

Dharma Blogs

2016 Spring



by Michael Erlewine

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INTRODUCTION

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

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THE REASON

April 1, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

As we all know, there are hundreds of kinds of meditation and many ways that meditation is useful to us, but what is it primarily for? Yes, it can relax us, focus us, give us a sense of purpose, and many other things. However, basic sitting meditation, what is called Shamata (Sanskrit) or Tranquility Meditation in English is a preliminary form of meditation practice and not meant as an end in itself. At the very least, Tranquility Meditation is a launching pad for Vipassana (Insight) Meditation or used in conjunction with Vipassana.

In that regard, meditation is a purification practice, meaning that through engaging in it we become aware of our distractions and obscurations and begin to remove them. The goal of Tranquility Meditation is ostensibly to learn to allow the mind to just rest as-it-is naturally. However, in that process, we first become aware of everything that prevents us from doing just that, resting. And that process, for most of us, is a lengthy process of purification, nothing short of preparing us for the recognition of the actual nature of the mind itself, which is what Vipassana (Insight) Meditation is all about.

If meditating each day is a time-out and calming for us, that is fine, but a brief respite in a busy day is not the goal of meditation practice. According to the dharma as I read it, that goal is nothing less than

recognition of the true nature of the mind itself and the eventual realization of enlightenment.

As mentioned in the previous blog, eventually we each have to reach some kind of critical mass in our practice that is incendiary, where like a booster-rocket, we burst into flames and much of our dross just falls away. And this actually happens.

Here in America, the dharma is just now getting organized and coming together. This is still all very new, and there are not yet enough authentic teachers, not enough useful programs, and not enough qualified students. The tradition I have been taught in, the Karma Kagyu Lineage, being Vajrayana, is very much oriented to guru and student interaction, through what is called Samaya, an indissoluble bond between the two.

Currently, here in America, a similar dharma situation as in Tibet has not finished forming and, for all we know, may take quite a different form here from that practiced in Tibet. We don't yet have in America the kind of dharma infrastructure that has nourished the dharma in Tibet for all these centuries.

I mention this because we dharma practitioners here in America will have to work that much harder to help develop our own realized practitioners in this country, i.e. ourselves. It is to this end that I write the following:

The instructions in the dharma have to be taught and we must receive them. Like any technique, these instructions are the blueprints for not only experience, but for realization of what the experience is about. They can be read, listened to, and understood as an

outline or abstract of what has to be realized by each of us. It remains for each of us to complete our practice, which, as mentioned, is to actually experience and then realize the nature of our own mind. Now, what follows are from my own experience, so please take them with a grain of salt.

I have been practicing dharma for at least 42 years. And I have done my best to follow instructions and to do the practices I have been given by my teacher and others. What worries me and why I bring this up is that after some 40+ years of practice I, quite by accident, had some life experiences that were unfortunate outwardly, but very fortunate in igniting my passion for dharma.

And while I am willing to assume that only I require such a deepening through adversity, there is an inkling in me that senses that I am not unusual in this and that perhaps others are unable to bring their dharma practice to bear to the degree necessary for it to become incendiary. In my case, this is what it took to jar me loose. Am I the only one like this?

It is because of this concern that I would like your patience as I share some things about dharma practice that I found surprising, but useful.

GOING THROUGH THE MOTIONS

April 4, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Oh yes, we do that. We go through the motions, and mindlessly at that, much of the time. It is called dharma “Practice” because we are consciously practicing, just like we might practice a piano lesson. Still, it is just practice.

For dharma practice to be successful, it cannot be just rote repetition. If we are practicing “mindfulness,” we have to actually be mindful. If we space out, putting our practice on automatic, this accomplishes nothing. If our idea of dharma practice is watching the clock and daydreaming, we are only fooling ourselves.

In that case, any “Realization,” by definition, will wait until our practice is no longer just “practice.” Dharma practice is like a bobsled run. We push like crazy in the beginning, but then just jump in and ride. It is the ride that we want, not just the pushing. If we manage to stain our practice so that it becomes an obligation or burden, then it is time to re-evaluate taking an alternate route until we can reinvest effort with more joy. IMO, Joy is essential for realization.

You know that old phrase “Trying doesn’t do it; doing does it.” Trying to meditate is an oxymoron. The words are wild. When we build a house, we use scaffolding. When the house is built, we take the scaffolding down. Dharma practice is like that. Before

meditation can be successful, we have to stop “practicing” and just meditate. Effort and meditation don’t go together. It’s like “trying” to relax. Just relax.

Meditation, like any other kind of practice, initially takes effort, but the effort has nothing to do with meditating. It’s just the opposite: effort is contrary to meditation. Somewhere along the way, we have to stop practicing meditation and just meditate.

It’s a messy business, learning anything, and even more so with spiritual realization because we have no idea what realization is like beforehand. In other words, we can’t realize until we realize. The Tibetans often use the analogy of tasting sugar. We can describe what sugar tastes like until we are blue in the face, but finally each person has to taste sugar for themselves. Dipping our big toe in the swimming pool is not the same as a full-body plunge.

My point here is that one of the greatest obstacles to dharma practice is the practice itself, the fact that it practice obligatory and not spontaneous. We can strike flint and steel together for a long time before we get the first spark, much less a fire. Greater awareness, which is the object or goal of any dharma practice, is pure joy. The rest is practice and its technique. Don’t confuse the two.

So, we have a real Catch-22 in that, with dharma realization, we must start somewhere and learn the technique, which then has to be practiced. So, right off the bat we are taking two steps forward and one step back or two steps backward and one step forward, depending on the day.

Traditional sage advice says “Don’t stain the practice,” meaning don’t make practice so effortful that you don’t want to do it. That is called “staining the practice,” that we begin to have an approach-avoidance response when we even think of practice. Eventually we just avoid it.

Back in the early 1970s, the emphasis was on long sitting-practice times. It was a practice till you puke sort of thing. Instead of a marathon, my Karma Kagyu teachers suggest many short sessions. A session (according to my teacher) can be as short as the time it takes to pick up a teacup and take a sip. Again: we don’t want to stain our practice by forcing ourselves to do more than we feel like. If we don’t feel like “any,” then we may have already stained our practice and need remedial attention.

The point here is that spiritual awareness is joyful. It just is. “Trying” to be joyful is a contradiction in terms. This is an age-old conundrum, how to do rote practice joyfully. A first step is to not stain our practice or at least to know when we already have and do something about it.

At my age, there is no point in my shining you on or pretending things are otherwise than they are. From my own experience I know that it is possible to waste an enormous amount of time not practicing dharma effectively, while at the same time imaging we are. I know this from bitter experience.

My approach may not be for everyone. When I went through a very strong spiritual awakening experience back in 1967, part of that experience was what is called “direct voice,” where I was directly spoken to in

my mind. In that visionary moment, I was told that I would have two gifts or powers. One of these was the ability to stop bleeding. Of course I had no idea what this meant at the time. As the years pass, I have come to understand this more as psychological rather than just physical. I am somehow a natural astringent that helps psychological bleeding to stop, if that makes sense. If my words appear caustic and negative, they are just an antidote for falsely optimistic or overly enthusiastic thinking that just wastes our time. I sometimes think I am like smelling salts. Perhaps a little bit is all you need!

PRELUDE TO INSIGHT MEDITATION

April 6, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

It would be much easier for me to write a poetic interpretation of Insight Meditation, a dharma practice that is called Vipassana in Sanskrit. I would much prefer that and no-doubt will do that in another blog. However, what follows here will be hard going for me to write and for you to read, since it is an attempt at a little more formal description. I understand and sympathize if it looks like Greek to you. Feel free to ignore this blog.

What is so special about Vipassana (Insight Meditation) that causes me to go on and on about it so? How and why is Insight Meditation different from basic sitting practice (Tranquility Meditation), a practice that most of you must feel by now that you know at least something about?

Before I begin, please note that there are scores of practices out there that are called Insight Meditation, yet have almost no relation to what I am presenting here. What you may call Insight Meditation may be (and probably is) very different from what I am pointing out. The “Insight Meditation” referred to here is that practice taught by the Karma Kagyu Lineage as part of Mahamudra Meditation training. This is a very particular form of Vipassana practice that is directly intensive and not primarily intellectual or conceptual. It is not so much an intellectual process of

understanding as it is a process of using the mind to directly look at itself. And it is very important to understand how Tranquility Meditation differs from Insight Meditation.

