

Beginning Dharma Practice

by

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Introduction

This is a collection of articles on meditation and training the mind, many of which first appeared as blogs. They are not overly formal and most contain personal stories and anecdotes as illustrations. The type of mind training detailed here is the most common form of meditation as used by both the Tibetan and Zen Buddhists.

There is repetition here, which is good.

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF PRACTICE

[It is brief and it is about my introduction to dharma practice, but that is what I know best. After that, I hope to point out a few ways we can accumulate practice at no additional cost in time. Let's start with what I remember.]

When I first started studying Buddhism, there was no such thing as dharma practice. We had never heard of it. Back then, in the late 1950s, it was read and talk, read and talk, usually late at night, with lousy instant coffee (powdered creamer), and plenty of cigarettes. No one had asked us to sit in meditation and somehow we never put that part of it together.

And it was mostly Zen we talked about, because it was mostly Zen that had made it to America and had set up shop. Well, there were also the Akira Kurosawa films, with their unique combinations of violence and humor. I saw damned-near all his movies and bought into the whole Japanese gestalt, with its rice-paper walls and manicured-sand gardens, which seemed so simple compared to what I was raised in, i.e. the Catholic Church. So it was with some irony that I found myself in Tibetan Buddhism, with not only the equivalent of church-Latin, but its “cacophony” of colors, etc. – almost like going back to church. But there in fact I was.

And it was mostly the fault of the great Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, whose wake embraced more than a few of my closest friends. He gave all of us the confidence that there was, despite our deepest fears, life before death. Trungpa was undeniable, way better than any rock star.

What I am getting to here is how Trungpa pointed out to us that the dharma was not just a topic for talk; it was a path to walk, something to do. That had never occurred to us.

Sure, we knew about Zen, sitting Zazen, sesshin, and all of that, but that was more like something out of a movie we were watching, a movie we were not featured in.

Sure, I managed to sit all day in sesshin with Roshi Philip Kapleau, where we were smacked on the back with the Kyosaku, the “awakening stick” as it is called. But that was more like going to Disneyworld for a day. The dreary end of practicing had not yet reared its ugly head, but it was coming. And it came, for me, via Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, if only somewhat indirectly. When I first met Trungpa in February of 1974, where I served as his chauffeur for his visit to Ann Arbor, about the first thing he did after arriving at the professor’s house (where he was to stay) is sit me down alone in a room with him and personally teach me Shamata, Tranquility Meditation. He never even told me what he was doing. He just did it. I had never met anyone like him, not ever.

That is a story in itself, but what I am getting at here is that although Trungpa came and went, I did not join his group for two (that might sound crazy) reasons. They all drank too much and, as a working musician, I had been there and done that. And secondly, they all wore suits. Even back then, you had to die to see me in a suit. I came out of a wannabe-a-Beatnik past, which had morphed into being a hippie-leader, and I was all about NOT wearing suits. But....

And, as Simone says to Pee-Wee Herman in the movie “Pee-Wee’s Big Adventure,” “I know you’re

right Pee-Wee, but... And Pee-Wee says, "But what? Everyone I know has a big 'But'? C'mon, Simone, let's talk about YOUR big 'But.'" I digress.

What Trungpa did for many in my generation was to shatter the idea that Buddhism was something to just talk about, some kind of oriental philosophy. As mentioned, he made it clear that the dharma was a path, a way to go through life, and it could be hard work.

And that "hard work" first took the form, in my experience, of sitting meditation. When Trungpa said "Sit," he meant for a long time. He not only had all-day sessions like the sesshin I had experienced, he had all-week sitting sessions called "Weekthuns," and was best known for his Dathuns, sitting for an entire month. For those of us who had never sat, that was like going from zero to sixty in one-second flat.

And to make it worse, Trungpa Rinpoche had some students who in 1975 formed a company called Samadhi Cushions. What they specialized in, and what was most often used by the Trungpa group, was a cushion called a "Gomden," which in Tibetan simply means "meditation cushion." And it was (and still is) recommended on their web site for "beginners." The Gomden is a fairly high rectangular cushion which is very firm, so firm that its edges seem to cut into your legs after even a short while. I am a little bit of an expert on cushions and I should write a blog about all of the different kinds, but suffice it to say that in my opinion Gomdens were a big mistake for beginners. Just my two cents.

They are still all over the place, even in our own shrine room at our center, tons of them. Yet, if you bother to look at what the rinpoches sit on, it is not

that rectangular firm gomden. That should tell you something right there. I'm wandering again....

The long and the short of it is that many of us were more or less bullied into sitting on gomdens by peer pressure and sitting for much, much longer than we felt like. The idea that was bandied about, both in all-day sesshin-sitting and by Trungpa students, was something like, "no pain, no gain." And folks like me just bit our lips and did our best to go along. In my case, this was not a good thing.

Of course, later I find that my own rinpoche and the great siddhas in the Mahamudra tradition recommend not to sit any longer than you feel like it, which would have been my choice. My teacher goes as far as to point out that in the texts it says that a session can be "as long as it takes to raise a teacup to the lips and take a sip." That, my friends, is not long.

The reasoning behind this approach is that forcing ourselves to sit runs the risk of staining our enthusiasm so that eventually we have an approach-avoidance response when the idea of sitting comes to mind. We don't like it and find ways to avoid sitting. And that can be a very serious problem. Certainly for me it was. I sat for over thirty years, well, mostly incorrectly, and the results showed it. When a series of events intervened in my sitting, basically a perfect storm for "good" sitting, I finally managed to understand how meditation actually works. And part of what I saw, at least for me, was that forcing ourselves to practice is the exact opposite of what is actually required for progress. So... what is a reasonable approach to dharma practice, one that won't turn around and bite us in the butt? I will attempt to answer this in another blog, if there is any interest.

