I don't intend to "diss" astrologers, but I am "dis"-appointed in the lack of direction, IMO, that I now see happening in field of astrology. As an apprentice curmudgeon, I am entitled to that opinion.

Much of the astrology I have pioneered is not understood and hardly recognized by my fellow astrologers. Take for example, my work on deep-

space astrology and the book “Astrophysical Directions,” which was published in 1976, before home computers even existed. In particular, my work on solar activity and cosmic activity needs to be incorporated into the fabric of modern astrology. I am not complaining, but I am explaining. And I am not the only innovator in this. My friend Theodor Landscheidt led the way.

Anyway, as the recent 11-year Sun-cycle is powering down and solar activity levels diminish, by default another form of radiation is on the increase, i.e. cosmic radiation. And so I thought to post a little something on this for those of you that might benefit from being aware that it exists.

Cosmic rays (and radiation) are highly energetic radiation (protons and atomic nuclei) that shower the earth from outside our solar system; they come from the supernovae of gigantic stars when they explode, and other deep-space sources.

Cosmic ray radiation is a relative constant in our universe, but our exposure to it waxes and wanes with solar activity. In effect, as the sunspot cycle reaches its peak every 11 years or so, the solar radiance serves to shield Earth from cosmic rays by literally deflecting and blocking these rays. And when solar activity is at a minimum, cosmic rays succeed in penetrating Earth’s atmosphere and funneling in through the polar regions. And they reach us!

The qualitative biological effects caused by cosmic rays are being studied, not just as to how they affect astronauts, but how they affect those of us here on Earth as well. These effects potentially include direct

damage or change to our DNA, and so on. For all we know, cosmic events at astronomical distances trigger direct changes in our lives here on Earth. Scientists are busy studying this question. There is no question that they affect us, but how do they affect our psychological and spiritual nature?

My point here is that as the current solar cycle powers down, the increase in the effects of cosmic rays increase, and that increase is itself increasing.

“In 2009, cosmic ray intensities have increased 19% beyond anything we’ve seen in the past 50 years,” says Caltech’s Richard Mewaldt.”

“We’re experiencing the deepest solar minimum in nearly a century,” says Dean Pesnell of the Goddard Space Flight Center, “so it is no surprise that cosmic rays are at record levels.” The bottom line here is that we are bombarded by one of two alternating influences:

The first is the energy of our own Sun, which hurls huge sheets of plasma directly at Earth in the form of CMEs (Coronal Mass Ejections), and these disrupt all kinds of radio transmission, electric grids, etc. And the second influence is these highly-energetic cosmic-ray particles that bombard us in the form of cosmic radiation. That solar activity alternates every 5.5 years with these energetic cosmic rays which literally pass right through us.

Now, these energetic particles (either from the Sun or from cosmic rays) affect us and it is anybody’s guess just how that works on our psyche or spiritually. I have written a number of books, articles, and even videos

on solar activity and how it changes us here, for those interested. Also, included is my deep-space book "The Astrology of Space," a re-work of my earlier book.

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

Personally, I find the effects of solar radiation from our Sun change us more than any other astrological factor. Astrologers need to reflect this in their practice! In fact, the change is so large that we don't even register it, if that makes sense. It is too much a part of who we are. Solar change is, IMO, the primary cause of change in our lives, so close to us that we can't see it and thus ignore it. And solar change appears to be difficult emotionally and psychologically to assimilate.

On the other hand, the effects of cosmic ray radiation seem less visceral, but even more powerful in the kind of radiation it represents. It changes us too, but perhaps more subtly. In other words, solar radiation literally floors us, perhaps sending us to bed with a headache, while cosmic rays pass right through our mental-mesh and we don't even register it physically. But the effects are perhaps even stronger.

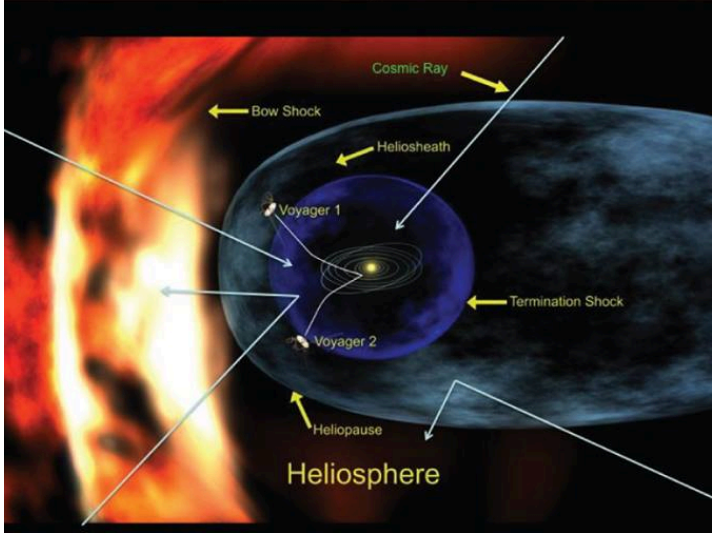
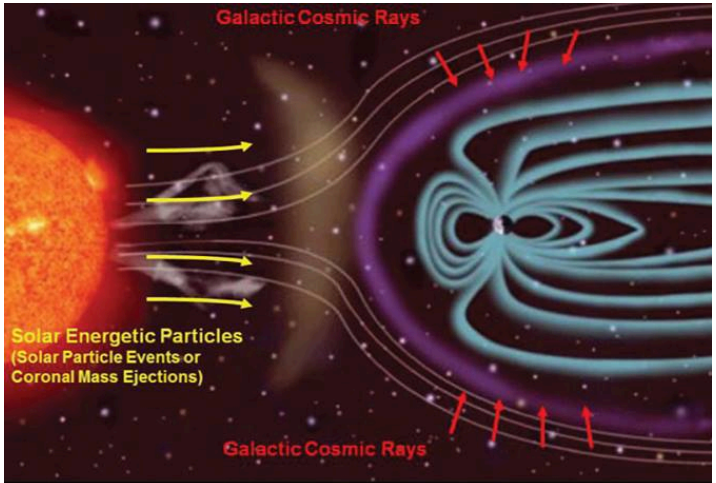
All of this I am writing here is highly theoretical. My gut feeling is that cosmic rays are the most powerful and directly influence us in ways we cannot now imagine, while the more constant solar radiation (the Sun) represents our basic makeup. It is too close for us to even be aware of it.

The fact that not only are cosmic rays on an upsurge (and will be for some years), but that the Sun, in

general, is growing quieter, meaning that the range of cosmic-ray influence also is rising.

This would be kind of scary, but we would do well to remember that these effects have always been there, so this is no “alien” infusion, but an integral part of just who we are and have always been. We “are” ourselves the stuff that stars are made of. We are the intelligent life that we scan the heavens for. And we are the “spaceman,” our own being from outer space. We are (and always have been) in outer space!

If the vast solar activity of our Sun turns the wheel of change in our lives, then perhaps the penetration of cosmic rays every few years provide the vitamins that stimulate what we call “new” ideas.



DO NOT GO GENTLE
INTO THAT GOOD NIGHT
January 16, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

What we have been looking at in these recent blogs are concepts from a particular school of Buddhist thought called Yogachara (yogācāra), which translates simply to “yoga practice,” although here the word “yoga” does not refer to Hatha Yoga’s asanas or physical postures, but rather to yoga in the sense of meditation practice. Yogachara is one of the two main philosophical schools of Indian Mahayana Buddhism, the other being Madhyamaka.

The Yogachara philosophy is renowned for its incredible meditation practitioners and its concern with what we could call “phenomenology,” actually directly looking at the mind and consciousness, as to how it works and is constructed, through actual experience, rather than by conceptual examination alone.

Yogachara is sometimes referred to as the “mind-only” school, but this easily leads to the misunderstanding that Yogachara practitioners think that everything is just in the mind (and empty) and it’s all like a dream and “What Me Worry?”, when actually the Yogachara practitioner’s intent is to communicate that we look at everything through the “filter” of our personal mind (through the mind only), with all of its obscurations, i.e. “see through a glass darkly.”

Although, until now, I have not formally studied the Yogachara tradition, I have been absorbing it osmotically for decades, since it is ingrained in the particular lineage of Tibetan Buddhism (Kagyu) that I belong to. Therefore, directly encountering Yogachara tenets has been something of a revelation to me, but also a sort of homecoming. I belong here.

And driving all this has been the need on my part to learn more about exactly what happens at death, in the bardo states, and then beyond that to some kind of rebirth. After all, I am getting old and will be facing this experience, probably sooner than later.

Of course, what I want to know is just one piece of a much larger puzzle. And to understand that one piece requires grasping where it fits in with the pieces that surround it. I am trying to get the picture, and have been kind of thinking out loud here and sharing my thoughts with my Facebook friends, although there seem to be fairly few of you who are that interested in these conundrums.

As you may know, I have been working hard at sorting out my belongings these last months and passing them out here and there, kind of an introduction to the time when I will have to leave my Self, with all of its warts and blessings, and venture out beyond what I now know. I can't believe that many of you, if you are getting older, are not wondering about some of these same things. You are so quiet.

The thought of leaving my Self, family, friends, life, and body behind and just shoving off into the bardo is a little challenging. And, once into the bardo, comes the moment of complete blocking out (as the Tibetans

describe the turning point in the bardo experience), and then waking back up and somehow entering into a new body, where I will have to create a new Self all over again. All I can say is wow!

It reminds me of the experience when I get on an airplane. There is absolutely nothing I can do, except lean back and try to enjoy the ride because I am in other arms than my own. Actually, I am one of those folks that easily sleeps on a plane.

And so, I am looking at a lot of scenarios and concepts just now. In particular, since my Self is getting ready to go nowhere, I have been looking into what the Yogachara practitioners call the Storehouse Consciousness, which effectively acts as our subconscious. And I am intrigued that this vast storehouse of all our memories, karmic imprints, and, I guess, everything else, operates much like one of those UPS Power Supply, battery-backups, that prevent my computer from losing whatever it has in RAM when the power blacks out. A UPS Backup holds our memories in store, until the lights come back on.

Sounds a lot like what I am wondering about with death and the journey beyond. This Storehouse Consciousness (Alayavijnana) functions like a UPS Backup System, by faithfully preserving whatever it has recorded of “me” and piloting it through the bardo and on into the next life, where it immediately is available as a palette to paint a new Self in just the colors I am most used to.

So, I won't be the “me” you sometimes read here, but hopefully I will be some kind of new “me” all over

again, with at least some of the qualities that I have managed to develop and hone over the last 74 years. I can say this:

The more I study and have real insights into this whole “rebirth” scenario, the more confidence I gradually am acquiring about all of this. And although we each have to face that moment when our consciousness blacks-out, the rest of the experience (as defined by the teachings) we apparently take with some considerable kind of consciousness and ability to think and maneuver. So, I apologize for my concern over all of this, but I do see, pardon my image, light at the end of the tunnel.

And one other analogy that occurred to me while studying all of this, and then I will let you go.

The Alayavijnana (Alaya Storehouse) is like a kind of bank account, into which we are continually making karmic deposits and withdrawals. If our intent is not pure, then that puts an angle or a bit of attitude on an action or experience, and that angle (and its blueprint) is deposited in our karmic bank account. When ongoing life situations arise that resonate with our karmic deposits, a particular karmic blueprint springs to life and puts its spin on our actions, which then tend to be repeated. And the results of each action are themselves recorded and some sense of recursion sets in. It is a real hornet’s nest IMO.

We are constantly depositing and withdrawing from the Alaya Storehouse. As we work on purifying our actions through various mind-training practices, less and less is deposited, and what is already there begins to be used up. Finally, when we are

enlightened, there is nothing remaining in our bank account. It is perfectly empty and cleared out.

With that, I will try to give you folks a break and write about something else, but no promises!

EGO EXHAUSTION

February 1, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The main problem with Ego is exhaustion. I believe we have little to no idea of what our biases and prejudice cost us in sheer physical energy and strength. The Tibetan Buddhists point out, perhaps more than any other fact, that our fixations are what take it out of us. It's not what we are fixating "on," but the fixation itself that is the problem. We are "attached to" or negatively "detached from" just about everything. Its push me, pull you. Deep inside, we long to not have to pull things we like toward us and push what we don't like away from us. That takes energy and almost all of our time. Fixation is "The" primary distraction.

With all that internal pushing and shoving, we are seldom idle. It's not like we are just floating there treading water. Our fixations push and shove us around until all we feel like doing is just lying down and taking a nap. There is just no rest to it.

If we manage to remove our fixation on even a few things, we immediately experience relaxation and rest, something we have seldom to never known. Just think about it. Having an attitude, for or against something, is just aerodynamically inefficient. These attitudes are, well, unnatural; they go against the grain. It takes energy to persist in our fixations and that energy (and effort) itself is an obscuration, white-noise in what would be a peaceful state of mind. What

The solution is not as easy as we might think. Just as the effort to maintain a prejudice or attitude is itself an obscuration, so is any effort to remove it. Like all things dharmic, becoming aware of what we are doing is always the first step.

When we talk about uprooting karma, this is a very subtle process, one that can be difficult to understand, much less do. Karma that is already recorded is not what is uprooted. That karma is already written and will have to endure until it ripens and exhausts itself. What is uprooted (or can be uprooted) is the tendency to repeat that karmic act in the present, not some erasing of what we have already done in the past. This is why practitioners can achieve some realization, but still be inundated by karmic acts they did long ago. That karma still has to ripen before it leaves the system.

To properly understand this, we have to understand something about the Alayavijnana, the Storehouse-Consciousness. Like what here in the West we call the “subconscious,” the Storehouse-Consciousness is where our memories are stored, including all our deeply embedded karmic traces and latent tendencies. The Tibetan Buddhists make a point of noting that while our personal (Self) memories are abandoned at death or soon thereafter, this is not true of our Storehouse-Consciousness, which persists from one life to the next.

Yet, even the Storehouse-Consciousness does not last forever; it just has a longer half-life than our personal memories of our self. The Storehouse-Consciousness is like a vast ship moving through time carrying our recorded memories and karmic traces; it

persists beyond our death and on into our next rebirth. Yet, even the Storehouse-Consciousness is not permanent, but gradually evolves, based on our actions and reactions. Specific karmic traces eventually ripen and are erased from the Storehouse-Consciousness, along with other memories. Everything is in motion, although like rocks, we can't always witness the change.

The point here is that the Storehouse-Consciousness lasts long enough to give us some continuity between one life and the next, even though it does not preserve the sense of Self, what is often called "Soul" to our next rebirth. In fact, the Buddhists point out that this more stable half-life of the Storehouse-Consciousness is what we apparently mistake for a permanent Self. The analogy I like is that of two trains running side by side in the same direction, but at different speeds. The faster train (our Self) assumes that the slower train (Storehouse-Consciousness) is standing still permanently, when in fact it is also moving, just at a slower rate. In this analogy, the speed of the Self in its forgetting is the faster train. We assume, because we can sense the more-permanent Storehouse-Consciousness, that it is (and we are!) a permanent or eternal Soul (or Self), which we are not.

There actually is great beauty in understanding this, but it seems to come in its own time and will eventually dawn on us. In short, we forget the small stuff and rebuild a new Self in our rebirth, a self shaped by circumstances, but also by our own latent karmic tendencies and stains from our previous lifetime. How we get a sustained (permanent) consciousness of Me, Myself and I is anyone's

guess. The simple answer is that we don't. And just about all bardo texts point at a moment of complete blackout in our transition, after which we gradually regain some kind of consciousness, but apparently, instead of looking back at our previous birth, we then are looking forward to rebuilding a new Humpty-Dumpty Self all over again.

Is this clear enough?

THE BUDDHIST CONCEPT OF “SCENTING”

January 13, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I want to continue looking at what there is of us that continues to exist after we die. Yesterday, we looked at the Alayavijnana or Storehouse Consciousness, what Freud would have called our subconscious. This Storehouse Consciousness is beyond our conscious grasp, but nevertheless it influences our actions and contains the various karmic residues that we have accumulated.

In the last couple of episodes, we left you with the idea that, according to the Tibetan Buddhists, our regular consciousness is not anything permanent like we might hope, you know, a “soul” that flits between births, and also that our Self and personal memories (as we all know) decay and are gradually forgotten. And they certainly end at death. I have always found that statement... concerning.

To repeat, the teachings point out that beneath our regular day-to-day consciousness is a subconscious layer called the Alayavijnana (Storehouse Consciousness), which we don't have conscious access to, except through our intuition or whatever.

It is that Storehouse Consciousness that contains all of the remains of our experience, the karmic imprints (good and bad), and it has a much longer half-life, much greater, than our normal memories. In fact, it is

the Alayavijnana that persists beyond death, whereas our personal memories, Self, and persona all are left at death's door, a residue epitaph. In today's blog, let's look in a little more detail at just what the Storehouse Consciousness contains.

VASANAS

The teachings say that what is contained in the Alayavijnana (Storehouse Consciousness) are termed Vasanas, which are defined variously as subtle karmic imprints, latent tendencies, past impressions, wishes, desires, habitual tendencies, and so on. In particular, it is important to note that in all of this our "intent" is recorded, as well, I imagine, as any recording of merit that we may have accumulated.

My dharma teacher once taught that every single thought we have is either, at heart, beneficent or maleficent. I had to check it out and I examined my thoughts carefully for some time, and he is right. Often, even what I think is rather funny has a mean edge (or not) to it. This is something easy for us to check out, and the result for me was kind of sobering. I am not as nice as I think I am.

Another approach is to say that the Storehouse Consciousness contains "Bijas," basically karmic seeds. Yet another (and even more fascinating) description is the idea of what is called "scenting," that the Alayavijnana holds nothing but stains and smells that color or perfume what otherwise would be pure. It seems that the architecture of whatever about us that is NOT pure, whatever is bent and stained, is preserved in the Storehouse Consciousness.

The great Traleg Rinpoche has this to say about “scenting,” in his pivotal book “Karma, What It Is, What It Isn’t, Why It Matters:”

“These impressions, or psychic energy deposits, that carry over are termed Vasanas. In traditional literature, a Vasana is described by the analogy of putting something very smelly, like an unwashed pair of socks, into a drawer. If we were to leave it for months, upon opening the drawer, we would most likely be overwhelmed by the smell. Even throwing them out and doing our utmost to remove the smell seems to have only a marginal effect – the next time the drawer is opened, the smell is still there... the so-called perfume of the Vasanas.”

That description by Traleg Rinpoche is pretty graphic, as is his above-mentioned landmark book, which I highly recommend. Vasanas are latent tendencies, karmic imprints, past impressions, desires, wishes, habitual tendencies, and whatever contaminates or colors our mind. And, as mentioned earlier, Vasanas record our karmic “intent.”

As to what is called “Scenting:” Just as smoking impregnates the clothes worn by someone who smokes, so that we can smell a smoker in a room even if they are not smoking, in a similar way, Vasanas, like a cheap perfume or incense, leave a karmic stain on whatever they encounter. They stink up our life. Vasanas are sometimes defined as “Imprinted-volitions-of-mind,” so it is here that our intent is captured and recorded. I would imagine, but I have not had it confirmed, that any merit we accumulate is also registered in the Storehouse

As to those threaded stories of experience we all carry in our mind that we call memories, some are stronger than others. But memories in general are still relatively fleeting and they don't normally extend beyond death's door. There is a deeper storehouse of life impressions that we don't have conscious access to and, even if we did, they wouldn't represent anything coherent. As mentioned, this is called the Alayavijnana or Storehouse Consciousness, and it contains what are called Bijas or the seeds of our actions, seeds that will sprout and expand as opportunity arises.

In one sense we could call what is stored there our karmic stains, including just how they can repeatedly stain our otherwise pure thoughts. I tend to think of the Alayavijnana more as a karmic toolbox, much like a cosmetic kit, filled with all of the many ways and habits we can stink up ourselves with, but in seed-like or freeze-dried form, ready to expand instantly and shape our thoughts.

VASANA REMOVAL

And this perhaps explains why the removal of these karmic grooves is said to be so difficult, because we are not trying to erase a single stroke of karmic imprint, but rather a deep-down stain or groove that bears our particular signature. Each groove is the compounded result of thousands or hundreds of thousands of the same action on our part, each undermining more deeply the action before it. An

example might be: if every time we run into a certain person that we don't like, we wince and have "bad" thoughts, that imprint further underscores the groove or track laid down previously, and it gets ever deeper and "serious-er."

We can't just undue one layer of that kind of karma with one stroke; the entire groove or mold must be worked out and removed. Vasanas are logo-like iconic forms, pressure-molds that can shape our future actions based on past impressions, a mold or form that can manifest the same bad karma again and again until the mold itself is dissolved. These are stubborn stains, but they can be removed and eliminated from our karmic toolbox.

We all know how hard it is to change our habits. It is the same with removing Vasanas from the Alayavijnana. It takes time and practice, but it can be done. The first step is not to double-scrub our mental self clean, but rather to simply stop recording any more karma by ceasing those actions that create negative Vasanas in the mind. The teachings point out that this is the most positive thing we can do. As Bernie Sanders might shout, "Stop creating the damn negative karma!"

After that, we can undertake a course of mind training to carefully work on and remove our bad habits. It is akin to removing buried landmines in a battlefield, slow and painstaking. With some work, we can remove existing Vasanas and reseed our Storehouse Consciousness with positive Vasanas or, better yet, no Vasanas at all. We can, with effort, change, our personality and become a different person.

FINDERS, KEEPERS

March 8, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I had an odd experience the other day. I was chatting online with a dharma student from another form of Buddhism, and he said something in passing that took me aback. He commented to the effect that we are all “seekers.” Not only are we all seekers, but to not be a seeker in his mind was to somehow have lost something essential. It was like we are obligated to search forever. I have not been a seeker for many years now, and I am no worse for the wear. In that moment, talking to this fellow, I realized that my years of seeking came to an end when I began to grasp the dharma. Before that I was a seeker and I sought.

Anyway, visions of evangelicals danced through my head, all those too-friendly people who knock on my door and ask me if I have been saved. I used to invite them in and ask for equal time; they never stayed long. Theirs is a one-way street. When I tired of that, I now just politely wave them away. I am sure that evangelical Christians are not seekers, but finders, just like me. However, I hope that my love of the dharma comes through as the enthusiasm it is and not as misplaced evangelism. There is a difference. Buddhism does not rob the cradle.

Just as there is no shame in not being a seeker, so there is no shame in being one. We are what we are, rather than what is just considered politically correct

at the time. Certainly I sought; I was a seeker for many, many years, and an energetic one at that. For me, it was not “any port in a storm,” but I had the hope that, somewhere, there was a port for me. I had a spiritual itch that I wanted to scratch.

I was trained as a naturalist since I was a child, so it was just a hop, skip, and a jump to the dharma. After all, nature is but a subset of dharma, and Mother Nature does not sugar-coat things. I was already used to nature’s laws from early-on, so dharma for me was like finding a spiritual version of Mother Nature. I couldn’t be happier to find something I am devout about, but that is also natural and independent of society’s compromises.

Once I realized a bit of the clarity and lucidity that Insight Meditation brings, I could never go back. Without the light of the Mind, my world would be a dark place.

FOLD-UP MY TENT

AND STEAL AWAY?

March 11, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Not likely, right? So, don't worry about me folks. Mostly I write about the dharma and how to go about practicing it. But let's not fool ourselves into thinking that there is not a personal side to our life, one which should not be ignored, much less underestimated. I am not going to shine you on and pretend that our personal equation is necessarily going to be simple, just because we are dharma practitioners, but I agree that it helps.

No one who has ever lived has been able to avoid what has sometimes been called that "terrible crystal," the demise of our person. I mentioned it in yesterday's blog, not for your condolences, but to remind myself (and perhaps some of you) of the physical cost of life to each of us. And the bill comes due later, not earlier in life. I do like to share some of what I personally am going through. For example:

I am amazed at how (even at my age) I keep tilting at windmills, pushing on toward the future as if there was still a lot of it out there. Is it no surprise that every now and then I actually bump into reality, come up short, and have to pull in my horns? I'm forced to back off and simply recalibrate. There is no question that my reach continues to exceed my grasp. Reality sends me a wake-up call time and again, suggesting

that I must scale back and slow down, unless I want to hit the wall at warp-speed. And thanks, but no thanks, to those of you who suggest I go for the gusto and just ram the wall!

I am nothing if, after all these years, I am not something of a sign reader. The doctrine of signatures is how I have scaled across the web of my life, by being sensitive to the signs appearing around me. And this includes the signs of warning that once seemed so far apart, but that now, with age, are clearly coming like the flurry before the snowstorm. I am not blind to the obvious. That's never been my problem.

What is difficult for me sometimes, as mentioned in the previous blog, is to remain aware of the reality, and to not mindlessly slip back into the habit of business-as-usual, the old Peter Pan "Second star to the right and straight on till morning" approach. That's why I practice dharma, to wake up. As a society, what we have not swept under the carpet, we tend to push off into the future. However, as we age, we can no longer ignore the obvious. And since I am on a Disney-film kick here, I need more of the advice like Thumper's in "Bambi," "Wake up, Wake up, Friend Owl."

One day I am sailing ahead, with the spinnaker full out, and the wind at my back. Then, a day later, I'm in dry dock and hardly even afloat. I go back and forth, either full-steam ahead or back in the pit-stop for repairs. We all know how fragile our bones become with age. Well, that's not all. At my age, my whole "jalopy" becomes fragile, and what is possible on any given day turns on a dime, at the will of the least

event. A year ago I fell on the ice and fractured two ribs. That sidelined me for a while – things like that.

I do so many about-face maneuvers these days that, at times, I don't know which way I'm going – stop, go, stop, go. Yet, despite all that, I continue to move down the halls of time marveling at the display. Physical events conspire with age and the bill adds up. So, there you have it.

I know... this may sound like I'm complaining, but by now you should know me better than that. Not complaining, but, explaining. Yes, I am giving a head's up on the trail as I travel it. What I am talking about here, as mentioned above, is what has been called that "terrible crystal," our personal equation and its dance with time. Spiritually, I am fine, yet personally I am like any one of us, I have my ups, downs, and arounds. How are you any different?

FORCED VACATION

March 14, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I have discovered, and once again, that I am at heart a phenomenologist, someone who studies the structure and appearance of consciousness from a first-person perspective. I had a personal health-upset recently and in the melee managed to void-out the sense of Self that I am used to, suddenly finding myself on what appeared, for all the world, like an empty movie set. For one, all the props were gone. My "Self" had just vacated and there I was, once again, wandering in the void. It had been a while. Once I got over the initial shock, it was almost refreshing. Almost.

For a few days I found myself at a loss and had trouble finding my way, pulling my self together. I know enough by now when this happens to just bide my time, for the Self, if nothing else, is a re-animator. It always reboots and repopulates itself, but it takes a while. In computer speak, what we call our "Self" must be in RAM, not ROM, or so it would seem.

So, I felt out-of-sorts for a while, what is called "beside ourselves," but then I automatically began watching the reanimation, as my Self begin to reboot and, before I knew it, I was annotating all this, and (naturally) feeling more like my old self again. My self was coming back online. I don't know whether I

should be happy or sad. I was learning a lot. So, I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't.

And I can't help but recognize what all the Buddhist textbooks talk about, as I witness in real-time that the Self is not something permanent, but something we create out of our various attachments, our likes and dislikes. As I like to say, attachment is the glue that holds the Self together.

Having just lost my sense of Self, as it rebuilds, I can't help but see how it repaints itself, layer by layer, much like those new 3D printing machines, by increments. Of course, the Buddhists point out that the Self is nothing but an accumulation of our attachments, our actual likes and dislikes. It is one thing to consider all this abstractly from afar (to read about it), and quite another (as in my recent experience) to actually have my sense of Self blown out like a candle, leaving "me" in an empty mental desert, devoid of any context. It was a revelation to witness that what suddenly disappeared in a puff of smoke was something that I must have created, for example, like most of my sense of forward motion, my direction, and all the veneer that had accumulated from that momentum. I am really much simpler than all that.

Anyway, after my sense of Self was shattered, all of that elaborately-constructed context was suddenly gone, if only momentarily or for a time. Any sense of direction I had up to that point just vanished, leaving me stranded, with virtually no sense of Self and at a loss as to purpose, the same purpose that had driven me so relentlessly only days before. It took time to

So, it's one thing to be upset by health-related news, but quite another to observe how easily my sense of self was rocked to the core, leaving me stripped of what only yesterday was my inner compass, all that was steering me along through life. Like that last huge Ka-Boom that ends the fireworks display on the 4th of July, I was left listening to the sound of my own emptiness appearing. Now, that's a vacation.

There you have my report. I am still collecting myself, so to speak, hopefully making better choices as my self reanimates.

HAPPY TIBETAN NEW YEAR!

The Year of the Male Fire Monkey
February 8, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Today is the New Moon (9:40 AM EST) and it marks the beginning of the Tibetan New Year, in this case the year of the Male Fire Monkey. Tomorrow; Tuesday (February, 9th, 2016) is the official Tibetan holiday to celebrate the New Year called “Losar.” As an astrologer who has studied Tibetan astrology, perhaps I should say a little something about the Tibetan New Year, and tell a few stories. First, some stories.

As an astrologer since the 1960s, of course when I first began meeting the Tibetan Rinpoches I wanted to know about Tibetan astrology. I soon found out that every Rinpoche, lama, monk, and lay Tibetan person uses astrology, and often at that. Most carry around with them an astrological calendar. Of course, that thrilled me because most Americans raise their eyebrow when I tell them I am an astrologer. That’s the good news.

The bad news is that although Tibetans all use astrology, finding one that knows about the calculations is very, very hard to do. And I tried. First, I would repeatedly approach every rinpoche I met (when I dared to and the moment was right) and ask them about astrology. As mentioned, almost none of them could tell me the calculation details. At first, I

just thought it was all so very secret and they were just being polite, but over time I came to understand that they really did not know how their almanacs were calculated, so that was a dead end.

As for myself, my brother Stephen and I had published a yearly astrological calendar since 1969, and all that. Next I found a Buddhist monk living at our monastery above Woodstock, New York that knew astrology. His name was Sange Wangchuk. We became friends, good friends, and Margaret and I invited Sange and his wife Tseten to come live and work at our dharma center here in Big Rapids, Michigan, which they did for a few years. Sange Wangchuk, who had been a monk, was a skilled artist and calligrapher, spoke seven languages, was well-known for his singing of the songs of the great Tibetan saint Milarepa, and on and on, eventually he became the Minister of Culture for Bhutan.

Anyway, Sange and I together worked on translating Tibetan astrology into English, in particular a work by the 3rd Karmapa (Rangjung Dorje). So, gradually I learned and studied Tibetan astrology. I still have notebooks on our work scattered all over the house. It was not long before I began publishing a little Tibetan astrological calendar and making it available to anyone interested, especially to our sangha. But there were problems.

The Tibetans and Indians publish their own calendars, and the use of these calendars, well, religiously. And they are very dogmatic about what they read in them. The problem was that these calendars were calculated for use in India or Tibet, and that meant different time zones. Typically, there were monks

using calculations (like for the lunar phases) in Indian or Tibetan time, but living in America. The times they were using were for the other side of the world, not for here. I would try to point this out, but who am I when they have a little printed book in their hands, and I don't want to make waves. It gets worse.

As it turns out, there is disagreement, even among themselves, about when the Tibetan New Year begins. In particular there is one astrological calendar used by my lineage (Karma Kagyu) called the "Tsurphu Calendar," named after the ancestral home of the Karmapas at Tsurphu Monastery in Tibet, and another calendar used by the Dalai Lama's lineage (Gelugpa) and they don't always agree. In fact they can disagree by an entire month and in fact do, so we have a recipe for confusion. Then, if you add in the intercalary months that can be doubled or cut out, it gets even worse. Into all of that I plunged head first.

Then, I found out that the very few astrologers who had fled Tibet into India, and who knew the calculations, were now very old or had already passed on. However, I found one young monk who had learned the calculations from the older generation, but was not computerized, etc. Of course, I invited and sponsored him to come and live at our center, and we set about to reform the calculations, and that went on for a while. I have many notebooks from that time as well. In the end, after we revitalized as best we could the calculation methods, we found out that they were not perpetual, but ran out at a certain date, with no algorithm to extend them further. That really was an impasse.

I ended up taking all these calculations and traveling to Tibet and presenting them to no less than the 17th Karmapa himself, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, at Tsurphu Monastery, high about the Tibetan plateau at some 15,000 feet above sea level. His Holiness took that all in, thanked me, and gave me the name “Tenzin Nyima,” which translates to something like “Holder of the Sun.”

Some of my work can be found in this free book (827 pages) on Tibetan Astrology at this link for anyone who has a hard-core interest:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Tibetan-Astrology.pdf>

For those of you who would like a perpetual calendar of the Tibetan lunar phases for your dharma practice, here is a 478 page “Dharma Practice Calendar” at this link:

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

And now for what you probably want to know. This is the year of the Male Fire Monkey, officially starting on February 9th, 2016.

Some of the translation work Sange Wangchuk and I did finds this traditional synopsis of someone born in the year of the Male Fire Monkey:

The Male Fire Monkey loves good things and will be wealthy and socially prominent, although somewhat rough in nature. Their average lifespan is about 67

Yang Fire Monkey



South
3-IX



Bing Shen

33

As for the graphic shown here, it was designed by me, along with the rest of the Sixty Year Cycle, the sexagenary table.

The sexagenary or sixty-year animal-element cycle is a cornerstone of Tibetan astrology and is part of Jung-Tsi, Tibet's astrological heritage from China. This sixty-year cycle combines two cycles within itself, the 12-year cycle of animals (Mouse, Ox, Tiger, Hare, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Sheep, Monkey, Bird, Dog, and Pig) and the cycle of the five elements (Wood

Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water). This cycle is also called (mostly by the Chinese) the Great Cycle of Jupiter. In this cycle the 12 animal signs follow one another in strict sequence, with each animal sign taking one year, and these are paired with the five elements, but the elements are repeated twice, so that one element is the same for two successive years. It may be easier to just look at the list as shown below.