No less an expert than the great Thrangu Rinpoche puts it better than I could: “Shamata meditation [Tranquility Meditation] can bring about relaxation of the mind, but it cannot eradicate the cause of suffering. We need to practice Shamata [Tranquility Meditation] because it establishes the foundation of Vipassana, or Insight Meditation, and Vipassana eradicates the cause of suffering.” This ability to remove the cause of suffering is something very rare indeed and deserves our close attention.

If Insight Meditation is that powerful, why don't we just start out with Insight Meditation? Why bother with anything else? As mentioned in earlier blogs, Insight Meditation is a non-dualistic (absolute-truth) practice, while Tranquility Meditation is a (relative-truth) dualistic practice.

Those are just words, fancy language to point out that our ingrained day-to-day mental approach (how we are now) is dualistic, what the Buddhists call a “relative” truth. A relative truth means that there is an “I” in here and a “you” out there. I'm the subject and you are an object in my eyes, and vice versa.

Tranquility Meditation is a relative or dualistic form of dharma practice, one intentionally designed to help us become aware of our own ingrained dualistic projections. When we sit on the cushion in Tranquility Meditation, trying our best to just rest our mind, a myriad distractions intervene in the process until we

become aware of the duality that we are in here and those distractions are out-there, and begin to resolve that duality. We eventually discover that out there is also “in here.”

It is when we have resolved those interruptive distractions and embraced them as within us that it can be said we have mastered Tranquility Meditation and are ready to learn Insight Meditation.

On the other hand, Vipassana (Insight Meditation) is a non-dualistic practice, what is called an “Absolute” truth, a practice we can undertake only when we have resolved our ingrained dualisms and recognized them as part of us.

In order to practice Insight Meditation, as mentioned in many blogs I write, a break-down and softening of our habitual (and ingrained) tendency for dualistic (relative) thinking has first to be negotiated. “Dualistic thinking” is simply allowing the Self to rope some things in close (what we like) and shut out and externalize the rest (what we fear or do not like), i.e. we draw lines.

This rigid form of dualistic thinking (all by itself) obscures the mind from the possibility of our engaging in Insight Meditation. It is that simple. Remove the dualistic thinking (the “us” against “them” component) and Insight Meditation can be practiced. As mentioned, Shamata (Tranquility) Meditation is a practice that gradually allows the mind to rest naturally, and most folks know that part. What is not so well understood is that in order for the mind to come to rest naturally through Shamata meditation practice, an enormous amount of our dualistic thinking

(distractions, etc.) has to be negotiated and allowed to resolve and thus subside. We have to break down the line between in here and out there.

This is why preliminary dharma practices like The Ngöndro and Lojong are usually practiced along with sitting meditation. These, including Tranquility Meditation, are all relative-truth practices, meaning there is a subject in here opposed to an object out there, and a moving dividing-line between the two, a line that ultimately has to be weakened until it vanishes or ceases to obscure. We eventually include it all. So, a lot of preliminary work has to be done to prepare us before we can begin learning Insight Meditation.

Tranquility Meditation involves coping with distractions (interruptions, etc.) in such a way that the mind can rest in spite of them. Those distractions include the relative-truth practices, with all their dualisms and dualistic thinking. I don't have to remind you that all these words of mine simply mean doing something about our ingrained habit of prejudice, judgments, drawing lines, and the like – dualistic thinking.

To repeat, my point is that when we say mastering Tranquility Meditation, this involves coming to terms with all manner of distractions, including (as pointed out) our ingrained dualistic habits. For most of us, this takes time, including the time to even become aware of the problem.

So, while we can run out and start learning sitting meditation (Tranquility Meditation), we can't do that with Insight Meditation, because we first have to have

a tranquil mind and have dealt with all of our distractions, including whatever dualisms we have picked up along life's way. And that is not so easy to do.

While I would very much like to help folks learn Insight Meditation, I can't do that until they have mastered Tranquility Meditation and its requirements. Another way to say this is that, if you gradually include all of the distractions and dualisms required to master Tranquility Meditation as part of yourself, what is left is Insight Meditation or the doorway to it.

While you may not be ready to learn Insight Meditation, it still can be helpful to know as much as you can about it, so that you aspire to learn it. Trust me; Insight Meditation is worth any effort it requires. It is the jewel of great price.

THE WISHING WELL

April 8, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The unexplored regions of this world are no longer places like the top of Mt. Everest or even the bottom of the sea, but rather the mind itself, which remains largely unknown to most of us, except perhaps as a tool to examine the outside world. To say we take the mind for granted would be an understatement. It has just always been there and we don't know its value unless we lose it. If we lose our mind, it's game over.

As for looking inside, using the mind to look at itself, it's an almost unknown territory, yet it is so close and omnipresent that we have yet to even notice it, much less learned how to use it.

Without knowing it, we have been given this incredible gift, which we have been automatically using for as long as we can remember, mostly to negotiate the outside world, and we have never questioned it.

The legendary Tibetan "Wish-Fulfilling Jewel" is nothing less than the mind itself, but we have yet to even wish on it, much less ask it our deepest questions. Every thought, word, deed, and concept came only from the mind, so of course the mind knows everything. All we have to do is ask, but we don't yet know how to ask.

In other words, we each have our own wishing-well as near to us as our next thought. Instead of following that thought as we usually do, all we have to do is learn to recognize the nature of each thought. That is what Insight Meditation is all about.

CONVERGENCE

April 19, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Even the brief look that we get from time to time at our own craziness should tell us that our mind is out of joint and we don't see clearly. Apparently, this is the human state. The exigencies of Samsaric life somehow mean that we come into this world with a carefully warped view or, as I like to say, we are born as if we were already "beside ourselves."

The Buddhist dharma, whether Zen, Tibetan, or otherwise is all about straightening out our view and seeing things clearly. The true nature of the mind can be as close to us as our own breath, yet still we cannot see it. The Buddhists go so far as to say that in all the time there has been until now, we never have seen things clearly. To this very day we still don't quite get it.

Instead, it's more like we see everything cross-eyed, and dharma-training reminds me of focusing a pair of binoculars, gradually bringing our own out-of-focus image together (and in-synch) with the true clear image of how the mind actually is. Unfortunately, this does not happen automatically. No one can do it for us. As they say, each of us has to turn the wheel of our own dharma. Otherwise, it will sit there, unturned.

The chance that we can figure out how to turn our own dharma wheel without some help is said to be slim to none. That is why the Buddha left us the teachings on dharma, to show us how. And that is

why authentic teachers of the dharma are so invaluable. An authentic teacher is someone with realization, who is ready, willing and able to guide us and whose advice rings true and is, well, helpful.

In the tradition in which I train, the Karma Kagyu Lineage, there is a close interaction between the teacher and the student, close enough to guide the student to the correct view, much like a mother guides her baby to the nipple. It is like that. We are all trying to find the dharma that we need, but may not know just where to put our hands on it. An authentic teacher (who has some realization) can save us an infinite amount of time since, without that help, it is usually not possible to see clearly.

This is why in my experience the teacher/student relationship has been so very precious.

WHAT WE DON'T REALIZE ...

April 21, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

As the old saying goes, there are “different strokes for different folks,” even in the dharma. Keep in mind that there are said to be 84,000 dharmas, thus 84,000 specialized teachers, and 84,000 kinds of students. So, it’s not a case of one-size-fits-all, but rather one of finding out what fits us and then tailoring that to our needs. It is my belief that folks fail to understand how personalized the dharma must be for us to grasp it. Empty intellectual dharma-concepts do more damage than benefit, because they suggest we may already have “realized” the mind’s nature, when the rubber has yet to even touch the road, much less go anywhere.

Books, teachings, and teachers can provide us with a very rough idea of what we might expect, but expectations are just that, mostly something we have managed to come up with ourselves, and they usually (by definition) do not accurately fit the reality. Otherwise, we would all be enlightened by now.

My point is that fitting our expectations to the reality is not a slam-dunk affair, which is why we have authentic teachers and what (in my lineage) are called the pointing-out instructions. It’s not like the true reality (the nature of the mind) is something out there that we can just “see,” but rather it is something “in here,” so close to us that we have never yet managed

to see it, and the Tibetan teachers go on to add, in all the lifetimes (and from time immemorial) up to now. Some even go so far as to say that we are the “dregs,” the ones who have never grasped reality.

The authentic (realized) teacher does not have to be a big deal or muckety-muck. They can be a butcher, a baker, or a candlestick maker. The only thing required is that they personally have realized the true nature of the mind. If they have this, he or she can check us out and get some idea of how far off the mark our concepts and expectations as to enlightenment are, and help us find ways to pop our expectation bubble, which can then allow us to snap into line with how the mind actually is.

As mentioned, this is called “Realization,” the point when we finally actually realize the true nature of the mind and let go of all our concepts, ideas, and mental expectations as to how “We” think it is or should be.

