

Karma and the Alaya Consciousness



The Alayavijnana

by Michael Erlewine

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and the

Alaya Consciousness

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BOOK REVIEW: “Karma” by Traleg Rinpoche

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 a celebration at finding it! It is more useful 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, What It Is, What It Isn't, Why It Matters,” 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 during 2004, Traleg Rinpoche was there for the blessing and opening of the great shrine room, a new gumpa 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 unforgettable to 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, forward. 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. These are pith instructions!

REBIRTH OR REINCARNATION?

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, cravings, and desires. That reborn consciousness has no body or physical form, which is why it is being reborn, to get one. It has some cravings, intents, 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 new lifetime from scratch. We are not hampered in our next life by the big nose we have in this life, etc. 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 of

cravings, 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 the rest of us. We take rebirth, whatever we can agree the “We” is.

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 a friend) raised the whole litter in the bottom of an old 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 stainless-steel 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 that something significant is being worked out. [Note: Molly passed on some years ago.] I think of him almost every day.

This is all food for thought.

WHEN LESS IS MORE

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 egotistic?

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 a non-intuitive segue into mind training, it would be 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. We should start with ourselves.

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. We start by stopping.

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.

THE DESCENT INTO EXPERIENCE

“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. It’s the old “go to meet your maker” refrain.

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 intellectual 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.

Going 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 or perhaps two-year olds.

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.

READING ABOUT DHARMA

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 Buddhas 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 certain level of student, and so on. Years ago, I 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 a 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. Upadesha 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 of 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.

MIND READER

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, in my youth, and even as a young adult, the mind was not even on my best-seller list. I kind of fell into it. It was not hard to do.

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 psychic, and I seldom speak about them because they are too out of the ordinary to expect folks to believe they exist. But, at my age, who cares. So, sue me!

The first of these messages that I received by “Direct Voice,” so to speak, was that I did not need to travel and that I should stay put, and my own would come to me. And mostly, I stay put; that idea.

I was also told, and this is kind of interesting, that I had two natural “gifts” or talents. The first is the ability to stop bleeding. In other words, I’m a natural cauterizing agent, staunching the flow of blood. 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. I just heard it loud and clear in my mind, like a voice.

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 bleeding. You can see it in my writing, if you look. I cauterize.

And the second quality or talent that I heard directly was the ability, by 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 too old for that.

Anyway, that's it. Those are my special gifts, as I was told. There were two other direct-voice experiences that I had, when I also was notified directly, that in order to open my mind as fast as my generation needed it to open, the force of a more sudden 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 of losing some detail, in exchange for opening the mind sooner.

I have no idea exactly what this meant, but I relate here that it happened. And I have had two strokes, that removed some of the mental bric-a-brac, for better or for worse. And lastly, I was told I would one day write an epic work or poem. I have not written that epic poem, but I have written an epic amount of writing. LOL.

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 for me 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. Or, perhaps I am like the old saying “Even a blind squirrel will find an acorn every once in a while.” LOL.

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 the Tibetan Buddhist mind training and a practice called Vipassana, Insight 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 my identifying with the mind itself rather than my previous outsider view, and I found myself looking inside the mind from the inside, if that makes sense. This is a form of transmigration.

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 a habit of following the thread of 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. This is learned.

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 created and made it up out of whole cloth. It is literally a spitting image of our attachments, those same attachments which are the glue that holds what we call 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 consciousness” 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 a password that prevents easy access to it. We don’t have that password.

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 (storehouse consciousness) 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 because of that, the following concept 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 deep in there there with a longer half-life than we are familiar with, i.e. 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. We mistake the slow-train for a permanent Self. 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 (what we call "Me") 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 Alaya 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 the next few blogs. 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. I took the Bodhisattva Vow at KTD monastery in the old retreat house in a large room filled to the brim with many practitioners. Rinpoche was not able to give each of us a Bodhisattva name because there were too many of us and too little time.

Years later, I asked Rinpoche if he would give me a Bodhisattva Name. Sometime later, he told me that my name was “Sempa Chönyi Rangdrol”

“Sempa” is a general term that means Bodhisattva or “Compassion Warrior.” We all have this. As for the specific or personal name “Chönyi Rangdrol” “Chönyi” means Dharmata (True Nature of the Mind or Reality), and “Rangdrol” means Self-Liberating. So, the name translates to Self-Liberating the True Nature of the Mind.

WHAT PERSISTS AFTER DEATH?

[The Buddhist Subconscious]

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 and available 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. Perhaps savants can remember past lives, but most of us reading this cannot. 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 fact seems to be that

we do not remember our past selves and personalities.

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 VIJ-NAH-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, or just the “Alaya” 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 extended thoughts, experiences, memories, and the like as we remember them. It is more like a database that contains singular parts but makes no attempt to connect them all, much like a box of Lego parts. And it is from these “parts,” these cravings, that we create a new Self at rebirth.

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, apparently, is not all that easy to define.