Sixty Element-Animal Combinations

	M/F	Ele. Animal	Vital	Body	Power	Wind	La
4	Female	Fire-Hare	Wood	Fire	Fire	Fire	Water
5	Male	Earth-Dragon	Earth	Water	Earth	Water	Fire
6	Female	Earth-Snake	Fire	Wood	Earth	Water	Wood
7	Male	Iron-Horse	Fire	Earth	Iron	Iron	Wood
8	Female	Iron-Sheep	Earth	Earth	Iron	Fire	Fire
9	Male	Water-Monkey	Iron	Iron	Water	Wood	Earth
10	Female	Water-Bird	Iron	Iron	Water	Water	Earth
11	Male	Wood-Dog	Earth	Fire	Wood	Iron	Fire
12	Female	Wood-Pig	Water	Fire	Wood	Fire	Iron
13	Male	Fire-Mouse	Water	Water	Fire	Wood	Iron
14	Female	Fire-Ox	Earth	Water	Fire	Water	Fire
15	Male	Earth-Tiger	Wood	Wood	Earth	Earth	Iron
16	Female	Earth-Hare	Wood	Earth	Earth	Fire	Water
17	Male	Iron-Dragon	Earth	Iron	Iron	Wood	Fire
18	Female	Iron-Snake	Fire	Iron	Iron	Water	Wood
19	Male	Water-Horse	Fire	Wood	Water	Iron	Wood
20	Female	Water-Sheep	Earth	Wood	Water	Fire	Fire
21	Male	Wood-Monkey	Iron	Water	Wood	Wood	Earth
22	Female	Wood-Bird	Iron	Water	Wood	Water	Earth
23	Male	Fire-Dog	Earth	Earth	Fire	Iron	Fire
24	Female	Fire-Pig	Water	Earth	Fire	Fire	Iron
25	Male	Earth-Mouse	Water	Fire	Earth	Wood	Iron
26	Female	Earth-Ox	Earth	Fire	Earth	Water	Fire
27	Male	Iron-Tiger	Wood	Wood	Iron	Iron	Water
28	Female	Iron-Hare	Wood	Wood	Iron	Fire	Water
29	Male	Water-Dragon	Earth	Water	Water	Wood	Fire
30	Female	Water-Snake	Fire	Water	Water	Water	Wood
31	Male	Wood-Horse	Fire	Iron	Wood	Iron	Wood
32	Female	Wood-Sheep	Earth	Iron	Wood	Fire	Fire
33	Male	Fire-Monkey	Iron	Fire	Fire	Wood	Earth
34	Female	Fire-Bird	Iron	Fire	Fire	Water	Earth
35	Male	Earth-Dog	Earth	Wood	Earth	Iron	Fire
36	Female	Earth-Pig	Water	Wood	Earth	Fire	Iron
37	Male	Iron-Mouse	Water	Earth	Iron	Wood	Iron
38	Female	Iron-Ox	Earth	Earth	Iron	Water	Fire
39	Male	Water-Tiger	Wood	Iron	Water	Iron	Water
40	Female	Water-Hare	Wood	Iron	Water	Fire	Water
41	Male	Wood-Dragon	Earth	Fire	Wood	Wood	Fire
42	Female	Wood-Snake	Fire	Fire	Wood	Water	Wood
43	Male	Fire-Horse	Fire	Water	Fire	Iron	Wood
44	Female	Fire-Sheep	Earth	Water	Fire	Fire	Fire
45	Male	Earth-Monkey	Iron	Earth	Earth	Wood	Earth
46	Female	Earth-Bird	Iron	Earth	Earth	Water	Earth
47	Male	Iron-Dog	Earth	Iron	Iron	Iron	Fire
48	Female	Iron-Pig	Water	Iron	Iron	Fire	Iron
49	Male	Water-Mouse	Water	Wood	Water	Wood	Iron
50	Female	Water-Ox	Earth	Wood	Water	Water	Fire
51	Male	Wood-Tiger	Wood	Water	Wood	Iron	Fire
52	Female	Wood-Hare	Wood	Water	Wood	Fire	Water
53	Male	Fire-Dragon	Earth	Earth	Fire	Wood	Fire
54	Female	Fire-Snake	Fire	Earth	Fire	Water	Wood
55	Male	Earth-Horse	Fire	Fire	Earth	Iron	Wood
56	Female	Earth-Sheep	Earth	Fire	Earth	Fire	Fire
57	Male	Iron-Monkey	Iron	Wood	Iron	Wood	Fire
58	Female	Iron-Bird	Iron	Wood	Iron	Water	Earth
59	Male	Water-Dog	Earth	Water	Water	Iron	Fire
60	Female	Water-Pig	Water	Water	Water	Fire	Iron
01	Male	Wood-Mouse	Water	Iron	Wood	Wood	Iron
02	Female	Wood-Ox	Earth	Iron	Wood	Water	Fire
03	Male	Fire-Tiger	Wood	Fire	Fire	Iron	Water

As you can see each year the male and female polarity alternates. The 12 animals rotate in strict sequence, while each of the five elements persists for two years, and then rotate to the next in the element series.

These 60-year Tibetan cycles are measured from the year 1027, the year that the Kalachakra teachings are said to have come to Tibet, although the similar cycle from the Chinese version of this cycle marks the year 1024 as the start.

The difference is three years and that is why the list above starts with the year of the Female Fire-Hare, rather than the Male Wood Mouse. In any case, the difference in starting points does not change what animal-element combination goes with which year.

At the close of each sixty-year cycle, the entire cycle begins again. All of this (and much more) is in my book mentioned above for those interested.

HITCHHIKING WITH BOB DYLAN

March 18, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

In the late 1950s and early 1960s I would hitchhike to New York City often. Back then unless you had some old junker of a car to borrow, you hitchhiked. Heading out of Ann Arbor, the bad places to get stuck hitchhiking were down by the prison in Dundee, Michigan or trying to get around Toledo, Ohio, that sharp left turn. Once you got past those areas, it went pretty smoothly, usually. And we would hang in the Village in New York City.

I remember being there with Perry Lederman and Bob Dylan back in 1961. Lederman is how I met up with Dylan. They were already friends. Perry Lederman was a phenomenal instrumentalist on the guitar. If Dylan and I were in touch, we would still marvel at what a player Lederman was. Lederman played Travis-style, which we used to term '3-finger picking' and his playing was unmatched. Lederman was not a vocalist, and when he did sing it was not special, but he could play like no one I have ever heard. When Lederman took out a guitar, people would listen and marvel. Each song was like hearing a mini-symphony, with an overture, the main them, variations, and an ending.

I traveled with Lederman a number of times and later in 1964 spent time with him during the year I spent in Berkeley, where both of us were living at the time

After that I don't believe I ever saw him again. He died some years ago now and, although there was a CD issued after his death, it was not of his early playing, but something he did later, not representative, a shadow of himself.

Perry Lederman was also expert at finding and selling old Martin guitars, scavenging them out of attics and garages, fixing them up, and selling them. While traveling with Lederman I have seen some of the best and rarest old guitars in the world, like double and triple-0 martins with intricate purfling around the edges, rosewood and ebony bridges, and intricate inlaid necks and headstocks, sometimes with the Tree-of-Life design. It would be hard to put a price of any kind on these guitars today. I had one for a while, an old koa wood Hawaiian guitar. I wonder what I ever did with it? Anyway, back to New York City.

I have memories of Izzy Young and the Folklore Center on MacDougal Street in the village. We would hang out there because we had no place else to go and also because that is where you met other players and like-minds. Back then we all smoked all the time, Lederman, myself, Dylan, everyone. Cigarettes, caffeine, and some alcohol. That was the thing.

I don't know how many days we were in the city on this trip, which was in June of 1961, but it was probably a while. We were hitchhiking and tended to spend at least a day or so at each main stop before moving on. Plus, Lederman's mom lived in Brooklyn. I remember visiting her one time and she served us matzo ball soup at a small kitchen table by a window. I looked out and quietly ate my soup while Perry and his mom got caught up. I don't remember how we got

out to Brooklyn or back to the city. It could have been by bus.

What I do remember is one night during that trip, being at Gerde's Folk City on West 4th Street in the West Village with Dylan. We were all just hanging out. In those days we stayed up late, usually most of the night. Who knows where we would sleep, but it was not often comfortable and we were in no hurry for bed. The particular night I remember, the guitar player Danny Kalb was playing at Gerdes. He was being featured that night or week. Kalb later became part of the group "The Blues Project."

I am sure Kalb was enjoying his prominence and I can remember him playing, the lights on him, and Dylan, Lederman, and I standing off toward the shadows. Perhaps it was packed, because I recall walking around in a crowd and there was not a lot of light. Bob Dylan was not happy about Kalb. I think we all felt that way, because Kalb did have an air about him of 'better than thou', and who could blame him. He was the man of the hour that night at Gerdes Folk City.

I can't remember whether Dylan played a few songs later that night himself or perhaps he or Lederman played some tunes elsewhere. I can't recall. But I do recall his being irritated by Kalb, and dissing Kalb was not hard to do. He was just a little full of himself at the time. After all, Gerdes was 'the' place to be.

Thinking back, I don't think it was jealousy on Dylan's part with Kalb. He was not petty, as I recall. He was probably just itching to let all of us know he was "Bob Dylan" and wondered why nobody could see this right off. Back then (and it is not so different today) if you

had something to sing or had worked on your stuff, you wanted a chance to play and show it off. Dylan was a nervous type and it showed.

Keep in mind that back then Bob Dylan was still trying to find out for himself who he was. This was before he recorded his first album. I can remember another time in Ann Arbor sitting with Dylan in the Michigan Union Grill for hours drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes while we waited for a review of a concert or 'set' that Dylan had done the night before. I am not sure if the set was part of the Folklore Society performance or some other one, but I remember that Dylan was very concerned about how it went over. That is most of what we talked about. He wanted to know how he was received. This was before he had the world at his feet. He put his pants on one leg at a time like the rest of us back then. When the Michigan Daily newspaper finally came out and we got a copy, sure enough Dylan got a good review. With that he was soon at the edge of Ann Arbor and hitchhiking to Chicago and the folk scene there.

Back then there was an established route that folkies like Dylan and myself travelled. It went from Cambridge to NYC to Ann Arbor (sometimes to Antioch and Oberlin) to the University of Chicago to Madison and on out to Berkley. It was the folk bloodstream that we all circulated on, either hitchhiking or commandeering some old car for the trip. Most of us hitchhiked. Early folk stars like Joan Baez and the New Lost City Ramblers did not hitchhike, but they too still sat around with us in the Michigan Union drinking coffee.

And another time, I remember hitchhiking with Dylan and Lederman, heading out of New York City down the road to Boston and to Club 47 in Cambridge. Here was Dylan, standing on the side of the road with a big acoustic guitar strapped around his shoulder playing while I stuck out my thumb. I remember the song "Baby Let Me Follow You Down" in particular. Even though I did not know at the time that this was "Bob Dylan," it still was pretty cool. This is the life we all wanted to live back then. We were chasing the Beats.

And Cambridge was another whole city and atmosphere. For some strange reason I seem to remember the Horn & Hardart automat there, and trying to get food from it. Club 47, like "The Ark" in Ann Arbor, was one of the premier folk venues in the country, even back then. Today it is known as Club Passim.

Cambridge was where we left Dylan that trip. He was heading out West hitching along the interstate toward, I believe, it was Saratoga Springs or perhaps Schenectady, New York for a gig. Perry Lederman and I went on, hitchhiking over to New Hampshire and Laconia to attend the annual motorcycle races there, which is another story. I don't know where we slept at the races. I remember it being just on the ground, but still kind of cold out at night.

And the motorcycle races were incredible. Large drunken crowds that, when the official races were not being run, would part just enough to allow two motorcycles to run first gear, while the crowd cheered. The problem was that the crowd pressed in too close and every so often one of the cycles would veer into the crowd and the handlers would tear someone's

chest out. The ambulances were going non-stop way into the evening. And it seemed the crowd never learned. It was scary and very drunk out. I remember riding around the race track on the back of a big Norton motorcycle at almost 100 miles an hour, not something I would do today.

This all took place in mid-June of 1961. The Laconia, New Hampshire races were held from June 15 through the 18th that year. This would put us in Gerdes Folk city some days before that.

As to what kind of “person” Bob Dylan was, in all sincerity he was a person like any of us back then, a player or (in my case) a would-be player. Dylan and I are the same age, born a month or two apart. All of us were properly intense back then. I was 20 years old in 1961. Imagine!

I vaguely remember Dylan telling me he was going to record an album or just had recorded one; it could have been the Harry Belafonte album where he played harmonica as a sideman on “Midnight Special,” I don’t know. I believe it was later that year that Dylan recorded his first album on Columbia. I don’t remember seeing him too much after that. I was reminded by a friend that I helped to put on a Dylan show at the Union Ballroom, etc.

THE SINGING VOICE OF BOB DYLAN

Something that I got a lot, mostly years ago, was the comment that Bob Dylan really can’t sing. I addressed this in an article I wrote years ago, some of which appeared in the biography of jazz guitar great Grant Green in the book “Grant Green: Redefining the

Forgotten Genius of Jazz Guitar by Sharony Andrews (Grant Green's daughter) and published by Backbeat Books. The full article is called "Groove and Blues in Jazz," which is at this link for those interested, and below is an excerpt:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../Groove%20and%20Blues%20in%20Jazz...>

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 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 velvety-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.

Billie 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 try to grasp that voice), we are 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. Shakespeare was the master at this. You can't read him and remain conscious. He knocks you out with his depth.

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, the opposite of ego. 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.

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[Michael Erlewine is an award-winning archivist of

popular culture and the founder of All-Music Guide (allmusic.com), All-Movie Guide (allmovie.com), ClassicPosters.com, and other sites. An author of a many books on music and film, his most recent book is "Blues in Black and White: The Landmark Ann Arbor Blues Festivals," released in July of 2010 by the University of Michigan Press was picked as one of the "Top-20" books in Michigan by the Michigan Library Association in 2011. He can be reached at Michael@erlewine.net]

IGGY POP: PRIME MOVERS DRUMMER
March 24, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

That's right, Iggy Pop was our drummer. Of course, as usual, I was ahead of my time and he was not "Iggy Pop" at the time, just Iggy. However, I still claim that we named him Iggy. In recent years it seems that everyone from Ann Arbor had the honor to have given him that name. But hear me out. My reasoning is pretty good on this.

When our first drummer "Spider" left the band, we had no drummer. Looking around town we spotted young Jim Osterberg playing in a frat band called the Iguanas. It did not take Osterberg long to see that the Prime Movers Blues Band was a whole other kind of band and take on music. He wanted in and we let him in.

But we didn't really know him yet and he was a wee bit suspect, just because he had settled (up to that point) with being in a frat band. So we called him from day one "Iguana." It was not 100% disrespectful, but it did serve to remind him where he came from. In a matter of days his name was shortened to "Iggy" and that is how he was known from then on until he added the last name "Pop" much later. He obviously likes the name "Iggy." His band "The Iguanas" certainly would never have called him Iggy, and if he had already been called "Iggy," we would never have called him "Iguana" for a time, so I believe we named the Iggster.

To me, Iggy was a lot of fun to be around, never a problem. I don't recall having had a single argument with him, and I can argue. In fact, if I remember right, Iggy was afraid to tell me himself when he finally left our band, and so I first heard it from someone else. Obviously, he eventually had other fish to fry.

And when Iggy joined our band, he was not a great drummer. He was an adequate drummer, but he had never played something as difficult as the blues. I know, most musicians think the blues is easy, the same progression over and over. This just shows how little they know or care to know. Blues are not easy and Iggy found that out.

Iggy had to work on his drumming and he was very diligent in this. He became a very good drummer. The hardest rhythm he had to learn is something called the "double-shuffle." It is a very difficult beat and Iggy learned it from the Butterfield-Band drummer Sam Lay. It took him weeks to learn it, but he eventually nailed it. Iggy was a fine blues drummer.

We played at whatever gigs we could find. For a while the legendary promoter Jeep Holland managed us, or tried to manage us. We were kind of unmanageable. He dressed us in suits and put us on the teen circuit, playing at teen nightclubs around the state. Blues music and the kind of stuff we played really weren't for teens. And back then we would smoke the weed.

I remember we had a pound of really less-than-great marijuana that we kept under the floorboards at 114 N. Division Street, what was called the "Prime Movers House," and we smoked every last fiber of that weak stuff. It was terrible. I can remember one gig out on

the teen circuit, perhaps at Daniel's Den in Saginaw. The weed that night was too good and my brother Dan and I were stoned and on stage. He was the lead guitarist and at that time I was playing rhythm guitar.

We were looking across the stage at one another, eye-ball to eye-ball. Neither of us had the slightest idea what the next chord change could be, at least I didn't. It seemed impossible that we would ever remember it in time. I was freaked. And of course, the song seemed like it was all in slow motion. But, sure enough, when each chord change finally rolled around, by some chance accident of fate the right chord would appear and we would smoothly play it. Try doing that for most of a night.

And Iggy was also with us when we played the Schwaben Inn down on Ashley Street in Ann Arbor. The wonderful blues player from Detroit, "Washboard Willie and His Super Suds of Rhythm," would play on Wednesday nights, and we would play on weekends.

The Schwaben Inn is where the tide of students who came to hear us met the tide of townies who claimed we were one of them. After all, most of our band were townies, not "pin heads" as we called the U-M students. The fights that broke out between the two groups found us cringing behind our amplifiers. As I have mentioned in another blog, there was one fight that took nine police cars to break it up. And this beer hall never dried out. With its low ceilings, it always smelt of wet beer and cigarettes. You had to catch your breath when you first walked into, until you got used to the smell. One of our good friends, Peter Meek, used to man door, I think just for the fun of it.

And Iggy had one other thing going for him that the rest of us did not. My brother Dan, who roomed with Iggy, tells me he had a great big you-know-what, and was pretty pleased about that. I can't blame him. Later on, as Iggy Pop he liked to show it off from time to time.

Folks are always asking me how outrageous Iggy must have been. Not really, folks. Iggy was a nice guy, even a bit shy. He was a gentleman. And with his long eyelashes, the ladies loved him, but he would always let them approach him, and not vice versa. In my heart of hearts, the Iggy Pop that the world knows was something Iggy came up with just for show, not how he was inside. Who knows what he is now, but back then we all loved Iggy. And of course, I have not seen him all these years and assumed he had forgotten us.

However, on April 19, 2011 at the Michigan Theater in Ann Arbor Iggy did a show in honor of our mutual friend (and Iggy's guitarist) Ron Asheton, who had recently passed away. Asheton used to play bass in our band, and was much loved by us. At that event, Iggy gave me a shout-out. Of his old Ann Arbor friends he only brought up my name, which surprised me:

"There is a guy named Michael Erlewine, who had the Prime Movers Blues Band, of which Ron Ashton and I are both graduates of, and so many great musicians around Ann Arbor. It is just endless... Ann Arbor is a great, weird, little town."

Thanks Iggy!

P.S. I recently heard an interview with Stooges guitar player Ron Asheton, who used to fill-in on bass for our band the Prime Movers. Ron passed away not long ago, I am very sorry to say. Here are some remarks that Ron said about the band. I am sorry I don't know who did this interview, but if anyone knows, comment, and let's say thanks!

Asheton: Other than that, my first real professional type situation was in the Prime Movers Blues Band, where Iggy was going to Pioneer High also and I would see him at school... We used to meet down at the Michigan Union and... at that time, originally, he was in the band "Iguanas," but he quit and hooked up with the Prime Movers and they were auditioning for bass players.

The Prime Movers was where I really got in touch with Iggy. He is the one who turned me on for auditioning for the Prime Movers... So I went in one night, played for them, got the job. That's what kicked off my real learning experience of playing music.

Question: What kind of job was that you got at that point with the Movers? Were they playing around a fair amount?

Asheton: Yeah, the Prime Movers were just really taking off. I felt really, wow, I was blown back. At that time they were accomplished musicians, so what it did for me... I would either skip school or every day after school I would just go and practice. It's the house you live in now, the Prime Mover House. Right in that room, for hours every day. They taught me a lot until... they were so much better and more accomplished than myself at that time, and they

eventually copped to Jack Dawson for a bass player, who was more their age group and much finer a player than me.

Question: How long did you play with them?

Asheton: I think I was in the band for like six months and then after ... I saw it coming... and then after the boot I still hung around, did equipment, went out on their gigs and they let me sit in for a tune or two. They would even do things like tell their bass player Jack that practice was an hour later so I would get to play for an hour with them. And I still worked out with Iggy on drums, helped him learn the double-shuffle, play some bass while he practiced his ass off every day learning the double-shuffle.

Question: So the Prime Movers Blues Band that was really nice, eh?

Asheton: Oh that was a great band, the Prime Movers Blues Band.

Question: People speak really highly of Michael and Daniel Erlewine?

Asheton: Yep, I learned tons from the Erlewine brothers. That was my first real foot into the reality of actually being in a band, you know, and having the experience of...With Dave and Scotty it was like basement things. We weren't ...none of us were good enough to get that real hit from playing in a band, but the Prime Movers was like...whoah...They would do like all the blues tunes ...they got more blues, just more into the solid blues.

Question: Where did the Prime Movers play?

...Those guys would also do bars like they did two weeks in Grand Rapids at this bar. We lived above it.

Question: That was a college bar then?

Asheton: No, it was just, whoah...all types. It was just like this redneck place... there were a lot of close shaves with drunken redneck types and the Erlewine brothers, with their long curly hair. They would be ... guys would get drunk and call them "Hey, Brillo head" or "Hey nigger hair" or something like that. It was a lot of close shaves, but it was fun. You would just get so plowed and transcend the danger. There was always that edge that there could be a fight any second, you know.

[Not sure who took this photo or at what venue it was taken.]



INSIGHT INTO HEAVEN

March 6, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I have pointed out in the last few blogs how what are called the Preliminary Practices (and basic Shamata sitting meditation) are, for all practical purposes, purification practices. By “purification,” I don’t mean burning at the stake, but rather the removing of dualistic concepts, like our knee-jerk reactions, likes, dislikes, biases, prejudice, etc. And this in preparation for Insight Meditation (and beyond), what are called non-dualistic practice.

I find it humorous that there is so much reference to turning the wheel of the dharma. My joke to myself is that, like any other wheel, it has to be turned and my guess is that eventually we turn our own wheel. By that same token, if we don’t turn the wheel, it is going to just sit there and wait for us to turn it. While I chuckle at that, it probably is true as well.

Certainly, in my case, although not intentionally (or was it?), I let the dharma wheel sit there for a very long time, imagining that someone else was going to turn it for me. That probably was a hangover from my generation’s assumption that the world owes us a living. Every generation does that. I was happy with the Buddha turning the wheel of the dharma, but not so comfortable with the idea that I could turn the dharma world, or had to.

Perhaps I spent decades “Waiting for Godot,” when it came to dharma progress, assuming that, certainly, someone was coming to liberate me, someone other than myself, of course. It’s true that the Buddha left us the instructions, but he made no promises to enlighten us himself. The dharma is very much a do-it-yourself project. If we don’t do it, no one else will, and nothing will happen.

As it turned out, I did a lot of dharma practice, many decades of it, but nothing too much did happen. Of course, I was going through the motions, but perhaps it was more like following instructions, going to school, doing what was asked of me. I certainly did not get outside of the box, and assumed that doing what I was asked was enough.

It takes more than that, however. We have to make the dharma our own, which involves not just following rote instructions, but making those instructions into something we can understand and act on -- our own words. They have to make sense to us. So, there is a bit of a dilemma here. On the one hand we want to stay within the tradition, yet at the same time we have to tailor the dharma to fit our personality.

Being a good student does not just mean learning by rote, but also daring to make the tradition personal to us, daring to try on the dharma and tailor it to ourselves until it fits and makes sense. We have to feel comfortable in our own skin. The dharma is not just a skin-tight coat tailored to fit us; rather, it becomes our skin itself.

There comes a point when we stop reading dharma books, stop just following along, and start actually

getting the idea. The dharma for us is no longer Tibetan, Indian, or any other culture but our own. We no longer need an interpreter, don't depend on translations, etc., because we are grasping the dharma directly, living it.

Insight Meditation is as close to heaven as I know, because it is mainlining life, a direct connection with the mind itself, with no filters. It is self-explanatory.

INSIGHT MEDITATION

March 4, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Abstract: I don't want to get too technical, but in my experience, traditional sitting meditation (Shamata in Sanskrit) is a "relative" practice (i.e. dualistic) in which we become aware of our thoughts and distractions while attempting to concentrate or focus on an object, either form or formless. This is a purification practice.

In this relative process of sitting meditation, being distracted by thoughts, etc. (me and them, etc.), we gradually become aware of and begin to remove the duality between our "Self" and whatever at the time we consider external, like thoughts, interruptions, concepts, mind-wandering, and so on. When the dualism of these distractions are resolved and come to rest in a non-dualistic state, then we have completed the Tranquility Meditation practice.

OK, now moving on with the blog: What happens when we finally actually master basic sitting meditation (Shamata) and are able to allow our mind to just rest? The next step in dharma practice is what is called Vipassana or Insight Meditation. Now, I do have to make something clear. Just as there are many forms of Buddhism, but only one Dharma, so there are a great many practices that go by the name "Insight Meditation," (Vipassana), and they may or may not have much relationship to one another.

I can only offer a general explanation of how I was taught Insight Meditation. And let me start out with what will be for many of you a real deal-breaker, but something that it is important to understand anyway. In our tradition, we don't teach ourselves Insight Meditation. In fact, the pith texts by the great Indian Mahasiddhas don't beat around the bush; they clearly state that Insight Meditation, insight into the true nature of the mind itself, can only be realized by an authentic dharma master pointing out to us the actual nature of the mind. The teacher points it out and we may or we may not be able to get it.

Before you tell me that your introduction to Insight Meditation is not like what I will be describing, please remember that I told you so at the beginning of this article. In the Kagyu Lineage in which I have been trained, Insight Meditation is part of Mahamudra Meditation, the pinnacle of mind-training for all Kagyus. And I am not about to try to go into detail about it here. That is between you and an authentic dharma teacher to experience. I can, however, say a little bit about Insight Meditation, in general.

Basically, Insight Meditation has two parts in our tradition, both of which are very important. The first is called the Analytic Meditation of a Pandita, and the second is the Resting Meditation of a Kusulu. The Analytic Meditation of a Pandita appears to be a more scholarly analysis, like so many other Buddhist analytical teachings. However, unlike the more traditional scholarly teachings, this particular approach is not what it appears. It appears to be putting us through a lot of intellectual examination, but in reality it ends up standing intellectual examination on its head. The teacher walks us through an intense

series of analytical examinations that encourage the student to actually begin looking at the mind itself.

The second part of introducing Insight Meditation is the Resting Meditation of a Kusulu. This second part is anything but scholarly. In fact, it is more what we would recognize as Insight Meditation, using the mind to directly look at itself. In both the first and the second part, it is the task of the authentic master to point out to the student the nature of the mind, and this is often not just a walk in the park.

Taking my own case, I certainly did not get anything pointed out to me when my Rinpoche first gave the Pointing Out Instructions. Rinpoche pointed out, but I saw or got nothing. And, sad to say, at another point, one the Heart Sons of the Karma Kagyu Lineage, one of the Four Regents of the Lineage, took me into a room with him, sat me down in a chair, and did his very best to point out to me the nature of the mind personally. As for me, well, I just sat there. Nothing happened. I was not ready. I had not finished enough of the purification practices to “get” it.

That is why there has to be some humor in all of the old talk about the hidden secrets of Tibetan dharma. The secret is that there is no secret. Everything is out in the open. What is missing is our ability to grasp the obvious. I remember that one time Rinpoche called us the “stragglers,” the ones who, in all the time there has been, have never managed to grasp the nature of reality, the true nature of the mind, try as we might. Intellectually perhaps, but in terms of actual realization, nada.

So, my point is that, while it is the task of the authentic master to point out to us the nature of the mind, it is also the task of the student to be ready to receive the pointing-out instructions. Luckily, some years later I did manage to grasp a little something as to the mind's nature.

To sum this up, learning Insight Meditation marks the end of what are called the relative practices, "relative" meaning dualist practices of purification, i.e. removing the "me and the them" of dualism. Perhaps, I will say something in another blog on the results of Insight Meditation, if there is interest.

“IT ALREADY HAS PERFECTION”

February 27, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

People think that to be a writer, first you have an idea, and then you write about it; you write it down. That's not how it works in my experience. I don't start with an idea. I start with a feeling. First, I feel like writing... anything. I am in the writing mood and, when in that mood, I could write, as mentioned, anything. Another way to say this is that anything I write, will be (at least for me) “good writing.”

I am always reminded of a line in one of Franz Kafka's journals, which said something like “Each line I write, it already has perfection.” I must say that it took me many years to figure out what he meant, but I did figure it out. What Kafka was saying was “Each line I write, it already has perfection, BECAUSE I have perfection.”

This is just 180-degrees opposite from what most of us might think we need to be a writer. The general opinion is that we should work on being a writer, learn to write by practicing writing. There is a half-truth to this approach, but it is not what you would think.

Kafka worked not on his writing, but on himself, and particularly on his mind. By perfecting his mind, eventually whatever he wrote was already perfect, because his mind was more perfect. So, yes, Kafka did write a lot, but not because he slaved at being a

writer, but rather because he worked to perfect his mind and, once perfected, as Kafka put it: “Each line I write, it already has perfection.”

That “perfection” is what moves a writer to precipitate clarity into his or her world, a clarity that is not only effortless, but, pardon me for the obvious, clear. That clarity sees through the back of the proverbial mirror. There is no reaction or reflection, just the clarity itself. This kind of clarity is why we write, why I write. It is a window beyond whatever meaning might be there. Yes, the movie reel keeps turning and the story unfolds, but the clarity looks through the meaning, past and beyond the story at absolutely nothing at all. Why? Because the clarity, the “seeing” itself, is greater than any story, plot line, or train of thought. Anything written with that kind of clarity is sealed with that clarity, a signature in itself, and it naturally registers when read.

This is what “meditation” is all about, the clarity and the lucidity; nothing else. And this is why we can’t “work” on meditation; it just happens. What we work on is purifying our mind by removing obstacles to allow that clarity to just happen. When enough obscurations are removed, clarity is all that is left. Traditional Buddhist meditation is about having that clarity. Learning to meditate is about removing the obscurations, and not the meditating practice itself. That is just practice. We practice to remove obscurations, at which time all that is left is the clarity and lucidity. Do you read me?

LIFE CHALLENGES

February 15, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

"If it doesn't kill you, it will only make you stronger."

Oh yeah, I get that, but it seems to kill or confine a lot of us.

I have come to believe that despite appearances we each create our own problems, which are solutions if we can solve them, although they first appear as challenges. I have watched it happen over and over again and marveled at the efficiency of it all. We self-destruct, like a cell collapsing.

We literally create our own situations by virtue of our faults, prejudice, bias, attachments and revulsions, etc., all of which conspire to box us in and then challenge us head-on. The concept that we are our own worst enemy is acted out regularly in 3D.

Incapable of being still, we continue to struggle on, making waves as we go. We like this; we hate that, pulling this toward us, pushing that away. Either way, we only succeed in defining our own box or coffin. The more we struggle or draw lines, the tighter we're bound.

For example, we are offended by someone close to us and cut off our connection, and then proceed to suffer until the situation is resolved. It takes energy to

draw lines, and that energy is then bound-up in our judgment until such time as it is undone. We tie ourselves up in knots with our opinions, good or bad.

We each have only so much energy and we invest it as we will, in either productive directions or unproductive ones. Our ROI (Return on Investment) is up to us. We define it. That same energy either carries us to the next breakthrough or it remains bound in bad choices, opinions, biases, that persist as long as we hold them. That energy is no longer available to us until it frees itself, somewhere down the line. Things “last” if they are done well, but they also last if they are made badly. That is what mindfulness is all about, to make the right choice, what is called skillful means.

Talk about being “uptight.” It’s all up to us. And the worst mistake IMO is to declare ourselves the victim, and the whole world our antagonist. These are “The World Owes Me a Living” folks. By that statement we absolve ourselves of any responsibility, and by that same act insure that we can do nothing about our situation. Do you get this point?

Instead of being responsible for our own life, as we usually are, we decide to make the world and things outside us responsible for our fate, while we play the victim and hope for things to change. It will be a long wait. And it gets worse the more personal it becomes.

The moment we hear someone declaring that they are the victim and someone else (their spouse, etc.) is the cause of all their suffering, you can be sure that they have absolved themselves from any responsibility to do something about their own

condition, gone limp, and thereby condemned themselves to the status quo. They have cut themselves off from themselves, throwing any real possible change into the deepfreeze. It's like we are driving down a rocky road in an old jalopy and refuse to put our hands on the steering wheel and steer. It's a car wreck certain to happen.

Like the newborn child who refuses to breathe and the midwife slaps them on the butt, if we don't respond and instead somehow abdicate our responsibility, life is going to do everything in its power to wake us up, until we wake up and respond.

MAHAMUDRA: AN ALTERNATE ROUTE

January 23, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Here is a little bit of classic Mahamudra-speak from the Indian Mahasiddha Savaripa:

“When we practice looking at the nature of the mind,
But can discover nothing;
That is the greatest discovery!
We see that there is nothing to be seen.”

What follows may seem like a bit of a ramble, but there is an interesting thread here, if you can take time to follow it.

Buddhism study is enhanced by repetition. To me it's like driving in a great circle, especially when reading a pith dharma text. By the time I get back to any one point in the text for the next read, it's all new again, like seeing it for the first time. Either that or I am just getting old!

And when I stop to think what would be the best theme for a blog here on Facebook, it almost doesn't matter because, like the old saying “All roads lead to Rome,” all dharmic themes, sooner or later, lead to recognizing the actual nature of the mind -- every last one of them. There are only interesting disguises for what turns out to be an identical theme. There is nothing we have to do but recognize the true nature of the mind, nothing at all. And how do we do that?

Well, that's the big question. If it were easy, we would all have done it by now, so what's the holdup? The answer, according to the Mahamudra teachings, is a two-step, and "watch that first step" holds true here, that first step being to learn basic Tranquility Meditation (Shamata).