Here is a pithy quote from the Ven. 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 Traleg Rinpoche.

It is repeatedly pointed out in many of the great texts by no less than the Indian Mahasiddhas that our main teacher, who is called in the Tibetan teachings our “Tsawi Lama,” refers to that one teacher, that one guru who first points out to us the true nature of the mind so that we actually get it. Lots have pointed out, but we have never managed to get it. They go on to say that once this guru (or guide) has successfully pointed out to us the actual nature of the mind, their job is effectively done. They may stick around, but from the point of our recognition forward, our eventual enlightenment is our own responsibility, and, best of all, we are finally up to the task. In other words, we get it.

The takeaway from all this is twofold: One, there is an alternate route to recognition and enlightenment other than what are called the complex “deity practices,” and two, we can’t realize “Recognition” and Insight Meditation (of the Mahamudra variety) without help from an authentic teacher. As mentioned, an authentic teacher is someone who has achieved recognition (and thus some realization), at least enough to be able to point it out to us.

The Dharma (as I have come to know it) is not just about reading books, but rather the dharma is about realization. As the great Mahasiddhas say:

“From the midst of experience, realization can arise.”

They go on to add, “...with the help of an authentic teacher.” There are other approaches to the dharma, but when I asked about them, I was told that they take much, much longer, like an untold number of years to achieve realization. So, those who don't want to take the long way around have an option.

THE EASIEST PLACE TO BEGIN

April 21, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

There is a mind-training technique anyone can do, that if practiced always gives direct, easy-to-see, results. Perhaps best of all, this technique can be done anywhere and anytime. We don't have to set aside a special time or place to practice; we can do it wherever we are and whenever we want. I do it all day long, by now automatically.

The focus of this practice is none other than our own moment-by-moment reactions, so there is nothing unfamiliar. It is all our own doing. It is as simple as allowing ourselves to become aware of our own reactions as they happen, reactions that are taking place just all the time anyway. And we don't have to look for reactions, as in make an effort to find them. Instead, we just note the next time we react to something. We let it come to our attention. It could be anything and often is.

For example, I don't like the person sitting next to me, or I don't like the tie you are wearing or your nose is too big. That's what I mean by anything, as in: anything at all that gets a reaction out of us. And I reiterate that this is not something we have to look hard for, but rather something that we just allow ourselves to become aware of, our day-to-day and minute-by-minute reactions. They happen all the time, countless reactions a day.

And the important thing is that each of these reactions is recorded as karma of one kind or another in our subconscious, what is called the Storehouse Consciousness. And this karma adds up, big time. Its endless karmic accumulation obscures our mind. I call it micro-karma.

Just imagine the reactions we experience each day, the countless wincing at things we don't like or the countless times we shine ourselves on by padding the truth for things that we "like." Reactions can be positive and negative, anything that twists or deviates from reality that we project from in-here. I don't have to tell you that we all project our biases, our likes and dislikes, on the screen of the world, just like a movie, and then we watch it as if we have nothing to do with it.

The beauty of this technique is that these are OUR reactions, every last one of them. Even we can see that, so all we have to do is recognize that fact as we become aware of each reaction and own it as ours. We reacted. These are our reactions.

There is nothing more to do than that. We don't have to try to walk the reaction back, regret it, apologize, or make any amends. It is all in the past and our goal is to become aware of our reactions, not further get involved with them. All we want to do is become aware of how we react and to what. And we do this over and over and over all day long. And each reaction, once we become aware of it and acknowledge it as our own, gets weaker with our repeated awareness of it.

In time, a particular reaction weakens to the point of either fading out or is no longer taken so seriously. In essence, we become increasingly more inclusive and aware of where we endlessly draw lines, liking or disliking, being biased or prejudiced, etc. The result is that we gradually stop making judgments, drawing lines, excluding, and instead become a more accepting person, and all this by leaps and bounds.

There are a few caveats, but you will soon figure those out by yourself. For example, someone may go out of their way to get us to react. Regardless of their intention, our reaction is our own. The way I say this to myself is that I must learn to stop knee-jerk reacting and instead begin to respond appropriately to whatever comes at me.

This technique is so easy to learn and yet so effective. And, since we react anyway, we can practice this all day long at no extra expense in time and effort. In fact, as our reactions begin to fade, we gain both time and energy, until we are just naturally present more and more of the time. Our awareness of reactions becomes just awareness.

To help you read further, I have produced a free e-book on Reaction Toning for those interested. It is titled "Tong-Len: The Alchemy of Reaction." It is also available as a paperback on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), but it costs \$6.

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Tong-len - SecondEdition.pdf>

MY FIRST DHARMA PRACTICE

April 23, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I made many attempts at dharma practice, early on, but none of them really got me that far. For one, I didn't know what I was doing. This was before I met my root teacher. It might be helpful to say something about the first successful dharma practice that I ever did, one that was given to me by my Tibetan teacher. But let me back up a bit.

Margaret and I first met the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where he was teaching for the weekend. That's another story, but it might interest you to know that Rinpoche came to both Margaret and I in a dream, causing us to drive some 200 miles in an attempt to meet him. That story is here:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10153972982042658&set=a.110624912657.118041.587252657&type=3>

Anyway, that day we met Rinpoche stayed with us so vividly that it was not long after we met him that we felt we just had to see this wonderful man again, but as it turned out, he was the abbot of a monastery in the mountains above Woodstock, New York, some 800 miles away. We decided to go anyway.

It was in those Limbo-like days between Christmas and New Year. I have told this story many times, so I will not go into much detail here. We packed up our young family (three kids at the time, including our one-and-one-half-year-old daughter May) and all together drove some 800 miles across the country on one of the coldest days of the year to the monastery in upstate New York where Rinpoche lived. We never even called ahead. To this day, I don't know what we were thinking.

The reason for the trip was to ask Rinpoche what dharma practice he would suggest we start out with. Of course, I had in mind something difficult and exotic like the Ngöndro (in English called the Extraordinary Preliminaries), but Rinpoche did not recommend that. If you want the whole trip story, here is the link (the trip is described in the 2nd part):

<http://spiritgrooves.net/articles/DHARMA/DHARMA%20TOOLBOX%20-%20TONGLEN.pdf>

Then I explained to him that I had been an astrologer for many years and was used to spiritual practice. I thought perhaps that I could skip meditation 101 and start with something a little more advanced (of course I would think that). However, Rinpoche very gently pointed out that since this particular kind of meditation was actually new to me, it was best to start out at the beginning. As it turned out, he did not introduce us to sitting meditation during that visit. Instead, he pointed us to us a practice called Tong-Len, sometimes translated as “sending and receiving” or “exchanging yourself for others” as the place he felt we should start.

That was many years ago. We thanked Rinpoche for his advice and drove all the way back to Michigan, where we began to practice Tong-Len. Later, we eventually ended up doing many dharma practices, including “The Ngöndro” I mentioned earlier and others. But looking back on it now, Tong-Len seems somehow peculiarly American in its appeal. It is both easy to do and very effective. Over time, I developed an even easier form of Tong-Len that involves working with our own reactions. I presented this to Rinpoche and he approved of it and said this was a valid technique. I have been sharing that with you here in the last couple of blogs.

The technique, called “Reaction Tong-Len” or just Reaction-Toning, is super simple and very effective. Anyone can do it and the results are visible almost immediately. And perhaps best of all is the fact that by working directly with our own reactions, there is no one else we can blame for how we react other than ourselves. I have yet to see anyone who actually practiced this technique not benefit from it in short order.

I have produced a free e-book on Reaction Toning for those interested. Also, a paperback on Amazon, but there is a minimal charge to have that printed.

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

REMEDIAL PRACTICES

April 25, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Remedial dharma practices are whatever it takes to “remedy” our situation. I put off remedial practices for far too long thinking I could just do it straight away. As I continue to point out, in the Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries, at least in our lineage (Karma Kagyu), instead of “remedial,” these practices are simply called the Preliminary Practices. They are required practices before Shamata (Tranquility) Meditation is even taught.

Unfortunately, in America, because the preliminary practices were considered by Americans to be too difficult, the Tibetans stopped asking Americans to do them, and instead started us right off with sitting meditation. This was not helpful, IMO, because we failed to even register the existence of (and need for) remedial practices. Instead, we ignored them.