I think of the Alaya Storehouse, which I pointed out before, as more of a parts-based 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 and cravings determine 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 desires, cravings, unfinished business, etc. 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 regrow (and continue with) a particular part of consciousness or build a new persona (Self), and so on.. One analogy I use for myself is that, while the Alaya Storehouse does not contain the story of our personal experiences threaded and intact, it does retain the karmic residue of all our repeated actions, where each action is laid down in an ever-increasingly deep groove or track. Some of our karma involves deeply repeated and underscored tracks. These deep tracks cry out for an answer.

Each track, through sheer habit, gets only deeper and deeper as it is repeated. 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, by our residue, our karmic actions, and in that sense, we may (in a sense) persist in our rebirth with some vague sense of what we are now. One time I asked my dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, does anything remain of our personality after death that may appear in rebirth, and he said that we may, for example, have a preference for hot sauce. That kind of thing.

Our conscious mind is what it is, known to us, 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, an automatically at rebirth.

In other words, when a habitual action is triggered, the Alayavijnana mold or groove provides a personalized form (molded to our specs) as a response. This storehouse contains the shape and degree of our every karmic trace, good and bad, and serves them up on demand and 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 a single human rebirth, the bodies may change, but the palette used to create our Self or “persona” in each rebirth remains the same – our particular karmic traces and residue moves forward through time – until we remedy that through their exhaustion or 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 our Buddha-Nature, but we can’t do much with that if we can’t be aware and realize 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, which removal is 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 etched, engraved, and resides, just beyond the reach of our conscious mind. This is the palette from which our persona or precious Self is painted afresh each next life or rebirth. Like a huge barge moving upstream, the Alayavijnana is dragged behind us through time, life after life, while our desires and craving are the tugboat that drives us. Although it remains invisible to us, the Alaya Storehouse alone is responsible for the elephant in our room.

FASCINATING: THE BUDDHIST CONCEPT OF “SCENTING”

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, that is something like 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 preceding episode, I left you with the idea that, according to the Tibetan Buddhists, our regular consciousness is not anything permanent like we might hope for, you know, a “soul” that flits between births, and also that our Self and personal memories (as we all know them) 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 Alayanijnana (Storehouse Consciousness), which we don’t have conscious access to, except perhaps 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 Alayanijnana that persists beyond death, whereas

our personal memories, Self, and persona are forgotten and are left at death's door, a residue epitaph. In this blog, let's look in a little more detail at just what the Storehouse Consciousness contains.

VASANAS

The teachings say that what is contained by 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 is 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 that 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 "Bija," 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 Consciousness.

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 Bija or the seeds of our actions, seeds that will sprout and expand as the opportunity arises. I repeat, these impressions are not stored as threaded stories, but more as in a database of parts.

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 parts-box, 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 and personality.

VASANA REMOVAL

And this perhaps explains why the removal of these karmic grooves or stains is said to be so difficult, because we are not trying to erase a single stroke or karmic imprint, but rather deep-down stains or grooves 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 identical 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 a single 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. Indeed, these are stubborn stains, but they can be removed and eliminated from our karmic parts box.

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, perhaps no Vasanas at all. We can, with effort, change, our personality and become a different person.

SUMMARY: WHO MANAGES TO BE REBORN?

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. And 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 it is not so, this idea of an Eternal Soul. They pointed out that such a soul had no true existence; find it! And also why it was to my advantage not to have to carry every last personal Self forward in time. They see rebirth as a fresh start on a self and personality, and are not so concerned about what we call our Self.

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 then of me powers forward? Anyway, the Tibetan view of that question is what these last couple 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 our normal personality memories, which means that it persists or endures for a much longer length of time than our conscious memories, which are lost at death and the bardo. However, it too is not permanent or “eternal” as in “unchanging,” yet it lasts not only into our next rebirth, but will continue to be with us from thereon forward, somehow, perhaps recharged by each rebirth, until we reach full enlightenment. A corollary to that statement is that it has been here with us all along.

But, like all things, it too changes, and 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, but more slowly.

I was disappointed that I have no eternal soul, no way of ferrying my Self across the borderland of death and on to another life without losing track of “Me,” but at least something in 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, cravings, and karma, and seeks to be reborn in a new body, but not necessarily a human body. And that fact is another concept new to Westerners, which I will have to address in another blog, but it is a spine tingler.

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, but they change at different rates, and that is key for understanding the two as well as a common misunderstanding.

However, the Storehouse Consciousness carries on (lasts) into our rebirth, unlike our normal consciousness of ourselves. 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 with the sediment from our past lives blessing each rebirth with our cravings. 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 and reanimate another, after which we may be just as selfish as ever, but not with the same Self.

The Storehouse Consciousness exists until every last craving, attachment, and karma is exhausted, after which it is empty and does not provoke rebirth. Yet, at the rate most of us apparently load up the Storehouse Consciousness, we are in no danger of running out of karma, and thus rebirths.

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.

“AWARENESS OF UNAWARENESS”

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 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” or impure 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 effect (and show up) in our next lifetime, but don't hold your breath about seeing much change in this current life. That's how I read the instructions.