Unfortunately, right now in our history as a nation, we are just trying to sort out what meditation is. There is a circle of confusion that obscures what otherwise should be a clear path through learning beginning meditation. And it's here that we are kind of stuck.

As mentioned earlier, there is only one enlightenment, but many paths to it, all of which necessarily go through (like threading a needle) the process of actually recognizing the true nature of our own mind. And to get to that Recognition usually requires two steps, learning Tranquility Meditation and then learning Insight Meditation. The analogy I like as to how these two basic kinds of meditation relate is: it's like trying to thread a very tiny needle with shaky hands. Tranquility Meditation removes the shakiness of the hands so that we can thread the needle, which is Insight Meditation. That is the traditional order in which they are learned, Tranquility and then Insight Meditation, but that is not the only way.

Some folks manage (with the help of an authentic teacher) to first learn Insight Meditation, which in its wake then manages to bring about Tranquility Meditation naturally. That's pretty much how I learned it, Insight and then Tranquility Meditation.

To quote the Ven. Traleg Rinpoche:

“Enlightenment may be the most important thing within Buddhism, but there are many different ways to attain it. We can do tantric practices; we can practice analytical meditations that break the phenomenal world down into minute constituents, or meditations that recognize those constituents as having no intrinsic reality. In Mahamudra, we don’t spend too much time analyzing the phenomenal world at all. We simply concentrate on exploring our mind and the various aspects of our consciousness.” -- From “Moonbeams of Mahamudra” by Ven. Traleg Rinpoche.

Mahamudra training is just another approach to enlightenment, IMO, one that should interest Americans, especially the younger generations, as it resembles in some respects a video game in that it is very much an adventure. Traditionally, there are two basic approaches to Buddhist philosophy, one that analyzes the phenomenal world (the so-called “outside” or “object”), and another that works with our own mind (“inside” or “subject”). As far as I can see, this particular world-period we are now in is more prone to the phenomenology of the mind, of the subject, rather than analyzing the object world. No? In that case Mahamudra Meditation may be an easier entrance to dharma practice than other approaches.

Another pithy quote from Traleg Rinpoche on Mahamudra:

“It is important to understand that this Mahamudra system goes beyond Tantra. The text contains a discussion on the relationship between Tantra and Mahamudra, but Mahamudra is not confined to conventional tantric practices. The goal of all higher

tantric practices is to realize Mahamudra, but Mahamudra meditation is a distinct meditative system. Conventional tantric practices include visualizations of deities, mantra recitation, ritual practices, chanting, and so on. Not so in Mahamudra meditation. Mahamudra does not rely on any of these things or even regard them as important. We can practice Mahamudra without practicing Tantra or we can practice it in conjunction with Tantra, but the Mahamudra system as presented in this manual is a complete and distinct practice in its own right.” -- From “Moonbeams of Mahamudra” by Ven. Traleg Rinpoche.

Something we find out only later in our practice is how individual, even personal, our particular practice must become. In fact, it has to be that way. We can drive the main highways, where there are many clear road signs, but sooner or later, in order to get to our destination, we have to leave the expressways and venture down off-roads that may have no signs at all. In that case, we have to finally just look around and decide for ourselves if we are where we want to be.

The word “guidelines” means just that, very broad and general paths that we must all go down. But just as the glove must fit the hand, sooner or later, our practice must be tailored tight to our thin skin. It gets personal, and this is not often spoken of, or at least not spoken of often enough so that it registers.

The dharma is a broad path, but one that ends at our particular address. It homes in to where we must flex and exercise it personally. After all, we are talking about liberation here. This concept is hard to convey. I can remember when I first realized that the Karma

Kagyü Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism was my tribe, so to speak, because it accepted me just as I am which had never happened before. There was enough room for me within this tradition. I felt embraced, warts and all. I was on the inside, and no longer out. Instead of always being the odd-man-out, I found myself inside, and with room enough to breathe. Instead of looking to fit in and belong, it was suddenly “You’re in! Now what are you going to do?”

I remember the last time I saw the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa. I was saying to him much I identified with him. His comment and parting words were: “You know, Michael, were about the same age and are both married men.”

MEETING KHENPO KARTHAR RINPOCHE

February 24, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

With my teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche visiting the Karmapa in India and receiving much deserved praise, it gives me pause to once again realize how fortunate I have been to meet someone like Khenpo Rinpoche face-to-face in this life. And meeting Rinpoche was a life-changer for me. My wife and I have been with Rinpoche now for some 33 years, and he has never changed in how he treats everyone, always with kindness.

How fortunate to have come across someone like Khenpo Rinpoche in the sea of life in which I found myself, although it was anything but an accident. In fact, believe it or not, Rinpoche first came to us in a dream. Here is the story:

It was in the fall of 1983 when I received a phone call from my old friend James Coats of Ann Arbor. He just called to say that I might want to come to Ann Arbor and see this Tibetan rinpoche (we used to go “guru” hopping together). However, at the time I was a businessman, and busy at that. I thanked him, of course, for the invitation, but pointed out that this was a work day and that I no longer was meeting every new teacher that came to Ann Arbor. I wished him well and went about my work.

It was a couple of days later that I had the dream, very early in the morning, just before dawn. I dreamed I was driving to Ann Arbor to meet this radiant golden being, some kind of monk or lama... but resplendent, and then I woke up. I sat bolt upright in bed and tried to reach in my mind to recapture the dream, but too late. And as the dream vaporized, I suddenly felt a great sadness come over me, sadness that my life had become so work-oriented that magical moments or events of wonder no longer really interrupted my routine. All I could see was my life stretching on to a dead end.

The dream was better than life, and I regretted that this was the case. I woke up my wife Margaret, who, amazingly enough, had a similar dream. We looked at one another and I decided that there was no way I was going to work today. Instead, we would drive to Ann Arbor and meet this “golden” being from our dreams that my friend told me was visiting Ann Arbor. By this time, it must have been around 7 AM. I dialed my friend James in Ann Arbor, although I knew he was a late sleeper usually. I said we were coming to meet the Rinpoche. His answer was that we were too late. Rinpoche was leaving Ann Arbor for Columbus, Ohio at around 10 AM, and it is a three-hour drive to Ann Arbor.

My answer to that was that we coming anyway. I just could not rejoin my normal life after the dream. The rinpoche would either still be there or have gone. Margaret and I grabbed our kids and, literally, with toothbrushes in hand we jumped into the car and headed out. We brushed our teeth as we drove, and we drove as fast as we dared. When we finally got to

Ann Arbor, James was down at the end of the long driveway, waiting to flag us in.

By luck, it turned out that the Rinpoche was still there. As we drove up the long driveway I spotted a young Tibetan man with long hair out in the yard. My heart fell, because this was not the golden man in my dreams! I soon found out that this was Rinpoche's translator, Ngodup Burkhar, who became a dear friend of our family. So, there we were, Margaret, I, and the kids waiting for Rinpoche in the living room. And then he walked in.

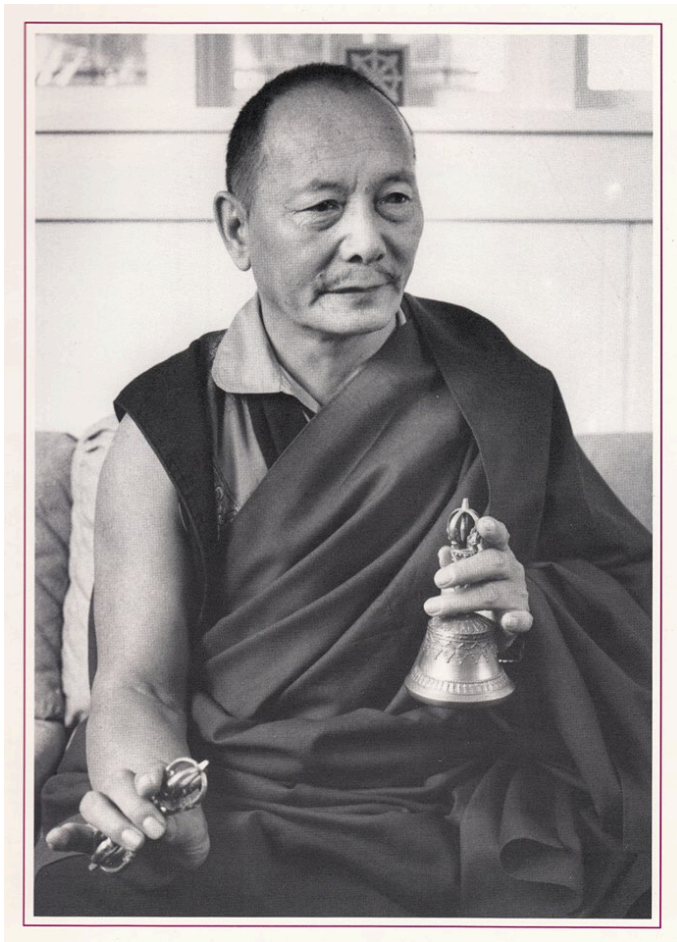
And here was, indeed, the radiant being from my dreams, and in living person. We connected at once and, although the visit was brief, when Rinpoche left on his road trip, Margaret and I were already transported into a transcendent state. And we went around in that state for days afterward, being kinder to others than perhaps we had ever been. Of course, we took this as a good sign.

And from that day onward, we were students of Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. Later, he became my Root Guru, and all that. My kids grew up around and within his influence, his mandala. Of course, to me, he has been the perfect teacher. So, it becomes even more amazing when the Karmapa himself, singles our Rinpoche out as an "incomparable master... a powerful example of being learned, venerable, and good." Indeed, that is just what he is!

We are so grateful for his presence in our lives.

[This photo is one of many that we took at our center, the Heart Center/KTC, here in Big Rapids, Michigan.

This photo was part of a book we did of Khenpo Rinpoche doing mudras. Photo taken by Tom Erlewine. "Mudra" book project by Michael & Margaret Erlewine.]



MIND READER

January 11, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

You guessed it! The Mind itself is my favorite read, and the older I get, the more this is true. To me, this is a bit amazing because as a child, youth, and even a young adult, the mind was not even on the best-seller list. I kind of fell into it. You might too.

And the mind speaks! Fairly early-on in my young-adult life, the mind actually spoke to me a few times, mostly presaging various coming events or confirming one thing or another that I would have to face. Such messages are called “direct voice” by the psychics and I seldom speak about them because they are too out of the ordinary to expect folks to believe. But, at my age, who cares. So, sue me!

The first of these messages was that I did not need to travel and that my own would come to me. Stay put; that idea. I was also told, and this is kind of interesting, that I would have two “gifts” or talents. The first is the ability to stop bleeding. In other words, I’m a natural caustic or cauterizing agent. I am sure some of my friends would acknowledge that. Now, I had no idea where that message came from, except from the mind itself. And I’m no doctor, but if I understand this as psychological bleeding, like feeling sorry for ourselves, etc., then it seems true. Contact

with me does seem to stop the flow of mental blood. You can see it in my writing, if you look.

And the second quality or talent was the ability, using my mind, to fit large objects through small openings. Now, this I have observed many times in my life, when I or others are trying to fit something or other through a narrow channel or space. I do something with my mind and the object just slips through. I know. All this may sound crazy, but why should I lie or not say it? I am old.

Anyway, that's it. Those are my special gifts, as I was told. There was one other direct-voice experience that I had, when I was notified directly, that in order to open my mind as fast as my generation needed it to open, the force of opening would tear through or blow out some of my ability to remember fine details. Actually, it was put to me as a choice I had to make.

But there really was no choice, because the times I lived in were those where my generation was coming out of the 1950s mentality, and a slower, more natural opening, would have taken decades, time which we did not have. I chose to accept the responsibility, in exchange for opening the mind sooner. I have no idea exactly what this meant, but I relate here that it happened.

Perhaps because of this kind of direct communication with the mind itself, over time, I became more and more interested in looking into and being receptive not only to what the mind has to say, but to the mind itself. I guess the word we have for such experience is "intuition," aided perhaps by insight.

I have become more and more intuitive, meaning I have learned (by trial and error) to trust my intuition as much as I do my insight, and this is not a small thing. When my mind “speaks” or intuits, I now listen, and usually act accordingly. The image of a blind person feeling their way along a corridor comes to mind. Intuition is not “blind,” but it is more dependent on feeling our way than is insight. It is another kind of seeing. We have to receive without alteration what is coming from deep within the mind, directly to us. You get the idea.

If I try to mess with or alter my intuition in any way (perhaps because I don't like the message I hear), then, of course, it does not work. Purity of reception is a big factor in intuition. I had intuition before I developed true insight. And “true” insight only came with the help of Tibetan Buddhist mind training and a practice called Vipassana Meditation.

The mind is a vast reservoir, what the Tibetans call the “Wish-Fulfilling Gem,” and so it is. Every idea, invention, thought, and concept in the history of the world came to us through the mind. Of course, we should all know by now that this world we live in is totally a product of our personal mental filter on reality, call it our rose-colored glasses. And some filters are not all that rosy.

Once access to the mind itself was open to me, I found myself using it (going there) more and more of the time. Instead of ignoring the mind itself, which I had done most of my life, I actively began to remove the various obscurations on my mind's filter, one by one. Of course, that just eliminated more and more of the background noise that clouded whatever signal I

was receiving. I found that direct juice was, well, enlightening.

Somewhere along in there, the “me” that was peering into the mind from the outside transformed into identifying with the mind itself, looking inside the mind from the inside, if that makes sense. A better description would be that instead of following the content of my train of thoughts as I always had, I learned through Vipassana Meditation to look right through the thoughts themselves at their intrinsic nature, which is identical to the actual nature of the mind. In other words, each thought became a lens to look through rather than to follow the content it contained.

It is like the old analogy of water and waves. The waves and the ocean on which they arise are both water. Well, thoughts are the waves of the mind and, instead of being followed-on, thoughts can be seen through (like a looking-glass) to their actual nature, which, as mentioned, is the very nature of the mind itself.

Looking through thoughts, nothing is seen but the seeing itself. The “seeing” itself is an incredible place to rest our awareness in, and let it go at that. Rest there. By resting “there,” illumination, clarity, and lucidity arise, and, at least in my experience, pure intuition just naturally takes place. That’s as much as I know.

Now, the Tibetan Buddhists point out that there are different levels in the mind where our memories and fixations are stored. Of course, we have our personal “Self,” which amounts to the sum total of all our

attachments. We should be VERY familiar with our Self, because we personally made it up out of whole cloth. It is literally a spitting image of our attachments, which are the glue that holds the Self together.

However, and this is a big “however,” beneath those layers of Self, is another vast accumulation of our impressions, imprints, and fixations called by the Buddhists the alayavijnana, which is often translated as a “storehouse” of impressions, fixations, and I-don’t-know-what-else. However, to use a computer analogy, the alayavijnana is like a personal hard drive with a firewall and password that prevents easy access to it.

We are already somewhat comfortable with the fact that the makeup of our Self is always changing (impermanent), at a rate (I would guess) that we are kind of used to. In contrast to that, the alayavijnana changes too, but at a much slower rate. In other words, this deeper storehouse consciousness has a half-life that is much longer than those of our normal memories. And the following is important to note.

The upshot of all this, as I understand the Tibetans to mean, is that although we don’t have the password into our own alayavijnana storehouse of impressions, some of what is in there filters up anyway so that we, at least, know or sense that it is there. In fact, again according to the teachings, the fact that we feel or intuit that this storehouse is there, is said to fuel our mistaken belief that our Self is permanent, simply because we sense something with a longer half-life than we are familiar with, our own faltering memory.

Another analogy might be the traditional one of two trains running in the same direction, but one is faster than the other. To the fast train (our Self and memories), it appears that the slower-moving train is fixed and standing still, even though it is moving at its own pace. Other analogies would be how the Sun seems static as Earth moves around it, or the solar system's motion relative to the motion of the Galaxy, and on and on.

The upshot of all this is that whatever we sense or intuit that is deeper than our Self (call it our subconscious, or whatever) appears to be static and unchanging, but in fact it too is changing, but just at a much slower rate. Anyway, the Tibetans say that this relative motion of the two banks of impression (Self and alayavijnana) accounts for our mistakenly believing that the Self is permanent and we assume that it is unchanging like an "Eternal Soul," when in fact it too is changing, only at a rate we cannot perceive.

Therefore, even the alayavijnana is impermanent, but it seems to carry over to our next rebirth more than our personal Self memories, which are left at death's door. And, as mentioned, while we don't have the password to directly access this archived storehouse consciously, nevertheless, it influences us subtly. This, then, is what I understand is laid out in the Tibetan teachings.

I will try to elaborate this storehouse-concept in another blog. Anyway, I know of nothing more informative than learning to directly access the mind itself, minus any filters we can remove.

Michael Erlewine
Sempa Chönyi Rangdrol

That Tibetan phrase under my regular name is my Bodhisattva or dharma name, as given to me by my dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche.

“Sempa” means Bodhisattva or “Compassion Warrior.” “Chönyi” means Dharmata (True Nature of the Mind or Reality), and “Rangdrol” means Self-Liberating. So the whole phrase translates to something like the bodhisattva that vows or intends to self-liberate the True Nature of the Mind.

MIND THE GAP

February 14, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Our expectations and conceptualizations have gotten us to where we are now. The Tibetans would say that in all our lifetimes up until now, this is the best we can do. Or as my teacher once said to us, we are the stragglers, the dregs, the ones who up until now have never managed to realize their own mind and get enlightened. Of course, we are not alone, but that is small comfort.

If you look at where the rubber meets the road in both Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, both point out that our conceptual ideas and expectations are gapped by the actual reality of the mind itself. Crossing or closing that gap is something that those of us who are not realized have so far been unable to do. There remains a gap between our expectations of greater awareness and that actual awareness. Do we somehow intuitively sense the existence of a clarity that we don't yet have? Perhaps. Here is a journal entry that I wrote back in the mid-1960s after some realization experiences of greater awareness that were fleeting, but I wanted them back. Sorry for the florid prose:

"Without this pure awareness, I am lost, alone, and wait on its coming as on the break of day. I hear it breathing, and know I am often only steps away from

the health of the spirit, yet I am bound in my pattern, unable to move the least inch to its home.”

“It knows this. I am trapped in this form, and yet the form holds all my bid for its favor, trapped so close to the Lord of Life. Yet, it is everywhere perpendicular to myself. If I were stronger, I would come at it, and be forever in its hands. More of it, I cannot but cry for more of it. It breathes and moves under, around, and over all of me, yet I cannot grasp it. It is behind me, then in front, yet I cannot hear it directly. It moves in the corners of my eyes, yet defies my pursuit. I must get back to a clear state. The wolves of the flesh howl for my soul, for the beast in us stands forth at every handout and claims the whole. Way be clear to my heart. Open. Open up.”

If we study the Vajrayana teachings of Tibetan Buddhism, we see how all of the preparatory practices (Common and Uncommon Preliminaries) point and lead to what is called the “Recognition” of the true nature of the mind. There is no doubt that “Recognition” (in Zen the word is “Kensho”) is the end of experiences and the beginning of realization, the gateway and first real step toward enlightenment.

That being said, it is obvious that as serious practitioners we need to understand what “Recognition” is and how best to approach it through our practice. There’s no faking it. We need to know right off that the great siddhas and the pith teachings clearly state that “Recognition” is something almost impossible to realize on our own. Over and over it is stated that only an authentic lama, someone who has themselves achieved some realization, is capable of

pointing out to use the actual nature of our mind so that we get it.

That is why they are called the “Pointing Out Instructions,” because an authentic teacher points out to us the true nature of the mind and we get it. The term “Root Guru” reflects this situation when it is understood that the teachings say that our own Root Guru (Tsawi Lama in Tibetan) is the one lama who firsts points out to us the nature of our own mind so that we get it. We can have many gurus, but only one root guru. In light of this fact, we should adjust our priorities appropriately.

Tibetan Buddhism came to the West cloaked in the cultural trappings of Tibet. Many Tibetan teachers have been hesitant to make any attempt at this point in time to separate out the dharma from its Tibetan heritage, including my own teacher. When asked why not do our practice in English instead of in Tibetan, I was told by one very distinguished Rinpoche that we must wait for Western practitioners to become realized and write their own practice sadhanas. In other words, it is realized Americans (among other westerners) who will clarify the dharma for us in our native language, English. How about them apples?

MIXING -- WHAT IS IT?

March 27, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

“Mixing” means many things in dharma language. Most important, it refers to mixing our mind with the mind of our guru until there is no difference between the two. “Mixing” suggest that two things are mixed together, but that is just poetry. In fact, it is more like purifying the difference of our mind as compared to the mind of our guru, purifying ourselves until no difference can be found between the two. But there is surprise in the mix, so to speak, and that is that our guru no longer has what is called an ordinary mind, but rather a realized mind. So, if we mix successfully, we then no longer have an ordinary mind. Read on.

As we succeed in purifying ourselves, the differences between our mind and that of our guru dissolve or are erased until there is no difference left. We are talking about purification, purifying our own mind to bring it into resonance with our guru’s mind. If this is a scary thought and you think that mixing your mind with that of your guru brings up ideas of being subject to a “puppet master,” subordinating our person to theirs, you miss the point, and it is an important one not to miss.

I like the analogy of the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks. Purification is like picking away the sticks, one by one, until there is nothing left at all. That is mixing. There is nothing to mix, except nothing. So what is called

“Mixing” is basically the result of the purification of our own obscurations, not our teacher’s. And here is the key thought that has to be understood exactly:

An authentic teacher already has realization as to the true nature of the mind. Mixing our mind with the mind of our guru amounts to reaching our own realization as to the nature of the mind, since realization of any kind requires a certain degree of purification. To mix mind-with-mind requires realization on both sides. Well, the guru already has realization, so no purification there has to be done. It is the student who must become purified enough to mix with the guru, who, as mentioned, already has realization. And mixing is not personal.

The guru already has authentic recognition as to the true nature of the mind, a form of realization beyond the personal. Aside from the color of the guru’s hair, etc., there is nothing personal there, just realization. At this point, we as students lack realization, so there is a difference between our mind and the guru’s, but it is on our side. Attempts to mix our mind with that of the guru therefore require removal of obscurations on our part, some kind of purification. As we purify, there is less and less difference between our mind and that of the guru, until there is none. At that point we are said to be mixed.

So, there is actually nothing to “mix,” only something to be purified or removed from our consciousness, until, like the guru’s, it too reflects the same selfsame reality, i.e. is realized.

There is nothing to be added to the realized mind of our guru. Therefore, realization involves purification

on our part, and purification is a process of removing what needs to be removed, what obscures. As mentioned many times, purification does not involve purification of past misdeeds, but rather purification of our current mind so that our innate realization can shine through.

The Buddhist approach is not so concerned with the past, what is already etched in stone, and not concerned with the future, what is mostly still speculation. It is involved with the present, not in its role of creating a past, so much as using the present as the lens to realize fully the nature of the mind itself. Through the “Present” awareness we can see and realize our own true nature.

I take it you got my point that there is nothing to fear as to mixing our mind with that of our guru, because a guru with authentic realization is reflecting the true nature of the mind itself. He or she is beyond persons and the personal.

I will close by giving an example of how mixing appeared in my own life. The concept of learning “Mixing” appears as early as the Extraordinary Preliminaries, what is called the Ngöndro, in particular as part of Guru Yoga. In general, mixing also appears in almost all deity practices, at the end of the practice, even if it is only in the form of a brief moment. In relating this to you, I am not making claims to any enlightenment or final type of mixing on my part, but here is a simple example how it came up for me.

I have been traveling to see my teacher in Woodstock, New York at his monastery for some 33 years, a 1600 mile round trip from where I live. I am

always my best self when I am with Rinpoche, in his presence. Seeing and being with Rinpoche is the highlight of my year. Leaving Rinpoche and driving back home, when the 10-day teachings are over each year, reminds me of the line “Trailing clouds of glory do we come.” Soon after I leave the monastery and head for home, I gradually revert to my “regular” self, much against my will.

Anyway, one year, while at the monastery, Rinpoche gave the Pointing-Out Instructions as to the nature of the mind, which I had received before, but had never quite grasped. Anyway, that year I actually got the idea of what was being pointed out, and for the first time. I returned home with that idea and a desire to practice, and did so assiduously for some three or four years. Then one year, when we made our yearly trip to the 10-day Mahamudra teachings, after we arrived and saw Rinpoche and all of that, I felt no change in being in Rinpoche’s presence. I was feeling pretty good by that time on my own.

Of course, I was happy to see Rinpoche and to spend ten days with him, listening to teachings and practicing, but I felt no different from when I left home. None. And when I drove back home after the teachings on that 800-mile journey, I had no regrets and did not feel I left anything behind or was reverting to anything less than I normally felt about myself or Rinpoche.

Without initially being aware of it, until that trip, I had mixed my mind with Rinpoche’s mind, perhaps as much as possible at that time. I already felt one with him or, another way this is phrased, Rinpoche had come to dwell within me all the time. At heart, there

was no separation between Rinpoche and myself, whether at home or at the monastery. And it has been like that since that time, for many years now.

That is probably a crude example of what “mixing” is all about, but hopefully it gives you some idea as to the concept.

MOONBEAMS OF MAHAMUDRA

Translated by Traleg Rinpoche

January 21, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The book “Moonbeams of Mahamudra” by Takpo Tashi Namgyal (1512-1587) is the classic meditation manual for Mahamudra Meditation, including its unique combination of instructions on Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) and Insight Meditation (Vipassana). Although I learned to read a little Tibetan a long time ago, it was never good enough to tackle a book like this. So I have been, up to this point, dependent on the English translation by Lobsang P. Lhalungpa in his book “Mahamudra: The Quintessence of Mind and Meditation,” as published by Shambhala Publications, which is an excellent book. Until now, this translation is all that I knew. I am sure that many readers here have had the same experience.

I don't have to introduce readers to the Ven. Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche (the 9th Traleg Tulku), one of the highest lamas in the Karma Kagyu Lineage, his incarnation going back to Saltong Shogam (one of the Three Men of Kham), a student of Gampopa. His untimely death a few years ago was a shock to all of us.

Over the last forty or so years, I have had the good fortune to meet many Tibetan rinpoches, most of the Kagyu order, and have many of them visit our dharma

center here in Big Rapids, Michigan, and, of course, take teachings from them. This includes Traleg Rinpoche and his wife Felicity. Of all the great teachers that I have met, none has studied Western philosophy, psychology, and literature to the degree that Traleg Rinpoche has.

So, I am more than happy to suddenly have two excellent translations of this classic text. My point in posting this mini-review is just to briefly point out how, in my opinion, they differ. If I have to come up with one word as to that difference, it would be that the Traleg Rinpoche translation is more integral. It is very elegantly written, so that everything coheres quite naturally. If you have read Traleg Rinpoche's other works, then you are aware that he really knows (and enjoys) the English language, much as the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa did. This book proves that.

The great many quotations in the book from the original sources read like the poetry they are. The prose commentaries are equally elegant and easy to read. In fact, the book is quite magical in the way that it expresses the meaning of this very detailed text. It is a pleasure to read and understand. If you ask me if we need another and newer translation of this great classic, my answer is that indeed we do. This book is a wonderful addition to those of us studying or practicing the Mahamudra tradition.

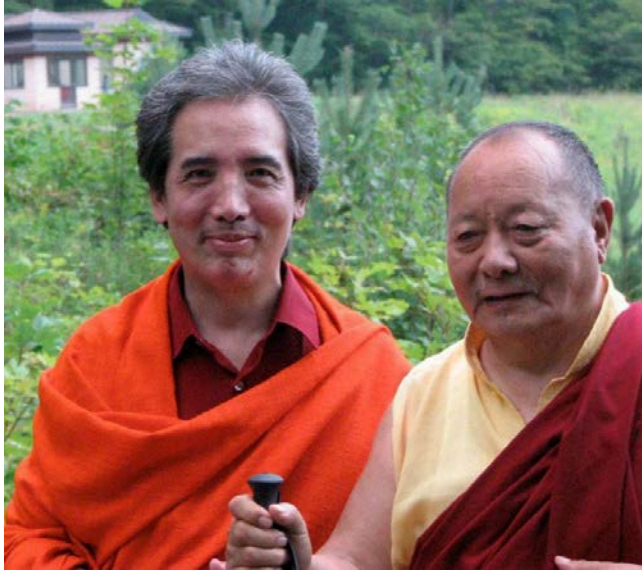
In a nutshell: I always found this book, in the earlier Lhalungpa translation, very difficult to grasp. I would work at it. The same book in Traleg Rinpoche's translation is simply laid open to my mind, especially the translations of the original-source quotes, which

are now are sheer poetry. What a brilliant adventure this new translation is!

Incidentally, the last time I saw Traleg Rinpoche was in 2004 at the inauguration of a new shrine-room at Thrangu Monastery in Kham, Tibet. I can never forget when Traleg Rinpoche arrived at the monastery. People were lined up along the road as far as one could see (I am told for five miles), all with white scarves which they piled on Rinpoche's car. The car carrying Traleg Rinpoche had to stop every 100 feet or so to remove the scarves, because the driver couldn't see the road.

The previous 8th Traleg Rinpoche was the abbot of Thrangu Monastery in Kham, Tibet and one of the main teachers of my own teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. When Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, Thrangu Rinpoche, and the young 9th Traleg Rinpoche fled Tibet in 1959, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche carried the young Traleg Rinpoche on his back. They spent weeks, nearly starving, hiding from the Communists, as they slowly made their way to India.

Photograph of the Ven. Traleg Rinpoche (left) and my teacher the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche (right). Sorry, but I do not know who the photographer is. Not sure where this photo was taken, but it looks like perhaps it was at Karmé Ling, our three-year retreat center in Delhi, New York.



MORE ON “AWARENESS OF UNAWARENESS”

January 15, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The Ven. Chögyam Trungpa said:

“The process of going through your birth and your death shocks you so much that you forget your past, which is what usually happens to ordinary people.”

In these last blogs I have been opening up a discussion as to what happens between death and rebirth, and what, if anything of us, survives. As the pulp magazine’s slogan states: “Inquiring Minds Want to Know.”

I want to know and am just beginning to get my arms around this whole concept of the Eighth Consciousness, the Alayavijnana or Storehouse Consciousness. This whole part of the dharma, called the Abhidharma, is probably the least studied and understood area of Buddhism for me personally. It is, in general, too intellectual for me to follow, as some say “Drier than dust.” But at this point I would like to learn more, so I am slowly poking around in it.

At the same time, I realize that I have studied little else all these years, although I call it “Phenomenology,” and have always seen myself as a phenomenologist, one who directly monitors the internal structures of experiences and of the mind. So, go figure

One concept that I am clear about from the teachings is that the Storehouse Consciousness (Alayavijnana) is very hard to alter or transform in a lifetime. Although, as they say, it is ever changing, it is also very fixed and difficult to change within ourselves. In fact, the situation is so tough that great lamas like the Ven. Traleg Rinpoche say that the best approach to removing these negative patterns from the Storehouse Consciousness is simply to stop creating bad karma, so that it is not recorded in the Alaya Consciousness in the first place. For me, that is something of a radical statement, because ceasing to record karma, itself, is a very difficult proposition. This suggests to me that the statement that the Alaya Storehouse is hard to modify must be very, very true.

Traleg Rinpoche's advice, to head it off at the pass and just not record karma, is really saying something. It is not likely that many of us could just up and do this, if we could do it at all. Apparently, my worries about finding some kind of consciousness that persists through time are answered by the staying qualities of the Alayavijnana. If it is really that persistent, then that makes sense, because the teachings point out that this Storehouse-Consciousness will remain with us, fully active, until we reach enlightenment, and that might be a while. And by that fact, it must equally be true that it has been with us since, well, forever. That is staying power enough for me, but how to properly use it?

So, the first advice, as mentioned, is to stop recording karma, because as hard as that is to do, apparently it is easier than trying to remove karmic stains from the Storehouse Consciousness. We should know this by the simple fact of how difficult it is for most of us to

alter or change bad habits into good ones. That is not easy for me, and this is what is being pointed out here that has to be done.

Not that removing karmic stains can't be done, but that it can't be done easily, and some lamas say that, in practical terms, it can't be done in this lifetime. Period. In other words, whatever we do in that regard in this life may affect (and show up) in our next lifetime, but don't hold your breath about seeing much change in this current life.

It occurs to me that this information is a sword that cuts both ways. If the Alaya Storehouse holds the negative karma in, it must do the same for positive karma. If we can learn to stop recording negative karma and gradually remove the traces and tracks of what we have already accumulated, we have a better karmic reference-field to draw upon. If I read it right, the Tibetans also point out that when we finally become enlightened, the Alaya Storehouse is absorbed into that enlightenment and vanishes. Wow! I have no idea what to make of that.

And they also say that it is superior or better not to record any karma, either good or bad. Most of us think that the more good karma we can have, the better. But it seems that the great Buddhist teachers say that with enlightenment we have neither good nor bad karma. We don't need it. All karma is a diversion.

So, it looks like I have some studying to do on all of this, and that, for me, will be interesting. If some of you find this upsetting, then I suggest that you not read here for a while. The same is true for those who are apparently not interested in this topic. Find

something better to do, while I am still learning about this. Hopefully I will be able to be more articulate down the road. Come back later and see how it strikes you then.

ONE MORE RINPOCHE STORY: THE DRAWING

February 25, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I've gone this far, so I might as well finish up. There is another story based on the photo I posted yesterday taken for the "Mudra" book. There is a wonderful story behind a drawing based on the same photo. As long as we are recognizing Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, I might as well tell this story here.

I guess I have dreams, now that I think about it. Here is another significant dream. Many years ago, in the 1980s, I had a dream. In that dream I presented my dharma teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche a drawn image or portrait of himself. It was one of those dreams that is magical, somehow more real than waking life. Anyway, I couldn't shake the dream. For some reason, I felt it was important that this dream be made real and acted out in life. So, after the dream I began actively to consider how this could happen. I tried on many ideas. Although I am almost an artist, I don't have the kind of skills needed for this work.