WHERE TO BEGIN

By far the easiest and least-invasive-of-your-time practice is what I call “Reaction Tong- len” or just “Reaction Toning.” It requires no extra time in your day and no special circumstances. You can do it while you work and play, anytime night or day. At the same time, it is very demanding in that it requires you to come face-to-face with your own behavior and to own it, a bit at a time. It is remedial and thereby healing, and it is a form of relative-Bodhicitta (Lojong) in that it feeds on dualisms that you support and either tones them back or eventually removes them. And perhaps best of all, it reduces your micro-karma load incrementally and steadily. And it is very easy to do.

Reaction Toning involves simply looking at your moment-by-moment reactions with awareness, awareness of when they occur, and awareness of how you react. Of course we react when someone flips us off, but more important we react endlessly throughout the day, not just with major confrontations, but in innumerable distractive ways that you can become aware of.

And it is important to discover for ourselves that every reaction we have is dutifully recorded in our mindstream, a bit of micro-karma that leaves a trace, underscores a groove that we have inscribed in our stream of consciousness. Within minutes of hearing this, you should be able to identify many examples, just by using your awareness.

It could be the office worker who “hates” you that suddenly comes around the corner. What is it that happens? You react, visibly or internally, to their

unexpected appearance. Regardless of whether you have a good reason (or not) to react, your reaction is completely your own and no one else's. Others may give us good reason, but whether we react in knee-jerk style or respond reasonably is up to us alone. And I am distinguishing here between our involuntary reactions and whatever we could agree might be an appropriate response to whatever happens.

These endless negative reactions throughout the day are like a thousand tiny razor-cuts to the mind. They imprint, and if repeated, they imprint deeper, inscribing a groove in our mindstream that is a form of karma. And, as they say, karma always burns twice, once as it goes down and twice when eventually it has to ripen and finally be removed.

No, this type of karma is not like killing or stealing, but it is much, much more common, numerous beyond counting. This is an amount of karma that exponentially dwarfs whatever "10 Karma Commandments" that most of us try to maintain. And you can start right now if you want to do something more than just read about it.

Just observe your own reactions and I don't mean only the major ones like the office-worker who does not like us that I mentioned above. It is equally true for reactions on a much smaller scale, like reacting to someone's big nose or the color of the blouse they are wearing or what-have-you? The point is the regardless of what causes the reaction, large or small, the reaction is ours and ours alone. We may have little say in many of our life situations, but we have a total say in how we react to every one of them.

However, mostly we never make use of that fact. We just continue to react and record every reaction in our

mindstream as karma. Every reaction is like a little wince, so many of us can hardly keep our mental eyes open because of the constant wincing. We can't see straight.

What I am describing here is a very useful dharma practice, approved by my own Rinpoche, one that we can do while we live our day. I do it all the time, and for me it is pretty much automatic by this time. I have become more and more aware of my reactions, large and small. With each reaction that I am aware of I note it and make a point of owning it as purely my own reaction. When recognized, these reactions begin to disarm automatically and tone down. Pretty soon I can recognize a particular reaction as it arises and allow it to subside before it internalizes itself. After a while, these reactions get weaker and weaker, as I recognize and own each one, first recognize and then own it, over and over again.

If we are Vipassana students in the Kagyu Lineage, we can also learn to look at the very nature of each reaction and further help each one to quiet down in our mind.

What needs to be realized is that this smokescreen of our reactions is no minor hindrance. It's like the windshield of a car driving 80 miles per hour in a hurricane of mosquitoes. All these reactions obscure our view and reduce the natural clarity of the mind. If we begin to tone them down and eventually eliminate them from affecting us, there is nothing else we have to do. Our mind will just become clearer all by itself, just by not being occupied with the continual "wincing" that reactions require. As mentioned, this wincing is not only debilitating, but it obscures the clarity of the mind itself.

Observing our moment-by-moment reactions can lead to observing our thoughts in general and eventually to becoming more aware of our conflicting-emotions (kleshas) as they too arise. This practice is totally easy for anyone to do, and it offers great ROI (return on investment) for the effort involved.

If this very easy practice proves too difficult for you to do, I can't be of much further help to you. I don't know of any off-the-cushion dharma practices that are easier than this.

Feeling around in the dark of the mind for light is, of course, no fun. Not knowing what we are doing is just that, not knowing. We have to fix that, each of us. There is a lot of talk about our mind being distracted all the time. Sure. And there is talk about our managing to ignore all kinds of stuff. Sure enough, ignorance. That is pretty much understood.

What is not so much understood is how subject we are to our own endless reactions throughout the day, each one a kind of little wince, as we react. In other words, we are wincing (consciously or unconsciously) all the time from our own involuntary reactions, the net effect of which is to dim down our awareness. Of course, we wouldn't know the difference because it has probably always been this way for each of us, respectively.

This is why, if we start to monitor and tone down our reactions, our awareness will blossom and we will just kind of wake up. Really, it is an open and shut case, or should I say a "shut and open case."

We either have reactions or we don't. If we have them, we either are aware that we have them or not. If we are aware that we have them, then it is easy to establish that they are our own, our reactions, and no

one else's. Even just monitoring and recognizing each reaction is itself usually enough to begin to tone it down. If, in addition to recognizing 'that' we are reacting, we acknowledge to ourselves perhaps why we are in fact reacting, that further helps to tone the reaction down.

In other words, once we become aware of a particular reaction each time it arises, we can gradually de-react it and allow it to begin to subside. Eventually, we no longer react, at least a much. Do this thousands of times a day (yes, we react that much) and the net effect is an increase in awareness, if only because we are not being debited every other second or so by our own reactions.