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. I need to learn more about that.

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.

“DO NOT GO GENTLE INTO THAT GOOD NIGHT”

What we have been looking at in these recent blogs are concepts from a particular school of Buddhist thought called Yogachara, 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 of permanence) and it’s all like a dream and so “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 (we look through the mind only), with all of its obscurations, i.e. we “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, and for sure sooner than I think.

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 all 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 years 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 blacking-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, when I am reborn, 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 80 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, after that moment (as defined by the teachings), we regain consciousness, including the ability to think and maneuver. So, I apologize for my concern over all of this, but I do see, pardon my analogy, 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 Alayavijna (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 also 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 to be used up. It is perfectly empty and cleared out. It is said, we no longer incarnate.

THE PATH OF ACCUMULATION

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, if even possible. And so, I cast around to find ways to avoid creating karmic traces in the first place and for ways to purify my actions so that I'm 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-six 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 valuable 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, compared to 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 it also is recursive: the more carefully and mindfully we act, the more awareness or merit results. And these two accumulations feed on one another. The output of one is the input of the other, and on around. 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. This is the result of the accumulation of merit.

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 skillfull-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 yet 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

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 or Reactivity 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 judgments, have 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. We don't think about it or mull it over, but just exactly drop it.

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. Instead, we learn to have an

appropriate response instead of a knee-jerk reaction. 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.

WHY YOU MAY NOT BE READY FOR MEDITATION

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 that 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. Authentic meditation is not a hobby, but something that is necessary for us to master. 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 warmup of some sort of preliminaries.

With that in mind, this is why I recommend something as simple as Reaction 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:

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

TWO TYPES OF INSIGHT

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 trying to find the cause of things, while Insight Meditation focuses on realizing 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 I still do some now and again. However, I have never done therapy because IMO I have always seen therapy as something that requires special training, especially a degree in patience, 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 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 yoga, 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 rejigger 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 that 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.

The idea is very simple. Our karma that we have created is, by definition, already in the past. And like anything in our past, there it is. We don't just deny the past or try to scrub it clean as new. It is not new. The dharma just does not try to reanimate the past or clean it up. Instead, what they do is to remove our fixation on what has been done and is passed.

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 or underscoring 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, or 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 as part of Mahamudra, 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?

MAHAMUDRA: AN ALTERNATE ROUTE

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. That’s the wonderful event, being able to decide for ourselves.

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 Kagyu 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 how much I identified with him. His comment and parting words were: “You know, Michael, we’re about the same age and are both married men.”

BEYOND POLITICS

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 mind.

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 and then realized. 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 opinion 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.

EGO EXHAUSTION

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. It's 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 out 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 can we do about it?

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 somehow persists from one life to the next. How is that possible?

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 (exhausted) 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 (continuing) between one life and the next, even though it does not preserve the sense of Self, what is often called our "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 DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS

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! Now that's some warped sense of humor.

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 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, imprints, can cravings are what are passed on at death instead of our Self or, wishful thinking, as 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 (almost firmware) to get us to the next life, rather than RAM-memory that (like our self) 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. We will erasing for lifetimes.

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.

REALIZATION THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY

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 intellectually 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, "WE" realize. 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.” That is true transmigration.

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. And it is not what we imagined. By definition, it couldn't be. Otherwise we would already be enlightened.

It is more than a little surprise to finally recognize the nature of our 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 already 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' thunk 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 dharma training, both in theory and in practice, and with some of the finest teachers on the planet. And during that long time, where 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, get my mind right, and let go. 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 or admitted. 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.

“TRYING” DOESN’T DO IT, DOING DOES IT

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 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 think 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. That point has to be accepted as true.

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, the first step.

THE WAY THROUGH

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 takeaway 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 I 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 (mostly talk), 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 was in his mid-nineties when he passed on and he spoke 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 by 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 that 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 sandcastles 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 or knows how to instruct. 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 just how that is done, thus what are called the “Pointing Out Instructions.”

THE OTHER HALF

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. However, 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.

MIND THE GAP

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 expectation 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 it 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 direct. 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 first 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?

LIFE CHALLENGES

"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 ensure 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 that 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.

A KARMIC MISS-TAKE

What I am going to present here may seem trivial, but it's not. In fact, IMO, it is crucial to fully understand.

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. Instead, 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, 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 put 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 (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.

THE ALCHEMY OF REACTION

It was key to my dharma understanding 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,” and meaning that we all react and suffer from reaction all the time.

I found it hard to know 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, 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, not just once in a while, but like: all day long.

And a corollary of that was, among all of the many and various dharma practices, that 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.” I have written many articles and the following free e-book on the topic:

“Tong-Len: The Alchemy of Reaction”
<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Tong-len%20->

%20Second%20Edition.pdf

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, are 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.

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, if you look, that we react to almost everything, and we react all the time. Someone challenges us or purposely embarrasses us.

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 a 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.

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