I finally settled on a sketched portrait, but finding an artist good enough was not easy. I heard of such an artist, one of the finest draftsmen in Michigan, a man named John Felsing who was renowned for his life-like portraits of wildlife, especially birds. I contacted Felsing and asked to visit him. Then Margaret and I traveled to Lansing where he lived and sat down with

him. I explained my dream and what I was hoping he might do. After some discussion, he agreed to do a drawing and I gave him a really nice photo of Khenpo Rinpoche, the same one as shown in a previous blog.

Several months went by and I heard nothing. Then one day a large envelope came in the mail. It contained a first-sketch of Khenpo Rinpoche. To my dismay, the drawing he sent was a sketch of an elderly oriental gentleman, but not the dynamic rinpoche I knew. This would not do. I got on the phone and explained this to John Felsing and he said that he would try again. To assist him I then sent him some of Rinpoche's dharma teachings and one of his books, "Dharma Paths."

Again, several months went by and then one day another large manila envelope showed up in the mail. I hesitated to look inside; holding my breath, I carefully opened the package. When I did, this time the image was actually of the Khenpo Rinpoche that Margaret and I knew. Apparently the books and Rinpoche's own teachings helped to communicate the idea of the man himself. The ending to this story is remarkable.

When the artist Felsing finished the final drawing, he called to notify me of that. And as it happened, Khenpo Rinpoche, who (of all things) was visiting our dharma center that very day, was about to do an empowerment for our local group that evening.

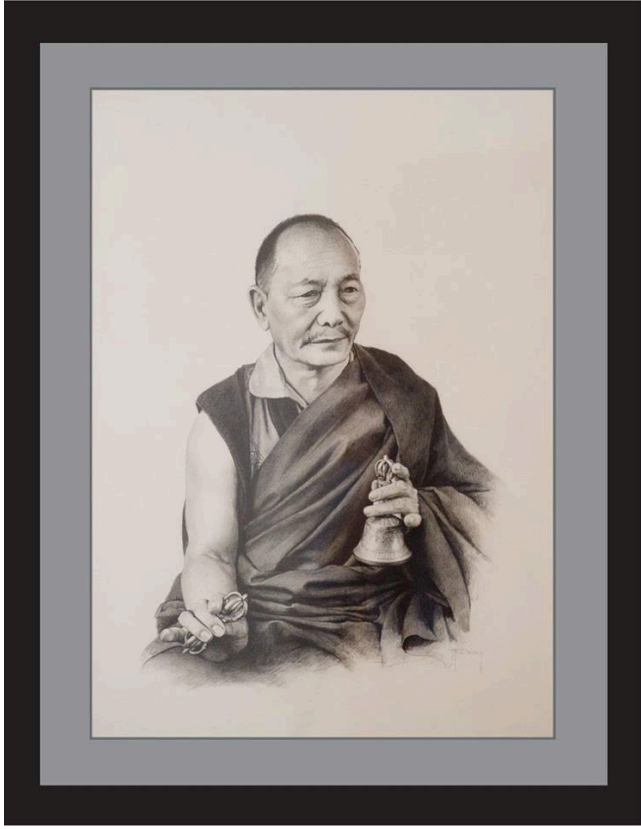
Felsing did not hesitate a moment, but said he was coming to Big Rapids to see Rinpoche. He jumped into his car, drove through the oncoming night (and

rain, if I remember) to our center and, when he arrived, formally asked Rinpoche to give him “refuge.”

Refuge is a short ceremony that takes place when someone discovers that they have great respect for the dharma, respect not only for the historical Buddha, but also for his teachings (the dharma), and the sangha (those monks and nuns who embody the living teaching). It is a request you make of a teacher. Felsing’s request was honored and Rinpoche gave the refuge ceremony, which includes giving those who ask for it a dharma name.

Apparently during the months that John Felsing was working with Rinpoche’s image and reading some of the teachings, he was moved by what he learned and had developed a true respect for the dharma. He was inspired to become more actively involved in the dharma and so asked to receive the refuge ceremony. I am struck by how a simple contact with Rinpoche, even at a distance, made a difference.

[This drawing, framed and matted is (I believe) still available at KTD Monastery or through the fundraising department. Try <http://www.namsebangdzo.com/>]



POLITICS FALLOUT

January 27, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I love it. Some of you commented or messaged me that you don't think I should comment on politics, but that I have to remain the monolithic blogger, one shade of color: spiritual. LOL.

There is a lot you don't know about me! For one thing, it's more than OK for a very liberal person like myself to be patriotic. Patriotism is not owned just by the conservatives. We liberals can be patriotic too. I consider myself very much a patriot. I love this country.

Here is a poster designed by legendary rock-poster-artist David Singer. Singer created 75 posters for the great 1960s dancehall, the Fillmore Auditorium, in San Francisco, more posters I believe than any other artist. I published this poster (along with David Singer) in 2003 as part of my rock-concert-music poster site "Classic Posters," the largest site of its kind and the first large site of its kind. It is still going today at ClassicPosters.com. The theme of this poster is the Irish Orator John P. Curran's quote "Eternal Vigilance is the price of liberty," written in 1790.

Actually, I follow the news carefully each day, including politics. I just don't blog about politics because I am not that knowledgeable and I do my best dancing to a different drummer – the Dharma. I

always vote and the year of an election is disruptive for me because I tend to get caught up in the politics and trying to see through the confusion that comes with it.

Yet, I am anything but a politician. We all do what we can, right? For example, I have a neighbor who is totally dedicated to furthering the goals of the Democratic Party in our small town. She works on it constantly. I think it's wonderful she does this, but I don't often attend those events. I am not the fly on that wall.

Instead, my approach to changing this world starts with changing how we access and use our mind. I work just as hard, but on a different aspect of it all. I believe that eternal mindfulness is the price of clarity and awareness, and that trying to change the outer world without having your mind right is like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. At best, we will get only temporary relief. Outer change has to be balanced by mind-training and inner change. IMO, inner change and increased clarity is the best driver of useful outer change.

For me, it has always been a question of priorities. Like one of those old Chinese wooden-box puzzles, you have to find that one key piece to move first, and then the others fall into line. Well, in my opinion, that key piece is our approach to the mind itself. If we don't have that right, then any extrapolation is already off-center and heading in a wrong direction.

I can remember, many years ago in the early 1980s, having John Myrdhin Reynolds (Vajranatha) visiting and speaking at our center about Tibetan astrology:

Back then, almost no one knew anything about Tibetan astrology, at least in English. Anyway, I was trying to learn what I could from Reynolds about the astrology in Tibetan Buddhism, and he pointed out to me that in the beginning he too went after the astrology in Tibetan Buddhism, but along the way got seduced by the dharma in it all.

That has been my experience as well. I figured that Tibetan astrology must be very integral because the dharma is so integral. However, in order to understand the astrology, I had to understand more about the dharma in which it was embedded. Well, that was a happy assumption because, by the time I finished learning what I need to know about astrology's dharmic background, I realized that it was the "dharma" in astrology that I had always focused on. The dharma was the very heart of astrology. Before I knew it I was in a paradigm shift.

Of course I love astrology and have done it for more than 50 years, but once I encountered the dharma in depth, I quickly realized how astrology is a relative truth, good for getting reoriented, but the direction we get redirected toward is toward the dharma.

I never broke step with my astrology and continue to this day to develop it in many directions, but astrologers (as a group) lack clarity and seem to have little interest in my particular work. It's the dharma folks that are my tribe. All it took for me was (back in 1974) talking to someone with true clarity on a one-to-one basis, in my case the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa. That was it! I slipped through the portal and saw my own future as a dharma practitioner. I could think of nothing better to do with my life than that.

I have had the good fortune to meet, host at my home, and talk extensively with many of the best astrologers in the world. And I have done the same thing with visiting lamas and rinpoches. And while I love astrology, there is not the clarity of mind among astrologers that I find among the rinpoches. That's the simple truth as I know it. My point here is that each of us labors in the area where we can see most clearly. The dharma is the view that works for me. I digress.

Anyway, the kind of change that we (as a nation) need right now must come from innumerable avenues, all in convergence. I am doing my level best to share with you what I find in mind training and the dharma. If you like that, this blog is one channel. If you would like more politics, by all means find another channel for that.

We all have to work together on this. And now is the time.

BTW, here is an interview I did with the great poster artist David Singer, for those interested:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/articles/Posters/Classic%20Posters%20Interview%20with%20David%20Singer%20by%20Michael%20Erlewine.pdf>

AMERICA BE VIGILANT

UNITED WE STAND



ETERNAL VIGILANCE
IS THE PRICE OF
★ ★ ★ LIBERTY ★ ★ ★

John P. Curran, 1790

PRELIMINARILY

March 3, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I have written the following many times, but it is so important to understand, that I am repeating it. In Tibet, sitting meditation (Shamata) is not taught to beginners. Instead, it is taught after the student finishes what are called the Extraordinary Preliminaries (called Ngondro), which are a set of very, very arduous practices that take years for most to finish.

And I have been told by Rinpoches that the ONLY reason that they do not teach the Ngondro in this country to beginning practitioners is because they found out early-on that Americans simply will not do it. When I first asked my teacher, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, could I do the Ngondro, he instead directed me to a passage in a standard handbook on Ngondro ("The Torch of Certainty), but to the part of that book on Tong-Len, what is called Lojong practice.

Obviously, he felt that Tong-Len was where he wanted me to begin. And I must say that Tong-Len is quite natural for Americans and IMO by far the easiest practice to start out with for Westerners. My point is that jumping into sitting meditation with no preliminary training, in my experience, is a quick way to sidetrack your practice for a very, very long time. I banged my head against the wall of sitting meditation for over 30 years, all because I had refused to take the time to

more properly do the preliminary practices, i.e. to get ready for something like sitting meditation. In my belligerence, I assumed that I knew best what I wanted to do, when in fact, I had NO IDEA where I was going and how I could get there.

When we speak of “purification,” we are also talking about belligerent, mule-headed, purposeful ignoring of what is being pointed out to us by the Rinpoches. That kind of ignorance is very hard to become aware of in ourselves, much less do something about.

Of course, given the opportunity we will all do what we want; everybody does. But, for what it is worth, I feel an obligation to point out that there is a graduated path that the Tibetans have used for centuries that we Americans are not being introduced to because we have told them (by our lack of receptivity) that it seems too difficult for us, i.e. we refuse to do it. And, in Tibet, that path PRECEDES sitting meditation.

In Tibet, before doing Ngondro or sitting meditation, most Tibetan practitioners are first introduced to what is called the mind-training practice call Lojong. It was to Lojong that my Tibetan dharma teacher introduced me at the very beginning, just after meeting him and before anything else, despite my attempts to leap-frog all of that and get to the advanced stuff. Obviously, he know better and that is the whole story of working with an authentic teacher and what is called “Samaya,” the bond between teacher and student; it requires trust.

The Lojong practices highlight the practice of Tong-Len, and often that name “Tong-Len” is used instead of Lojong. The virtue of Tong-Len practice is that it is easy to learn and understand, and simple to do. AND

it brings visible rewards in a short time. What more could you ask? Especially, if we are venturing into a spiritual practice, the result of which we can only imagine, guess at, and certainly not sample or try on before we reach it.

This is why I continue to suggest the technique I call Reaction Tong-Len or Reaction Toning, working with our own reactions, our own likes, dislikes, and obvious prejudice. For one, once we become aware of our reactions, ultimately there is no way we can blame anyone else for how we react. These are OUR reactions and we have to own them. We can learn to stop having knee-jerk reactions and, instead, begin to respond appropriately to what life offers us

PURIFIED

February 28, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

We like the word “purified” better than “purification.” Without understanding the nature of purification, progress with sitting meditation can be very difficult. Westerners tend to have a kind of medieval concept of “purification,” such that it is something like being burned on the cross or being placed in an Iron Maiden. The Buddhist concept of purification is different. We make giant steps forward when we have purified enough karmic residue to “see” for ourselves what needs to be done. It is all about priorities. But to make the right choices, we first have to see the choices before us. Then, we just do it.

No doubt, meditation is an exponential curve, which makes the beginning practices very difficult. No amount of striving for the results of meditation brings results, except perhaps when it comes to purification. Even purification must be done gently and with skillful means.

And here’s the thing. It is not the practice of sitting meditation itself that works, like most tend to think. That is just “practice,” as in “practicing.” Rather, what we call our dharma practice (such as sitting meditation) is only there to bring out and show to us the impurities, the distractions, the obscurations. This is why sitting in meditation can be so frustrating, and why those who come out from their sitting practice

saying how “relaxing” it was are not doing traditional sitting meditation. They are just relaxing, which we all need too.

That “frustration” is the essence of sitting practice, not the sitting practice itself. Talk about the baby and the bathwater. All the time, what we thought was the bathwater was the baby, and vice versa. What a flip!

It is the so-called distractions that interrupt our practice (thoughts, noise, etc.) that is the practice itself. That’s my point here. First, these distractions have to be identified, and then embraced, just as a drop of water striking the surface in a still pool sends out ever-increasing circles of containment. Everything must be included. There are no exceptions.

So, what is commonly called “meditation” is not actually meditation, but rather the practice of becoming aware of obscurations or the impediments to clarity. The old saying that increased clarity is the result of meditation practice is a half-truth. Increased clarity can only appear after removing the obscurations that we discover while sitting and practicing meditation. There is no such thing as “meditation” itself, only non-meditation, as in: not trying to do anything.

In other words, it is all purification practice, the result of which, when done correctly, is clarity. Take away the obscurations and what is left is clarity and luminosity. Again, I like the analogy of the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, where you carefully take away sticks until nothing whatsoever is left. That “nothing” that is left is the clarity and luminosity I am pointing at here. Taking the sticks away is sitting meditation “practice.”

When nothing is left but the clarity, it is “non-meditation.” In fact, in advanced mind training, non-meditation is clearly pointed out.

READING ABOUT DHARMA

January 9, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Reading “about” something is just that, one-step removed from the thing itself. As my first dharma teacher would frequently say to me when he saw me carrying all kinds of books around. “Michael, someday you must be the book.” With spiritual ideas and concepts, especially those that the Buddhists say are “beyond elaboration” (meaning they can’t be put into words), it is tough sledding for beginners to plow through the many books out there. To some degree this is an individual thing, where one man’s food is another man’s poison. And some of it is just too intellectual for almost anyone. In particular, if we go back to the early Western writing on Buddhism, most of it is far too intellectual for me to grasp. There is little to no “juice” there. And there are questions as to whether they got it right in the first place.

The original teachings of the Buddha are vast and aimed at different levels of students. The Tibetans include Buddha’s actual words as part of their canon, the Kangyur (108 volumes). Most of the Kangyur is not in English, to my knowledge. The second part of the Tibetan canon is called the Tengyur (224 volumes), which are the various commentaries on Buddha’s teachings. It is these commentaries that make up the Vajrayana that most of us study, because they at least attempt to sort out and condense the Buddha’s teachings into a form we can more easily assimilate, collecting the teachings for a

learned to read Tibetan script and had visions of translating things myself, but at this point it seems that my translating ability and a ticket will get me a ride on the bus. So what are we left with?

Well, our greatest single resource is our own mind, which is still in its first-edition, requiring no amendments or updates. Next in line is actually practicing the dharma, even if at first our experience is one of not knowing what we are doing. As the Tibetans say, the mind is the wish-fulfilling gem. When all else fails, we can always cast off from books and just learn to look at the mind itself. You are going to have to do it sooner or later, anyway. All we need for that is an authentic teacher.

And this problem is something the Tibetans themselves tackled a long time ago: how do we condense the vast teachings of the Buddha into something that beginners can grasp? Of course, there are more commentaries than scriptures; so far there is no reduction in size of the teachings, but there is a lot of organization.

It is like the fact that poetry is the shorthand of prose. We need to boil this stuff down to something manageable, and the Tibetans have done this. They call such condensations “Upadesha,” sometimes translated as “pith instructions.”

And, of course, Upadeshas themselves have various degrees of specific gravity of meaning; some are more intellectual than others. As for me, I need them as graphic, practical, and down to earth as possible, you know, like the image of Buddha Shakyamuni himself, one hand touching the ground. Upadeshas are

the nitty-gritty of the Vajrayana teachings, where the rubber meets the road, but where to find them?

Well, that's not so easy, because of many factors. But here is a link to a whole bunch for very concise and direct teachings, and at no charge. For a time, a few years from 1997 to 2003, a very special (Western) lama by the name of Lama Tashi Namgyal published a magazine, "Shenpen Ösel," with teachings by some of the finest Kagyu lamas. The issues of this magazine are precious and, for those interested, should be downloaded and saved to your hard drive. They keep threatening to disappear from the Internet, but right now can still be found here:

http://ksoc.org/?page_id=12

As for reading, reading, and reading dharma books, you know what I'm going to say. Often we would rather read just one more book on something, than jump in and experience what we are reading about. It's like the alcoholic, just one more drink before I hit the road.

There are times when the words come alive and jump off the page into our minds. Sometimes that window is only open for a day or part of a day, and then it closes. Those are the times to read. But as you also know, there are times when no matter how hard you try to read, the meaning just slips by you. Those are the times not to read, obviously.

My advice is not to indulge overmuch or become fixated on reading about dharma. Read a little; practice a lot, even if that practice is like fumbling in the dark. We each need to come to grips with "what it

is!” for us to practice, and accept that. Start there. Best of all, of course, is to find an authentic teacher and work with them, but it can be difficult to find a teacher who is authentic and from whom you can actually learn.

And then there are the books available to you. It is mostly useless to persist in a book that puts you to sleep on contact. It goes right over your head, and you know it. This is not a classroom. Dharma books have to grab us where we live and wake us up with their words. So, browse around until you find something that makes sense, “sense” being that you can feel it in your gut. It makes sense to you.

Sure, browse and re-browse those books that are too intellectual (or whatever) every so often to check if you are now ready to read them, but don’t pursue them overmuch, or worry that you can’t grasp them. I find that when I can open my eyes, I can read most anything.

REALIZATION THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY

February 7, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Some of you have remarked that you like my photos, so this blog is about why photography is more than just a hobby for me. I never think of photography that way, as a hobby. And I have made a point of not being a professional photographer. Photography has changed my life and the secret is that, for me, it has a sacred quality.

Very much to my surprise, it was through photography that I first began to realize my dharma practice, and not vice versa. I know, it makes no sense, but then it actually does make sense, and it is the particular kind of sense that I want readers to take in, because what I am pointing at here is so important to understand.

Books and teachings on the dharma (and their study) help to paint a picture in our mind of what the dharma (and greater awareness, realization, and enlightenment) is all about. But that is just an abstract concept or picture, something we have constructed ourselves as best we can. The hardest part of learning the dharma is to eventually take our hands off the intellectual steering-wheel that books and teachings offer us and transfer them to the hands-on reality of what all the dharma teachings point at, the reality of the nature of our very own mind. This, in my experience, has to be the hardest part, letting go of our expectations long enough to embrace the reality.

And, by definition, there is a difference, often a huge difference.

We would rather read another book about the dharma or about someone else's experience with the dharma than put the books aside and take the plunge into actual practice, as if our life depended on it. Why? My guess is that we don't know where to start, what to expect, and have little to no understanding of what exactly we are to do. Meditation is new to Americans. It is not like football, in that we know how it works. And, we may feel self-conscious about trying something we know so little about. And, even if we try, how are we to know what is a good result? It is all so new and so very conceptual at this point for most people.

Which brings me back to this idea that our conceptual expectations, what we have managed to pull together and understand about enlightenment and realization, inevitably become the greatest obstacle to realization itself. I cannot emphasize enough that what we read and study about the dharma is only a ballpark-plan of what is in store for us, and not the reality itself, not the dharma. When we actually realize the dharma (or any part of it), when the rubber finally meets the road, it does so in a language that we can understand only too well. That's what the word "realize" means. But the learning curve is anything but familiar to us.

Once we get the hang of it, the dharma finally steps-down from the conceptual (and intellectual) and gets very, very personal, like a glove that must fit a hand. It is hard for us to even imagine such a thing, so conceptually bound-up are we in our expectations, what we have come to think is supposed to happen if

we meditate. In other words, the dharma itself at some point begins to shine through our expectations and, with help, we can begin to transfer our identity from what we “think” to the reality of what “is.”

The transfer from our intellectualized idea of the dharma to the ACTUAL realization of the dharma is not often a smooth transition, any more than learning to drive a stick-shift car and actually driving that car on our own is necessarily easy at first. There is not only a steep learning curve to negotiate, but there is the very physical shock of actual realization, coming face-to-face with our own mind, the reality.

It is more than a little surprise to finally recognize the nature of your own mind and just how it works. There is no way that I know of to be prepared for that. For one, it will be much more familiar than it will be different or new. In a way, what is called “recognition” by the Tibetans is the complete disappointment of all our study and concepts of enlightenment to date. Faced with the reality, our concepts go right out the window. Poof! We had it so wrong.

We imagine that spiritual awareness is something in our future, something out there to find or get to, or have, but that’s not it. You might ask yourself what is greater “awareness” an awareness of? It is an awareness of what is inside and most familiar, not something outside and shiny. It is a “recognition” of the nature of our own mind that unconsciously we already know all too well. As they say, “Who woulda’ think it?”

That is why photography is so special for me. I have been mixing my mind and my photography for years

In fact, when I finally had a little bit of realization break out in my dharma practice, oddly enough it was not by sitting on a cushion as I had always imagined it would or should be, but rather it happened by seeing through the lens of a camera. I had done traditional sitting meditation practice for some 34 years. It is ironic that when things finally clicked, it was not on my meditation cushion, but rather out in nature, watching the sun come up, when I was crawling around in the wet early-morning grass, peering through a pristine camera lens at tiny worlds and the critters that live there, while patiently waiting for the incessant Michigan wind to die down so I could take a photo. That was the reality. At the time, it was too natural for me to even be aware of. I was just so “right there.”

Indeed, it was out there in the meadows and fields that my mind finally concentrated and relaxed at the same time, totally at home in the nature that I had loved since I was six-years old. And it was through the awareness of my mind staring so intently through the macro lens at small critters that, without knowing it, I looked beyond what I was seeing in front of me and directly into the nature of the mind itself. And I didn't even conceptualize it, so vivid, lucid, and total it was. That came later. In a very real way, “I” was not there, and I didn't think to even miss “me.” And it was addictive.

I should mention that I had some 35 years of fairly rigorous training, both in theory and in practice, and with some of the finest teachers on the planet. And during that long time, during which I saw myself totally as a fumbler, something did sink in.

For a long time after that realization I spoke of above (which was gradual), if I wanted to have any clear insight, any lucidity, I had to get my camera and go out in nature and photograph. I couldn't just go sit on the cushion and have the same thing happen. Nothing happened. I had to go out with camera in hand and immerse myself in nature. Later, over several years of training, I learned to separate the meditation from the photography, but that is another story.

I should have known that something was up when I found myself heading out at dawn (every day for six months straight) for hours and hours, watching the sun rise, and peering through a camera lens at, so it turns out, the actual nature of my own mind. When was the last time you watched the sun come up? Can you imagine doing that for six months every day? I didn't know what exactly I was doing; I just wanted to keep doing it.

What I did back then is no different in concept from having to go and sit on the cushion to meditate, but, instead, I had to go out and photograph. I am not going to tell that whole story here (I have written it out in a book called "Mahamudra: A Story"), but I will just finish up here by pointing out again that photography is not something I do just to relax. Instead, it is a way or path of "Seeing" for me. Too bad I am not a Zen Buddhist, because I probably could write a book titled "Zen, and the Art of Photography." You get the idea.

The point here is that you might want to check in on your own concepts of what you imagine spiritual awakening, awareness, recognition, dharma, etc. actually consist of. Chances are you have no idea as to what recognizing the nature of your own mind is

like, or perhaps to put it more accurately, you ONLY have an idea, and maybe a little experience, but no recognition of the nature of the mind itself, much less realization. As they say, “recognition” is not of something you don’t yet know, but rather of something that you have always known, but just have not recognized. Think on that. The distance to “recognition” is near, not far.

As for my photography, it’s no different than sitting on a cushion, only perhaps more technical and complex. It is the “process” of photography that I like, the “Seeing,” not the results, but over time the results have gotten better; they sometimes even reflect the state of my mind. So, what’s the moral of this story?

Tibetans are raised their entire lives with the idea of sitting meditation. The ambiance of cushions (and the other dharma paraphernalia that goes with that) is totally familiar to them. It is on the cushion that all of this awareness stuff happens, etc. However, we Americans have not been raised like that. As a nation, we barely know what meditation is, much less have we done it as a child or in church. We might like to find out what meditation requires without the Asian trappings. I will address this in another blog.

REBIRTH OR REINCARNATION?

January 6, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

It is important to understand the difference between “rebirth” and “reincarnation.” In Tibetan Buddhism, they are not the same by any means. Reincarnation suggests that our personality, like Michael Erlewine (me, myself, and I) is reborn again and carries on in another life. In other words, I pick up in the next life where I left off in this one; that idea.

On the other hand, “rebirth” suggests that our personality, like an old coat, is left at death’s door and does not continue. We don’t have the same driver’s license or social security number next time. That is abandoned.

What continues at rebirth is a consciousness driven by a certain set of fixations and desires. That consciousness has no body or physical form, but perhaps just some predilections for this or that, a way of behaving, and whatever we have accumulated from dharma practice and the karma we have generated. This is what I understand from the teachings.

In rebirth, the body of our personality (persona) is something we rebuild each life from scratch. We are not hampered in our next life by the big nose we have in this life. We probably won’t have a big nose again. We grow a body anew, and it is the same with our personality. We acquire that afresh too, based on our

various fixations and desires – our attachments. In “rebirth” we are like a big magnet, drawing around ourselves a new body and persona based on our fixations and attachments.

And because of our desires and fixations, our consciousness is drawn to this or that kind of body and womb, not necessarily a human body, but “any” body. I like the old phrase “any port in a storm.” If all things are equal, we may be attracted to another human birth, but as I understand it, if we are upset or unbalanced, we may find ourselves (again, like magnets) glomming unto some other kind of body (animal, etc.) without knowing or meaning to.

If the opportunity presents itself and the circumstances invite it, presto, we find ourselves being born as a chicken or an ant. Our consciousness can take hold of almost any kind of body and be reborn. That body may not be as sophisticated as the human body, but consciousness will do the best it can with whatever body it finds itself in.

This is why the Tibetan Buddhists treat all sentient beings, large or small, with the same respect, because to them an ant does not have a little-bitty consciousness, while we have a Cadillac consciousness and psyche. No, all beings have consciousness, the same quality of consciousness, but just with different vehicles. You may drive a Porsche, while I drive a Yugo, but we are both “consciousness” driving. It is just that your car is fancier than mine. However, if I had your Porsche, I would do my best to drive that too. I am sure I could manage.

Tibetan Buddhists work on purifying themselves of negative actions and developing qualities like patience, kindness, and so on. They also seem very interested in our state of mind at the time of death, but hasten to point out that the state of mind when we are dying is only one of many factors to consider. Still, they do seem concerned about it.

In some way, a Teflon consciousness seems more useful than one that is too sticky, especially when it comes to selecting a new body after death. In the teachings, it is said that great meditation masters are balanced enough that they are not just pulled, willy-nilly, into one body or another while in the bardo, but can deliberate and carefully select not only the type of body for rebirth, but even the particular parents, their situation with each other, and the location for being reborn. I doubt that I can do that.

For the rest of us, perhaps it is more like bumper cars; the first womb we bump into is perhaps where we end up. Personally, I have no direct knowledge of this, but am only sharing with you what I understand the teachings point out. I find it helpful to know this stuff. Do you?

A minor clarification: In speaking of the Tibetan saints and masters who are reborn again and again (like the Dalai Lama and the Karmapa), you will find that in their case they are said to “reincarnate” and retain memory of their past life or lives, as opposed to rebirth, which is the term used for most of us.

NEAR AND DEAR

We never know what consciousness inhabits the sentient beings surrounding us.

Take my dog Molotov, “Molly” to friends. He originally was my daughter May’s dog, and she raised him. By raised him, she was like his mother. Molotov’s mom was killed by a car very early on, leaving the tiny puppies with no mom. As I understand it, May (and perhaps friends) raised the whole litter in the bottom of a sleeping bag. And much of his life, Molly has loved to crawl and get under anything like a blanket and so on.

May had learned from Margaret and I how to raise baby animals, because we were part of a group called “Wildlife Rescue,” and therefore our back yard was filled with cages of animals in one state of health or another. We rehabilitated and released them. So, May knew how to make baby formula and all of that. She raised Molly, literally.

Molly then accompanied May during the years she traveled the country busking music. Molotov hitchhiked, rode freight trains, and constantly travelled with May all over America serving as her protector. Now, what kind of karmic link (or whatever), what consciousness, would find its way into being reborn to be May’s protector.

And, when May began to be more and more well-known for her music, and could not take a dog with her, Molotov became our dog, in particular even my dog, spending almost every moment with me and

taking up residence in my office, and this for the last many years.

What kind of consciousness would first be with May and then be with me all these years? How did that happen? And today, at 15 years, Molly is on his last legs, and we are taking care of him around the clock. What this exactly is and how it all works, I don't know, but I do know it is something significant is being worked out.

This is all food for thought.

REMOVING MICRO-KARMA

January 19, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

According to many authentic dharma teachers, what's important (and this is expressly pointed out by the Ven. Traleg Rinpoche) is that we should do our best to prevent recording negative karma to the Alayavijnana (Storehouse Consciousness), which is essentially our subconscious, because, once recorded, it is so difficult to remove. And, unfortunately, in my experience very few people are aware that we are recording negative karma not just once in a while, but pretty much all the time, even if it is only what we might call "micro karma."

I have mentioned this before in these blogs, but it still is a hard lesson to follow, the time my personal dharma teacher, a high rinpoche, pointed out that our every thought is either beneficent or maleficent. Just like the present nanosecond is an infinitesimal moment bridging the past and the future, so is the line between beneficent and maleficent is essentially non-existent, i.e. no neutral-ground. If we will examine our thoughts carefully, we may be surprised at how unkind many of them are. And certainly, those that are not beneficent are faithfully recorded as negative karma in the Storehouse Consciousness. Our conscious mind must be tired from riding out all this micro-karma.

And, as mentioned, these thoughts don't just happen now and again; most of us have a torrent of them all day long. Basically, the teachings say that any thought or impression that is not a direct valid-cognition of reality is stained either with maleficence or is reified to the point that, while it may be beneficent in intent, it too does not reflect reality. And it is clear to me that all thoughts that miss the mark of directly reflecting reality are recorded as either "good" or "bad" karma. I don't want to beat the drum on this any further; instead, I would like to describe a very useful technique that can prevent karmic imprints from being recorded.

This is a technique that I myself developed, but one that was presented to my dharma teacher, who acknowledged that this was a valid form of practice, so I will briefly present it here. It is a variation on an essential Lojong technique called Tong-Len. I call it Reaction Tong-Len or just Reaction Toning. Its virtue is that it is portable, easy-to-do, and something we can practice all day long while we are doing our daily activities. And, best of all, it works!

While most of us manage to stay away from large karmic actions like killing, stealing, and the like, our mindfulness does not usually extend to the moment and to what is happening in the micro-seconds. In other words, we SHOULD sweat the small stuff.

As we go through our day, we probably manage to skirt the big karmic issues, but most of us walk right into the micro-karma; we never even see it coming. I am talking about our minute-to-minute reactions, every last little wince and shrug we suffer all-day long without being mindful or aware that they are

happening. So much takes place along the borderline or edge of our awareness, and most of us just ignore it all.

It could be as simple as bumping into the not-so-friend at the office, the one that does not like us. We may put on a happy face, but we struggle to suppress our true reaction, which is some kind of mini-shock to the system, an almost undetectable cringe or wince, but one that is dutifully recorded as karma in our Storehouse Consciousness.

Our moment-to-moment involuntary reactions record more karma than everything else put together. And the worst part is that we can actually do something about them, with only a little practice. The best part, IMO, is that that this is a fail-safe practice, one that our familiar old Self cannot rationalize or wiggle out of. This fact alone makes it invaluable. Here is the practice:

We can't control what life throws at us each day; we all know that. However, we can control how we react to what we have to go through, and it is very simple. All that is required is to gradually become aware of our own reactions each moment. I don't like your big nose or the color of that scarf you are wearing. That's an example, and not a flattering one. It's not a big thing, but it is a "thing" and we do it constantly, thousands of times each day, make judgment, prejudice, bias, and the like. And each instance is recorded as karma that we alone create.

You may call me a name or do something mean to me, and that is your problem. Yet, how I react to you is my problem, regardless of whether I have cause to

react negatively or not. I have the choice to just understand where it's coming from and let it go. I don't have to lock it into karma. In other words, I don't have to add insult to whatever injury comes my way. It's your karma if you intentionally say something hurtful, but it's my karma if I respond in the same manner, openly or inwardly, or if I take it to heart and feel hateful in return. And this is just the tip of the iceberg.

We are deluged every day with the onslaught of our own reactions, and their karmic residue amounts to what is a very big deal. For one thing, our reactions serve to cloud our mind, constantly, with their demands on our consciousness, reacting, cringing, cowering, etc., not to mention anger and lashing back.

And the beauty of reaction training is that when we examine it, we have absolutely no one to blame but ourselves. We can't slough it off on someone else. Yes, they may have intentionally done something to hurt us, but our response is unequivocally ours, and no one else's. The practice is simple:

We begin to be consciously aware of when we react. Instead of suppressing or ignoring each reaction (or remaining entirely unaware), we acknowledge it, and we acknowledge it as 100% our own. It is OUR reaction.

That's it; that's all we have to do. With that awareness and acknowledgment, we begin to be aware of and tone down our reactions and, with time, we cease to react. And best of all, we cease to record our reactions as karma, because we are no longer

reacting to whatever it is. In summary, the best way to remove karma is to cease creating it.