Reaction Toning works. Try it and see for yourself. And it's not rocket science. Anyone can do it. Sure, we are not aware enough to catch the smaller reactions at first, but we sure can become aware of the biggies, the low-hanging fruit, so to speak. Start from there and work down to ever more subtle occurrences. It's a zero/sum game. The more we tone down our reactions, the more awareness we automatically have. It is that simple.

It's like we have this huge backlog of credit slips, our continual investment in reactions; all we have to do is cash them in, one by one, by deactivating or toning our reactions down. The guaranteed result is greater awareness and mindfulness.

WHAT TO DO

It is clear to me after some 40+ years of practicing dharma that, of course, there are things I would do differently today than I did back then. For one, I had no idea what I was doing and I had even less idea where I was heading or what was really important in dharma practice. I may not have gotten all that far, but I am finally oriented correctly, at least for me. So what is important?

Well, the answer is: a lot of things. I will attempt to prioritize them as best I can. Becoming enlightened would be nice, but realistically that is unrealistic for most of us in the short term, like that of this life. Yes, it apparently has been done, but as the beginners we are, that would be a really long shot. More realistic is to settle on what short-term goals can set us up properly for going toward enlightenment.

I am assuming you have read some books, perhaps even a lot of them on Buddhism. Dharma books, in my experience, are only useful if they eventually lead to action. As my first dharma teacher would often say to me, "Michael, some day you must become the book." So read, read, read, but reading just to read or to tread water, instead of actually practicing, is ultimately not that helpful. Many people would prefer to read another book than to actually get started practicing. We have to act, and the act of reading is not what I mean.

Of course, I want to say to go out and find a qualified teacher that inspires you, but that is not an easy task. I used to be amused by those brilliant young folks who made a point of stating that they needed no one

to instruct them and were on the watch for anyone who even tried to guide them, as if it was insulting that they might take something in from outside themselves. What they didn't know is that even if they tried with all their heart to find a teacher, it is not permitted for everyone. We have to deserve to have a teacher, to be worthy of one, before they will appear. So, if you don't even want one, that will probably make it less likely, unless you have a change of heart. Not everyone has the confidence to externalize themselves in the form of a teacher outside of themselves, who then assists them. That itself, affording a teacher, is a sign of real progress, a great blessing.

And we have to find a teacher that is just right for us, quirks and all. There are said to be 84,000 dharmas, so perhaps that means there are 84,000 different paths, and the same number of teachers and students. I would say run right out and see if you can meet my personal teacher, but he is 92 years old and might not suit your style anyway. There seem to be more and more Tibetan Buddhist teachers becoming available, but I have no idea how useful they might be for any particular one of you. Let's say, for now, that you don't have a teacher.

Even so, you should be able to get some authentic dharma teachings under your belt from somewhere, even if the instructor is not someone who could become your personal teacher. The long and the short of it is that sooner or later, perhaps later, you will need a teacher, actually what we call a "guru," to help you through certain practices. Those who say a teacher is not necessary either don't know what they are talking about or should look elsewhere than in the Karma Kagyu Lineage for instructions. In Karma

Kagyü Vajrayana Buddhism, for example, it is exhaustively written that we cannot recognize the actual nature of our mind without a guru who can point it out to us. Period. End of story. Anyone who does not accept this statement should, well, look elsewhere. Therefore, until you can find a personal teacher, a guru, how best to spend your time?

To begin with, there are the preliminaries to consider. Certainly, what are called the Common Preliminaries (The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma) have to be thought through and taken to heart. And they couldn't be easier. You can never contemplate these four thoughts enough. We encounter them at the beginning of dharma practice and we return to them much later when we learn Mahamudra Meditation. When I was learning Mahamudra, I spent something like three years just on those Four Thoughts. That should tell you something.

What is important about the Four Thoughts is that they are capable of getting our "mind right," as they say, for useful dharma practice. Without them, we can't get grounded enough, serious enough, to really practice or for that practice to amount to much. So, no amount of time spent on the Four Thoughts is ever wasted. I will go over the Four Thoughts a couple blogs from now.

I have told, many times, the story of when the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa explained to me, while pointing at a Tibetan woodblock print of a Tibetan dragon flying in the clouds with each of its four paws clutching a precious pearl or gem. His comment to me was that as long as the dragon can keep all four pearls in his paws, he can fly, but if he drops even one of them, he will fall to the earth. That was about as clear a

statement as we will find that entertaining one or two of the thoughts will not be enough. We need to have all four thoughts in mind like: all the time, thus my suggestion that no time spent on them is ever too much or wasted.

So the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind” is a good place to start. Read about them, read them, contemplate them, imprint them into your being, and live them. They should, even on first sight, already be quite familiar to you. They are as natural as nature is to the human condition, so there is nothing foreign there whatsoever.

Another really useful practice, something we can do anywhere and all day long is (as I mentioned in the previous blog) “Reaction Tong-len,” what I sometimes call Reaction Toning. I have written about this a lot. Here is a whole book about it called “Tong-Len: The Alchemy of Reaction.”

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

Reaction Toning is something we can practice all day and anywhere we are. It is very effective in helping to remove our long-standing reactions to people and things. It can greatly increase our general awareness and clarify our mind. Of course, it is one of the main remedial or purification practices.

TRUNGPA

[Some of you have asked for additional details, perhaps a little more story, so I will try to oblige.]