Yes, we ignored them, only to later find that they are something almost everyone requires, as opposed to just a few folks. Again, in Tibet every apprentice monk does them, sometimes more than once. I have mentioned this before, but when I at long-last completed The Ngöndro (all five parts, which took some years), and met with my dharma teacher, looking for what to do next, he had this to say:

“Michael, do you want to know what I would do if I were you?” Well, of course I did; that’s exactly what I wanted to know. Rinpoche replied, “I would do another Ngöndro.” That answer took me aback, but of course I did another Ngöndro, which took another few years.

All of the so-called “relative-truth” practices can be considered remedial, and this includes all practices whatsoever up to what is called “Recognition,” being the actual recognition of the true nature of the mind by the student.

As for which ones fit us, that varies with the student and the particular set of remedial practices the authentic guru feels will best enable “Recognition.” Popular remedial practices include the study of “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma,” Lojong, Tranquility Meditation, study of the Eight Noble Truths, and on and on. It might be easier to recite practices which are not remedial.

As for me, I was struck by “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma,” Tong-Len (particularly Reaction Tong-Len), and Lojong in general. I spent a great deal of time (years) on Deity practices, but never got much out of them. The kicker for me, what worked best, was Mahamudra Meditation training, which for me formally started with 10-day intensives on Mahamudra with the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche each year, which are still going strong to date, some 27 years later. I also did a 2-years of intensive practice with H.E. Tai Situ Rinpoche on Mahamudra, and so on.

I cannot encourage enough (with your teacher's consent) trying different practices, finding those teachings that speak to you at the most profound level, practicing them, and adapting them to your personality. If we just do what the directions say, I never found that enough. It was important to me to get used to the technique, and ADAPT the technique to my personal style of being. Make it your own, without grossly changing it.

We can't practice a dharma technique hands-on at arm's length. Like a pair of comfortable shoes, we have to break a practice in, which may involve a little stretching and walking a ways with it. A dharma technique has to be something we love, a refuge for us in this world we all live in. Our dharma practice is precious to the point that we don't want to stain it.

Staining our practice, unfortunately, is very easy and hard to remedy. We stain our practice when we try or push too hard to practice, push to the point that we begin to balk or react when we even think we have to do it each day. The correct amount of practice is the amount so that we look forward to it. More than that and we begin to stain the practice.

There are many teachers that want you to push your practice long hours, whether you feel like it or not. My teacher has, instead, recommended many short practice periods. Rinpoche has even said that a practice period can be as long as it takes to raise a teacup to your lips and take a sip. In other words, you can't learn to meditate by brute force or by coercing yourself. Do I need say more?

Practice becomes joyful somewhere down the line. Beginning practice, by definition takes trial and error. That's why they call it "Practice." We are practicing meditation, not actually meditating. We can't practice meditation and meditate at the same time. When we finally learn to meditate, we stop practicing meditation and we just meditate. This is an important distinction.

VIPASSANA: HURRY UP AND WAIT

May 2, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I am in a hurry to keep to the regimen prescribed by my cardiologist, but further health conditions intervene and keep getting in the way. It is obvious I can't rush anything, as long as more illness-related obstacles appear. Even in healing, I have to have patience. In recognizing that, I have (once again) to slow down and live. With that in mind, my whole history with Insight Meditation comes to mind. It's worth a mention.

Perhaps we all have moments of extreme clarity, in particular related to those areas where we have learned to exercise great patience. I am not an expert in this, but I have had some experience and have realized at least a thing or two. Wherever extreme concentration comes together with love (or at least familiarity) of effort, and if in that effort we can rest, then great clarity and luminosity can arise. I have found this to be true.

You can hear tales of great clarity from mountain climbers who very carefully, with great effort and skill scale a peak. Again, the exercise of a skill or technique that requires great exactitude and at the same time is something we enjoy or love to do is key here. And, if given the above, we can (at the same time) take refuge in the action, rest in that action, then

what is called Insight Meditation can arise. The great Mahasiddhas have written in the pith texts:

“In the midst of experience, realization can arise.”

Repetitive action or technique that is familiar to us and in which we can relax to the point that we rest in the process rather than look forward to the result of the particular technique is required. The technique must require great concentration and our complete attention, and all that quite naturally, without any effort or thinking. It must be, at the least, very familiar to us and, if we enjoy or feel love for the process, all the better. While performing the technique, instead of focusing on the result of the technique (its outcome or product), we allow our mind to rest in the technique itself, much like a tied bundle of straw slumps to rest when its cord is gently cut. We rest in that way.

These conditions, then, are how I first learned Insight Meditation, and quite naturally at that, with no visible effort. Such conditions can exist in each of our lives, if we can be effortlessly mindful. That is not an oxymoron. “Effortless mindfulness” is just another tag for awareness. Awareness that is concentrating on a particular technique, one that is repetitive enough to last a while, is a prime environment in which to allow the mind to come to rest within the repetition itself. And it is within that “resting” that superior clarity and luminosity can arise. At least, that has been my experience.

And by “superior clarity,” I refer to what is called Insight Meditation, a clarity that is entirely free of the conceptual dualism that accompanies common day-to-day clarity, i.e. being clear about something. The

clarity of Insight Meditation is clarity of another order of magnitude to what we have previously known, clarity (and lucidity) that once realized, is never forgotten, and is more like a window into another world.

Once we have realized Insight Meditation, however slight or fleeting that insight may at first be, we find ourselves endlessly repeating the conditions for its arising again and again until it re-arises. And, even a tiny rent in the veil of the obscured mind (and the ensuing flash of insight) finds us painstakingly enlarging and expanding that tear into a window that we can eventually step through, like Alice did through the looking-glass. This much I know.

DHARMA CREDITS AND DEBITS

May 5, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I receive many private messages with questions as to where one can begin in dharma practice, a practice through which we can actually see visible results, and sooner than later. What follows is a simple practice that is easy to do, conserves energy, and protects loss of the life force.

Credit is what we have in the bank, while debit is what takes away from that amount. When it comes to money, we are all very exact in deposits and withdrawal, but perhaps we are less careful if we look at our energy credits and debits. At the same time, it happens all day long.

There are necessary activities that take our energy, like climbing a flight of stairs, vacuuming the living-room carpet, and taking out the trash. These are physical energy sinks, but we also lose energy based on judgments and opinions we hazard from moment to moment, and in those transactions we very seldom end up on top or come out close to being even. Instead, we tend toward the losing end of the stick.

I have been convalescing of late, and so have had more time to just observe my own state of mind. One thing that has become clear is how much I debit my own energy bank, almost constantly. It's up to us how we spend our energy, so there is no moralizing here.

However, I find it helpful to realize that I spend my energy (without much control) on meaningless gestures and opinions.

Perhaps I am not usually as sensitive as I have been lately, and so in the past have missed what I now notice almost in slow motion, my constant energy debits taking place. I hesitate to give examples, since they are so personal, but to not give any is even worse.

Let's say, by way of example, when I see a person at the grocery store that has done their best to harm me, if only in words. Just running into them can set off a stack of dominos of harsh or compensatory thoughts. When those thoughts have run their course, if I notice, I am usually worse for wear, having spent good energy on a subject that can offer no return on the investment. In other words, I am out some energy that I had before this event ensued.

Or, it could be as simple as seeing one of the presidential candidates on the tube, such as the ones I especially don't care for, and then running the gamut of thoughts on that encounter. Whatever thoughts I run through, I end up losing a burst of energy that I would otherwise have. And the list goes on. In fact, given very little encouragement, I can react this way all day long, and (if I don't realize it and stop), I often do.

The net result is that, basically, I squander a huge amount of energy that otherwise would help contain me properly, but instead is lost, leaving me drained to whatever degree of energy I put into it. I should know better, but reactions are easy to trigger and so difficult

to stop or cause to subside. Instead, once set in motion, these reactions tend to run their course.

With practice, I can see these reactions coming and just drop them right there, before they start, not to mention the karmic residue they implant in my mind.

So, this may seem overly worrisome on my part, but I guess it depends on how much energy you have to waste and how much you want to pool and hang on to. Aside from the energy component, I briefly mentioned the karma we generate through such reactions, and I could write an entire blog just on that. Suffice it to say here that the amount of micro-karma that is exactly recorded via our every reaction accumulates at an alarming rate and every last iota of it will re-emerge and affect us farther down the road.

As mentioned, what I am pointing out here is more subtle than perhaps our major reactions, but nevertheless it results in “negative” karma, aside from the simple energy loss that is the theme of this blog. We are nickel and dimed constantly by our own reactions, like: all day long.

My point here is that even with minimum awareness on our part, we can stop making judgments, drawing lines, projecting prejudice, and otherwise squandering our precious energy on issues that we ourselves have concocted and can, with a little work, learn to just stop repeating. And the energy saved is energy we need to live properly.