This is a VERY easy practice and one with almost immediate results and most definitely great long-term benefits. I have presented this technique much more thoroughly in a little free e-book called “Tong-Len: The Alchemy of Reaction,” which you can find here. Just scroll down:

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

For the die-hard printed-books readers, it is also available on Amazon.com.

rites of passage: the ring pass not

January 5, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

OK, we'll let the smoke clear out from yesterday's excursion into a bit of politics. Regardless of our politics, one climactic point that will come up for each of us is facing whatever responsibilities we fall heir to, sometimes called the "Ring Pass Not." As an astrologer, the nexus or vortex for this life-changing event comes due when we go beyond our first Saturn Return at around 30 years of age.

Whether we are aware of it by name or not, we all go through this, so I find it helps to be aware of it. I was fortunate enough to be instructed on this inner change by an expert esoteric teacher, an 82-year-old Rosicrucian initiator, before I turned thirty, so I was somewhat prepared for what happens. I am not sure anyone can be totally prepared for it.

One thing I learned about early-on is like the old Bible phrase from the Book of Isaiah," which states, "There is no rest for the wicked" and "The wicked are like the troubled sea when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up dirt and mire." That description is a little heavy, although the Buddhist concept of Samsara is similar, turmoil continued, and no rest, ever, by definition.

And by no rest, they mean here no real sleep or peace too. Ignoring Samsara only deepens its ruts and mires us more. Awakening, awareness,

enlightenment really isn't the option we may like to think it is. Rather, it's only a matter of time until the exigencies of life will literally force us to respond, wake up, and become more aware.

As mentioned, I learned this long ago, when all I wanted to do at the time was to be left alone to doze on and not to be constantly disturbed by the increasing responsibilities that life demanded of me. I would kind of wake up just long enough to take care of the squeakiest wheel, and thus buy myself enough time to go back to ignoring it all and doing what I thought I wanted to do, which was like: dream on. The fact is I just couldn't keep my head above water and didn't even realize it.

What I eventually found out was that there is no back door to life, no way out except through the present situations we face, whatever they happen to be. God knows, I spent more time ignoring my responsibilities than taking care of them. Ultimately, it was easier to just learn to respond and do what I had to do rather than to be eternally delinquent, as was my habit.

In other words, there is a bell curve to life, and if we fall behind the curve of the present moment and become delinquent in our debts and responsibilities, the accumulating demands on us pile up and soon outpace our wish (or ability) to sleep on and just ignore them. Finally, I was forced awake by everything around me to which I had not responded appropriately.

And, as pointed out, reluctantly I finally turned away from trying to sleep-on in my youth and began to respond (albeit begrudgingly) to life. It was exactly like

when a new baby is born; it has to start breathing and never stop as long as life lives. What does the doctor do to the baby who won't take that first breath? Slap it on its butt, that's what, to get the breathing started. Once started, the breathing does not stop until we die. If it does not start, of course we are dead anyway. Our ability to respond (responsibility) is like that.

My point here is that this need to become more aware (and eventually to be enlightened) is not some religious option or new-age whatever. We refuse or put it off at our own peril. Little gaps of awareness, like coming up for air, may get us through life when we are younger, but sooner or later, life demands awareness from us full-time, as in: waking up. The legal system does not protect the juvenile past a certain point. The Saturn Return at thirty years is exactly like that. Suddenly we are forced to respond to life's demands, ready or not.

Perhaps the Zen Buddhists point this out most clearly, when they suggest being fully awake not just sitting on the cushion, but every minute and hour of the day. Like: Wake Up! But it seems that no one points out that we HAVE to do this, ready or not. In other words, once started in developing awareness (when we are over thirty), there is no going back. It is an ever-increasing recursive activity that is practiced until it reaches an incendiary moment when our awareness bursts into true clarity and begins to feed on the thoughts of the mind itself. Then there is rest, and also clarity.

Now, the kicker is that if we balk at making this transition, if we get caught in the vortex of not responding, what can be a fairly swift transition can

instead stretch out like... forever, the rest of our life. It is very, very painful to go down this way. Sometime we just have to soldier-up and take charge of our responsibilities, at which point things clear up rapidly.

However, getting to that point is the challenge, but one that is inevitable for each of us, no matter how long we put it off. My philosophy has always been: "go to meet your maker," rather than be tracked down and forced to go. I wrote a whole book about this based on my own very difficult time of transition at my Saturn Return. It is called "Astrology of the Heart," and is a free read for those who identify with the problem:

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

RUBBING OUR NOSE IN THE PAST

February 26, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

We don't remedy the situation by rubbing our nose in our past or having it rubbed in the past by someone else. The past is done and gone. If we read the dharma texts carefully, the past can't be undone and its stains can't easily be uprooted. Once karma is recorded, it lasts, and the texts seem to say that for the most part it lasts beyond this lifetime, before it ripens and is then eliminated. Yes, we can tone down our reaction to the past, but even that effort has distinct disadvantages.

If we continually identify with the past or if we allow others to continually place us in the past by pointing out our faults and mistakes, this does not help. It only cements the identification with the past and further binds us. According to the dharma teachings on karma, what does work is to purify ourselves until we no longer make the same mistakes, i.e. commit karma-producing actions. This is quite different than rubbing the dog's nose in it and scolding him.

In other words, it is of little value to endlessly rework or dig in the past and imagine that we clean it up so that it is the present or presentable. Instead, we stop identifying with the past and we begin to identify with our more purified self in the present. We learn to stop committing the actions that record karma and begin to identify with our new "purified" person, and not with

the person we once were. This is real transmigration, a concept that seems to have escaped many therapists.

“Person” is impermanent, ever changing. This is considered a Buddhist “fact,” that our Self or person is simply the sum-total of our current likes and dislikes, biases and prejudice. As a kid, perhaps our Self was all about a new bike, as a teenager a new girlfriend or boyfriend, as an adult our career or marriage partner, and so on. Yes, our actions record karmic traces that are embedded in the matrix of our mind, what is called the Storehouse Consciousness.

It is one thing to record karma through our unskillful actions, but quite another thing to identify with our past actions to the exclusion of modifying our behavior so that we stop recording that karma. Obsessing over our mistakes is what is called adding insult to injury or throwing good money after bad. The whole concept of transmigration is about transferring our identity from the past to the present moment, taking a new grip in the present and letting go of our frozen grip on the past. We are free to do that.

Trying to make a silk purse out of the sow’s ear of our past will never work. We have to have the courage to let go of what we are ashamed of long enough to get a grip on the present moment, which we can learn to control.

I can’t remember how many times I worked very hard to clean up my act, to stop doing what I shouldn’t be doing. However, when I returned home to my parents, they continually would try to identify me with who I was in the past, assuming that I was exactly who I

used to be. And, as often as not, I would slip up and fall into some former behavior, at which time they would seize upon that with the refrain “There, I told you so. You have not changed!” That became a real Catch-22, until I didn’t want to go home again for fear of triggering that response. In fact, I was making progress.

There are a great many therapies that dig and probe in the past, exhuming our past actions with the intent of gradually tempering our reactions. At best, this can perhaps be useful, but it is also like touching our sore tooth to see if it still hurts, and finally the touching itself is what makes it hurt. In other words, sticking our finger in the past can be an attempt at desensitizing our reactions to what we fear, are ashamed of, or whatever happened back then that we are still reactive to.

Of course, to a degree, toning down our reactions works, but working with our present reactions is the key. With past actions, we are also identifying with our past karma once again, even if only to stop reacting to it. This is pure tar baby. Fortunately, there is another approach that is well worth checking out and it avoids strengthening the past.

I became aware of this alternate approach to probing the past when I understood more about how karma works, how it is recorded, and, most important, how persistent or semi-permanent it is. In other words, what’s done is done, a karmic stain that is not going to be easily bleached out by further messing with it. It has to work itself out, like a deep sliver does.

So, instead of spending valuable time and effort probing our past, one Buddhist approach is to stop identifying with the past and instead concentrate on purifying ourselves. By purifying, I don't mean purifying the past, somehow trying to make it OK, but rather purifying our current behavior so that we are no longer recording negative karmic traces.

By purifying our present behavior, we effectively create a new past, one composed of more positive behavior and actions, and we learn to identify with that new "self." After some time at building a new self (and identifying with that), we gradually forget our old self (and actions) and don't even care about it anymore. It no longer worries us. We have transferred our identity to our new self.

When we continue to identify with our old self (and its faults and mistakes), at best it is a case of two-steps forward and one step back, but it can easily slide into one step forward and two steps back. We have to give self-criticism and probing that old sore tooth of our faults a break and just let it rest.

The approach to therapy that involves working with the past has the danger of what I call the tar baby effect, i.e. that the more we probe the past, even with the best intent, the more we identify with it and are further stuck in it.

The Buddhist approach of concentrating on the present and mindfully monitoring our current actions with skillful means, helps to create a new "fresh record," a new past that is easier for us to identify with as opposed to the painful past that is better just forgotten. I know, "the past is prologue" but in this case

we have already noted it, and have no need to prolong it. As the great Mahasiddha Tilopa said in his first of six words of advice, “Don’t prolong the past.” He meant it.

A big mistake is to associate purification with purifying our past misdeeds, somehow rejiggering the past until it comes out right. We don’t purify our past deeds; we purify ourselves so that we no longer commit them, and thus no longer record negative karma.

It would take the equivalent of a dharmic brain surgeon to separate the wheat of the future from the chaff of our past. Since everything is done in the present, the immediate moment is the perfect place to build a new past and it is much easier to identify with. This, as the Buddhists understand it, is the most efficient way to deal with the past.

SHOCK TO THE SYSTEM

March 28, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

In environmental studies and, for that matter, almost any studies, all eyes on are the borderlines, where two parts of the system meet and come together. It is on the border than all of the contrast can be most easily seen. This is perhaps never truer than in our own fragile mental ecosystem, which many of us may not even be aware of.

The human condition forever hovers between ecstatic and out-of-the-body states on the one hand and out-and-out depression on the other. The phrase “happy medium” takes on new meaning when all these things are considered. We have all heard the old chestnut that we all walk around as if we are going to live forever. In my life, this is so true.

And then, some untoward event interrupts my preferred out-of-the-body, “Sail On, Silvergirl”, trancelike state and brings me down, but usually only momentarily or for perhaps a day or part of a day. Then I am right back up there in the clouds and back in my Peter Pan “2nd star on the right, and straight on till morning” frame of mind.

And yet, we all know that into every life some rain must fall. It should be obvious, but probably ignored, that as life lengthens, as we age, those raindrops come increasingly more frequently, until the term

“cloudburst” makes more sense, or to twist the old phrase “It never rains, but it pours.” Certainly, lately, those chickens have come home to roost for me. Not only are my friends dropping all around me, but the endless light at the end of the tunnel is dimming down. I love the Dylan line “It’s not dark yet, but it’s getting there.”

So, like it or not, lately I find myself examining my ups and downs. I see how the raindrops of unwelcome events rudely interrupt my imagined trajectory into the future. Of course, it makes so much sense. What was I thinking? As if?

I see good and bad in this process. It is good that I come down to earth and realize some of what the Buddhists have been telling me all along, such as those incredibly useful “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma,” for example, like “Impermanence.” It is one thing to read and write about it, but another thing entirely to realize it in the flesh. All of us over a certain age know this for a fact.

Yes, it is good to grasp impermanence, but if the hit is too heavy, it not only brings us down, but it can shatter the delicate ecosystem that we call our Self, which we did not realize was “that” delicate. Well, it is.

Anyway, lately, I have had a lot of opportunity to, shall we say, “reevaluate” my situation. Yes, it brings me down, but I seem to more-or-less adjust and bounce back, if not all the way back to Never-Neverland and pie-in-the-sky, at least to a reasonable level.

I don’t want to just dream on until time runs out. And I don’t want to be present to Buddha Now, but at what

expense? That is the question. In my case, I have no choice, so it's not because of any discipline I have exercised. At the same time, I don't like the feeling of literally every plan and expectation I have dissolving, either.

I have to be realistic. And the word "realistic" is just a hop, skip, and a jump from "realization," so there are many kinds of realizations and they are all brethren. Which leaves me with the main point of writing this:

In my dharma journey of many decades, it is clear to me now that you don't get any tire wear unless the rubber meets the road. The rubber will certainly meet the road farther down the road, as we age. Trust me.

So, many of the Tibetan Buddhist suggestions or admonitions, that I tend to refer to as their Fire & Brimstone approach, are really more an act of kindness than a getting too-severe-for-my-taste. I just had not tasted what those admonitions refer to, at least not fully.

This must be how liberals eventually become conservatives, coming up with the short end of the stick or its equivalent. It is clear (or clearer) to me now that floating above the fray of life is not really getting away with much. And the line of the artist Michelangelo, who also wrote poems, keeps coming to mind: "What if a little bird should escape death for many long years, only to suffer a crueler death." Just so.

Folks, my message is that farther down the line, age and nature will be your disciplinarian. While you are young, you have the "option" to drill down to where

the rubber meets the road... or not. As I see it now, it would be to your advantage to do so, or as I say it: go to meet your maker, rather than wait for it to come for you.

SUMMARY: WHO MANAGES TO BE REBORN?

January 14, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I have little idea what others feel and think about our eventual death and what will happen then, because the subject is seldom brought up. I, for one, have always been very interested, to say the least, in this topic. Of course, there were all the years when I was young and had never even heard of the concept of reincarnation, much less “rebirth.” Early-on, I had little to no faith in the Catholic Church’s “Heaven,” at least as it was presented to me. The Pearly Gates and all that never made sense to the young naturalist I was; after all, I had the confidence of Mother Nature, and she does not tell fairy tales. I could see what nature was like for myself. I could also see that few adults have ever really looked at natural law.

And I’m sorry to say that I eventually fell under the spell of the Schlitz beer commercial and their slogan “You Only Go Around Once,” but with the reservation: how could something as elaborate as my life and consciousness just end in a moment?

Of course, when I finally heard of it, I was relieved to hear about the Hindu concept of the reincarnation of the “Soul” and that it would allow me to take with me to my next life my dear old friends me, myself, and I.

But nitpickers as they are, the Tibetan Buddhists sorted that out and presented me reasons why this is

not so, the idea of an Eternal Soul. They pointed out that such a soul had no true existence, and also why it was to my advantage not to have to carry every last personal Self forward in time. Instead of reincarnation of the soul, so the Buddhists say, what we have instead is “rebirth,” but not with the same-old, same-old Self.

Well, so I wondered, what then does that leave me of what I call “me?” If I leave behind my Self, with all its personal traits, as I exit this life, hmmm, just what of me powers forward? Anyway, the Tibetan view of that question is what these last several blogs have been about.

What the Buddhists say does go forward is the Alayavijnana (Storehouse Consciousness), which contains a compendium of all our karmic traces, etc. This Storehouse Consciousness has a greater half-life than normal memories, which means that it persists or endures for a much longer length of time than our conscious memories. However, it is not permanent or “eternal” as in “unchanging.” It lasts not only into our next rebirth, but will continue to be with us from thereon forward until we reach full enlightenment. A corollary to that statement is that it has been here with us all along.

Like all things, it too changes, but it changes forever. In other words, it is a level of consciousness that will always be with us until we are enlightened, itself always changing.

I am disappointed that I have no eternal soul, no way of ferrying my Self across the borderland of death and on to another life, but at least something is there

related to me persists and endures. So, of course I need to learn more about this Storehouse Consciousness. Perhaps we all do.

While our personal Self disintegrates with the death of the body, our Storehouse Consciousness persists, driven by our desires and karma, and seeks to be reborn in a new body, but not necessarily a human body.

And when we take rebirth in a new body, the forces of our karma embedded in the Storehouse Consciousness draw around us a new Self (and persona) based on the karmic traces and material from our Alayavijnana (Storehouse Consciousness). Thus our habitual karma causes us to rise again, but as a new person with a different Self, one that fits the times (and body) we are born in, as shaped by the material in our Storehouse Consciousness.

Buddhist philosophy is all about change, the fact that all things change and nothing has permanent existence, except change. The key thing to understand here is that both our normal consciousness and the Storehouse Consciousness, like all things, change; neither is fixed or permanent. However, the Storehouse Consciousness carries on into our rebirth, unlike our normal consciousness. It not only persists until we are reborn, but it then picks right up where it left off when we died, with our new birth. In other words, we will always have a Storehouse Consciousness, but it will always be changing. The many selves of me, but not really any particular “me.”

Rebirth must certainly be more of an adventure than climbing Mt. Everest or something similar, IMO, and we don't have a choice but to do it. We just have to learn to love sky-diving or bungee-jumping from one birth to the next, love the gap or bardo-time when we forget one life, until we can build another, after which we may be just as selfish as ever, but not with the same Self.

I am still learning all of this. The teachings suggest that the Alayavijnana (Storehouse Consciousness) has two (or more) levels, one of which is the true nature of the mind we are all trying to realize.

To be continued... somewhere down the road.

SUMMARY OF GOING FORWARD

March 6, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

My first dharma teacher would repeatedly say to me, "Michael, this is It!" The import was that everything was right here, Samsara and Nirvana. Sometimes he said "This is hell; we are going to have to make our own heaven in a little corner of it."

The Idea is that it does not take a long journey to get here where we already are. The journey is learning to respond to what we have right in front of us. You know, "start where you" are sort of thing. I have written many blogs here lately, mostly describing what are called the Preliminaries, the preparation for receiving what the Tibetan Buddhists call "Recognition," the "Pointing Out Instructions" as to the actual or true nature of the mind.

And we discussed that all of these Buddhist preliminaries are purification practices, various ways to close the gap between our conceptualization of reality and the actual reality itself. We have been shining ourselves on for as long as we know life, so it is hard to stop.

And I hope by now I have made it clear that by "purification," we don't mean spending any time on our past mistakes or misdeeds. Of course, we regret and are sorry for stupid stuff we have done, but beyond that, spending time on the past is just

throwing good money after bad, adding insult to injury.

In other words, we don't purify our past actions, but rather we purify our actions in the present, in the here and the now, so that we simply stop recording the same karma over and over again. We change ourselves, not our past actions. As for those past mistakes, we just let go and start over.

Given that approach, how long it takes to purify ourselves is up to us. It can be a little or a long time. In my case, it was a very long time (decades), not because I was so obscured, as it was because I didn't get serious enough about actually changing my actions. I went through the motions, but never got into it as if my dharma life depended on it.

I would have sailed along, skimming over the surface of life, had not events in my personal life conspired to really bring me down to earth, forcing me to sober up and actually engage with life at a more real level. On a personal level, it was a smack in the face and a shock to the system. However, on a dharma level it was finally getting to where the rubber meets the road. I found myself engaging reality as I never had before.

I am not suggesting you run out and slam your head into a brick wall. However, I am "just sayin'" that in my case it took hard-times to get my attention so that I could begin to separate the wheat from chaff, what was important from what was not. Purifying, it was.

I write this and I have written all these blogs because

head out the other side, I realized that anyone can do these practices. The Dharma is not for one group of people, but not for another. The dharma is for all, but it is relative to ourselves. In other words, we do have to do it.

I am not a pie-in-the-sky kind of guy, not a believer in the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. However, I must say that when I finally did get through the preliminaries, and I only knew when I was through the preliminaries when I finally grasped the “pointing-out instructions,” at least enough to be able to learn Insight Meditation, and eventually get some small realization as to how the mind actually worked. That’s the only proof we get, not for others, but for ourselves, yet that is enough.

When I finally grasped the teachings to some degree, from that point onward I had no doubt. I knew just what to do and I did not need approval or fear disapproval. I was no longer of two minds, but just one mind. And I have been that way ever since. The thing about realization, even a small amount, is that, unlike experience, it does not come and then go. Once you have it, you always have it. That’s what realization is.

Anyway, may these words be of use. May they be encouraging and may you find the strength not just to follow along, but to seize the day, to purify your own dualistic concepts, and to become one-minded about your dharma practice. In my opinion, Insight Meditation is by far the most worthwhile gift that life offers.

TAKING A CHANCE ON LIFE

March 1, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Sometimes we just have to take a chance. As I liked to joke to myself, I can decide to go and meet my maker, rather than be hunted down by fate. I am reminded of a time, long ago, when I had a kind of awakening experience. It was 1967. I lost all fear or shyness and I wanted to know what others were thinking or doing. I could play too! So, I would make appointments with famous people or just walk into their office unannounced. Now, for sure, many of these folks were too up-tight to allow someone they did not know to address them directly, but others were open, as I was.

I remember one time when I just decided to take the train to Chicago to see my hero, history of religions expert (and practitioner) Mircea Eliade. I had spoken with him on the phone. Of course, I never called ahead, and that day he turned out not to be there, so I ended having a heart-to-heart talk with philosopher Hannah Arendt.

Or, one day in the middle 1960s I walked into the office of the famous economist Kenneth E. Boulding. I had no appointment and had never met him. He welcomed me and took me into his private office where we laughed and cried together, and even read each other our poems. The thing that he told me that I

most remember was that we have to learn to fail successfully, referring to old age and death.

My point here is that every once in a great while we have to throw caution to the winds and just roll the dice. Believe it or not, in my opinion, learning sitting meditation is like that. Meditation training is not the benign practice that it is often made out to be. Far from it! Deciding to learn sitting meditation as the Buddha taught is like throwing down the gauntlet, inviting the challenge of our own limitations to confront us, what the esotericists call directly invoking the ring-pass-not.

I am reminded of Frank Herbert's novel "Dune," in which the huge sandworms (Shai-Hulud) are called forth by setting down a "thumper," a device that pounds the sand to create a sound that draws the worms. If you can, please hear me when I say that attempting to meditate is like that.

Our goal may be to allow our mind to rest (or whatever we made up or imagined), but before that can happen, we have to learn to deal with everything that has prevented our mind from naturally resting up to that point, i.e. all of what we have ignored or denied. Attempting to meditate, no doubt, is asking for it. It is the "thumper."

This is why I can't say much when someone tells me how blissful they feel from their half hour on the meditation cushion. Whatever they are doing in there is not the meditation that the Buddha taught, but rather some form of relaxation therapy, which I have no quarrel with. I like to watch movies for that.

However, formal Buddhist meditation is not initially relaxing, but just the opposite. There is a reason that the Buddha's teaching is called the "Lion's Roar." To the exact degree that we attempt to learn meditation, an equal and opposite force will arise to challenge us, usually in the form of thoughts, distractions, interruptions, and so on. We can't "try" to meditate. According to the Buddhists, we can't even meditate. We can't even try to stop trying, so to speak. We just have to let go. Get my point?

THE ALCHEMY OF REACTION

February 17, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

One key to understanding the dharma is to grasp what are called the Four Noble Truths, and in particular that first truth, “The Truth of Suffering.” Yet, I spent years not correctly understanding that word “suffering.” It took the psychologist (and Tibetan translator) Daniel P. Brown to point out to me that the word “suffering” might better be translated as “reactivity” rather than suffering, making the first thought “The Truth of Reactivity,” meaning that we all react and suffer from reaction all the time.

I found it hard to understand just how I was suffering in this life, especially as a younger, healthy person, but I instantly understand how I suffered from my own reactions, because I noticed them 24x7. I had no doubt about that. And, as I extrapolated from that initial insight, I immediately began to be more aware WHEN I was reacting, and it was not just once in a while, but like: all day long.

And a corollary was that among all of the many and various dharma practices, working with my own reactions is an intuitive and easy practice that I could do, not only on-the-cushion, but all day and all night. And I began to do just that.

I don't want to go into great detail here on the process of what I call “Reaction Tong-Len” or “Reaction

Toning.” I have written many articles and the following free e-book on the topic:

“Tong-Len: The Alchemy of Reaction”

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

However, it is worthwhile here to go over some of the basic ideas, so that we are clear. Beginning dharma training, such as the various forms of sitting meditation, is difficult to master, at least in my experience. However, our own reflexes and reactions are very close to us and quite obvious if we will just develop some awareness of them. If we look, we find our reactions hard to ignore.

All we have to do is begin, to the degree we can, recognizing when we are in reaction. And what is that? You will find that we react to almost everything, and we react all the time. Someone challenges us or purposely embarrasses us, etc. Whatever their motives are, friendly or unfriendly, our reaction is solely our own. We can't control all the incoming we receive, but we can control, with practice, how we respond to it.

There is the knee-jerk reaction, where we flame out, and join the fray, and there is an appropriate considered response. Often we fall into the flame-out, and forget the appropriate response. By learning to monitor our reactions, recognizing that they are 100% our own, and accepting that fact, we begin to desensitize and gradually tone our reactions down. As we cease to react, we simultaneously stop recording

our reactions as karma or at least drastically tone them down.

I found that in a short time I became very aware of my endless reactions and, one by one, began neutralizing them, catching them on the fly, simply owning them, at which time they began to lose their bite. It seems that we are in reaction so very often, wincing at this and micro-creasing at that, and not even aware of it. Such reactions suck up an enormous amount of energy and only further cloud our mind. If we are recording all of this as karma, that amounts to a deluge each day.

In summary, I find that being mindful of my reactions, and even very small ones like “I don’t like her scarf” or “What a big nose,” are important. In time, we cease to react and instead learn to just respond more naturally, to let things be as they are without our annotative reactions. A big nose is just that; we don’t have to weigh in with our two-cents. As originally pointed out, active reaction-toning is, at least for me, the easiest and quickest way to stop recording a great amount of karmic residue. Try it out. It’s free, easy to do, and the results are relatively obvious with only a little practice.

As mentioned, Reaction Toning is the easiest dharma practice that I know of. You can start this moment.

THE DESCENT INTO EXPERIENCE

January 8, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

“Come down, come down, from your ivory tower,” lyrics from an old Gale Storm song. Does anyone but me remember that tune? Shakespeare said the same thing with his “To be, or not to be.” What does it take to get us to abandon our wallflower perch, descend into the material world (what the Buddhists call “Samsara”), and experience life firsthand? If we don’t, life will come and get us, regardless. I’d rather go willingly than to be dragged.

Experiencing life at a distance, conceptually and intellectually only, is a slow boat to China when it comes to getting a return in awareness on our investment. Buddhists point out that the problem with conceptual ideas is that intellectual understanding comes too easily, and like water running through a sieve, not much is retained. As they say, “In one ear and out the other.” Beyond simple conceptual understanding, so they point out, is the actual experience of what is being conceptualized, to feel and experience an idea, to live it.

Experience is better than mere understanding, but still not sufficient. According to the Buddhists, experience comes and goes, is up and down, and goes around. What is needed is that we realize fully not only every idea, but the very nature of the mind itself. Realization

is the goal of all Buddhist training, at least as a first step toward enlightenment.

One of the most shocking events (when I was trying to figure what Buddhism is all about) was when I first “realized” that the mind (my mind, just as it comes out of the box) was not pure (and innocent) at birth as I was taught in catechism class. It is not (as the common phrase would have it) that “civilization is the corruption of infants,” which suggests (and perpetuates) the Platonic myth that we were once pure, but have since somehow fallen into matter, must atone, and be redeemed, which is what the Christian idea of Original Sin suggests.

In fact, it took me years to grasp and realize that Buddhism does not hold that Platonic view and I had to ask my Buddhist teachers more and more direct questions until it became clear that they were serious about this. I had been programmed to assume that we are fallen creatures, sinners, great spirits who, although once pure, have somehow devolved into the material beings we are today. In other words, the concept of original sin is a stubborn stain that is hard to remove, perhaps (according to the Buddhists) because it never existed in the first place.

The difference between this Platonic/Christian (and predominantly Western view) and how Buddhists see it is (so some say) purely semantic and a matter of word subtlety, but I don't find it at all subtle. I find it life-changing. The Christians say we once had purity, but sinned and lost it, while the Buddhists say that we always have had it (and are even now) pure, but have yet to realize this.

To me, that is an enormous difference. In the Buddhist view, there is no blame and no sin involved, nothing to repent or be ashamed of. Having been raised Catholic, removing guilt from the equation is, well, huge.

To go back to my opening comment: the Buddhist view points out that we do not enter this world, as the poet Wordsworth intoned, "Trailing clouds of glory," but rather we enter this world with inherent obscurations, driven by karma and our fixations. It is all right there to see from the very start. And civilization is not the corruption of infants; the infants are already corrupted. If you don't know this, you have not seen enough infants.

The above discussion is a simple concept, the difference between two views, but if you realize what is being discussed, the implications are enormous. With Buddhism, it is always about realization.

THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS

February 2, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

In this political season, I can't help but see all the talking heads on TV, each pushing their own agenda. It is as clear as the nose on your face where they are going with their words, misdirecting as fast as they can. Mostly, I can't watch them, but I end up seeing more than I intended.

We do this all the time with our own mind and its biases and prejudice. If we could listen to and watch ourselves as we can the endless talking heads on TV, we would quickly see where we veer from reality (the truth) into wishful thinking or downright misdirection. And the funny part is that we are only fooling ourselves!

If our impressions or perception is not true, and that is like 99.9% of the time, then that misperception or a skewed view is faithfully recorded in our subconscious, what the Buddhists call the Storehouse-Consciousness. I can hardly imagine how quickly all those recordings of karmic imprints must pile up. Staggering! And all of that is recorded in our own personal Storehouse-Consciousness is either retrieved as memories or engraved in our memory as karmic traces.

And karmic tendencies are not just recorded once with a little digital counter marking how many times

we have had the same thought or fear. The karmic imprints are engraved or underscored thousands or hundreds of thousands of times, each instance more deeply scoring the same groove. You can bet they don't come out in the wash, but will be there, so the Buddhists say, long after we have died and been reborn. Those karmic tendencies are what are passed on at death instead of our Self or, wishful thinking, something like a "Soul."

I find it baffling to imagine what such a memory bank, much less one with a debit-card like we have, could physically be like. Talk about sending stuff to the "cloud" or the terabytes of data needed. I don't have the terms to guess what kind of storage memory it would take. And I find it is comforting that all of this storehouse-consciousness is in ROM-enough (firmware) to get us to the next life, rather than RAM -- memory that vanishes when the plug gets pulled.

The bad news is that our Self (or "Soul") is in RAM, which goes away when the power goes out, and the good news is, as mentioned, this vast Storehouse-Consciousness lasts long enough (temporary ROM), which persists from life to life. At least that is better than the old beer commercial, that claims "You Only Go around Once."

It is helpful to begin to grasp how whatever bias, prejudice, or twist of the mind we put on things is recorded as karmic imprints in the storehouse consciousness. The takeaway is that it pays to be honest, to not put our thumb on the scale, or anything that will misrepresent reality because it will just be that much more karma to be recorded. And, as they say, karma burns twice, the first time when it goes

down, gets recorded, and further obscures our mind, and second, when it ripens, reappears in our life, and has to be worked off.

I was shocked to find (according to the Buddhists) that these karmic imprints, which are constantly recorded, are so durable, so persistent that there is little chance of their being dug out or even ripening in our current life. Most karmic imprints apparently last through death to appear in the next or some subsequent life. That's how deep-down those stubborn karmic stains can be. It's not like a pencil mark and a quick erase.

And, as mentioned in other posts, the most shocking fact that the Tibetan teachings reveal (and no less than the most Ven. Traleg Rinpoche states it) that there is no point in imagining that we will easily uproot our karmic traces stored in the Storehouse-Consciousness. They will have to play out. It would be easier, Traleg Rinpoche points out, to learn to stop recording karma by changing our behavior than to root out what we have already accumulated. That's saying something!

In other words, the only way to actually uproot stored karma is through mastering Insight Meditation, which is why I am making efforts to do just that. Insight Meditation is famous for pointing out how to uproot karma by ceasing to record it.

THE FOLK MUSIC REVIVAL IN ANN ARBOR (LATE 1950s-EARLY 1960s)

March 21, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Ann Arbor was one of several main centers for the folk revival in the late 1950s. In 1957, freshman students Al Young and Bill McAdoo founded the University of Michigan Folklore Society. Bill McAdoo went on to record for Smithsonian-Folkways and today Al Young is the Poet Laureate of California. Although oriented toward the campus and students, the Folklore Society was also a natural interface between the university folk and the townies – music. As a high-school dropout, I had no trouble integrating and being accepted in the folk circles. No questions were asked. We were all just ‘folk’ and it was a culturally rich scene.

And the University of Michigan was not the only campus with a folklore society. Folk music was popping up on campuses all over the nation and we were interconnected by what came to be called the folk circuit, a constant stream of folk enthusiasts that traveled from campus to campus playing and sharing folk music. The circuit went from Cambridge to New York City to Ann Arbor to Chicago to Madison to Berkeley and back again. We were hitchhiking or piling into old cars and driving the route. Musicians like then unknown Bob Dylan would hitchhike into town, hang out, play a gig or two, and be off down the road. And well known folk singers also came to Ann

Arbor. I can remember sitting around the MUG (Michigan Union Grill) for hours on end with players like Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, and many others -- on and on. No one was that famous then, except perhaps for Baez.

Folksingers like Ramblin' Jack Elliot, groups like the New Lost City Ramblers, and the Country Gentlemen were regular visitors to Ann Arbor. This was before anyone was well-known. They didn't spend money on fancy motels; we put them up. They stayed in our houses, where they slept on a couch or in the spare bedroom. And we all hung out together and played music or sat in the Michigan Union Grill (MUG), drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes all day. If we were not inside the Union, we were out on the lawn by the long low wall and walkway out to State Street, playing our guitars and practicing. Once we got past just strumming, we learned Carter Family Style picking, and songs like "900 Miles," "Jimmy Brown the Newsboy," and "The Cuckoo"; Later it was Travis-Style Picking (we called it 3-finger picking), and songs like "Freight Train" and "Railroad Bill."

Whatever music and culture the traveling players brought with them really had a chance to sink in. They shared themselves and their time with us and us with them. They were just folks like we were, only better players. We felt we could perhaps be like them if we worked at it.

Of course, Ann Arbor had its own players. The president of the Folklore Society was Howie Abrams and the society sported folk musicians like Marc Silber, Al Young, Dave Portman, Peter Griffith, and Darryl Lederman. And we put on festivals and events

For example, the folklore society raised money to bring Odetta to Ann Arbor where she gave her first college performance. And a young Bob Dylan gave an early performance as part of a small folk-music festival in Ann Arbor put on by the U-M Folklore Society. I don't remember, but I am told by those who do that I helped put on one of the first Dylan concerts in A2.