Chögyam Trungpa's "Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism" was a seminal book in the early 1970s. We were in the middle of the flowering of the New-Age Movement, when almost anything spiritual took a turn toward the almighty dollar. The Sixties were over and all of the spiritual exotica from that period were trying to take root in mainstream America. Suddenly there were swamis, yogis, devotees, disciples, and the like all over the place. And in the middle of all that new-age circus here was Trungpa Rinpoche, who was calling out all that New-Age exploitation stuff with this incredible book. The title alone was enough to stop me in my tracks.

And he had all the right signs. The covers of those early Trungpa books published by Shambhala Press were to die for, incredibly brilliant designs, mostly graphics from Trungpa Rinpoche himself. As someone who appreciates design, I was knocked out by the simplicity and choice of colors on those early covers. Actually, the first book I remember reading by Trungpa was a little Penguin paperback called "Born in Tibet," his autobiography, that was published in 1966. I read it again and again.

So imagine how I felt when I saw a tiny notice on a campus bulletin board that Trungpa himself was coming to speak in Ann Arbor. And on that note there was a phone number, which of course I immediately called, hoping to find a whole group of folks who felt like I did. What I found was a tiny handful of people

trying to make this happen and before I knew it I was one of them, volunteering to design the poster for his talk and also act as his chauffeur for the weekend. Wow! I would get to meet Trungpa Rinpoche!

At the time I was just a struggling astrologer trying to survive in wake of the 1960s. The Sixties had come and gone and people like me were trying to sort our lives out in the aftermath. Margaret and I had met and married in 1971. We immediately went into the green-plant business, starting (“Erlewine Plants”) running a greenhouse for tropical plants in Northern Michigan. That business went bust because, even though I had better plants, the flower shops were afraid I might not last. And thanks to that view, I didn’t. I was forced to take a job with my competitor, managing 19,000 square feet of their greenhouses down in Apopka, Florida. We moved there, driving down in my old Dodge van with all our belongings plus our two English Bull Terriers and a litter of puppies.

Florida was like heaven to me, being surrounded by all those incredible plants in a semi-tropical climate, heaven, that is, until I realized that all the immigrant workers under my direction were being exposed to the very lethal Parathion, a poison in powder form that is cumulative in its effect. It sneaks up on you and then kills you. The workers were getting it all over themselves and didn’t realize the consequences. When I explained the problem to management back up north, they just laughed. They would do nothing. So, I resigned, left that plant paradise, and moved back up to Ann Arbor in the spring of 1972 to start all over.

In the summer of 1972, when we found out we had a baby coming, I had a come-to- Jesus talk with myself about supporting a family. The day after the

pregnancy news, I went out and took a job on a city garbage truck and came home pretty stinky. I was trying to prove to myself that I would do anything necessary to provide for my family. After that garbage day, I realized that I could probably be more useful doing something else, so I hung out my shingle and began to make a living full-time as an astrologer, offering readings, giving classes, and lecturing here and there around the state. It was a shoestring existence.

At that time of Trungpa's visit in early 1974, we were living in an old house suspended on a hillside overlooking North Main Street in Ann Arbor, just across the street from Lansky's Junkyard and the Huron River. There were wharf rats around the garbage cans outside our house the size of cats. We had about zero money, but were happy nevertheless. I have always been a pretty positive type.

I was to chauffeur Trungpa Rinpoche, but I didn't have a limousine. Instead I had an old beater of a Ford station wagon that, when you turned off the ignition and pulled out the key, kept on sputtering and coughing for something like a ten or twenty seconds afterward. I couldn't believe I would get to drive to Detroit Metropolitan Airport and pick up Trungpa Rinpoche.

And the day finally came. There I was at the airport (and early too) in my Sunday best (which since I never went to church Sundays was not much), but as enthusiastic as all get out. Let me tell you, I was pumped.

The plane was a little late and I peered into the jet way as the passengers filed out, but no Rinpoche. Then, finally, way at the back I saw this short Tibetan

man in a suit; he was smiling and at me! And suddenly there we stood, eyeball-to-eyeball, even a little too close for my comfort. I am sure I mumbled something, but what I saw was this very tired pair of eyes staring into mine, and with a yellow tinge to them at that. Then Trungpa, still looking right at me, rolled his eyes up into his head until all I could see were the whites, and they stayed there for an uncomfortable amount of time. When at last they rolled back down, I found myself looking into perfectly clear eyes with no tiredness or yellow. Hello!

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

I carried Trungpa's bags into the professor's house, where a small welcoming committee was doing just that. My job as chauffeur was done for the moment, but I hated to leave, so I kind of hung around at the back of the room taking this in. I was very intrigued by Trungpa Rinpoche.

Before I knew it everyone there had decided to go for a tour of the U-M campus and they were heading for the door, while I scrambled to get out of the way, hoping I would not be noticed. Suddenly Trungpa Rinpoche said that he was tired and that they should go ahead while he took a nap. I kept my head down and waited until the rest filed out and then began to

follow suit, at which point Trungpa motioned to me. "Michael, you stay here with me."

This was like too good to be true, and he motioned me into a small room that turned out to be the professor's office and had me sit in a straight-backed chair that was there.

Meanwhile, Trungpa Rinpoche proceeded to completely ignore me while he went over every inch of that office, picking up and examining all of the various statues and knickknacks that were there and, at the same time, drinking a bottle of saké. I sat there like a bump on a log and hoped I was not disturbing him. Like a turtle coming out of his shell, I gradually relaxed and realized that Trungpa was totally occupied in every moment, delighting in everything that was there. I had never in my life seen this kind of focus being exercised, and that was my first lesson right there.

My natural inclination in that kind of spot would be to do nothing but fidget, which is exactly what I was doing. After a while, Trungpa finally got around to examining me and suddenly there he was right in front of me and looking right at me again. He proceeded to give me a series of instructions, never telling me what it was he was doing. But it had to do with watching my breath and breathing in and out, deeply, like we do when a doctor uses a stethoscope. And this next part is hard to describe, so you will just have to take my word for it.