TOES FIRMLY ON THE GROUND

May 5, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Of course, I am in a pretty thankful state, just now. Having been through a couple of weeks of medical hell, I have definitely got religion at this point. There is nothing like being wheeled down the halls stark naked under a gown that does not actually close, with an IV and various other things hanging off of you, all of this while on the way to the operating room, where you will remember about nothing. I do remember, before heading for the operating room, the nurse standing over me, chatting away, while she shaved my pubic hair where they were to make an incision.

And I have genuine compassion for the vast number of older people (like myself) that I have seen in and around the hospitals where I was. I did not realize that health was such a huge business. Of course, I knew it was, but if seeing is believing, then what is being right in the same boat with every other sick person like? That must be some kind of realization.

And I cannot help underlining one of my favorite themes, which is that without misfortune, unfortunately, I seem to realize about next to nothing. It takes rubbing my nose in pain, over and over, to wake me up and force my feet to touch the ground, even a little bit.

I am not voting for more hardship and suffering, but just having had a shot or two of it, I must confess that perhaps the one ray of sunlight in the rigors of Samsara is that hard times get our attention, at least when our neck is under the boot of unfortunate circumstances.

This is what the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma” are all about, keeping our mind where it can be most useful for us. The “Four Thoughts” are one of the first bits of Buddhism I encountered, so many years ago. Many think of the “Four Thoughts” as something to pass through as we move on to more complex dharma practices, but I can assure you it is something we need to carry us wherever we wish to go.

When I finished several decades of dharma training and began learning Mahamudra Meditation, the first thing I encountered again was the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind,” only this time I spent over three years concentrating on it, so that should tell you something important right there.

Advanced dharma practice is a little like advanced age. There is no rush to get there, and if you do rush, you will just get old faster, with no benefit. The “Four Thoughts” are the vehicle we need through which to move forward, not something for us to just pass through.

The Great Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche once told me very clearly that we must hold all of the Four Thoughts in mind at the same time, not just one or two of them. If you want to check these four thoughts

out, here is a link to a free e-book on the Four Thoughts:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/The%20Four%20Thoughts%20Book-2.pdf>

NEW LEASE ON LIFE

May 6, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

New lease on life? Well, that may be overstating it, but not as far as I am concerned. Privately, that is just how I feel, and “lease” is the operative word. Maybe I shouldn’t be alive, but here I am, perhaps not all the way out of the woods yet, but it looks like I might get there, and last for a while. So, what do I want to do with this opportunity of a life-extension?

Well, some things just fell away, like food. I am definitely eating to live at this point, rather than vice versa, although I have to watch myself. I can embroider when it comes to food like nobody’s business.

At the darkest moments of my recent health crisis, I found out that I was not afraid of death, although I was not welcoming it. If anything, I was intrigued. What I worried about is that my wife, kids, and grandkids need someone like me, if only as a movie prop, the “grandfather.” Just set me in the corner. Grandpa Walton is my idea of a grandfather, since I never had a grandpa (on either side) myself.

Other than that, recently counting my blessings, all I seem to care about is the dharma, learning more dharma myself, and sharing what little I know about it with others, to the degree anyone is interested.

Photography would be nice too, when I can get more mobile again. And that's about it.

I naturally feel compassion for all those trying to learn dharma, since in my case I found it so difficult to learn. However, once we get the hang of it, the dharma is so obviously intuitive. My sincere wish is to make learning dharma easier for others to grasp than it was for me. What is unfortunate, even sad, is that there is no way for beginners to know the incredible result of dharma practice without first achieving it, no preview, taste, glimpse, or sample of realization short of attaining realization itself. That is a problem.

Yes, we all have spiritual "experience," those high-clear times that come and then go in our lives, but please don't imagine those are what "realization" is like, i.e. strong experiences, only longer. It is not like that. What is missing from experience, that is present in realization, is the relaxation that comes from permanence. What is missing is the faith and confidence that arises from certainty. What is missing is the non-distraction, clarity, and luminosity that results from realization, all of which mark the end of what is just experience. And, finally, what is missing is to know exactly what to do in our dharma practice, and the knowledge that we, just as we are, can do it.

Realization may not at first be global, in that most of us don't realize everything at once. That would be what is called "Enlightenment." Realization is more like having a foothold in another dimension, but one that can't be walked back. It is more like the sudden opening of a bright window in a dark room that has never known light, one will now remain always open and through which shines light from a sun that never

sets. As the Tibetans say, the light from a single match can end the darkness of untold ages. Realization is like that.

Since realization usually falls short of enlightenment, it can be deepened, widened, and extended. In fact, it must be extended; its hallmark is that it is “realization” and not just another spiritual experience that is here today and gone tomorrow. Realization is permanent, although perhaps at first somewhat limited.

So... how do we “realize” realization? How do we get there? Well, obviously we must start somewhere, pick up on this or that thread of interest and unravel it. And of course, we can read books, texts, attend teachings, and so on.

However, by far the best method is to find someone with authentic experience to talk with, someone capable of giving us real advice and guidance. In my opinion, that is the best way to go. As a beginner, we don't need the Dalai Lama in person as an advisor, just someone we respect and whose words speak to us, someone who accepts us just as we are, yet knows enough not to encourage our worst qualities. That's the ticket, but it's up to us to reach out.

THE LAMP OF CERTAINTY

May 15, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

In Buddhism, Understanding, Experience, and Realization, in that order, (usually) measure progress. The difference between “understanding” and even experience (and its analysis) are in a different category from what is called “Insight Meditation,” a form of realization.

“Understanding” is the intellectual or conceptual grasping of a topic, and “Experience” is something that comes (and we live it) and then it goes away. Neither has permanency. This leaves “Realization,” which is what dharma practitioners most concentrate on. Realization is not ephemeral; it comes and it stays. Once you have it, you always have it. What is called “Insight Meditation” is, in my experience, where realization begins in Tibetan Buddhism and experience (as defined above) ends.

Insight Meditation has no second thoughts or, for that matter, no thoughts of any kind. When they call it “direct insight”, it is not insight into something other than the insight itself, the “seeing.” Direct-insight is more a channel for “seeing,” and, as mentioned, seeing is nothing other than the “seeing” itself. I don’t mean it “sees” itself, but rather that the “seeing” is just the process of seeing, not what might be seen. It does not “see” anything, but, like a light, it can illuminate

everything. This type of “seeing” is a matter of coming to repose in clarity and lucidity, and resting in it.

Since the textbooks say Insight Meditation is ineffable, we can’t expect words to take us anywhere but perhaps a little closer than we have been. All I know is that the “seeing” in Insight Meditation, as mentioned, is a clarity that collapses any second thoughts into certainty, i.e. it +is non-dualistic. Whatever is clear in the light of Insight Meditation is clear beyond a doubt.

The title “Insight Meditation” suggests, at least to Americans, the idea of “insight into something,” perhaps as if we are looking into it. One of the most essential books on the Preliminary Practices is “The Lamp of Certainty” by the first Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche. IMO, the actual lamp of certainty is Insight Meditation, a practice that happens to come at the end of the preliminaries. And I find it helpful to refer to Insight Meditation as a lamp, rather than as our looking or doing something. Insight Meditation is often described as clarity and lucidity, a perfect description for what a lamp provides.

In fact, a favorite Tibetan saying is that a single match can end eons of darkness. With Insight Meditation, we discover a lamp of certainty that wherever it shines or is shined, there is certainty, certainty beyond doubt and certainty beyond conceptualization. My experience with Insight Meditation is one of endless realization of this and of that. As mentioned, wherever the lamp shines, there is clarity and lucidity.

Since I first learned Insight Meditation, my life has changed drastically. I am more than content to remain

in the light of Insight Meditation, and read the ancient writings on the Mind's wall. These teachings are direct, have certainty, and are deeply satisfying. There is no double-think or conceptualization about it. For me this kind of direct seeing is not only non-typical, it is incredible. So, when they call Jamgon Kongtrul's book "The Lamp of Certainty," that title is perfect. Wherever I shine the lamp of insight, I find certainty.

This is enough for me. If I were an artist, I would draw an old-style drawing of me wandering through the dark cavern of the mind with the lamp of certainty held high, reading the pith Buddhist teachings engraved on the walls and nodding in agreement. Insight Meditation is exactly like that.

Insight Meditation as part of Mahamudra Meditation is the means through which realization is deepened and extended. After many decades of practicing dharma, trying it as best I could, the discovery of Insight Meditation marked the end of that type of practice (not knowing what I was doing) and the beginning of actual meditation. I felt I had found my way across a river and finally stepped on solid ground.