I can remember sitting in the Michigan Union with a very nervous Dylan drinking coffee and smoking while we waited for the review of Dylan's performance the night before to come out in the Michigan Daily newspaper. It was something like 10:30 AM when the review surfaced and it was positive. With that good news, Dylan gathered up his guitar, grabbed his backpack, and proceeded to hitchhike on out of town. And when Odetta sang at the Newport Folk Festival in 1960, Al Young, Perry Lederman, and Marc Silber hitchhiked to Rhode Island to see her. There was also a subtle change taking place.

Folk music in the late 1950s and early 1960s was part of what is now called the "Folk Revival," and those of us who were part of it were very much aware of the need to protect and revive our musical heritage. Dylan and Baez were not writing their own tunes back then, but rather reviving and interpreting songs that harkened from other generations. What made you a good folksinger in the later 1950s and early 1960s was the ability to authentically reproduce, reenact, and revive a particular song. The keywords were "authentic" and "revive." Folksingers went to great lengths to locate and reproduce the most authentic versions of a song. Writing our own songs only came years later. Back then, we were busy receiving this or

that part of our cultural heritage from oblivion. We were on a mission, that, and growing up.

Folk music at that time was mostly White folk music with maybe a peppering of Black country-blues artists or a virtuoso Black singer like Odetta. They were the exception, but were treated like the rule: revive them too and be authentic. When we heard the country blues, we wanted to revive and sing them as authentically as we could too, ebonics and all.

It was not too many years ago that, while giving a young White musician voice lessons in the blues, my first suggestion was about the song he brought that day to sing for me. It was "Mississippi Mud," complete with the lyrics "It's a treat to beat your feet on the Mississippi mud." I pointed out to him that it might sound better if he dropped the Ebonics. I doubt that this young man even knew the song was written in Tin Pan Alley and not by Black Americans. Some folks have to learn the blues. That young man today is a well-known blues singer in New Orleans. He learned.

So, it was somewhat confusing to folk enthusiasts in Ann Arbor in the early sixties when we eventually found out that the modern city blues not only didn't need our reviving, but were alive and well, just playing at a bar in another part of town, where they were perhaps separated by a racial curtain. We didn't go there because... well, just because... another insidious effect of racism.

But in fact, blues, especially city blues, was very much alive, still seminal, and very, very available. It didn't need us to "revive" it. In the early and mid-1960s, young White Americans began the trek to the

other side of the tracks, and not only took the trip downtown, but eventually the journey to Chicago and other places where electric blues were being performed most every night. Ann Arbor played a very significant role in introducing White America to city blues. Our city was only a short drive from Chicago, and the great blues players visited here often.

I can remember harmonica-great James Cotton and his entire band staying at our house for weeks on end. Each night we would drive to a gig like the Chessmate along Livernoises (near 6 Mile Road) in Detroit. While Cotton and his band played, I would sometimes sit in the tiny back room and talk with John Lee Hooker, while we waited. And then came the blues festivals.

The original two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals (1969 and 1970) were landmark events and the three succeeding Ann Arbor Blues and Jazz Festivals (1972, 1973, 1974) just opened it all up to a still wider audience. And the ripples of that early Ann Arbor blues scene are still expanding. More on that in another post.

Last Fall (2015), I saw a notice that “songster” Marc Silber was coming to play a house concert just north of Detroit. I had not seen Marc for over fifty years, not since he left Ann Arbor (the U-M Folklore Society) and headed out West to California where he became a well-known guitar maker and repairman, also opening a famous repair store in New York City, “Fretted Instruments.”

Although it was a journey of over 200 miles from where I now live in Michigan, I dropped everything on

that day last spring and made the journey to Birmingham, Michigan to a house in the suburbs. Some friends of the host were there. But otherwise, there was just myself and Stan Werbin of Elderly Instruments, another Michigan folk treasure. I had not seen Stan for about as long as Marc. And we were in for a treat! As founder of the All-Music Guide (which is in Ann Arbor), here is a review I wrote of that concert for liner notes on one of Silber's recent CD albums. It says it all:

"I was not disappointed. In fact my mind was totally blown by what I heard. I have heard a lot of folk music in the last 50 or so years, but nothing as pure and unadulterated as what Silber laid down yesterday. He did what I have never seen done until now. Using his own arrangements, but fueled by his very deep respect for the music, I heard guitar renderings that were, to my ears, perfect, ever so subtle, and absolutely so true to the tradition. It was never even this good back in the day!

"Silber is a just a perfect fingerpicker, with the lightest touch, the most delicate chords, just impeccable playing, and all of this right before my ears. He added nothing that shouldn't be there to the music, and took nothing away that should not be taken away. It was perfect. I never expected to hear anything this good again. Not ever!"

Later last year, I helped to bring Marc Silber to Michigan, where he was featured at probably the best music gathering that is held every year IMO, the "Harvest Gathering" up near Lake City, Michigan, three days, four stages, and over 110 groups playing mostly folk music. Over the years, I have brought

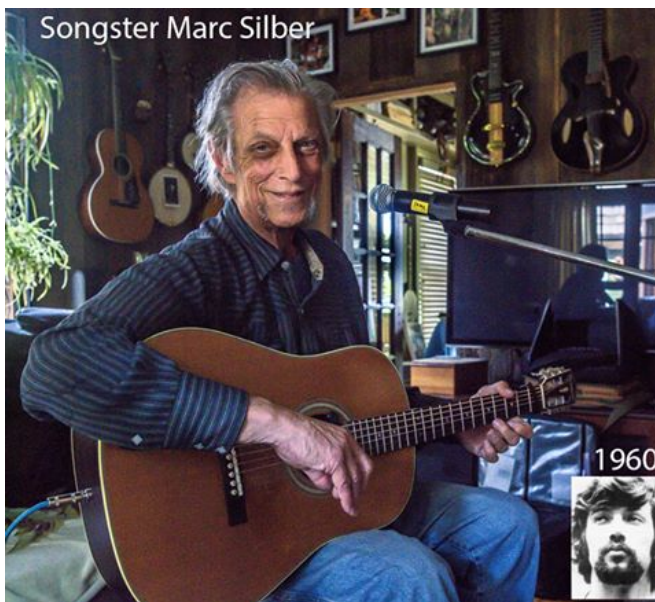
some other guests to the “Gathering,” folks like my friends Steve Coleman (legendary alto sax player) and Karl Berger (legendary vibes player) and founder of the Creative Music Studio in Woodstock, New York. The Harvest Gathering started out as just a private gathering of musicians who had played at the major Michigan music festivals, which got together after the festival season. It was there that they played with and for one another, but over the years, non-musicians heard about it and started to show up too, until today a couple thousand people come out. Anyway, it was a treat to have Marc Silber grace the stages there and offer a workshop in American roots music.

So, for those of you younger Ann Arborites, you can be proud of the folk heritage of this city, which started in the late 1950s and continues to this day with the incredible national treasure “The Ark,” one of the finest and oldest folk venues in America, still going strong. My band, the Prime Movers Blues Band, played The Ark a number of times in the mid-1960s. In fact, the Arks brilliant director Dave Siglin told me that the first time he set foot in The Ark was to hear the Prime Movers play, back when the place was still up on Hill Street, not far from the big rock at Hill and Washtenaw. Dave and Linda Siglin (now retired) have done an incredible job running what I see as the most integral and pure folk venue in the country, over 50 years. Their daughter Anya continues on as Program Director, along with Executive Director Marianne James. Here is a video interview I did lately with the Siglins about the history of The Ark.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l5xTLcXLOB4&list=PL5xDr8mWUwrySqSgxXAJ4ZUiUNntkacmd&index>

So, there is a little something for those interested about Ann Arbor's folk heritage in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Years later, I served on the Board of Directors for both The Ark and the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival. I am the official historian for the later. I will try to write something about the blues festivals in A2 another day.

[Photo by Michael Erlewine, 2015]



THE JAZZ SCENE IN ANN ARBOR BEFORE LIQUOR BY THE GLASS

March 21, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

How could the repeal of prohibition in 1933 affect the onset of the “The Sixties” in Ann Arbor? It sounds like Chaos Theory, where the flapping of a butterfly wing in Brazil affects the amount of snow that falls in Greenland. But such an effect did occur.

Prohibition was repealed at 6 P.M. May 11, 1933 at the Court Tavern on 108 East Huron and simultaneously at some nineteen other Ann Arbor businesses that day. But there was a catch that, although Ann Arbor would no longer be a dry city, liquor by the glass could not be sold at bars but only in private clubs like the Elks and the Town Club. And here is how it affected the onset of The Sixties.

Because liquor by the glass was illegal, it meant that bars did not have the extra cash from those sales to hire musicians and their bands. The result of this was that the jazz scene in Ann Arbor was not in the bars, but instead in houses (usually student rentals) around town. This “liquor by the glass” law was finally repealed on November 9, 1960, but up to that point there was a special music atmosphere that only existed privately. As a high-school student interested in all things “Beat,” including jazz, I found my way into that scene, albeit only as a tolerated bystander. And

there was a vibrant music scene happening in Ann Arbor for those who knew about it.

I can remember one large rental on the north side of the street in the first block or two of E. William Street. Hanging from the second story out over the front steps was an enormous flag with a photo of Thelonious Monk and (if I remember right) just the single word “Monk” or did it say “Thelonious Monk?” It may have only had Monk’s image. It was in houses like these that the forefront of jazz was taking place. Jazz players like Bob James, Ron Brooks, Bob “Turk” Pozar, and Bob Detwiler played. Small groups formed and improvised far into the night.

As a high-school kid, I was allowed in but had to keep a very low profile, sitting along the floor with my back against the walls and taking it in. No one offered me any of the pot they were smoking, but a friend and I used to snort the ashes left by the joints in the ashtrays. That was how dedicated we were in our wish to emulate everyone there. Aside from smoking pot, there was lots of wine and when they were not improvising jazz, they were playing classical music on the stereo. And, although the atmosphere of those parties was not pure Beat, it was all serious and “down” as the beats liked it. The sunlight, nakedness, and the dancehalls of the The Sixties was nowhere yet to be seen.

The point of relating this is to point out that these underground jazz sessions were just one of several indicators that pointed the way from the Beat movement forward to what was to come in just a few years, the advent of the Sixties. I am talking here of the late 1950s and very early 1960s.

These houses and jazz parties usually had one or two largish rooms. The jazz players would set up in a corner.... drums, a standup bass, and a horn, usually a saxophone, but sometimes a flute. And of course a piano, if one was present. There was very little vocal jazz as I remember. The drink of choice back then was wine, red wine, and you would usually find it out in the kitchen in gallon jugs or bottles. And there was pot, something that for a high-school boy like myself (who was reading Kerouac) desperately wanted to get a taste of. And these things went late. Time was something we had back then, with nothing better than the coming night waiting for us on the next day. The right-now of the late nights was just about perfect. And it was, oh, so serious. All of the dark mood of European movies, art, and literature had rubbed off on us until “down” was our form of cool. The word “cool” says it all. We were not hot, or even warm. We were “cool.”

And let's not forget the poetry. Words were big with the beats, and literature and poetry were the coin of the realm. If it was not about music, it was cigarettes, coffee, and endless talking until the bennies or Dexamylys wore off. And it is not like we had any experience in life at that point, so it was all speculation.

If I was on speed and also drinking coffee, some sort of high nausea would take hold of me as it got toward morning. My hands would shake, but I also knew that in that state no sleep would come for a long time yet, and any attempts to rest would be find me lying there wide awake, slightly in the zone, when dawn came. Any sleep would only be a half-sleep. I would be telling myself by that time that I never wanted to take

speed again, but I probably would. And I am talking about those little rolls of Benzedrine wrapped in aluminum foil... about ten or so, the size of aspirin.

So there were two places where I felt (at the very least) the presence of the Beat muse, in those all-night house parties at night and sitting in the Michigan Union Grill (MUG) by day. For Ann Arbor, that was it. And, although the beat stereotype image might be of the solitary thinker, the beats (or wannabes) I knew were remarkably social. They seemed to like gathering together. Of course there were one-to-one talks in apartments or even single rooms, but as often as not they were about administering drugs. I can remember one beat person, Frank Trun. He was older than me and had all the earmarks of the beat generation, including a heroin habit. He lived way out State Street in Ann Arbor, almost to the Stadium Bridge. Some late nights I would venture out there and, if his light was one, I would go up.

More than I once I had watched him cook his heroin, tie off an arm, and shoot up. Too me that was something to see, about as close to real experience as I got back then. I was not tempted. Sometime later I heard he had died when his car careened off a Pennsylvania turnpike. I can only guess at where his head was, at that point.

And many of the Ann Arbor beats were just students, although students that were conspicuous by their berets, long hair, and Navy pea coats. And of course, they seemed to always be older and more serious than someone my age. I so much wanted to be older and to be part of all that. And there were the women. I was too young to really deserve much attention from

the Beat women, although they were so beautiful. As I was really just a townie, I gravitated to the townie women who, like myself, danced at the edge of the student beatniks. And there were not many.

I remember a tall, skinny blonde girl name Francis that I kind of followed around or hung out with. She was shared by a number of us, and I was more a friend than anything else. I do remember spending the night with her at this or that place, although probably nothing much happened.

And now that I mentioned it, places to have sex in Ann Arbor when you were in high school (and living at home) were very hard to come by. The empty room or apartment, the tiny side room off where others were partying, the back seat of a car, the summer grass – anywhere you could. It was a constant problem. I can remember my grandmother who lived at the corner of East University and Hill Street had a little basement room that she would rent out to students. Sometimes it would be empty and I would sneak in with my girlfriend, file down the basement steps, past the old furnace. and slip into that small room. What a godsend it was to be out of the elements and alone with someone you wanted to make love with. Of course grandma, good Catholic that she was, would have hated the goings on there, or would she? She would.

So, there you have a piece of history that few of you probably knew about. I would love to see some photos of those house-jazz nights or photos of the Michigan Union Grill as it originally was, three rooms of tables connected together. This is part of our Ann Arbor heritage.

THE KARMAPA HONORS VEN. KHENPO KARTHAR RINPOCHE

February 23, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

When His Holiness the 17th Karmapa was visiting North America last spring, Margaret and I traveled with him for quite a few stops, first as participants, and then my working as a video (and still photo) cameraman, and finally Margaret and I working as part of his security force team.

During that time, the Karmapa asked our teacher the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche to come to India this winter (like now) and be part of the Kagu Monlam, a festival of prayer for world peace and the welfare of sentient beings. The Monlam is held annually in Bodhgaya, India, the place where the historical Buddha achieved full enlightenment.

Rinpoche is in his nineties, so of course we worried about his health, having to travel all that way, in airplanes, etc., but His Holiness said he would be fine. So Khenpo Rinpoche and an entourage of his retreat lamas left for India recently.

As it turns out, His Holiness the Karmapa wanted to offer a special ceremony for our teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, and honor him for coming to America, where he built the Karma Triyana Monastery, the seat of the Karmapa in North America. Khenpo Rinpoche came to America in the mid-1970s

Rigpe Dorje. He had nothing whatsoever and, along with help from a few lamas (and folks like ourselves), built everything that is there today from scratch.

Earlier yesterday, the Karmapa offered a special ceremony in which he thanked Rinpoche for fulfilling the direct wishes of the previous Karmapa, the 16th (Rangjung Rigpe Dorje). Here are a few screen grabs from a hard-to-see streaming video and the words of His Holiness the 17th Karmapa, Orgyen Trinley Dorje pertaining to our beloved teacher, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. Some of you may appreciate it. It is unusual for a lama to be singled out this way in front of thousands of monks and lay people.

His Holiness the Karmapa spoke about Khenpo Rinpoche's accomplishments and then offered him a small gift. Here is what he said:

“... But as in the practice of the great beings of the past, I would like to give rinpoche a piece of clothing, a meditation belt that I often wear. And this meditation belt is like a sign of his being lord of the family. And because it is like a symbol of the guru being the lord of the family, as it is said, from now and in all of my lifetimes may I be inseparable from the lama Guru Mikyo Dorje, the yidam Vajravarahri, and the protector Bernagchen, and so may Rinpoche never be separate from the ocean of deities and the three roots. May his life and activity be splendid and full, not only this life, but in all his future lifetimes, may he be able to continue acting in vast ways for the benefit of beings and the teachings.

[His Holiness also introduced a new long-life prayer for Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. What follows are his

words and at the end the actual long-life prayer, as far as I can tell.]

“Now, please recite this prayer for his long life, while I will make this gift to Rinpoche, along with a robe. This is a sign of Rinpoche having fulfilled all the qualities of being learned, venerable, and good, and having accomplished the wishes of the Karmapa.

“May this incomparable master live long, through his pure intentions to bring happiness to beings and the teachings, He is a powerful example of being learned, venerable, and good, and has accomplished the wishes of the Karmapa.

LONG-LIFE PRAYER FOR KHENPO KARTHAR RINPOCHE

“Through his pure intentions,
To bring benefit and happiness to beings and the teachings.
He has upheld the example of being learned, venerable, and good, and accomplished the wishes of the Karmapa.

“May this incomparable master live long.
May the glorious lama live long.
May he bring benefit to all beings throughout space.
May I and all others gather the accumulations,
Purify obscurations,



Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche sitting before H.H. the 17th Karmapa and thousands of monks inside and lay people outside in Bodhgaya, India.



Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche



Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche and Lama Karma Drodhul



Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche receiving blessing from the 17th Karmapa.



Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche receiving blessing from the 17th Karmapa, several taps on the head.

THE MAGICAL

February 13, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The poem by St. John of the Cross, “The Dark Night of the Soul (“La noche oscura del alma”) and “F. Scott Fitzgerald’s comment, “In a real dark night of the soul, it is always three o’clock in the morning” have somehow left an impression that I manage to rehearse every once in a while, especially when it’s three o’clock in the morning, which it is right now.

It is minus 3 degrees of temperature outside and I am trying to help Molotov, our aging dog, get back inside after a quick late-night pee and such. Each day it gets harder for him to move and a walk outside often requires my getting boots, hat, and coat to rescue him when he falls and can’t get up. Yesterday, we had snow all day long, patches of sunlight punctuated with wild snow flurries then driven around by strong winds. All in all, it was very beautiful, but also very cold.

The highlight of the day was a visit by my daughter May and her daughter Iris, who stayed overnight. Iris, who is not quite two-years old, was geeked to be coming to see grandma and grandpa. There is so much she likes to do here. The other day May sent us a video by iPhone of Iris madly coloring and scribbling with pencils. When Iris was asked (on the video) by her mom, “What are you coloring?” she pointed to a particularly scribbly patch and said, “Grandpa,” so I was happy to hear that somewhere in her memory am

I. And here is another great Iris story from last evening.

Grandpa's office has always fascinated the grandkids, probably because it has so many "strange" or at least different things in it, like a shrine at one end, a large TV screen in the center, and various thangkas, statues, etc. on the walls. And this is not to mention a couple of computers with large screens, and who knows how many remotes and things with buttons that can be pressed.

My granddaughter Emma, who when she was younger lived with us for something like nine months, and I spent many, many hours together in my office. Emma is now going on four. In fact, I feel that Emma and I have a strong bond because of all that time (and our laughs) together during that formative period. But I can also remember Emma's wide-eyes when she first came into my office. She was a little scared of it, but that soon passed and I soon had to put up a gate just to keep her out.

It is the same with little Iris. She used to come to the office door, stick her head in, look around, and then kind of run away. After a while she would venture in again, but still run on out. Now she marches right in and wants to enjoy all of the fascinating things (to her) in the office. Anyhow, last night she came in and we looked at my little Buddhist shrine. I turned on the small light and opened the shrine doors and Iris stood there taking it all in. Then, she just said one word "Magical!"

That was pretty amazing to me coming from a child who is not yet two years old. And then we proceeded

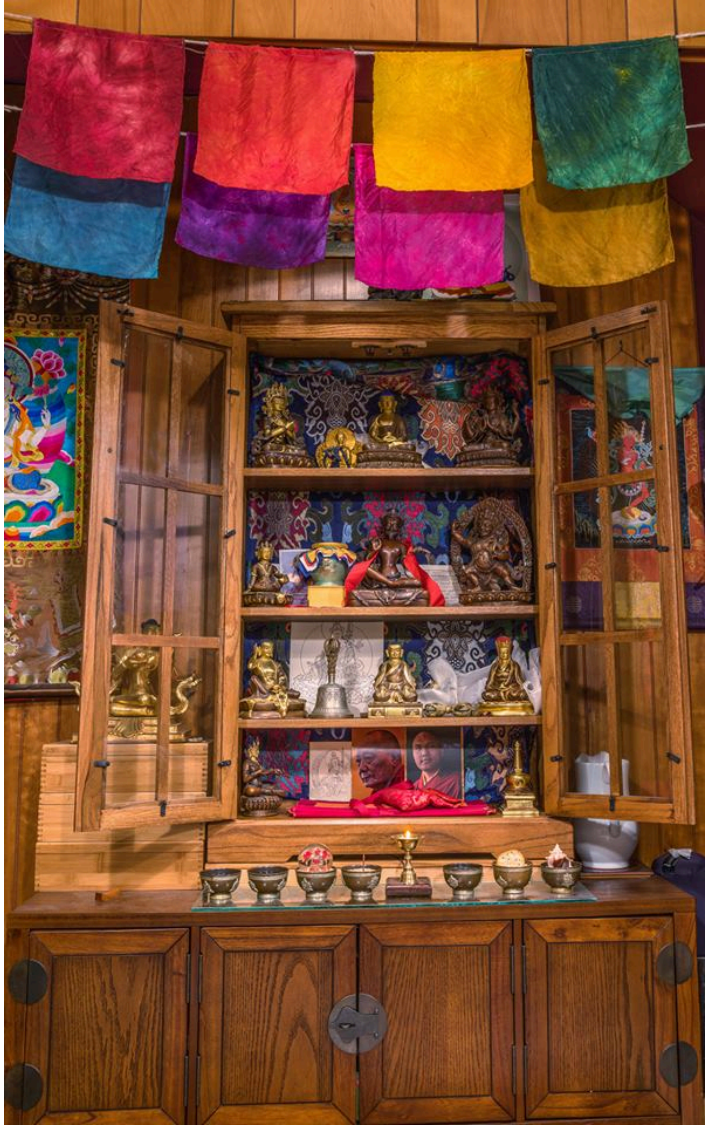
to examine this and that. She had to run and show her mom the bronze Vajra (ritual dharma implement), ring the bell, and hear the sound slowly die away. And there was this and that statue, but she was most captivated by the little cracker sticking out from a bowl of raw brown rice, which is one of the traditional Buddhist offerings, representing food. I am sure she wanted to eat that cracker.

Later, she played and played with a little wind-up flashlight and went around illuminating this, that, and the other thing for a while. For a finale, my wife Margaret, daughter May, and Iris came into my office and we all sat on my couch together and watched the cartoon-movie "The Snowman." Iris has seen almost no video or cartoons in her life, and even then probably on a small screen like a laptop. But last night, sitting on the couch, we watched it on a 55" OLED screen, in full color and sound. Iris was beside herself with joy, dancing in place, waving her arms, and singing along. She can actually sing the song. By the way, if you do not know this song, you have missed something very special in your life. Here is the excerpt from the video with just the song "Walking in the Air" for those of you who have never heard it or who, like me, just want to hear it again. Iris was thrilled and then she went to bed.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SuzLIOSJTKg>

This morning they were on their way, but Iris wanted to stay. So, there you have a slice of life, a sliver of happy/sad, a time deep in winter before spring can manage to get here.

[Photo of my office shrine 1]



THE OTHER HALF

February 12, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[Photo of our kitchen with some grains and beans is not connected to this blog, but just a photo taken yesterday to test out a new lens.]

I mentioned that we have to find an authentic dharma teacher, one who is realized enough to point out to us the actual nature of the mind, but that is only one-half of the equation. We are the other half, the ability on our part to see or receive what is being pointed out. Most of what we call dharma practice is nothing more than preparing us to successfully receive the pointing-out instructions. We tend to focus on what we want to receive and not on how to receive it.

This is “lineage” stuff folks, the systematic passing on from generation to generation the instructions on how to realize the actual nature of our own mind. I can remember when I served on a number of boards at our monastery. We never had enough money. I pointed out how the Indian ashram just down the road was raking in money, hand over fist. Perhaps we could do that.

The lamas never blinked. They thanked me for the suggestions, but kept right on doing what they were doing, just as they always had. It was obvious that this was not their intuition or their first rodeo. They have done this for many hundreds of years and know

that the most important single thing is to keep the lineage intact and pass it on perfectly as it was passed on to them. Money is great, but money can't buy you the kind of purity and sacrifice that protects the lineage. Without that purity, there is nothing of real value going forward to the next generation. In other words, without continued realization of the nature of the mind, there is no lineage.

We think of all the realized monks and lamas, but throughout the history of the dharma an innumerable number of lay practitioners have achieved realization. For example, the 84 Mahasiddhas not only had impeccable realization, they were all lay persons or ended up as such.

At some point, we have to stop waiting to be discovered and anointed and begin to look around to see how we can best prepare to receive the teachings. We must find an authentic teacher who possesses the pith instructions that we need, but equally important, we must be able to receive these instructions. If there is no container to receive, all the instructions in the world will be of no help. There is also truth to the old saying that when the student is ready, the teacher will appear.

However, as I found out for myself by growing up in America, I had always assumed that my mind, just as it came out of the box, was perfect and good-to-go. It never (not ever) occurred to me that I was not perfectly open and receptive. As the Japanese Buddhists point out, in fact I had my bowl mostly upside down and didn't even know it. We have to learn to receive the teachings. This is what most of what the preliminary practices are all about, to

properly prepare us to take the teachings in and realize them.

So, if like me, you have waited for a long, long time for somebody to discover you for who you are, some teacher to see you in the crowd, point right at you, and say “I know you. You belong to me and I to you.” That might happen one day, but it also might not. Chances are that we have not yet done what we have to do in preparation to receive the precious dharma instructions. That is why what are called “The Preliminaries” are so very important.

Buddhism is anything but passive as some assume. The Buddhist teachers that I have met are incredibly active in their receptivity. They make room for you. When I first met the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa and got to spend some one-on-one time with him, it was not so much just his teachings which got my attention. It was his incredible activity and curiosity at life that was my take-away, along with the thought: why am I not doing this too? I didn't know that this kind of “interest” was permitted! “Monkey See, Monkey Do,” is nothing to be ashamed of when you realize that you are welcome to do it too.

So, if everything has not turned out as you imagined it should with your dharma practice, you can always change that by giving more attention to preparing yourself, which is what my blogs are all about. This is exactly what I had to do with my own practice, with the help of my teacher. When I had finished what are called the Common and Extraordinary Preliminaries (several years of hard work), and even some of the more “advanced” practices, I still felt that something was missing. When I asked my teacher what to do, he

asked me if I would like to know what he would do if he were me, and I said “Yes, of course.”, My teacher told me that he would do the preliminaries all over again, starting from the beginning. And I did that and it helped. So, if you can’t go forward, then go back and repeat your preparation. Find a good instructor.



THE PATH OF ACCUMULATION

January 18, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

After my recent journey into some of the ideas behind Yogachara Buddhist philosophy, I realize that removing karma already set in motion is going to be very difficult. And so I cast around to find ways to avoid creating karmic traces in the first place and for ways to purify our actions, so that we are not recording so much karma all the time. Here is one classic Tibetan technique that I have been using for years that is easy to do, if you can learn to use it.

The Two Accumulations: Merit and Awareness:

Time and time again, when the Rinpoche I have worked with for over thirty years has been asked by a student why their practice is not moving forward, the answer from Rinpoche is: because they have not yet accumulated enough merit.

It does not take much awareness to realize that the accumulation of merit by each of us is crucial to any kind of spiritual development. So, what is merit and how do we accumulate it? To help point this out, I will introduce you to what are called “The Two Accumulations.” And rather than jump up and down and wave my arms to get your attention, I simply will say: understanding the two accumulations is important beyond any words I could put together. This is a brilliant technique that works like a charm

The two accumulations are said to be Merit and Wisdom, often translated as Skillful-Means and Awareness, which are the terms we will use here, and they go together like hand and glove. It is my opinion that if you can understand what is being presented here, realize how to use it, and then take the time to learn it even a little, you will have one of the most invaluable tools for enlightenment that exist. And it is so easy to grasp.

For example, if I use skillful means (with language) to describe the “Two Accumulations” here in this blog, the result should be that you become more aware of what I am presenting, than if I am sloppy and unskillful about it. In other words, skillful action is meritorious. The Zen Buddhists are all about skillful means (and its resulting awareness), because they recommend it for every action we take, day in and day out. Just look at the Japanese Tea Ceremony. But we could just as easily watch an expert fisherman tie flies or master chess players play chess. Any repetitive skill or action will do.

And the process is not only iterative, but rather it is recursive: the more carefully and mindfully we act, the more awareness or merit results. And these two accumulations feed on one another. Given more awareness, we can better see how to be more skillful yet in our actions. And acting even more skillfully with our actions results in still greater awareness, and ad infinitum. The process can start out slow, but because each half of this equation reinforces the other, it eventually reaches incendiary proportions. It becomes blue-white hot, like the tip of a blowtorch. Our mind eventually bursts into light.

With all the talk about the dharma being secret and whispered from mouth to ear, the reality is, as the Tibetans point out, that most techniques are “self-secret.” They are hidden in plain sight and rinpoches all over the world point them out to their students. Whether they are grasped and realized is another matter. Ignorance is not just “not-knowing;” ignorance can also be willfully ignoring what has been given or shown to us.

Merit is not something that accumulates somewhere, like money in Scrooge McDuck’s money bin. Merit accumulates as Awareness, and greater awareness makes acting skillfully ever easier. It brings more light. And one result from increased skillful-means is that less and less karmic imprints are recorded.

The Tibetan Buddhists are big on repetitive actions, like saying 100,000 mantras here, and doing 100,000 prostrations there, etc. But the point of repetition is to become increasingly skillful with every action we make. Every practitioner who repeats a mantra knows that, with skill, the mental space in which the mantra is reciting gets clearer and clearer, i.e. there is more and more awareness.

And, as mentioned, with more awareness we can see to do each action more and more skillfully, creating even greater awareness and there you go.

I don’t need to remind you that enlightenment is not something we will find at the live-long end of time, but as the Tibetan Siddhas point out, “realization” arises in the midst of experience, right in the middle of time. Skillful execution of each moment creates the increased awareness of expanded time.

THE PROCESS OF WAKING UP

February 29, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

This blog mixes a little Dharma with esoteric knowledge, so I hope you don't mind.

Just as bodily pain is a wakeup call about health, distracting thoughts are a reminder of the need for mindfulness. Far from being annoying, at some point in our dharma practice, our own distracting thoughts become the windows into the mind itself. We need them. After all, meditation practice is all about awareness, waking up.

It is part and parcel of growing up to become responsible. That is what the word responsibility is all about, the ability to respond. The baby who cannot respond at birth needs help from the midwife, who spansks them on the bottom to get them breathing. Something similar happens to us when we become an adult. Those who cannot respond to the demands of life need help to stop dreaming and wake up to their responsibilities, begin to respond. We all go through this around the age of 30, which is called in esoterica a "climatic" year, with a corresponding rite of passage.

What perhaps begins as a whisper in our ear, grows (if ignored) into a gentle roar, and finally becomes a torrent, a constant demand for our attention. And it won't stop until we wake up and take care of whatever demands life levies on us. And the amazing thing is

that these internal demands on us are not satisfied until they are met full-time, 24x7. Yes, we can be poked awake by life's increasing demands or irritations and perhaps respond a little, just enough so that we can go back to sleep again. But as we age, those demands will never cease. They only get stronger.

In the end, it will be easier to finally wake up and respond completely, which means all the time and forever, than to attempt to sleep on in ignorance. This happens to each of us, sooner or later. Becoming fully responsible, responding fully to life is ultimately not an option. We can delay being responsible, but that is just what it is, a delay only, however long that may take. The Buddhists point out it can be many lifetimes.

Someone like the Buddha is fully responsible, fully responding, completely awake. The rest of us are learning to wake up, which is what the dharma is all about, becoming aware, waking up -- responding. I point this out not to be a nag, but to make it perfectly clear that ultimately our responsibility is total; it will take all of what we have, 100% of our attention. We wake up!

The good news is that there is a point where our awareness and sense of responsibility take fire and, like a rocket that jettisons a booster stage, reach a point of no return and break free of gravity, the grave, if you will.

There is a point in our dharma training where there is no turning back, where our attention and responsibility reach incandescence and burn through any resistance, and as impossible as it was before to stay

awake, so it is impossible to be anything less than awake.

The Zen practitioners call this point “Kensho” and the Tibetans call this “Recognition,” the recognition of the true nature of the mind. And while this is not enlightenment, it marks an actual realization and a point after which we are self-motivated and free of doubt. We know what to do and have only to do it. Every form of dharma practice prior to “Recognition” exists to prepare us for that event.

THE SIXTIES RACE RIOTS
IN DETROIT/ANN ARBOR
AND
THE SUMMER OF LOVE – 1967
March 18, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Over the years I have often felt like Forrest Gump, always on the sidelines of major movements or events, but not quite front and center. This was not true for the landmark Sixties event “The Summer of Love.” I was right there and it was 1967.

For those of you who are too young, the “Summer of Love” was San Francisco in 1967, when more than 100,000 hippies showed up at the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco wanting to hang out. I was there for that in late summer and early autumn.

The summer of 1967 was also the when the race riots broke out in Detroit, July 23, 1967, what was called the “12th Street Riot.” I remember, because I was living in Ann Arbor at the time and a few of us were foolish enough to drive into Detroit during the riot just to see what was happening. Well, that was a stupid thing to do, because all we found out were nervous cops putting shotguns to our heads and telling us to turn around and get the hell out of there. We got.

And the Detroit race riots had their own little ripple-effect as far out as Ann Arbor and the one-block section of Black businesses on Ann Street, where our blues band played at a Black bar by the name of

Clint's Club. During the Detroit riots the police closed down that one-block area of Ann Arbor and even put orange saw-horses around Clint's Club to signify something. Nothing race-related was happening in Ann Arbor, as far as I knew, and suddenly we had no gig.