I was breathing in and out, as directed, but Rinpoche was concerned with my outbreath, the way I was breathing out. He told me I was not letting the breath go out far enough, but somehow holding back. By now I was nervous for sure, and I sat there trying to

exhale as hard as I could without actually fully exhaling. And I didn't want to breathe all over him. I was just too nervous and simply going through the motions. Then he said to me, "Michael, let it go all the way out. Don't worry, it will come back!" And with that I exhaled, and all of the way out too. And here is the unusual thing:

At the same moment that I really let my breath go, in the back of my mind (and at some higher level) all of my fears of death and dying that had haunted me all my life arose like a swarm of darkness and just evaporated. Gone. While today I am still not anxious to die, I no longer have the kind of dread and fear that I had before those instructions. Of course, later I was to find that Trungpa Rinpoche was teaching me basic Shamata Meditation, the cornerstone of all basic meditation practice.

I am trying to communicate here that doing ordinary things with Trungpa Rinpoche end up being extraordinary. I must have spent an hour and a half with Trungpa Rinpoche, after which he did go to take a nap, and I hit the road.

We had one more significant exchange on the way out of the professor's house. Trungpa pointed to a copy of the poster I had made for his talk that was on the wall. It was a woodblock print of a Tibetan dragon flying in the clouds, while each of its four feet clutched a pearl. "Do you know what this represents?" he asked? I told him I did not, but that I just loved the image and thought it might be appropriate for his talk. He went on to explain that the dragon, which in the Tibetan and Chinese cultures is perhaps the most important and positive of creatures, could fly, but only as long as he held those four pearls, one in each hand. If he dropped even one of them, he would fall

from the sky. Of course, I took this in. Later I understood that the four pearls that the dragon held were what are called in Tibetan Buddhism the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma," sometimes called the "Four Reminders" or the Common Preliminaries. And those four thoughts have always been key in my understanding of the dharma.

Here Trungpa was pointing them out to me and making it clear that we must hold all four thoughts in mind at once to maintain our awareness. The Four Thoughts are something one encounters at the beginning of Buddhist study, but also just before learning the highest form of meditation, called Mahamudra. They are profound and so much already a part of each of us. Trungpa was pointing something important out to me. There are other stories of Trungpa's visit, perhaps for another time.

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

There is that story. I will try to get back on track discussing the preliminaries to meditation training tomorrow."

PRELIMINARIES

Before we can lay out a plan for dharma practice, we need to know something about what the goal of such a plan would be. Why are we practicing? We could just say that we are going for enlightenment, but that for most of us is a long way off. What about some in-between goals, a landmark or two along the way. What would they be?

Learning basic meditation is obviously important, but not that easy to learn. In Tibet, learning basic Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) was not something beginners generally did. Simply put, it is too difficult. The fact is that most of us have too many intervening obscurations to just sit down and have success with basic meditation. In Tibet, this is understood, so before meditation is undertaken, a lengthy series of preliminary practices are first completed called “Ngondro.” Ngondro is like a dharma boot-camp, the basic preparation for further mind training, including the standard sitting meditation.

I am told that when Tibetan Buddhist meditation came to America via Chögyam Trungpa in the 1970s, it was introduced straight away with no preliminary training BECAUSE Americans would not begin to accept something as indirect and difficult as Ngondro. Ngondro, which is also called the Extraordinary Preliminaries, is a set of five extensive exercises, the first few of which are for purifying the mind of obscurations that make learning things like meditation so difficult. For most people, Ngondro takes at least several years to complete, so for fast-food Americans

it was assumed that we were not about to put up with that kind of sidetrack on our way to beginning meditation. As it turned out, we did it backward, started with meditation and then we had to do Ngondro, and that made it even more painful.

In the 1970s, most of us interested in Tibetan dharma were directly introduced to basic Tranquility Meditation right from the get-go. When we, as expected, found it difficult to meditate, we were told about Ngondro in case we found the going just too rough. In other words, we were given basic meditation training and, when many of us hit a brick wall, we were then told that it perhaps would be easier if we first cleared away some of the obscurations that were standing in our way, and then learned to meditate. I trust you can see how we got it backward from the traditional approach in Tibet.

It's easy to forget that many of the Tibetans who came to America had no place to live. In the beginning there were no monasteries, not even any centers, at least in our lineage. Great rinpoches were at the mercy of essentially strangers. My good friend Ngodup Tsering Burkhar, who translated for my teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche for 12 years, tells stories of Rinpoche and himself sleeping on people's floors, on couches, in living rooms, and so on. It's not like there was any infrastructure of any kind. They started from scratch like many other immigrants coming to America.

Therefore, if people like myself were on our own when it came to information and guidance on dharma, or dependent on students who knew little more than we did or, even worse, had gotten things mixed up or just plain wrong, who knew the difference? I did not live close to Khenpo Rinpoche, and thus saw him very

infrequently, often just once a year. On top of that, he spoke no English and had many other students just like myself who needed his guidance. So it was like that.

Personally, I spent many, many years (decades) trying to learn what is considered basic meditation. I was never told that basic meditation is difficult and not simple. And we were all in the same boat. All my dharma friends and I were giving each other high-fives and thumbs up as to how our sitting meditation was going, when in reality most of us didn't know what we were doing. "Practicing" at meditation, yes, but we certainly were not meditating, at least I wasn't. I didn't know how. Of course, we all sincerely believed we were meditating. And back then it was considered uncool to talk about your private meditation experience, which is just another unfortunate mistake that no one corrected. Later I found out that in Tibet everyone talks about these basic practices with one another – arguments, debates, share, discuss, etc. Buddhism is all about asking questions.