There are a great many kinds of Insight Meditation out there, and they vary greatly among the styles of Buddhism. The kind of Insight Meditation that I practice is part of the Karma Kagyu Lineage Mahamudra Meditation training and is co-emergent with what is called "Recognition," recognizing the true nature of the mind to some degree.

In other words, Insight Meditation is on a path of realization, rather than just an experience that repeats

itself through coming and going. Like the falling of a fine snow that melts on the grass for a long time, the advent of Insight Meditation is like when the snow catches and begins to accumulate from that point onward.

DHARMA IN AMERICA: ON THE VERGE

May 16, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Back in the late 1950s, interest in the dharma was mostly by way of Zen Buddhism and not many of us were even tuned in. For those who knew about it, Zen was just a casual interest and an intellectual topic at that. We would stay up late (after attending something like an Ingmar Bergman film), sit around smoking cigarettes and drinking instant coffee, and talk about Buddhism, conceptually. Back then, few-to-none of the folks I knew were doing any actual practice. The Dharma was something to discuss, along with the Tao Te Ching, Existentialism, and related topics.

I will spare you the long incremental story of how dharma practice slowly climbed into my generation, but I can assure you that we have walked every mile of it. Some are still just talking about it, but others have segued into actual dharma practice and are living it, or trying to. History shows that the Dharma takes about 300 years to come into a country, so we are just getting started. It is maybe close to 100 years now for Zen Buddhism, and considerably less for the Tibetan lineages. However, it does seem to be on an exponential curve lately.

Since I ended up in a Tibetan Lineage, over the years the emigrating or visiting Tibetan rinpoches and lamas have been incredibly helpful in guiding us, but (especially now that the dharma is catching on), they

are in somewhat short supply. Over the course of these several decades, many of us have been on our own more than we would like, at least at times I have. In my case, not only was I learning something completely new, I had to learn it in Tibetan, rather than English. Try that one on.

This is still the early times, with so much to learn. The dharma came to us embedded in Tibetan culture, so that has to be worked through. In the beginning, it was easier just to learn the Tibetan language and culture, along with the dharma, and sort it all out later. Well, it is getting later now, so the sorting out is happening.

I can still remember the shock when I asked my Tibetan dharma teacher (who speaks no English) when he would let us practice the texts as translated into English, and his answer was that instead of that, we should wait for realized Americans to appear and write our own sadhanas in English. That was a radical thought, one that I never seriously thought of until then. Of course, this makes sense, but it could be a while yet.

I have searched through the dharma literature and the teachers for those teachings that make sense to me, although what they are change as I change. By “make sense,” I mean just that, bring me down to earth, just like the image of the historical Shakyamuni Buddha, with one hand touching the ground. Good grief, there are said to be 84,000 different kinds of dharma, one to fit the needs of each one of us. They are not all going to make sense to us at the same time, and they don't.

Making sense is one thing and realization is quite another. The hard truth is that until we develop realization, we can't and don't realize the dharma. What is so hard about that to understand? It's like the old axiom that you can't be almost pregnant. You either are or you are not. It is the same with realization.

It is perhaps ironic that once we achieve realization, of course, we realize all that we did not realize up to that point. That's why it's called realization. Until that event, it is all "sounds like," "might be like this" or that, and so on – pure expectation. Prior to realization, everything seems conditional, as in "maybe it is" and "maybe it isn't." Without realization, there is a lack of certainty and more than a little doubt. How do we get around this?

The answer is we don't, at least that is what I have come up with. We can't fake realization, no matter how hard we pretend, just as we can't sneak up on a mirror. Of course, this is why the great traditions of Zen Koans exist or in Tibetan Buddhism, the Pointing-Out Instructions. All preliminary dharma practice (and that is most practices) lead up to a threshold event called "Recognition" (Kensho in Zen) that can't be faked. "Recognition" is recognizing the true nature of the mind for the first time.

"Recognition" is not enlightenment or anything near it, but it is a realization, an event that takes place for the first time. Literally everything, all dharma practices, lead up to Recognition. I feel that dharma practitioners in America are ripe for Recognition, have done their homework, and with only a little

adjustment, should be able to grasp the Pointing-Out Instructions.

As for, in my opinion, what's next in the American dharma scene, I would say this: A lot of work has been done up until now, formative work, but it seems to be reaching a turning point where some of the scaffolding that has been built can begin to be removed. There is no doubt that Tibetan Buddhism is on the rise in the West, and is now taking more of an exponential curve than a straight line.

The intellectual phase that I remember from the late 1950s and early 1960s had more or less dried up by the early 1970s, mostly thanks to the arrival of the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche on the scene and his ability to point out to us that the dharma was a path to take, rather than something to talk about, which came as a bit of a surprise to us. It was clear to me, on contact with Trungpa, that here was a realized being. His every word, at least to me, struck home, both delighting and subduing me at the same time.

I can remember saying to Trungpa when we parted, that I had never met anyone in my generation that I had not felt some personal resistance toward, until I met him. His response was to say "Well, Michael. We are about the same age and we are both married men." That was in February of 1974.

Since then, the dharma and its practice have grown greatly in this country. It has almost become a commodity, which is sad to see. As I have often mentioned in my blog, I do see many dharma practitioners as prisoners of their own expectations. My refrain is that, since we have no realization yet, we

thereby have no way of knowing what realization or even greater awareness is actually like. Instead, we cobble together our own home-brew idea of spiritual results and expectations and follow that, believing that what we “think” is the reality, when it is not.

And I see this happening on pretty much a mass scale among dharma students, and have come to believe that our own expectations about what the results of all our dharma practice should be, these expectations themselves become our greatest obstacle. In other words, we have bought into our own creation, like watching our own projected movie and forgetting that we created it. What to do?

To only mention a few things, here are some thoughts to perhaps keep in mind that I have found helpful:

(1) As mentioned, to recognize that we have no idea of what realization, enlightenment, or even greater awareness is, and stop using our made-up expectations as a guide or as how we decide whether we are being successful or not in dharma. Stop comparing our day-to-day practice to our expectations.

(2) Recognize that dharma practice is just that, “practice,” and that practicing meditation, for example, is just practice and not actually meditating. Meditation does not require effort, only learning how to do it does.

(3) With dharma techniques that we learn by muscle memory, like the technique of mindfulness in sitting meditation, etc., the effort to learn the technique must eventually be discarded once the technique is

learned, like the scaffolding is taken down when a building is finished. Actual meditation is effortless.

(4) Like learning any technique, dharma techniques should not be forced to the point where we stain or no longer want to practice the technique. Many short sessions done with enthusiasm are what are suggested

(5) Any dharma practice, in order to be effective, has to be adapted to our personality, much like a suit is tailored to fit us. We can't practice at arm's length from our own self. This takes some boldness.

(6) Any dharma practice, aside from perhaps the most personal guidance for our particular person in very advanced practice, is not secret and should be discussed, tried, vetted, and tested with our fellow dharma students. We need to ask questions and get feedback, all along the way.

(7) Our most valuable asset is contact with a realized person, a teacher and someone we can trust to tell us when we are off base with our practice or thinking.

GETTING OUR ATTENTION

May 22, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

As someone trained as a naturalist since I was a kid, of course I have been interested in preserving wildlife and life in general, as well as the environment and the planet

We are right to worry about reaching the point of no return with this planet, and it's like sand running through my fingers to see how collectively we are mostly unable to move ourselves to action. Yet, as much as I am dismayed to see the planet in decline, in my heart of hearts there is something that disturbs me even more. And I don't have to look farther than my own self to see my worst fears personified.

And as dire as the deteriorating condition of our planet is, what worries me most is similar, but much closer to home. It is the fact that it would seem that I cannot be moved to serious action except by misfortune and almost brutal circumstances. How discouraging is that?

I saw it some years ago when a perfect storm of bad news, mostly relating to a loss of all my work (and its value) for some 30 years, coupled by being laid off from my job, thereby suddenly made me unable to support my family. My point is that it took something like that to cut me loose from the drone-flight I was on cruising over life and propel me beyond myself into a

situation where I actually “realized” a few things, in the dharma sense of that word.

That was an eye-opener in more ways than one. And now, this recent series of health events showed me the same concept in another and perhaps even more close-up fashion. What came of all this is the realization that unless I am forced out of my comfort zone, I seldom get beyond conceptual lip-service to accomplishing anything spiritually important. I float above the nitty-gritty, without which nothing serious gets done, IMO.

I know that I am only myself, but if it takes such drastic events to get my attention, to ground me deep-down enough that I can realize things I otherwise cannot, this IMO is not a good sign. How else am I to read it? Left to my own devices, I seem to prefer to sail on over reality, meaning well to all of course, but with my feet never quite touching the ground. And there is the image of Shakyamuni Buddha, with his right hand clearing touching the earth. That should have told me something and I should have grasped it.