This probably led to our getting out of Dodge. In fact, my group "The Prime Movers Blues Band" drove all the way across the country to San Francisco (and back) in our 1966 Dodge Van. We had our band name all over the van, but most people thought we were a just another moving company, even though across the front of the van we had the slogan "Gonna Ring a Few Bells in Your Ears" by legendary New Orleans performer Jessie Hill from his song "Ooh Poo Pah Doo." Any of you remember that song? Here is that tune for those of you with open ears:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3qhxE5z9xRI>

How we crammed all of our band equipment and the entire band (there were five of us) into that Dodge van and managed to get it across the U.S. is beyond me. God knows there was not room for all that and also five suitcases, so who knows what we were wearing out there. We took turns driving and made it a non-stop trip. I can remember waking up as we crossed the Continental Divide to find us moving at a snail's pace surrounded on all sides by a flock of sheep. That moment was a long way from what we were going to find in San Francisco.

And of course we had no money and no place to stay once we got there. We just went there cold, because we knew it was happening. I am eternally grateful to

my friend Michael Bloomfield (lead guitar in the Paul Butterfield Blues Band and guitarist on Dylan's "Highway 61 Revisited") for finding us a place to live for the summer, which turned out to be the Sausalito Heliport. This was a place where some music groups practiced, and where we crashed on the floor. I remember some famous woman singer gave us \$5 at the heliport for food. It might have been Gale Garnet ("We'll Sing in the Sunshine"). We had zero money. Remember those days?

In fact we played blues at a local Black rib-joint for free just to have something to eat. We ate a lot of ribs because of our situation. The Sausalito Heliport was just across the San Francisco Bay Bridge to the north. Some people there live on houseboats, which was way cool. The band and I spent most of our time in San Francisco, where we auditioned and/or played at all the major Sixties clubs, places like the Avalon Ballroom, The Straight Theater, The Matrix, The Haight A, and even the Fillmore Auditorium. In Berkeley we played at the New Orleans House.

It was thanks to Michael Bloomfield that we played the Fillmore. Bloomfield was not only one of the most incredible guitarists I have ever heard, he was also one of the nicest and most compassionate musicians I have ever met. We knew the Butterfield Blues Band pretty well, and Bloomfield was our friend, for some reason. In fact we had recorded the Butterfield Band in Chicago when they were first doing their (now legendary) tune East-West, which is probably the first extended-solo track ever recorded and the harbinger for much psychedelic rock. It is over 13 minutes, then unheard of on vinyl, except in jazz. Heavy metal music kind of grew out of that. Our recording of East

West was released on an album some years ago by Butterfield keyboard player Mark Naftalin.

Bloomfield not only found us a place to stay but asked us to fill in for his band, the Electric Flag when they could not make a gig, and it was at the Fillmore at that. This was August 29th of 1967 at the Fillmore Auditorium, when we opened for Cream on what I believe was their first concert in the U.S. or at least in San Francisco. For those of you who don't know about Cream, it was the British rock supergroup featuring Eric Clapton on guitar, Jack Bruce on bass, and Ginger Baker on drums. Their songs included many classic blues tunes and, of course, their smash hit "Sunshine of Your Love."

In fact, I watched Cream (with needles in their arms) shoot up speed in the green room before the show. And I had a shouting match with Fillmore promoter Bill Graham before the show about how to mic our amplifiers. Graham wanted to run our sound directly through these giant walls of speakers, but I wanted them to mic our amps through their speakers, so our particular amp sound would be preserved. I am sure I was wrong, but at the time it seemed so right. And shouting with Bill Graham was almost required back in those days.

We played at a number of venues in San Francisco and in Berkeley. My best friend Michael Katz lived in San Francisco and played in the band "Anonymous Artists of America" (AAA). They dropped acid every time they performed. The house in which their band lived was covered (walls and ceilings) with San Francisco concert posters. Those posters are worth a small fortune these days.

I remember a gig the AAA did at Stinson Beach, north of San Francisco, near Mt. Tamalpais. I believe Charlie Musslewhite was on the same bill. Yes, they all dropped acid and then played. I must say that it was different.

The poster shown here was for one of our gigs, in this case the "Haight A," in San Francisco. I can't remember all that much from the time, but the whole summer experience was over the top. I can remember one time wandering through the Palace of Fine Arts in the Marina District of San Francisco, a huge palace constructed in 1915 for the Panama-Pacific Expo. I believe it was made out of Paper Mache. In the early morning with the mist rising, it was like some kind of dream. Looking back, the whole Summer of Love appears like that to me now.

Anyway, there you have a few of stories from the Summer of Love and the race-riot effects in Ann Arbor in 1967. I am giving you the cream off the top and not the blood, sweat, and tears that also went along with it. I am sure you get the idea. It is hard to even remember how it was back then, much less to describe it to someone else. It was the "Summer of Love," and our band was there. Hopefully you can sense a bit of the flavor from that time.



THE SKINNY ON BEGINNING MEDITATION

March 2, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I can remember when I finally stopped reading about meditation and decided it might just be easier to go and see for myself by actually meditating. Perhaps you too are ready to find out for yourself what meditation is all about. If so, you might want to get an overview of the path just ahead, so you can be ready for that. If you are just starting out, you will find that there are all these dharma practices. Which are the ones for you? What's the best strategy? Here are my suggestions.

For starters, it helps to have some idea as to where you want to go and how do you plan to get there? Perhaps at this point, you just know that you want to be more aware, perhaps even spiritually aware, whatever you imagine that is. And you know that the historical Buddha became more aware, reached enlightenment, and left instructions (the dharma) so that we could do the same. We might like to do that too, but how best to get there?

If we study carefully, we find out that the first real threshold (or gateway) to enlightenment is what is called "Recognition," and that refers to our recognizing the true nature of the mind itself. In fact, it would be fair to say that the sole purpose of all the dharma training before "recognition," all of the many preliminary dharma practices, is to prepare us to

actually recognize the true nature of our own mind for the first time. IMO, before recognition, we are kind of going around in circles.

And, for the most part, that preparation (those practices) means purification. All of those many dharma practices are essentially purification practices, becoming aware of and then removing whatever obscurations we have within us that have to be removed, so that we become more purified until we are sensitive enough to recognize the nature of the mind. There is no way around this that I know of.

However, I do need to point out what is a common mistake, and that miss-take is that “purification” means getting the stubborn stains out of our past. That’s not it, and thinking that would be a mistake. Of course, we can regret, vow not to repeat actions that are harmful, and all of that, etc. This never hurts.

But, in actual practice, purification has to do with that we not commit any more karma-producing actions, rather than somehow fixing up our past mistakes, i.e. what we have already done. In other words, we don’t try to change, clean up, or remedy our past. Rather, we change ourselves in the present so that we no longer are producing the kind of karma we may have in the past. THAT is purification. We purify our current actions, not the actions we have already committed. Those past karmic actions will be purified, but over a long time. This difference is important to realize and to keep in mind.

By purifying ourselves in this way, we are no longer recording and thus not accumulating karmic obscurations as we once did. We are being purified

not of our past. We will still experience the ripening of our past karma, of course, but we will be in a better state of mind to understand and work through it.

With all that said, let's look at some of the most common dharma practices, what are appropriately called the Preliminary Practices.

Of course, there is Tong-Len in all of its many forms. Tong-Len, essentially, is a powerful method to tone down our reactions (what is outside us) by becoming increasingly aware when we react, about what, etc. until we literally tone down our reactions so we are no longer recording the karma of our own reactions, biases, prejudice, likes and dislikes. Tong-Len is an extremely useful technique. Tong-Len was where my Tibetan teacher had me begin, rather than with sitting meditation.

Then, of course, we have all the forms of sitting meditation, perhaps the best known of which is "Shamata Meditation," which is called (in English) "Tranquility Meditation."

Tranquility (being more tranquil) is the final result of this meditation, but it is not the method or technique that we use to become tranquil. The technique used in sitting meditation (Tranquility Meditation) is a process of attempting to focus or concentrate on an object, with the result that we become aware that the effort itself to focus, like the Heisenberg principle in physics, interferes with the result. In other words, dealing with our own effort and the bevy of distracting thoughts that accompany it become the actual main practice of beginning sitting meditation. This has little to do with tranquility until we actually manage to

tranquelize our own effort and thoughts. Then we can be said to be “tranquil.”

All of the above are various forms of purification practice, and they work. When that purification has been achieved and our mind is relatively tranquil, we are then ready to shift gears and actively learn to look at the mind itself. This involves using the mind to look, not outside as we normally do, but to look inside at the mind itself. This is called Insight Meditation (Vipassana in Sanskrit).

When I first got into learning meditation, I did my best to skip Meditation 101 and jump on ahead to some of the more interesting practices. My Tibetan teacher directed me right back to the Meditation 101. It took me years to realize that without purifying my obscurations, I would not be sensitive enough to realize anything, much less the nature of my own mind. The Tibetans are always practical and they save us all the time they can, but purification cannot be faked or leap-frogged. It has to be done.

So, please let me know if any of this registers or if you have any questions.

THE VANISHING POINT

March 10, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

It's funny how converging lines vanish to a point in the distance, an almost perfect analogy for old age, the point of no return or at least of diminishing returns. Time runs out or we run out of time or we run out from time. To quote the words of The Bard (and my favorite Dylan song), "I Shall Be Released", the line "Every distance is not near" rings true, but with age, distance is near enough.

And what I find remarkable about the above analogy is not so much the converging lines and their vanishing point, but rather that all the lines occur ever closer and closer together, crowding in on one another like runners in a tight race. Complications of age compile and pile up, one upon another, until we are literally buried. After all, there IS a point of no return to this life.

All of the above considerations affect just how I dot my i's and cross my t's, how I prioritize. As a matter of fact, I find myself re-prioritizing more and more frequently of late. And why is that? "That" is because it does not pay to project all that much as I get older. My projector still works, but no sooner do I imagine one thing or another, than I find I have to scale back the project if I want to accomplish it.

My continual projection is just a habit, projecting my activity ever forward, even beyond what is reasonable. The great Mahasiddha Tilopa clearly said “Don’t Invite the Future.” So much of my life has been invested in the future, especially when I was younger. After all, the future is all I had when I was a kid. Living in the future is pretty much the way it was back then for all younger people.

An older friend of mine used to jokingly say “Don’t look back; they might be gaining on you.” Well, certainly time overtakes each of us eventually. Zeno’s Paradox of the tortoise and the hare, with halving the distance to the goal line, just doesn’t work out in practice. Time is inexorable and its telescope collapses as we age. Who needs it? The end is already clear.

At the same time I don’t want to be relegated to just rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic, twiddling my thumbs while waiting out the inevitable. I also see no point in opening ever more projects. It’s not that I don’t already have enough projects to keep me busy.

So, what is it that I find unsettling? One troubling thing is that I no sooner get started in a direction than some untoward event breaks out. More recently, these events seem to be health related, and I am not talking about just a hangnail. And these events are not just road signs on the highway of life; they can not only flag me down, but stop me cold. Blam!

So, I guess my question is should I just keep barreling onward and let come what may or do I acknowledge that something like these interruptions is inevitable. I mean, they are going to happen, if only because they

are already happening. It's not like there is any guesswork here or no precedent in human history. Right?

I keep coming back to the line that Kenneth E. Boulding (the world-famous economist) once said to me in a private conversation: "We have to learn to fail successfully." I see no reason to run headlong into a brick wall at full-speed. I have this image of a sprinter after they cross the finish line how, they slow their step and come gently to rest. Only, I want to slow down gently BEFORE I cross the finish line. Am I the Lone Ranger here or do some of you out there feel the same way? Perhaps we could learn to fail successfully together.

THE WAY THROUGH

February 11, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Someone once asked me what to do with their life and the best way to get involved in the dharma. Without thinking how it might sound, I found myself saying that the first thing I would do if I had it all to do over again is to drop whatever I am doing and go and see His Holiness the 17th Karmapa in person, take some teachings from him, and try to get a personal interview. That's what I would do. And in fact that is what I did myself.

I'm afraid that sounded too far out for the questioner, but is it? I am afraid we all have a case of "monkey see, monkey do," and seeing someone like the Karmapa in the flesh gives one all kinds of ideas of what we can do with our life. I know this was true when in early 1974 I first met the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. My take away from that meeting was "Oh, I never thought that we could be like that."

In 1997 my Tibetan dharma teacher, during an interview, told my wife and me to go see His Holiness the Karmapa, who was at that time still in Tibet. For someone who does not travel, I was shocked even by the thought. When I responded that I aspired to do that someday, Rinpoche told us to go now, that summer, within a month, and so we did. You don't argue with your teacher. We took our kids too.

According to Vajrayana Tibetan Buddhism, learning the dharma is not a paint-by-numbers kit that we can do by ourselves. For me, dharma practice without a realized teacher just does not work. Luckily, I have had some of the best teachers in the world. The written teachings are incredible, but eyeball-to-eyeball contact with a teacher who has authentic realization is not only comforting, but insightful beyond words. When I first got into it, the dharma was still barely visible in this country. We had to feel our way along.

I was trying to learn about Zen back in the 1950s, and by the late 1960s I was doing things like sitting an all-day sesshin with Roshi Philip Kapleau, and so on. By the early 1970s I had met Chögyam Trungpa and Rangjung Rigpe Dorje (the 16th Karmapa) in person, and also had a meeting with the Dalai Lama, where I was able to personally offer His Holiness a white scarf. And it goes on from there.

For me, the crucial matchup came in 1983 when I met the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, my root guru. I have been with Khenpo Rinpoche ever since. Rinpoche is now in his nineties and speaks no English. The “Root Guru” (called the “Tsawi Lama” in Tibetan) is the one teacher in the entire world that first succeeds in pointing out to us the true nature of the mind so that we actually get it. To use a photographic analogy, if I was a negative in the beginning, by now I have been fully exposed to the dharma and have become a positive. What an opportunity and what a journey. Anyway, enough about my background. Let’s go back to the key transition that the Tibetans call “Recognition.”

When I first began reading about Tibetan Buddhism, it was with authors like Even-Wentz and his translation of the “Tibetan Book of the Dead” or Anagarika Govinda’s (Ernst Lothar) “The Way of the White Clouds,” almost-impossible-to-understand books for someone just starting out. This was in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Back then, we all thought that the Tibetan teachings were secret, arcane instructions whispered from mouth to ear. I had no idea then that the teachings are “self-secret”, hidden in the one place we would never think to look, in plain sight, hidden from view only by our own obscurations. In the late 1950s, there were no Tibetan teachings in English by Tibetans, at least that I can remember. Tibet was a mystical realm we could only try to imagine, and hope that the teachings there were better than we could find nearer to home.

In previous blogs I pointed at the difference between our intellectual (conceptual) ideas about what the enlightened mind might be like and the actual reality of the mind itself. It would seem for most of us that “never the twain shall meet.” In fact, all of dharma training converges to the single point of abandoning our dharma expectations in favor of bringing online the recognition of the true nature of mind itself. “Recognition” as to the nature of our own mind becomes the threshold to actual realization, literally the gateway to enlightenment. And yet, in what passes for meditation today in America, few have ever heard of “recognition” by word or even description. We must remedy that.

As an analogy: if I want to make a model airplane, I have to gather all the pieces, read the instructions carefully, and then do my best to assemble the plane

All that is preparatory to whether the plane can actually fly or not. Most often my finished plane does not look like the photo on the cover of the kit, much less does it fly.

Putting together a model airplane has the virtue that it is physical. We can see whether it looks like it should and if it flies or not. With a spiritual practice, like learning to meditate, we have none of those visible or physical clues to guide us. We are going on spec, forced to imagine what the result we are aiming for must be like. It is entirely conceptual. Talk about a high wire act with no safety net.

It is the same with learning to play music. We can put on a CD and listen to what we should sound like, and try to emulate that. But with any spiritual discipline, like learning to meditate, there is no CD or DVD that will show us what greater awareness, much less enlightenment is like. We have to totally make it up based on books, teachings, teachers, and friends. Inevitably, there is a vast gap between our imaginations of what enlightenment might be, compared to the reality. Closing that gap is much of what dharma practice is all about. There is a big difference between studying how to fly an airplane and actually flying one.

According to the Tibetans, we have been building mental sand castles for lifetimes, each one farther and farther from the reality of the mind itself. We are not in touch with the reality of our own mind. "Recognition" is how we abandon our preconceptions as to the true nature of our mind and actually grasp the nature of the mind itself -- figure it out. But the problem is that we don't do it in that order. Instead

we first grasp the nature of the mind, at which time it is easy to abandon our preconceptions.

According to the Tibetan teachings, it is possible, like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, to painstakingly take apart our conceptions, bit by bit, until nothing is left but the reality, but this is said to take untold kalpas of time. A kalpa is said to be something like 16 million years long, so that may not be the most practical approach.

Instead, the method used by the Tibetan Buddhists is to point out to a student the true nature of the mind, at which time our preconceptions vanish on their own. Looking at the writings of the great Mahasiddhas, they all seem to agree that we cannot do this by ourselves. In other words, the Self cannot point this out to itself. These “Pointing Out Instructions” can only be done by an authentic dharma teacher, one who has themselves achieved Recognition. And there are also required preliminaries before this event can take happen.

Before “Recognition” can take place, we have to be able to steady our mind in a relaxed way. Learning to do this is called Tranquility Meditation (Shamata in Sanskrit). Next, once the mind is steady, we are ready to learn what is called Insight Meditation (Vipassana in Sanskrit). It is Insight Meditation that requires an authentic teacher to point out to us how that is done, thus what are called the “Pointing Out Instructions.”

“TOMORROW IS IN YOUR HEAD”

March 29, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

A quote from Facebook friend Donna Riley. As the great Bokar Rinpoche said at his monastery in Mirik, West Bengal, when I said goodbye to him: “Tomorrow or next life, Michael, whichever comes first.”

After a certain age, we make elaborate plans for the future at our peril. It does not take much to sideline us in the health department (or with the death of a love one) to send us rearranging our priorities, post-haste. Building castles in the air of the future comes to a sudden halt as reality sets in, and it is humbling, to say the least. There is also a snap-back-to-reality response to such untoward events, like in the movie “Bambi,” “Wake up, Wake up, Friend Owl.” We should have more wisdom than that by now.

I am not suggesting by this that our only alternative is to wait to die. Hardly! However, we might want to circle the wagons at least a little bit. In my own case I have made considerable effort to sort out my physical things, so that my kids and wife don’t have to guess what I had in mind. I also have a lot of stuff. Period.

With my intellectual property, I have only lately begun to seriously consider it. Lucky for me, one of my daughters, Lotis, was trained in enterprise-level web development by my own company many years ago, despite getting a degree from the University of

Michigan in other things. Lotis has worked for a large company as webmaster for years and more recently as web manager for the whole thing, so she is ready, willing, and able to take over my main web site (SpiritGrooves.net) (which is tiny) and keep it running. Things like that would worry me otherwise.

I can tell one story that I find interesting. As you know, I photograph nature, lately mostly plants and flowers, and in winter, indoors at that. I have written many articles (in photography forums) about how I value the “process” of photographing more than the resulting photographs. After all, it was through photography that I had one of my greatest breakthroughs with dharma practice.

Anyway, as part of my recent health problems, I have to keep a journal of my blood pressure through each day for some weeks. I record my blood pressure as I perform various activities, like exercise and what-not. Well, the amazing thing (to me) is that when I finish up a photography session my blood pressure is the lowest of all things that I do in a day, including sleep! That tells me something. It must be that I do photography meditatively.

Revising my priorities, thanks to my health scare, I have gradually (over the last years) had to abandon some of my more grand projects, like it or not. Instead, I have built smaller castles in the air than before, but still castles, some projection into the future. By nature, as future oriented as I am, I don't think that I project the future as much as I help to womb or birth the future to a real degree. I see myself as much a midwife as I do a projector. In fact, the

clearer my mind gets, the less I project the future and the more I just help the future to be born. That idea.

I learned years ago to mine the future, which is no different than searching in the mind. I am sure that you can understand that the truth being what it is, the "Truth," by definition has to be the future. It is the only thing that will last until then. This is problematic for me, because I have a lifelong habit of casting my net into the future and pulling it into the present. However, it's like raising a newborn child at my age. I don't have time to do that. I am already too old. I have to stop fishing the future. It's just another habit. Make sense?

TRYING DOESN'T DO IT

DOING DOES IT

February 9, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Unfortunately, thanks to the late 1960s (and all of the 1970s), we collectively suffer from a misguided idea of what “spirituality” is all about. We have learned to separate the spiritual from organized religion, so many don’t practice a religion but still consider themselves spiritual. But for much of modern society “spirituality” remains more of a label than something they actively identify with. We know what it means, or do we?

Is spirituality something we ever actually have or accumulate, or is it rather a process and a way of living, a path, as in: we do things spiritually? We like to imagine that we live “spiritually,” whatever that is. IMO, the most Buddhist of the Western poets has to be Shakespeare. He defined spirituality (to my taste) in his 13th Sonnet when he wrote: “You are no longer yours, than you yourself here live.” In other words, spirituality is a moment by moment mindfulness, rather than something we can acquire once and for all and then forget about it.

The Buddhist texts are rife with phrases that point out that no matter how many titles we may have, no matter how much practice we have done, when we are not practicing mindfulness, our mind immediately reverts to being perfectly ordinary once again. True

mindfulness is not an occasional foray into clarity attained by practicing dharma, but rather an eternal vigil of wakefulness – awareness. Getting clarity once in a while by sheer effort of practice must finally give way to “being there” all of the time. And here is my point: there has to be a transition from making endless effort in “trying” to be mindful into the state of naturally being mindful all the time. And this does happen, but just how?

I find it helpful to note that the texts say that there is an end to “trying” to be aware, making efforts to remain mindful and awake. Meditation only takes that kind of effort in the beginning, but without knowing how to progress, that beginning can take forever. Constant effort can be a tough go. Just as in the beginning, where we can’t get into the groove of meditation (we don’t remain present without real effort), there is a point later on where we break through and don’t have to worry about slipping back. The groove keeps us from falling out. And from that point onward it is effortless in that sense. That point is termed by the Tibetan Buddhists “Recognition” of the true nature of our mind.

This brings us back to conceptuality, all of the ideas we have managed to think up about enlightenment, realization, or whatever we want to call it. It is ironic that our own conceptions eventually become the main obstacle to any realization of the dharma. First, through study and the teachings, we form all of these conceptual expectations about our enlightenment that are not based on any actual realization on our part, and then, in order to actually realize what the concepts refer to, we have then to take apart all of these expectations because the concepts themselves

obscure the reality. First we build them up; then we tear them down. Expectations invariably are disappointing, compared to the reality. Otherwise they would be the reality.

So, it's great that we have become interested in the Dharma and get all fired up. Since we have no realization, we have no choice but to cobble up an idea as to where we are heading, what is realization or enlightenment, and so on. We literally make it up based on what we have read and have heard from teachings, teachers, peers, and the like. By definition, we don't yet KNOW what we are talking or thinking ABOUT. We are just thinking and talking about it.

The longer we read and practice, the larger the mass of this conceptual image in our mind becomes. We can develop very sophisticated concepts about dharma and its paraphernalia. We should know (by definition) that our expectations are errant, off the mark, but most don't or soon forget that fact. Otherwise we would already have realization, again by definition. At some point in our practice, this made-up conceptualization (our made-up ideas about enlightenment) is no longer helpful. On the contrary, since our expectations are not properly aligned with the reality of the nature of the mind itself, we have two distinct tracks going, only one of which we are aware of, i.e. the conceptual one we imagined. The reality up to that point has escaped us.

Yet, our increasing conceptual expectations eventually become more of an obstacle than a help... AND... we perhaps begin to sense there is something more, something beyond and more real than our tiring intellectualizations, i.e. that we are off track or on the

wrong track. This can be a very delicate and even dangerous point in our practice. How do we let go of our conceptualizations and somehow begin to grasp the actual reality, how things really are? We have studied and learned all about it, but have yet to realize it.

It is like taking the training-wheels off our first bike. There has to be a switch-over point in these two tracks by means of which we let go of our expectations and begin to grasp the actual nature of the mind itself, i.e. we get it. The Tibetans call that point “Recognition” of the mind’s true nature.

This, of course, is where the lama or personal dharma teacher comes into play. It is their responsibility to carefully point out to us the true nature of the mind, so that we can make the switch. It is like spiritual brain surgery, a very, very delicate operation that few can manage, i.e. to “Pick up on one and leave the other behind,” to quote the Lovin’ Spoonful, from their song “Did You Ever Have to Make Up Your Mind”.

Of course, the moment we reach what the Tibetans call “Recognition,” which is nothing less than the recognition of the true nature of the mind, our conceptual apparatus and expectations vanish like a puff of smoke, instantly. It’s like finally finding the doorknob in a dark hallway. It’s like when my GPS system says “You have arrived at your destination,” the “destination” being that we have finally brought our expectations in line with reality, the way things are.

Getting to the point of “Recognition” is what all the bullsh*t is about. Recognition is not enlightenment

but it marks the end of conceptual guesswork and the beginning of actual realization.

TWO TYPES OF INSIGHT

January 22, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

This is a blog about the two basic kinds of “insight,” insight into the cause of things and insight into the nature of things. Many psychological techniques focus on finding the cause of things, while Insight Meditation focuses on the nature of things. By the cause of things, we mean what was the cause of this or that thought, event, trauma, or whatever. By the nature of things we mean what is the nature of all these different causes, any causes.

The importance of the “past,” what has happened to us and its effect on us in the present, is contrasted when we compare the Vajrayana Buddhist view and the view of many psychological therapists and many, many more new-age style therapists. These are two quite different perspectives on handling our past memories and traumas, both useful, but for different purposes. I find the distinction interesting and worth considering.

These days, modern psychological therapy runs the gamut from degreed professionals to just about any person who wants to hang out a shingle. Just visit Woodstock, New York, which I do every year. And I must make the disclaimer that I have been an astrological counselor for the last fifty years, including at least nine years of full-time counseling, but some now and again. However, I have never done therapy

because IMO I have always seen therapy as something that requires special training, otherwise it can be a bit of a sticky wicket. Without the proper training, the more you work therapizing a client, the more danger there is of the tar-baby syndrome, getting hopelessly stuck over a matter of personal opinion with the client. And I am not just hypothesizing. I have experience.

As astrological counseling is often seen as a court of last resort, many of my astrological clients were refugees of one kind or another from psychological therapy (of one kind or another) gone wrong, therapy that aborted, leaving the therapy client in a personal war and struggle with the therapist, not to mention still having the troubles that brought them to therapy in the first place.

As an astrologer who sometimes counseled post-therapy clients, I was supposed to sort that out too, which would take (and here is the recursion), umm, some kind of “therapy.” As mentioned, I don’t do therapy, but I have too often seen the mess that failed therapy could turn into. I readily admit that the results of therapy that I personally have encountered in my clients were probably only the ones that did not work, but they sure did not work.

Also, it was made clear to me early-on from the Tibetan teachings that astrology (and the like) is what is called a relative truth. It can help us to get from here to there on the sphere of life, help to modify our view or attitude but, by itself, will not take us toward the center and will not liberate us from Samsara. It is not the same as dharma or, as my root lama puts it: “Astrology is one of the limbs of the yoke, but not the

root. The Dharma is the root.” And this is true for all relative truths, of which astrology and psychology (and its therapies) are an example.

This is not to say that astrological or psychological counseling (or therapy) has no value. Of course it does, but it is helpful to note the limits of that value, and just what it can and cannot do. Here is a bit of the Buddhist view from a very high lama, the Ven. Traleg Rinpoche.

Traleg Rinpoche:

“The insight technique [Insight Meditation] involves a kind of epistemological enquiry, and is not meant to deal with specific thoughts and emotions or their significance to our individual history or psychic life. For example, if we have harmful thoughts, lustful thoughts or confused thoughts, we do not try to work out where these thoughts have come from in our life. We are not trying to construct a causal analysis of our psychic life, because the causes are endemic to our human condition, and are consequently present in the very processes and strategies we might employ to make sense of that condition. The insight technique is designed to dismantle our fixation on these thoughts and emotions because it is the fixation that reinforces our biases and prejudices and dulls the lenses through which we ‘see the world darkly’.” -- “Luminous Bliss” by Traleg Rinpoche, 1st edition, page 214.

This is a very important statement to understand and hopefully realize. Basically, it is saying that the content of our thoughts, what they are about, like the history of our neuroses, blow by blow, should not be concentrated on. We are not trying to retrigger or

straighten out the past, which is what at least some psychotherapy techniques apparently focus on. Instead, through Insight Meditation, we focus on our FIXATION on those past thoughts, events, emotions, and history. Remove the fixation and the content has little to no power over us. I am sure this is the intent of many successful forms of therapy, to touch upon past experiences in order to desensitize them. Removing fixation outright appears to be the province of Insight Meditation (Vipassana).

The teachings on the Buddhist subconscious, which is called the Alayavijnana or Storehouse Consciousness, tell us that once karmic imprints are recoded in our subconscious, they are very difficult to remove. Basically, they remain there for whatever period of time or lifetimes they require. We are encouraged not to try and fiddle with them or give these karmic imprints any more fuel for their fire. It only underscores them.

The Buddhist view is that the Storehouse Consciousness, where our past memories and karmic imprints are stored, is not a simple “write-once and erase” affair, but rather it is a write-innumerable-times with no erase, making many imprints pretty much indelible, those cases where each similar karmic imprint underscores an ever-deepening groove that is practically-speaking almost impossible to remove. Simple scrubbing (therapies) will seldom help, especially if they focus on the content of the karmic imprints themselves.

It took me a while to grasp the import of this statement. So what CAN we do? Two things are suggested by the Buddhists, the first of which is to

concentrate on not creating more karma to record. Yes, the situation with the Storehouse Consciousness is so serious that the initial remedy is to find ways to stop recording that particular karmic imprint in the first place, which itself is very difficult to accomplish. Just try and break a bad habit.

Various therapies that attempt to manipulate our memory content are considered, as mentioned, “relative” means, in that they may (at best) provide temporary relief or some reorientation, but on the negative side they often succeed in only increasing our fixation. I distinguish these from therapy whose aim is desensitization.

Addressing the agents that cause the karma in the first place (stop creating karma) is said to be much more productive than trying to endlessly sort through and thus further fixate on the past. The theory is to let the past be what it is (good, bad, and ugly) and instead redirect the attention to the present where fresh (and hopefully) “good” new karma can be recorded, creating a “new” image, rather than continue to obsess on the past. Like with handling little kids, sometimes simple “misdirection” is in order.

The Buddhist teachings that I have read do not say that therapy itself is bad or that we should stop working with it, but rather that it can be very inefficient compared to simple redirection to the present, i.e. distracting ourselves from the distraction of grief, worry, and fretting about the past, those things that cannot be undone. As the great Mahasiddha Tilopa said “Don’t Prolong the Past.” That says it all. So what can be done? There is an answer.

Over-concern with the past, even with therapies that are supposed to relieve us, often can end up increasing our fixation on those troubling events. There is the tar-baby syndrome to consider. The antidote, in dharma terms, is to learn Insight Meditation (Vipassana), which is said to actually uproot the past causes once and for all. However, Insight Meditation is not easy to learn and usually requires an authentic teacher to point out how to successfully do it. It is not done in a day. And, there are dozens of forms of Insight Meditation; what is indicated here is the Vajrayana form as taught by the Kagyu and Nyingma Lineages, and perhaps others.

Anyway, that's what we are looking at. Now, as for my own view of all of this, since I have been a counselor for many years, which is a close relative to being a therapist, I can say this:

I view what I do with a client as similar to helping set the sails on a sailboat. The client is heading one way, like toward the top of Niagara Falls, and the astrologer helps to reset the rigging so that the boat shunts off toward the shore. Another analogy that I feel is apt: The client is gripping something like a baseball, and that grip has become frozen into a death grip; very painful. The job of the astrologer, as counselor, is to help them let go of the baseball, take a deep breath, and pick it back up again, but with a loose or more-gentle grip. This is what is meant by astrology being a "relative" truth. Astrology can help get us from here to there. The same goes for any relative truth, including psychological therapy. The key thought here is "temporary" relief and perhaps a new direction. As often as not, the client is soon right

back in the same situation, thus the need of therapy – repetitive treatments.

And what I would have astrologers and therapists consider carefully is that the Vajrayana Buddhists (including virtually all the great Mahasiddhas) point out that the only way to actually uproot or remove recorded karma is through the Vajrayana form of Vipassana (Insight Meditation), which, as mentioned, is more than a little difficult to learn.

And the whole reason for my writing this out is not to disrespect astrologers or psychological therapists, but to draw our attention to the fact that we may want to actually get on it and learn Insight Meditation ourselves from an authentic teacher. This is exactly what I am doing and so far it makes an enormous difference.

And, of course, it is the client that would eventually need Insight Meditation, and I am not sure how to get around that speed bump. Any ideas?

U-M Folklore Society

THE FOLK MUSIC REVIVAL IN ANN ARBOR

(LATE 1950s-EARLY 1960s)

March 21, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Ann Arbor was one of several main centers for the folk revival in the late 1950s. In 1957, freshman students Al Young and Bill McAdoo founded the University of Michigan Folklore Society. Bill McAdoo went on to record for Smithsonian-Folkways and today Al Young is the Poet Laureate of California. Although oriented toward the campus and students, the Folklore Society was also a natural interface between the university folk and the townies – music. As a high-school dropout, I had no trouble integrating and being accepted in the folk circles. No questions were asked. We were all just ‘folk’ and it was a culturally rich scene.

And the University of Michigan was not the only campus with a folklore society. Folk music was popping up on campuses all over the nation and we were interconnected by what came to be called the folk circuit, a constant stream of folk enthusiasts that traveled from campus to campus playing and sharing folk music. The circuit went from Cambridge to New York City to Ann Arbor to Chicago to Madison to Berkeley and back again. We were hitchhiking or piling into old cars and driving the route. Musicians

like then unknown Bob Dylan would hitchhike into town, hang out, play a gig or two, and be off down the road. And well-known folk singers also came to Ann Arbor. I can remember sitting around the MUG (Michigan Union Grill) for hours on end with players like Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, and many others -- on and on. No one was that famous then, except perhaps for Baez.