Yet, I have to agree that had I been told first to do a round of ngondro (something that typically takes years) before I began to learn meditation (which is all I thought Buddhism was about), I would have said thanks, but no thank you and moved on. Ngondro at first glance appears as purely Medieval, something right out of the dark ages, way too primitive-like for Americans. So... what we had were incredible beings like Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche telling us to sit on our gomden cushions to meditate and for a very, very long time.

I had the good fortune to meet Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and spend time with him. Later that same year (1974), I met His Holiness the 16th Karmapa,

Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, the head of the Karma Kagyu Lineage. Both of these incredible beings and teachers left an indelible impression on me, but then there I was, with all of these blessings, but just living in Ann Arbor with my young family. There were no teachers there, just people like myself.

Although we struggled on as best we could, it was some years before Margaret and I met the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, who was to become our main teacher. He came to us in a dream that both Margaret and I had the same night, but that is another story. Khenpo Rinpoche did not start us out with sitting meditation, but instead with what is called Tong-len, part of a mind-training system called Lojong. In my opinion, Tong-len could not be more perfectly designed for Americans than it is. I will get to that in a blog or two.

It is important to digest the fact, mentioned earlier, that in Tibet most students start right out with the Ngondro, with no apologies being given for its difficulty. Later they learn basic meditation. In the long run, indeed, Ngondro is a great kindness if our goal is to get the job done, i.e. prepare our mind for realization. But Americans back then were way too pampered for that. Meditation then was more like a fad, not an avocation. It was brand new to us.

What happened in many cases (in my case for sure) is that my mind was not prepared for basic meditation. Americans have this amazing assumption that our mind, just as it comes out of the box at birth, is like good-to-go. This probably comes from the idea that a baby comes into this world innocent and pure in all ways, you know, as Wordsworth wrote, "Trailing clouds of glory do we come." While that may be, apparently we bring with us a whole mass of

obscurations that obscure and obstruct our seeing the actual nature of the mind -- nothing much to do about that. The problem is that here in the West we are not aware that this is the case and therefore we never think to check our mental glasses to see if they are clear. We (mistakenly) assume they are, by birth, naturally clear. It is obvious by observing the state of the world that they are not.

Well, when we first sit down to meditate, we find out real quickly that our mind is anything but calm. Quite the contrary, it is thick with debris. This is why experienced meditators have to smile when the newbie comes out of a daily sitting-session saying how peaceful it all was. Sure, peaceful like a hail storm. Most likely, folks who say that are not even trying to meditate, but just getting a little much-needed relaxation, maybe even a nap like grandpa does on the rocking chair out on the porch, probably with their eyes closed at that. In Tranquility Meditation, we never close the eyes.

So... when Americans begin meditating, it should be no surprise that the going gets rough almost right off the bat. As mentioned, Tibetans don't even attempt it. Certainly I was an archetypical example of someone who eventually found it impossible to meditate because of low-flying obscurations that distracted me. For me, my meditation practice was like a stuck record, endlessly repeating the same mistakes, but expecting a different outcome. Wait a minute; that is the definition of insanity. Actually, it was a little crazy.

I wish someone had taken the time to explain to me the value of Ngondro early-on, but I probably would have ignored it anyway. Ngondro had none of the appeal of lighting a candle and just sitting quietly in a corner that meditation practice did. I sat in the corner

alright, but what I did there was not meditation. At best, it was “practicing” meditation, but I would never have admitted that.

When my attempts at meditation finally ran aground and I realized that I was stuck up the creek without a paddle, gradually the wisdom of Ngondro dawned on me. I was persuaded. Of course, by that time I was way down the road of being a dharma practitioner and willing to at least listen a little. It would have helped had someone explained to me that in Tibet everyone did Ngondro first, before even attempting to learn meditation. I might have been more open to doing it.

Anyway, Mohammed finally came to the mountain of Ngondro and dug in. And it was just as difficult as I imagined, requiring (straight out of the chute) 100,000 full-length prostrations on the ground just to begin with. Who in the world does something like that? And, as mentioned, that’s just for starters. It goes on and on for years. Aside from two practices in Ngondro designed to purify and clear out obscurations, there is one for accumulating merit, and finally one for mixing our mind with that of the guru. Let me tell you: when you finish Ngondro you know you have done something.

In my case, there is a funny little story. When I finally finished Ngondro, all 500,000+ iterations of the practices, I had my yearly interview with Rinpoche and asked what should I do next? He looked me right in the eye and said “Would you like to know what I would do, if I were you?” Of course I wanted to know. And he replied: “If I were you, I would do another Ngondro.” Well, that hit me like a sledge-hammer, but both my wife and I then did another Ngondro, so be careful what you ask a rinpoche. Of course I did another; he is my guru. He knows what I need to get

where we both agree I should be.

So, with a couple rounds of Ngondro under my belt, I was finally ready to approach basic meditation with a clearer mental windshield. And by that time I had also done a number of more advanced deity practices, so when I really doubled-down on meditation, I was already knee-deep in the preliminaries for Mahamudra Meditation, in our lineage the tip of the top of practices. And in Mahamudra preliminaries one combines a special form of Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) with a special form of Insight Meditation (Vipassana). It reminds me of Epoxy glue, where we mix together two types of resin into one super bond. That is what happens with Shamata and Vipassana as part of Mahamudra Meditation training.

Now, of course I could go on with what happened in Mahamudra training, but I have written of this elsewhere and it is not going to help much with those of you who are just learning meditation, so let's back up and go over the essentials. What can we do now that may bring progress?