In other words, I can't get down enough to earth to materialize my own dreams, to make my dreams matter enough to change things. And perhaps, as a whole, the peoples of Earth are in the same boat, intending to (good intentions), but not quite able to put the pedal to the metal, and somehow bring the forces of deterioration to a standstill, and turn it all around.

As mentioned, it is the same with dharma practice. I did practice for something like 35 years with no visible results. And it took a tsunami of personal hard luck to distract me from my distractions long enough for me

to actually realize a little something dharmically. How embarrassing!

Well, I could make a joke and remark that luckily this Samsaric world we live in has enough hard-luck to go around, so that sooner or later we all will come down from the clouds and get our feet on the ground enough to wake up from whatever has been distracting us. However, sadly most of us will wait till the converging bad-health news of old-age gets our attention.

So, I have these two main examples I have given above of what it took to get my attention in life, so that something more than superficial living was possible. What about you? What are your thoughts about our inability to be fully present, to wake up to the sufferings of the environment and do something about it? And what will it take to ground our dharma practice in the true nature of the mind so that we wake up permanently?

What's your plan on this? What steps should we take and what steps are you taking? Let's talk.

LOOKING TO “SEE”

May 23, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Here in America we are trained from birth to look outside. “Looking” is for looking out, not in. Who ever heard of looking in, and how would I even do that?

Well, you’ve already started, by being made aware that there is such a thing as looking in. You didn’t learn it in school, and probably not in church either. Looking “up,” maybe, but looking “in,” doubtful. So, how does one look in?

We begin by being made aware that “looking in” is not the same as “thinking.” We know how to think and we even think toward the outside, although we think of thinking as inside. “Thinking” is not what is being pointed out here.

A better term than thinking is “looking.” We don’t “think” inside, but we can look inside. For one, right now look to see where your mind is located. Is it in your head? Your heart? Somewhere else? Be careful not to think-look, by which I mean that instead of actually looking, you cut to the chase and just think instead. We could “think” the mind is not here or there. That is what we usually do, but that is not looking. Don’t make your mind up.

Looking means to look, to actually search inside ourselves for where the mind is located. If you find

yourself thinking it is or is not here or there, you are not searching, not looking as I am suggesting. How do we go into our mind and just look around?

Again, it is not by thinking and quickly dropping the subject. Looking means searching and by searching I mean for a very long time, until your search is exhausted. And what did you find in your search?

Some people resolve through searching that the mind is located in their head, others that the mind is located in their chest or heart, and some find that the mind has no location whatsoever that they can determine. The important point, to begin with, is not what you found (or did not find), but that you actually went and searched in your own mind for its location. You did not just think something and let it go at that. Instead, you actually got off your mental duff and searched your own mind.

What you will find, however, is that the mind is more like a muscle than it is an abstract thinking device. It is a muscle that up to now, in all your life, you may have never yet used. Exercising this muscle is strenuous and can leave you with a mental charley horse. Searching the mind reminds me of those little sets of Scotch Terrier magnets that I used to play with as a child. When I tried to put the two opposing poles together, they pushed back. Looking directly at the mind is something like that. You can prove that to yourself right now.

Just look directly at who it is that is reading this line. If you really look, you will experience the push-back that I mentioned, the kind of refusal to stay put that those two magnets have when their opposite poles try to be

placed together. They don't want to go. Looking directly at the looker is like that. See for yourself.

That push-back I am mentioning is a sign that you are beginning to exercise your mind muscles. Stop just "thinking" (and leaving it go at thinking); start looking directly at the mind itself. If you want to know how to train the mind, exercising the mind as I am pointing out is a beginning to real mind-training.

Treat the mind like a muscle and exercise it as one. When we look directly at the mind, it's not WHAT we are looking "for" that is important, but the act of looking itself. We stop just "thinking" and start looking instead. We are looking with all our heart -- searching. We are not looking to find, but looking itself is an activity that prepares us to "See." And "Seeing" is the lamp that traditionally illuminates the darkness of the mind. When we "See," we can see. Remember, the above is an exercise that, like the movie "Field of Dreams," if we build it, realization will come.

Here is a little poem I wrote some years ago:

LOOK/SEE

If you want to see,
You have to look.
We can look,
And still not see.

Once you see,
You will always see,
But only when you look.

We have to look to see.

FROM A DREAM

June 1, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I have gone to paint the sunrise in the sky,
To feel the cool of night warm into day.
The flowers from the ground call up to me,
The Self I think I am is hard to see.

[Literally, a poem written from a dream.]

[As mentioned, this poem was actually composed in a dream and I woke up and wrote it down. The “gone” here, to me, is the same “gone” as in the Heart Sutra, meaning “gone beyond.” The last line, about the Self, I would have written differently were I awake, but I honor my dream by recording it as it came down. This Self that we continually reify and hold as “real” (i.e. permanent) is “hard to see,” meaning: hard to find where it is or if it is at all.

Popular ideas mistakenly believe that Buddhists don’t believe there is a Self, but that is a misunderstanding. What they do believe is that there is a Self, but it has no permanent existence, but rather is something that we make up as we go along based on our current fixations. In other words, our various attachments are the glue that holds the Self together and, when we die, that Self will disincorporate along with our physical body.

However, if we can stop fixating before death, then we are liberated from those fixations while living. In that case, at least in my experience, we can learn to accept our fixated-Self for what it is, our own Frankenstein that we have personally created, which like the ventriloquists dummy, we then proceed to animate and believe it is real - reification.

Anyway, the Self and its fixations are history when our body dies. When we realize what the Self is, our struggle with it changes to compassion for it, and we treat it as kindly as we can, while at the same time learning to see through it to something much more important, the true nature of the mind.

So, that's a lot of explanation for a tiny poem, but there you have it. My poems, for me, are just a way to, by reciting them out loud to myself, recreate an experience or realization so that I can re-member and relive it -- reanimation.

REST HOME

June 2, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

My thoughts,
Like birds aboard a ship,
I let go free,
As they fly away from me.

No need to follow on,
And here's the perfect test:
There is no place to go,
All thoughts come back to rest.

[A short poem I wrote years ago about “thoughts” and meditation. In Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism, thoughts play a crucial part in mind training. In the beginning we can't live with them and later we can't live without them. The simple fact is: there they are and there they will remain, a “necessary” part, not only of life, but of dharma training.

Most beginning meditation students struggle to suppress or stop thoughts, because they interfere with what they “think” or expect meditation to be like. However, the great Mahasiddhas endlessly point out that thoughts are to the mind as waves are to the ocean; both are water, water in motion (waves) and still water (calm ocean).

In the poem is the analogy of birds aboard a ship that is far out to sea. The birds are free to fly as far as they

want, but in the end they must come back again to roost on the ship. In a similar way, thoughts endlessly arise, exist for a while, and then dissolve back into the mind itself. There is nothing we can do to stop them, any more than we can stop the sun from shining or the wind from blowing. In advanced meditation, starting with Insight Meditation, like the web upon which the spider crawls, thoughts become our ladder to realization. My favorite part of the poem is the line "I let go free, as they fly away from me." As if we could stop them if we tried. Thoughts are already free.]

TWO AND ONE

June 13, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

From the Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche:

“If one practices Shamata meditation without Vipassana meditation, one will not be able to understand the true nature of phenomena; one will just be able to rest the mind on something. It is like being on a vacation; one experiences peace on a vacation, but one does not get any lasting results from it.”

“If you practice Vipassana without Shamata, you will not be able to eliminate whatever negativity needs to be eliminated, because Vipassana without Shamata is unstable. So, even if you have the understanding of Vipassana, your mind will be agitated. Therefore, you need to have both Shamata and Vipassana.”

[IMO, what Thrangu Rinpoche points out here is important to understand, that we need to learn two very different types of meditation, what is called Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) and Insight Meditation (Vipassana). My own way of expressing this is by analogy:

It is like trying to thread a very small needle with shaky hands. Tranquility Meditation steadies the hands, so that with Insight Meditation, we can actually thread the eye of the needle.

Tranquility Meditation, as Thrangu Rinpoche says, is not itself a solution, but only a means to steady the mind. Insight Meditation is the solution, but it requires that we can focus the mind deliberately and steadily, a virtue of Tranquility Meditation.