Folksingers like Ramblin' Jack Elliot, groups like the New Lost City Ramblers, and the Country Gentlemen were regular visitors to Ann Arbor. This was before anyone was well-known. They didn't spend money on fancy motels; we put them up. They stayed in our houses, where they slept on a couch or in the spare bedroom. And we all hung out together and played music or sat in the Michigan Union Grill (MUG), drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes all day. If we were not inside the Union, we were out on the lawn by the long low wall and walkway out to State Street, playing our guitars and practicing. Once we got past just strumming, we learned Carter Family Style picking, and songs like "900 Miles," "Jimmy Brown the Newsboy," and "The Cuckoo"; Later it was Travis-Style Picking (we called it 3-finger picking), and songs like "Freight Train" and "Railroad Bill."

Whatever music and culture the traveling players brought with them really had a chance to sink in. They shared themselves and their time with us and us with them. They were just folks like we were, only better players. We felt we could perhaps be like them if we worked at it.

Of course, Ann Arbor had its own players. The president of the Folklore Society was Lewis Abrams

and the society sported folk musicians like Marc Silber, Al Young, Dave Portman, Peter Griffith, and Perry Lederman. And we put on festivals and events. For example, the folklore society raised money to bring Odetta to Ann Arbor where she gave her first college performance. And a young Bob Dylan gave an early performance as part of a small folk-music festival in Ann Arbor put on by the U-M Folklore Society. I don't remember, but I am told by those who do that I helped put on one of the first Dylan concerts in A2.

I can remember sitting in the Michigan Union with a very nervous Dylan drinking coffee and smoking while we waited for the review of Dylan's performance the night before to come out in the Michigan Daily newspaper. It was something like 10:30 AM when the review surfaced and it was positive. With that good news, Dylan gathered up his guitar, grabbed his backpack, and proceeded to hitchhike on out of town. And when Odetta sang at the Newport Folk Festival in 1960, Al Young, Perry Lederman, and Marc Silber hitchhiked to Rhode Island to see her. There was also a subtle change taking place.

Folk music in the late 1950s and early 1960s was part of what is now called the "Folk Revival," and those of us who were part of it were very much aware of the need to protect and revive our musical heritage. Dylan and Baez were not writing their own tunes back then, but rather reviving and interpreting songs that harkened from other generations. What made you a good folksinger in the later 1950s and early 1960s was the ability to authentically reproduce, reenact, and revive a particular song. The keywords were "authentic" and "revive." Folksingers went to great

lengths to locate and reproduce the most authentic versions of a song. Writing our own songs only came years later. Back then, we were busy rescuing this or that part of our cultural heritage from oblivion. We were on a mission, that, and growing up.

Folk music at that time was mostly White folk music with maybe a peppering of Black country-blues artists or a virtuoso Black singer like Odetta. They were the exception, but were treated like the rule: revive them too and be authentic. When we heard the country blues, we wanted to revive and sing them as authentically as we could too, ebonics and all.

It was not too many years ago that, while giving a young White musician voice lessons in the blues, my first suggestion was about the song he brought that day to sing for me. It was “Mississippi Mud,” complete with the lyrics “It’s a treat to beat your feet on the Mississippi mud.” I pointed out to him that it might sound better if he dropped the Ebonics. I doubt that this young man even knew the song was written in Tin Pan Alley and not by Black Americans. Some folks have to learn the blues. That young man today is a well-known blues singer in New Orleans. He learned.

So, it was somewhat confusing to folk enthusiasts in Ann Arbor in the early sixties when we eventually found out that the modern city blues not only didn’t need our reviving, but were alive and well, just playing at a bar in another part of town, where they were perhaps separated by a racial curtain. We didn’t go there because... well, just because... another insidious effect of racism.

But in fact, blues, especially city blues, was very much alive, still seminal, and very, very available. It didn't need us to "revive" it. In the early and mid-1960s, young White Americans began the trek to the other side of the tracks, and not only took the trip downtown, but eventually the journey to Chicago and other places where electric blues were being performed most every night. Ann Arbor played a very significant role in introducing White America to city blues. Our city was only a short drive from Chicago, and the great blues players visited here often.

I can remember harmonica-great James Cotton and his entire band staying at our house for weeks on end. Each night we would drive to a gig like the Chessmate along Livernoises (near 6 Mile Road) in Detroit. While Cotton and his band played, I would sometimes sit in the tiny back room and talk with John Lee Hooker, while we waited. And then came the blues festivals.

The original two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals (1969 and 1970) were landmark events and the three succeeding Ann Arbor Blues and Jazz Festivals (1972, 1973, 1974) just opened it all up to a still wider audience. And the ripples of that early Ann Arbor blues scene are still expanding. More on that in another post.

Last Fall (2015), I saw a notice that "songster" Marc Silber was coming to play a house concert just north of Detroit. I had not seen Marc for over fifty years, not since he left Ann Arbor (the U-M Folklore Society) and headed out West to California where he became a well-known guitar maker and repairman, also opening

a famous repair store in New York City, “Fretted Instruments.”

Although it was a journey of over 200 miles from where I now live in Michigan, I dropped everything on that day last spring and made the journey to Birmingham, Michigan to a house in the suburbs. Some friends of the host were there. But otherwise, there was just myself and Stan Werbin of Elderly Instruments, another Michigan folk treasure. I had not seen Stan for about as long as Marc. And we were in for a treat! As founder of the All-Music Guide (which is in Ann Arbor), here is a review I wrote of that concert for liner notes on one of Silber’s recent CD albums. It says it all:

“I was not disappointed. In fact my mind was totally blown by what I heard. I have heard a lot of folk music in the last 50 or so years, but nothing as pure and unadulterated as what Silber laid down yesterday. He did what I have never seen done until now. Using his own arrangements, but fueled by his very deep respect for the music, I heard guitar renderings that were, to my ears, perfect, ever so subtle, and absolutely so true to the tradition. It was never even this good back in the day!

“Silber is a just a perfect fingerpicker, with the lightest touch, the most delicate chords, just impeccable playing, and all of this right before my ears. He added nothing that shouldn’t be there to the music, and took nothing away that should not be taken away. It was perfect. I never expected to hear anything this good again. Not ever!”

Later last year, I helped to bring Marc Silber to Michigan, where he was featured at probably the best music gathering that is held every year IMO, the “Harvest Gathering” up near Lake City, Michigan, three days, four stages, and over 110 groups playing mostly folk music. Over the years, I have brought some other guests to the “Gathering,” folks like my friends Steve Coleman (legendary alto sax player) and Karl Berger (legendary vibes player) and founder of the Creative Music Studio in Woodstock, New York. The Harvest Gathering started out as just a private gathering of musicians who had played at the major Michigan music festivals, which got together after the festival season. It was there that they played with and for one another, but over the years, non-musicians heard about it and started to show up too, until today a couple thousand people come out. Anyway, it was a treat to have Marc Silber grace the stages there and offer a workshop in American roots music.

So, for those of you younger Ann Arborites, you can be proud of the folk heritage of this city, which started in the late 1950s and continues to this day with the incredible national treasure “The Ark,” one of the finest and oldest folk venues in America, still going strong. My band, the Prime Movers Blues Band, played The Ark a number of times in the mid-1960s. In fact, the Arks brilliant director Dave Siglin told me that the first time he set foot in The Ark was to hear the Prime Movers play, back when the place was still up on Hill Street, not far from the big rock at Hill and Washtenaw. Dave and Linda Siglin (now retired) have done an incredible job running what I see as the most integral and pure folk venue in the country, over 50 years. Their daughter Anya continues on as Program Director, along with Executive Director Marianne

James. Here is a video interview I did lately with the Siglins about the history of The Ark.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l5xTLcXLOB4&list=PL5xDr8mWUwrySqSqxXAJ4ZUiUNntkacmd&index=6>

So, there is a little something for those interested about Ann Arbor's folk heritage in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Years later, I served on the Board of Directors for both The Ark and the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival. I am the official historian for the later. I will try to write something about the blues festivals in A2 another day.

WHAT IS ORIGINAL SIN?

January 2, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The famous quote from Wordsworth's poem "Ode to Immortality:

"Trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
..."

This suggests Plato's concept that we once were pure, but no longer are, or the Christians concept of Original Sin, and that we originally knew our pure nature and have fallen from what we once were. This is a pretty common Western concept, i.e. that we are now something less than we once were, or have forgotten our original purity and fallen into dis-grace.

The comparable Buddhist concept states that we are all pure inside and have what is called Buddha Nature, but we have not fallen from that state. What they do say is that up to now, through all our lifetimes, we have never known and have yet to realize our own actual nature. Thus Buddhism has no concept of original sin and the result that somehow we have fallen from a pure state into where we are now. In other words, in Buddhism there is no blame or sin, but only the need to remove whatever obscures our own inner nature and realize it.

This is not just a question of semantics, but a very real difference, one that was music to the ears of this Catholic boy when I finally figured it out. The sheer burden and guilt of being a sinner from birth onward is too much to ask of a young adult, much less a child or an infant. Instead of original sin, Buddhists point out that, like wearing a pair of dirty glasses, what each of us has to do is learn how to clean our glasses and thus see the true nature of our own mind.

In summary, the Christians claim we had it and lost it, due to our own fault(s), while the Buddhists say that we have always had it, don't know it, and have yet to realize it. Those are some real differences.

Let's see... which one makes more sense to me?

WHAT IS SOLAR CHANGE TO US?

January 29, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Over the last many hundreds of years, as astrologers, we have looked beyond Earth to the planets, their aspects, and the various patterns they form. Here in the West, we have also given some attention to the Sun, Earth, and Moon, and to the lunar cycle, but nothing compared to the Asian approach to these bodies. Where we have the Four Quarters of the Moon (some very few Westerners divide it into the Eight Phases), the Asians have 30 lunar days (tithis), with great attention to the value of what each of those days are best suited for. We have not reached that level.

However, as I tried to point out in yesterday's blog on the Cosmic Ray increase, astrologers have almost completely ignored solar activity, the continually changing pulse of the Sun, its effects on Earth, and perhaps more important to astrologers, the effect of intense solar activity on our emotions, psychology, and spirituality. The Sun does more than just grow our grass.

What's astrology's excuse? Is it that solar activity is so close, so much a part of us, that we just can't see it or for some reason we feel we can safely ignore it? Whatever the reason, the fact is that astrologers (in general) don't monitor solar activity, which astronomers certainly do, and in minute detail. And

why is this? It is a fact that solar influx and activity literally control the pulse of our lives. In my opinion, astrologers should be all over solar change, if only because it explains so very much.

As I see it, solar activity is the key to the only constant in this impermanent world, “change.” As they say, the only thing that never changes is change itself. The activity of the Sun is almost the sole arbiter of the pulse of life on this Earth. Don’t we want to monitor the solar heartbeat, since it effectively in some way is our own? Why has it taken astrologers so long to grasp this? These are fair questions.

All of the above should be obvious if we just sit down and think it through. I have drawn your attention to all of this. I would like to spend the rest of this blog looking at change, the kind of change we all experience each day of our lives.

Perhaps it is because we take “change” for granted. Have we ever even questioned what change is? What causes change? What “is” change and where does it come from?

Perhaps we feel that such questions have nothing to do with astrology, but I question that. Let’s look at what a “science” of change might look like from an astrological viewpoint, and I distinguish the force of change from the direction that change takes us as individuals. We all receive the same solar impulse of change from the Sun, but we each react to change differently. Given a shot of the solar-change adrenaline, what it does to us differs. The Buddhists would have it that our reactions to change depend upon the past karmic traces that we have recorded in

what they call the Storehouse Consciousness, which is something like what psychologists might call the “subconscious” – deeply embedded karma.

The theory is that in response to a burst of solar-energy change, when circumstances resonate at a certain frequency with those stored karmic imprints, the imprint (like a freeze-dried action) springs into action and forces us in a particular direction. In other words, the adrenaline impulse from the Sun is the solar activity that turns the wheel of our dharma, but our reaction to that impulse are the karmic imprints that causes us to do this or that, move in this or that direction.

We may not all know about the Storehouse-Consciousness (or how it works), but the mechanics of daily solar activity is very well documented by our brother and sisters, the astronomers. Solar change is recorded online once every minute. All we have to do is look!

<http://www.swpc.noaa.gov/products/goes-x-ray-flux>

Perhaps astrologers avoid using these solar indices because they are unpredictable, i.e. unlike planetary ephemerides, we can't plot solar change into the future. While we can always predict that change will come, we have no way of saying when it will come in intense quantities. Perhaps astrology's response to that is, well then, why bother?

My response is: “Bother!” It is very worthwhile to know when there is a sudden influx or solar activity, not to mention when a large solar flare emits sheets of solar plasma directly at Earth, and the like. I have pointed

out the tools; now let's go back to examining what change is. What can we say about it other than it is "change?"

Solar "change" to me is something that flows evenly each day, just as the Sun shines on the meadows. It causes things to grow and life to live. While change is constant, it is not constant in its amplitude, whether or not we want to accept solar energy as part of what causes change. There are sudden increments of change in our lives, just as there are sudden influxes of solar energy, like a huge solar flare.

To me, change, like adrenaline, speeds things up and causes whatever is happening to quicken or happen faster or at least more intensely. And I might say, more creatively.

My mentor in all of this was the scientist/astrologer Dr. Theodor Landscheidt, who was also on the Supreme Court of Germany. He was well respected and lectured at many scientific conferences, etc. Landscheidt wrote a book called "Children of the Light," in which he points out major solar activity as it coincides with the work of great thinkers, scientists, and artists, etc. Unfortunately, this book is in German. I had it translated into English by no less than the great astrologer/translator Robert Schmidt, but have not received permission from Landscheidt's widow to publish it. The book goes into great detail about the effect of solar activity on human creativity.

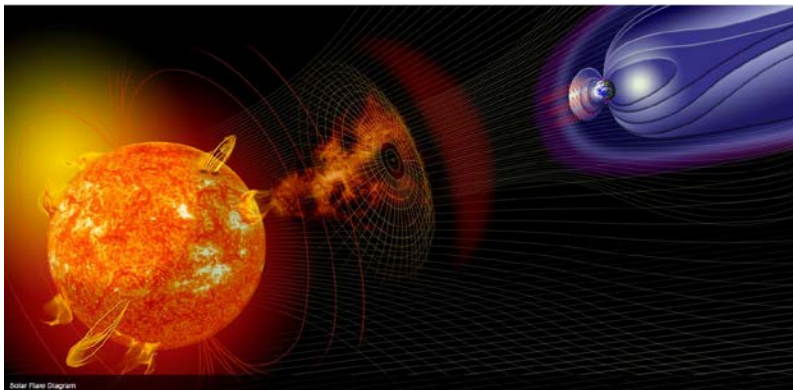
Sadly, Landscheidt has passed on. I was privileged to consider him as a friend and when home computers first came out in the late 1970s, I sent one to Theodor Landscheidt in Germany, on which he did many of his

initial computations and studies. He also visited our center here in Michigan and taught these things.

In closing this up, I suggest that the Sun be monitored by astrologers and integrated into our work. As for the effects of solar influx personally, emotionally, and spiritually, I suggest that we become increasingly aware of our reactions during times of great solar activity. Someone has to do it.

As mentioned, I view solar surges as an adrenaline-like shot of energy that precipitates inner change, depending on its size, and our reaction to it depends on our own habits and karma. Sometimes we can control the energy, and sometimes it drives (or causes) us to veer in this or that direction. Sometimes we even turn over a new leaf.

This interest on my part dovetails nicely with the awareness that naturally is the result of meditation and training the mind. I am learning as I go.



WHAT IT TAKES

February 3, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I have been more or less captive in my home this winter, not so much from the snow, as from the fact that our much-loved dog Molotov is failing fast. As Buddhists, we don't believe in putting dogs "down," because (according to the teachings) it is better for an animal to live out their karma, than to have them killed and push that karma forward. Of course, we don't put people down, yet, but they are working on it.

So, here I am with "Molly," and I am with him round the clock, helping him get up, carrying him here and there, cleaning him up when he has accidents, and all of that. I am grateful it is not any other member of my family. There is no question but that this whole ordeal keeps me from getting too ecstatic.

And while this inevitable situation is something that dampens my mood and is always on my mind just now, I have noticed one thing. It once again reminds me of the inestimable value of what the Buddhists call the Common Preliminaries, also called "The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma," often just referred to as "The Four Thoughts" or the "Four Reminders."

Of course, it was the "Four Thoughts" that attracted me to Buddhism in the first place, because they seemed so natural and, more or less, were pretty

much what I had been thinking myself before I formerly encountered them. For those of you who do not know what the four thoughts are, here is a simple list:

THE FOUR THOUGHTS THAT TURN THE MIND.

- (1) This human life is precious.
- (2) Our life is impermanent, like a soap bubble.
- (3) Karma: everything we do has an effect.
- (4) We will never get our ducks all in a row.

Of course, the particular one of these four thoughts hanging over me just now is the second one, that life is impermanent and we all will die. As the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa once said when he began a talk to an audience. “Some of us will die soon; the rest, a little later.”

Well, my little dog is dying just now, day-by-day, and while perhaps many people don't take animal deaths that seriously, I do. Trungpa Rinpoche personally made it clear to me back in 1974 when I was his chauffeur for a time, was that we must keep these “Four Thoughts” in mind all the time, not just one or two of them.

Well, I can't say I have them in mind all the time, but I do have the thought of “Impermanence” in mind these months, each and every day. And I must say that, despite the fact that it turns my damper down a bit, it does help to focus my mind and keep the pedal to the metal, as they say. I am less likely to get lost in meaningless activities. Indeed, death is sobering

So, this experience does bring to mind Trungpa Rinpoche's advice that we must hold those Four Thoughts dear. And it causes me to reflect that the time when I had probably my greatest dharma insight and breakthrough was not a time of clear sailing, but one of intense pain and mental suffering. It took that kind of extreme situation and pressure to forge my mind in the blue-hot flames of experience, and turn my mind so that some bit of realization appeared. Now, that alone is a sobering thought.

While I hate to think that it takes a terribly demanding situation to finally get my attention, that well may be the case. I am not about to go out and volunteer or seek out that kind of pressure, but it does give me pause that this is what it took to help wake me up.

It does make me concerned that many of our situations are so "good" that we kind of float over life rather than live it deep enough to come to grips with the Four Thoughts. I am reminded of a poem that Michelangelo wrote (he also wrote poems) that loosely translates to something like "What if a small bird should escape death for many long years, only to suffer a crueler death." Another way of saying this might be "there's no free lunch."

In my case, my own experience speaks louder than the theory that I can just casually go on doing my dharma practice. Apparently, it takes more than that to get my attention, a lot more. Those Four Thoughts, also traditionally called the "Four Reversals," I have to take to heart. Years ago, I wrote this simple poem after Chögyam Trungpa pointed out to me the need to hold all four thoughts in mind at once.

THE FOUR THOUGHTS THAT TURN THE MIND

This precious life,
Impermanent and brief,
I know.

My actions keep on piling up,
And I can't quite get my ducks all in a row.

Trungpa said to me,
So many years ago,
By grasping just one thought or two,
We'll never turn aside.

We must, he said,
Maintain all four,
And leave not one behind,
Four precious thoughts that touch the heart,
Only they can turn the mind.

WHAT PERSISTS AFTER DEATH?

THE BUDDHIST SUBCONSCIOUS

January 12, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I will start out with what I feel is a funny story. This morning when I was waking up, but still in that twilight zone between waking and sleeping, I was remembering that at 8 AM this morning a moving van was coming to haul away all my papers, personal correspondence, and a load of books, tapes, videos, etc. from the studio. They are being sent to the University of Illinois as part of their permanent collection.

Since I already had in my mind ideas about what goes and what stays, I slipped back into the zone and was wondering what stays and what goes when I die, and here is the funny part. For some reason I was thinking about my favorite coffee cup, a trim little minimalistic thing by Dansk that I like the looks of. Must be the Zen in me! I don't even drink coffee anymore. Anyway, I was telling myself that when I pass on from this world, I know I can't take any of my Self, but maybe I will take a few of those coffee cups with me. And then I realized what I was saying and laughed.

And now for what I hope will be an interesting blog, at least for me. What I am going to discuss here is probably above my pay grade, the kind of thing that requires an intimate knowledge of Sanskrit, Tibetan,

and perhaps even special practices. The best I can do is just sort of follow along with the texts and see what I can understand. That understanding, such as it is, will be what I share with you here. The gist of what is being looked at has to do with exactly what in us survives death and is thereby present for any future rebirth. I believe that we all have a stake in this topic.

The Buddhists say (and we should know this from the fact that we can't remember any past lives) that what we call the Self, our Persona, does not survive death. As the poets say, we lay down the cloak of our personality at death's door. It is a scary thought, but I can't remember any of my own past lives. Oh sure, I have had weird dreams and even some overshadowing of my consciousness by what seem to be experiences from another time, but nothing stable or constant. And, as an astrologer I have met thousands of other astrologers, so I am used to claims from folks about their past lives. However, aside from a few Tibetans, I have found none of them credible. Most of it is just harmless new-age banter, as we all know.

The Buddhists have discussed this issue of what survives death for something like 1500 years i.e. if our Self does not survive death, what in fact does? And many of us feel uncomfortable at the idea of the extinguishing of our much-loved Self at death, like blowing out a candle. If that is the case, what can we expect with rebirth and just who would we be if we are not our familiar selves? What then?

The answer from the Tibetans is something called the Alayavijnana (pronounced AH-LIE-AH VIN-YAAH-NAH), the Buddhist equivalent of the subconscious

which was being examined in Asia long before Sigmund Freud came on the scene.

Alayavijnana, more commonly called the Storehouse Consciousness (or the Alaya Storehouse) does not store our particular life experiences like we do our normal memories, you know, in a story-like or threaded format, i.e. ideas in complete sentences. The Alayavijnana does not contain whole thoughts, experiences, memories, and the like. It is more like a database that contains singular parts, but makes no attempt to connect them all. The scholars make a big point of saying that the Alaya is neutral, and contains both good and bad karmic imprints. Actually, if you read the various texts and commentaries by the experts, what the Alayavijnana does contain is, apparently, not all that easy to define.

I think of the Alaya Storehouse as more of a cosmetic toolkit in which all our propensities are stored. If you remember Mr. Potato Head as a kid, where you took a potato and then selected from an array of parts, the particular parts you wanted to use to create your Potato Head, you would not be far off. However, instead of consciously picking our attachments, like we do with our Self, in the case of the Alaya Consciousness, apparently our karma determines this for us. Indeed, we have a smorgasbord, but one that is tailored or designed just to our own karma. Think of the Alaya Consciousness as the palette from which our new persona at rebirth is created, but with an array of colors dictated by our particular behavior i.e. we may be missing some of the bright colors.

The Storehouse Consciousness contains all of the customized (by us) parts as created by our actions

and karma, each of which is like a seed or icon from which we can grow a particular part of consciousness or persona, and none other. One analogy I use for myself is that, while the Alaya Storehouse does not contain the story of our personal experiences intact, it does retain the karmic residue of all our repeated actions, which are laid down in an ever-increasingly deep groove or track. Each track, through sheer habit, gets only deeper and deeper. And, just as the bullet from a rifle can fingerprint the gun, so our particular ingrained habitual grooves serve as a kind of personalized mold for our actions. They identify us in a very broad sense of that word, and in that sense we may persist in our rebirth as we are now.

Our conscious mind is what it is, but we don't have the password to get into our unconscious mind, the Alaya Storehouse. Even if we did, we would not find anything coherent that we could understand. We access it subconsciously, not consciously.

In other words, when a habitual action is triggered, the Alayavijnana mold or groove provides a personalized form (molded to our specs) for a response. This storehouse contains the shape and degree of our every karmic trace, good and bad, and serves them up at a moment's notice. The wonderful Traleg Rinpoche writes: "We should not envision an actual storage place though, but rather see the storage space itself as part of what has to be stored."

Humankind is pretty much the accumulation of all the individuals that make it up. The same idea occurs in the case of the honeybee and the hive. The hive persists from year to year, but the bodies of the bees that make up the hive change each season. In human

rebirth, the bodies may change, but the palette used to create our “persona” remains the same – our particular karmic traces and residue – until we remedy that through dharma practice.

In other words, the form of our rebirths is shaped by the storehouse of karmic traces that we bring with us through time. Beneath all of that is what is called Buddha-Nature, but a lot of good that does us without realizing that fact. Instead we are suffocating under a cloak of our own karmic imprints. This is why the Buddhists state that the first thing to do is to stop accumulating yet more karma, and the second is to see about removing the karmic imprints from our Alaya Storehouse, easier said than done.

In summary, Buddhism is so very concerned with our intent. The Alaya Storehouse is where our intent, like a Rosetta Stone, is engraved and resides, just beyond our conscious mind. This is the palette from which our persona or precious Self is painted afresh each life. Like a huge barge, the Alayavijnana is dragged behind us through time, life after life, while our desires are the tugboat. Although it remains invisible to us, the Alaya Storehouse alone is responsible for the elephant in our room.

WHEN LESS IS MORE

January 7, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

God knows that I did not take to meditation (or any kind of mind training) easily. Aside from originally finding meditation totally boring, I did not want to mess with whatever inner mental mechanism was driving my mind, lest I screw up whatever magic in there that was “me.” How’s that for being egotistical?

As meditation and new-age notions continued to encroach on my generation, it became harder and harder to play dumb as to my actual involvement with meditation, which was about zero at that time. All I did was just go in a corner and sit there. Nothing happened!

Meanwhile, all around me, many of my peers at least were giving lip service to formally meditating. I tried to keep my head down, but my own view was, basically, that you can’t salt the salt, meaning “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” The only problem was that the individuals I ended up admiring were all spiritual or “meditation” types. Now, that really did throw a wrench into the works. I finally gave up holding meditation at bay and reluctantly began to explore it. All that ended the day I met the Ven. Chögyam Rinpoche, who took me into a room with him for an hour or so and taught me meditation. After that, I was all in.

Rather than try to piece together my story, which was

much more helpful to those of you actually considering getting more involved with looking at your mind to cut to the chase and point out an easier entry than I made.

When you finally decide to do something about working on your mind, I suggest you first take a deep breath and let the mind settle. That's already a start.

According to the Ven. Traleg Rinpoche, it is not wise to go right for the jugular of our problems, as in: take on the biggest bully emotional-klesha we can find in ourselves. That would be tilting at windmills. Instead, Traleg Rinpoche advises we start by simply ceasing to do our most negative acts. We add by subtracting. The idea that we have to run out and save sentient beings and make grand gestures is probably wasted energy in the condition most of us are in. We are in no shape to help others.

Instead, simply begin by walking back some of your own negative actions a bit. As my father used to say, "Keep it down to a gentle roar." There is a good case to be made that all of Buddhist mind training is simply the removal of the obstacles in our way, rather than the development of anything new, different, or special. There is nothing that is missing, except our awareness, and that is not something we have to drum up or create. We just have to let the light in.

And this is a process of the gradual removal (letting go) of our fixations, rather than of adding something new on. I like the phrase "abandon your fixations." Let them go. We already have everything we need close at hand. The Buddhist theory is that if we take away the obscurations, our natural Buddha Nature will

shine though, and that (in itself) is all the “positive” we need. So, add on by taking away negative actions, a bit of Buddhist logic.

For beginners, just ceasing to accumulate more “bad” karma is enough to change our life speed and direction in a good way. Start there. As mentioned, Buddhist training is very much about removing what obscures our inner light and letting that light just naturally shine through, as opposed to “doing” something we think is “positive.” Remember the Zen refrain “Do nothing. Do not do a thing.” Having less negativity automatically is positive. If we can stop the further accumulation of karma, that alone is a giant step forward. This is exactly what the great Mahasiddhas do: stop recording negative karma all the time. We too can do that.

So, first we cease and desist with negative karma-accumulation. And we learn to rest in that space that remains. We don’t, for example, tackle our big kleshas (emotional problems) head-on in the beginning. We work up to that first by not accumulating further bad karma. That may be the limit of what we can do at the start. It is all that is required and it is enough!

We also do not throw good money after bad, by beating ourselves up for whatever negative things we have done in the past. Yes, we acknowledge our so-called “bad” actions, but we don’t then proceed to spend any more energy scolding ourselves over them, worrying about them, or protecting ourselves from them. All that is just another way to prolong them. In other words, we don’t add insult to injury. We need that energy

So, removing obstacles and negative actions is a great first step to mind training, an example where subtraction adds up to something positive. Less is more.

WHY YOU MAY NOT BE READY FOR MEDITATION

January 20, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Meditation, like most worthwhile dharma “practices” in life, takes time to learn and get results, in fact, lots of time. Although it is laudable that we can squeeze out a half hour (or even ten minutes) of meditation on the cushion from our busy schedule, that much practice will hardly even keep our foot in the door. In other words, in my experience it takes more practice than that for real results.

Sure, even a small amount of meditation practice sends our Self a signal of our good intent (and that never hurts), but expecting more than that from it is, IMO, wishful thinking. And I now invoke the popular phrase, “I’m just saying...”

Because there are scores and scores of techniques and methods out there that are called “meditation,” it is getting very difficult to find the original method indicated by Shakyamuni Buddha, which is called Shamata Meditation, sometimes called Tranquility Meditation, but today there are even many non-authentic forms called “Tranquility Meditation.” In fact, the whole concept of meditation has been so twisted and confused with various methods of relaxation therapies that it is a wonder than anyone can be sure that what they are practicing is authentic. And by

“authentic,” I simply mean that they will work and produce the results that the original Buddha intended.

As you might imagine, I get in conversations all the time with folks who “meditate,” and I end up very gently questioning them on what in fact they are doing, and most often I find that they are not doing any kind of meditation that the Buddhists would recognize, or, worse, that they are not doing it correctly. Unless asked, it’s not my business to point out why whatever method they are doing is anything more than just another form of relaxation. Of course, we all need to relax as we will. Yet, we also need to learn authentic Shamata Meditation. It is the gateway to most of the more advanced Buddhist practices. Without it, we are just spinning our wheels. And there are some other facts that you might want to know about how the Tibetan Buddhists approach learning meditation.

As mentioned, the most common form of meditation, the place to begin, is Shamata (Tranquility) Meditation. However, learning to sit in Shamata Meditation is not easy at all. It amazed me when the Tibetans pointed out to me that in Tibet sitting meditation is not where dharma students begin. Instead, in Tibet beginners start with what are called the Common Preliminaries, followed on by the Extraordinary Preliminaries (also called Ngöndro).

As it turns out Ngöndro is a set of five very demanding practices that I will not go into here more than to say that it involves doing a hundred-thousand recitations of a 100-syllable mantra, a hundred-thousand full-length prostrations on the floor, and much more. I have been told by rinpoches that

Americans have about zero interest in the Extraordinary Preliminaries (Ngöndro). I can testify, as an American, to being pretty-much horrified when the idea of doing Ngöndro was first presented to me. To my mind, at that point, there was no way I was about to do those practices. Period. End of story.

Because of that kind of reception to Ngöndro in this country, the lamas and rinpoches, instead, started us out with sitting meditation, Shamata, even though in Tibet learning to sit in Shamata Meditation only comes AFTER extensive training in what is called the Ngöndro. The fact is that we wouldn't do it, so here in America we start right out with sitting meditation. Is it any wonder that sitting meditation ends up being little more than another form of relaxation therapy for many people, a way to take the load off? We have skipped the preliminaries, what the Tibetans themselves do, refused to take Dharma-101, and the fact is that there is a reason for doing Ngöndro. We need to have those preliminaries under our belt.

In my own case, after trying every-which-way to get out of doing Ngöndro, but also becoming more aware that I was getting nowhere with sitting meditation, I finally agreed to do the Ngöndro Preliminaries, and here is the funny part. After finally finishing Ngöndro (several years!), during my yearly interview with my dharma teacher, I asked him what I should do next; his answer was "Do you want to know what I would do if I were you?" Of course, I said "Yes!" After all, this is Vajrayana and he is my teacher. He then said, "I would do another round of Ngöndro." Gulp, and so I did.

The point of this story is that I needed all that Ngöndro to get loosened up enough to actually get something out of sitting meditation. I was way too tightly wrapped with all kinds of expectations, obscurations, uptightness, etc., to jump into sitting meditation. And thus my advice to you interested in making progress dharmically:

I have tried before in other blogs to explain what I'm pointing out here, but I have not been very successful; some folks take it that I just don't like sitting meditation, that I am discouraging it. That is not my message. There is an absolute need for sitting meditation, but there is also a time and order in which to learn it.

As mentioned, it may sound like I am belittling formal meditation on the cushion, but I'm not, so try to hear what I AM saying. Without performing the Ngöndro preliminaries, the truth is that the amount of time most of us can find to sit down and meditate is simply not enough. It is at best a token gesture, but it will probably not get us to where we need to be, IMO. We have to get a little more radical and think outside of that box. What kind of dharma practice can we do, off-the-cushion, that will help, as we go about whatever schedule life demands of us? I feel it is important to figure this out.

I don't expect many of you to be ready to perform a Ngöndro. But I also question whether a beginner can get much out of sitting meditation without the warm-up of some sort of preliminaries.

With that in mind, this is why I recommend something as simple as Deception Tong Len. Anyone can do it, it

is easy, and it provides results very quickly. Also, we can do it all day long as we go about our activities. Because we can do it off-the-cushion, we can accumulate a lot of practice, and it takes that kind of effort to get much of anywhere.

And the result of Reaction Tong-Len, like any remedial practice (which is just what preliminaries are) is to break-down and begin to remove our obscurations, which then makes sitting meditation much easier to get results from.

I have presented this technique thoroughly in a little free e-book called “Tong-Len: The Alchemy of Reaction,” which you can find here. Just scroll down:

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

For the die-hard printed-books readers, it is also available on Amazon.com.