Let's assume you are not about to go right out and start Ngondro. Of course, if you are, that is wise, but you would need first to get permission from a teacher to even do it.

Then you need to have the reading-transmission (Lung), and finally the actual instructions taught to you. Only then can you do Ngondro.

For those not starting Ngondro, what can we do, short of struggling on learning meditation, to prepare the way for actually learning meditation? The answer is that there is a lot you can do, so let's go over that. And here I am trying to find things that do not require that we go off in the corner and sit on a cushion

(which means scheduling practice times in our day), but rather what can we do that will actually help while we do the regular things we do each day? By all means, if you already have a daily practice on the cushion, keep it up, but in addition, try doing some of these off-the-cushion practices, in what is called post-meditation. I will get into these practices in the next blog.

INTENT

Somewhere I read, years ago, that the extant written literature in Buddhism is several orders of magnitude greater than any other “religion,” which just means that Buddhists like to write things down, especially long and detailed lists of things we should observe or not observe, such as lists of the five paramitas and other key words. Intent is such a word.

“Intent” is something that is often mentioned in the more advanced Buddhist teachings, but not as much in the more preliminary texts. Perhaps it is a more subtle topic, one that’s a little hard to put your finger on. I can’t say. What is our intent?

Here in the West, “intent” pops up more in the criminal justice system, where the intent to commit a crime factors very much in the seriousness of the crime. While the word is used differently, in Buddhist training the “seriousness” of intent is quite similar to the Western legal variety. Buddhist teachers take intent very seriously indeed.

The concept of “purity” of intent is very important. The whole idea of purity runs all through the teachings, perhaps because so many practices are concerned with purification, remedies, as a way, obviously, to become pure. “Purification,” a concept that smacks of Medieval torture or the American Pilgrims, is also true in Buddhism, but instead of trying to get the Devil out of us, in Buddhist practice we are working to remove mental obscurations so that we can see more clearly.

Above all, Vajrayana Buddhists are concerned with removing whatever stands between us and our recognizing the true nature of the mind. A sign of this

is that along with whatever key practices, like the various forms of meditation, usually there is another whole accompanying series of remedial exercises designed to prepare our mind for the particular meditation practices. And the reason for this is clear.

We can spend years (or lifetimes) trying to learn meditation through the clouds of obscurations and conflicting emotions that are common to most of us. We can soldier- on against all the odds of getting much of anywhere. OR -- and this is what the lamas point out -- we can take a step back, do some remedial training to take the blinders off and remove some of what obscures us, and then return to learning meditation with a much clearer mental windshield and a greater chance of success. As a typical American, I resist remedial work and usually end up learning the hard way.

We each have to find out for ourselves how clouded our mind is, how much debris we have accumulated that has to be removed before much clarity is possible. And we can fool ourselves, easily, into thinking, "Well, you folks may need to clear out your mind, but my mind has always been clear." Yeah, that thought and a ticket will get you a ride on the bus.

Our mind, just as we know it now, is all we have ever known. We have no way of even knowing whether we have a crystal-clear windshield or what we have been peering through up to now in life is really all that obscured. The fact is, as mentioned, that it's all we have ever known. The lamas would suggest that darn few of us have all that much clarity of mind just out of the chute. Mental obscurations at birth are the rule, rather than the exception. It is said that even some great reincarnate lamas still have to work hard to get their minds right, to remove the accumulation of

obscurations.

And we can decide this for ourselves by just jumping in and learning to meditate. If we can easily calm the mind and advance to Insight Meditation, that is well and good.

However, if we sit there on the cushion spinning our wheels while years roll by, we might have another thought coming. And that thought would be to take a break and remove some of our impediments and then return to learning to meditate.

Certainly this was true for me, only it took years for me to realize (and then admit) I was not really getting much of anywhere with basic meditation. I mean, how was I to know? I didn't have a lama nearby to talk to about it with. All my dharma brothers and sisters were mum about their personal practice. Way back then it was considered private.

Somewhere along the line we had been told that we were never supposed to talk about these things, which was a big mistake on all our parts.

Basic meditation is more like a science than anything else. We can talk about it, question it, discuss it, etc. any which way we can. It was just that back in the early days we didn't. Anyway, somewhere along in there I was able to admit to myself that nothing much was happening with my sitting meditation. And here was this specter of the Ngondro preliminaries (remedial practices) staring me in the face, something I had fastidiously avoided up to this time because it was just too horrible to contemplate doing it.

Yet, after a while, a long while, Ngondro started to look better than the alternative: pretending to meditate when I really wasn't able to. I mean, I didn't know

exactly what I was doing. I had no idea what the results of meditation were supposed to be. I had read books, received teachings, talked with friends, but my expectations about what meditation was supposed to be like were useless. In truth I didn't know anything. And, just for the record, when I finally did learn some actual meditation, it was nothing like I had imagined it, so all of those expectations were wasted energy. Ironically, those made-up expectations became a major obstacle to actually meditating.

And so, at some point what I did was bite the bullet and launch into the Ngondro preliminaries. And true to what I had heard and imagined, Ngondro was indeed no walk in the park. It was difficult for me, but I guess it takes something that hard to take out those deep down stains. The first two parts of Ngondro are purification practices, for sure. In the army, it's "Drop and give me twenty," while in Ngondro it's "Drop and give me 100,000" full-length prostrations on the floor. Ouch!

I am not suggesting you run out and do Ngondro. When I first asked to do Ngondro, my teacher said no, so don't count on getting to do it just because you think you want to.

For me, as mentioned, Ngondro was very helpful, but also very painful. Just finding the time was difficult. But the results were beneficial. It was purifying and did remove not only some obscurations, but also helped to break down resistance in general. And the last two parts of Ngondro, Mandala Offering and Guru Yoga are way beyond just purification. Mandala Offering was a breeze for me, my favorite practice of the set, accumulating merit. And the final Guru Yoga practice is essential preparation for any later practices.

In summary, Ngondro was tough but good for me. And, as mentioned earlier, when I was all done with Ngondro, Rinpoche asked me to do it again, which was a shock, but also very good in the long run. Let's face it. I am kind of a tough case folks, with apparently lots of obscurations. The bottom-line here is that these remedial exercises worked. Eventually I was able to learn to meditate so that even I knew it was working for me, and my teacher could see this too. What price can I put on that? The answer is that it is priceless and worth all the effort.

As a caveat, it is clearer to me as I grow older that not only do I want a clear mind to live life, but also to have something to take with me, as this little poem I wrote points at:

VACATION

I know,
What I will leave behind,
But not what,
I will take with me.

We need to know that.

PERFECT MAKES PRACTICE

I have had a chance to revisit the realm of music practice these last couple of days, learning an instrument I have never before touched. And I find new instruments hard, not easy to learn. I have been at war with brute “practice” all my life, so this has been a chance to experience the journey of practice with fresh eyes.

I have long had a personal theory that practice amounts to nothing more than waiting for the life energy to have a gap, an opening spurt, and then ride that. To be a little clearer, our life energy (like the energy of the sun) is not a continuous line fed to us at the same speed, but rather an endlessly varying stream of leads and lags. Think of it as the future opening and then closing again, much like the birth process, where a baby’s head crowns and then pulls back, and then comes on again.

If we like what is coming (the future), we want the spurts to outrun the lags, and they eventually do, of course. The future, for better or for worse, won’t be denied. Practice time is time when we are going through the motions of the technique and waiting for a surge, an opening. And by “surge,” I don’t just mean full-speed ahead, linearly, but more like waiting for time to expand, for there to be space in which whatever we are practicing can freely happen, as in: outrunning our effort.

Effort in almost any kind of practice is unavoidable. Unfortunately, that is what practice is generally thought to be about, trying to acquire muscle memory by effort that one day will become automatic, no

longer taking effort, and requiring little management. We put in our time, pay our dues. Too often we tend to just go on just the time we put in. We practice and wait out the hour or whatever it takes to pass. Then we are done.

This does not work because practice does not succeed by effort alone, and that is where I believe there is some confusion. Muscle memory is not only gained by sheer rote repetition, although it may seem so, and repetition is perhaps only the most obvious part of it all. There is something more required, and that's what I am pointing out here.

Instead of just blind repetition, look for the real progress in practice in the micro-flow of life energy. The cause may not be clear; it could be just variations in the sunlight and solar flux as far as I am concerned. We apply effort to practice so that what we are practicing becomes like second-nature to us. We all know this. Certainly the force of will to practice (effort), that kind of energy, will only get us half the way there, like into the ballpark, but little more. The effort to concentrate on the practice, as mentioned, keeps us in the ballpark, but it alone will get us no home runs. And this is the point.

For that, we require the gaps that are natural to any energy flow, the openings and expansions that overrun our effort and allow us to glide free like a bird in the air. If only ever so briefly, they happen and, when they do, we leave off with effort and have a moment of true freedom and that is when we move forward in our practice. We slip beyond the clock-ticking seconds of time into a breath of eternity.

The best analogy I know is that with certain sheets of plastic, polymers, when we pull to stretch them, they

only stretch so far, but with a little more pulling they suddenly almost double their length in an instant, effortlessly. Physicists call it “necking.”

Anyway, in the midst of effortful practice, when we reach a point of “necking,” time just opens up, expands, and the future is present, if only for a moment. If we are practicing music, in that moment we are playing music, not just practicing. And just as quickly the gap closes and we find ourselves wrapped in effort once again, and probably wishing we could repeat the experience. However, in that instant of free-flight we have tasted the future, not to be forgotten, and such experience is very helpful in urging us on in our practice.

So.... what’s the lesson here? Of course I can’t help but relate it to everything else I have ever practiced, especially dharma practice. It suggests that simply forcing ourselves to practice, rubbing our nose in it, so to speak, is obviously not going to help. As mentioned earlier, effort will get us in the ballpark, but that is all effort is good for. By itself, effort can never lead to a breakthrough, because the result of practice that we want is always, in that way, effortless. That’s the whole point.

So, just holding our feet to the fire will only get us burnt toes. The reality is more subtle than that. Too much effort will only, as they say, stain our practice and make us want to avoid it. The image that the Tibetans seem to use is that of holding a raw egg in our hand. If we squeeze too hard, the egg will break, and if we hold it too loose, it will fall and break. So the technique that we practice must be very gentle, not too tight and not too loose. This is something that most meditation practitioners need to take to heart.

Brute force is a waste of effort. The process is much more delicate than that.

Anyway, that is my take away from undertaking a totally new instrument these last days, one unlike any I have ever played. I find that reinforcing my effort does nothing but clog up the works. On the other hand, relaxing, and gently working on the technique, but looking to the music part of it, however distant it may seem, allows me to come alive when those spurts of spirit happen and I am freeborn. Look for the gaps of sheer spirit which, like pure oxygen, allow us to breathe within the technique. As my dharma teacher says, the length of a practice may be only as long as it takes to raise a teacup to our lips and take a sip.

If we look to lengthen the gaps of spirit (and rest in them) rather than worry about the length of practice, we can step through the door of technique and realize it. I don't feel this approach is very difficult to understand, but without it we are just sitting there spinning our wheels and burning out our tires.