To progress in the dharma, we want to train in these two types of meditation, usually first by learning Tranquility Meditation and then Insight Meditation. It is clear that in Mahamudra Meditation training, both types of meditation are required. In my experience, Tranquility Meditation can be understood, but Insight Meditation is beyond conceptuality. It has to be directly experienced. To achieve this, it is best to find an authentic teacher. "Authentic" here means a teacher whose words you understand and can take to heart.

ON LOCATION

June 10, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Can you locate where the mind is?

If not,

Can you find where the mind isn't?

[At some point, we have to be shown the shortcomings of intellectualizing everything, i.e. conceptualization without actual experience. It is a habit we have, to think “above” everything and not actually immerse ourselves in life experience. In other words, we don't “know” what we are talking “about.” The more advanced forms of meditation, at least in the Karma Kagyu Lineage in which I have trained, include direct involvement with the mind, not just conceptual “thinking,” per se.

It is interesting that we don't know how to look directly at the mind by ourselves. Even with help from an authentic dharma teacher, it is not easy for us to recognize the nature of our own mind amidst the general distraction, although it has been closer than a breath away ever since, well, eternity.

The Mind is worth learning of directly, not just conceptually. I have had many interests in my life, but none more absorbing and rewarding than learning to recognize the actual nature of my own mind in real-time. Not even close.

EXPERIENCE AND REALIZATION

June 22, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Words from the Great Ninth Karmapa, Wangchuk Dorje:

“Experiences are not stable because they do not go beyond being an aspect of the conceptual mind. Like the sun in the midst of clouds, the three experiences of bliss, clarity, and non-conceptuality will sometimes all occur to an elevated degree, sometimes just one of them is heightened, and at other times, none of them will arise. However, sustaining them without any fixation, the stains of conceptual mind will become transparent and realization will arise from where it has always been.”

“Moreover, if bliss, clarity, and non-conceptuality are experienced as an object-aspect and a subject-aspect, this is “experience.” If they arise without being objects, this is realization. If they are experienced by the mind, that is experience. If the mind itself arises as their nature, that is realization. If they are experienced as aspects of objects, that is experience. If their specific characteristics are directly recognized, that is, if the distinguishing features of the objects are realized, that is realization.

“If there is a meditator, your own mind, and if meditative bliss, clarity, non-conceptuality, or emptiness are objects of meditation or objects that

are felt, this is experience. If the non-duality of a meditator and meditation is directly recognized, without being mentally fabricated or being simply an intellectual understanding, this is realization.

[The Ninth Karmapa is recognized in the Karma Kagyu Lineage as one of the great teachers of Mahamudra Meditation. It is frequently said in the pith teachings that “Out of the middle of experience, realization arises.” Our life has been one long chain of experiences, one after another, riveting perhaps, but totally fixating our attention. Learning to break that chain of thoughts requires that we realize that we are lost in watching our own projections, as if it were a movie. As long as we sit on one side of the equation as a subject (eating our popcorn) and witnessing or watching experiences “out there” (or in here) on the screen of our own mind, what we have are “experiences.” Experiences are always dualistic; they have a subject and an object and never the twain shall meet.

When we wake up to the fact (Recognition) that what we have been watching (and reifying) all this time is nothing but our own awareness personified, then realization becomes possible. The right hand does not know what the left hand has been doing. Yet, it is all awareness. When we become aware of our own Catch-22 (dualistic awareness), playing both subject and object, then non-dualism can arise and with some help from our teacher, as Sir Edwin Arnold wrote, “The dewdrop slips into the shining sea.” That, then, is Mahamudra.]

NONDUALITY IN A NUTSHELL

June 23, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

From the incredible Ninth Karmapa, Wangchug Dorje:

“What is referred to as ‘awareness’ is that which perceives as the subject-aspect through the five sense consciousnesses. An ‘Awareness that is separate from Appearances’ does not exist even for an instant. Appearances are awareness, and awareness is appearances. As it is said in the sutras:

“Form is empty; emptiness is form.
Emptiness is not other than form;
Form is not other than emptiness.”

Eh Ma Ho! Here it is, in a few sentences, said more eloquently than I could imagine. How simple! It is all awareness, not just the awareness that we like to think of as ourselves, but also what that awareness is aware “of” is that very same awareness. As the Ninth Karmapa so clearly says “An “Awareness that is separate from Appearances” does not exist even for an instant.” That means OUR awareness does not exist separate from appearances. We have been busy being lost in the endless awareness of ourselves as a subject and as distinct from what we are aware of, all the imagined objects of our awareness. This, of course, is a prime example of the dualistic point of view, a perfect Catch-22. In reality, as mentioned, it is ALL THE SAME awareness (awareness being aware

of awareness), like waves and the ocean -- both just water.

Traditional Buddhist advice is to view all appearances as magical illusions, which may be confusing in that it leaves the door open to “think” of the “illusion” as possibly just another object for our subject. A clearer way to say might be: illusory appearances are not objective (not an object), but (as they are illusions) purely subjective (more of the same subject we imagine we are). So, we are always only subjective, looking at ourselves, like Narcissus gazing in a mirror. Once we mentally learn to give up on the making a hard line between subject and object, we can find ourselves just treading water in a vast sea with no shore, with nothing whatsoever to objectify, much less reify. Then we can begin to actually work with ourselves and our situation. This is what is called “non-duality,” as in we finally have no one to blame but ourselves!

The takeaway here is that by looking one-pointedly into this subject/object habit, we can begin to gradually loosen its hold on us, a day at a time.]

DHARMA FUSION

June 24, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The Ven. Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, the preeminent scholar of the Karma Kagyu Lineage, taught:

“Mahamudra is an approach to practice that can be used by any person, by anyone at all. It is an approach that engulfs any practitioner with tremendous splendor that is very effective and very easy to implement. This is especially true in the present time and is also especially true for the people of the West, for whom there appear to be very few obstacles in the practice of Mahamudra.”

[This is not just some passing comment. Mahamudra is the supreme form of meditation in the Karma Kagyu Lineage, what is usually done after all necessary preliminary forms of practice and meditation are completed. Here Thrangu Rinpoche is telling us that ANY of us may and can practice Mahamudra, and that it is especially appropriate for Western students of the dharma. He states that for Westerners, Mahamudra is easy to learn, a form of meditation with very few obstacles to our practicing it. So, what is Mahamudra?

Mahamudra Meditation is a combination of a special form of Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) and Insight Meditation (Vipassana). The analogy I use is that of

trying to thread a very small needle with shaky hands. Tranquility Meditation helps to remove the shakiness from the hands, so that with Insight Meditation we can thread the needle.

Threading the needle here signifies defeating duality with whatever is at hand. The analogy I would use is that Mahamudra Meditation is like realizing fusion from simple sea water, the oceans of life itself, an unlimited, perpetual source of enthusiasm and energy for dharma, again, from whatever is at hand, in particular thoughts and simply experiencing the senses.]

THE PREPONDERANCE OF THOUGHTS

June 26, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Lord of Dharma Gampopa taught:

“Great meditators may wish for the absence of thoughts, but they will be unable to stop thoughts. These great meditators will just exhaust themselves. However, just as the more wood there is, the greater the fire, the more thoughts there are, the more non-dual wisdom increases. Thus it is fine to let the five poisons and thoughts arise just as they are. This uncontrived state, with nothing to be stopped or produced, is itself the wisdom mind of the Buddhas of the three times. This alone is the Buddha we do not realize. There is no other Buddha.”

[Of course, there are all kinds of thoughts about thoughts. In beginning-meditation practice, thoughts, like mosquitoes, seem to buzz around our head. Try as we might, we can't get rid of them. The Tibetans say that thoughts are to the mind as waves are to water, simply a sign of the mind in motion. They teach that the existence of thoughts is a great blessing and that thoughts are completely organic, totally natural, irrespective of the content or meaning they may (or may not) carry.

The subject matter of thoughts (what thoughts are about) may vary, but the NATURE of all thoughts is the same as the nature of the mind itself. Learning to

ignore and see past the content of thoughts in favor of recognizing their nature is what Insight Meditation training is all about.

The great Mahasiddhas say that without thoughts, meditation progress would not be possible and that thoughts are the stairway to enlightenment. Further, through Insight Meditation training, individual thoughts become windows into the true nature of the mind. In other words, recognizing the true nature of thoughts through Insight Meditation is the chief means to undermine duality's hold on us.]

WHAT IS REST?

June 27, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The Glorious Ninth Karmapa, Wangchuk Dorje:

“Relaxing might seem to mean that all efforts in meditation are to be cast away. In fact, it is not a case of casting anything away. Just completely let go into an un-fabricated state, the absence of a self, and, for brief moments, simply be mindful without wandering. Lengthen your sessions a little and relax your body and mind from within. This can be illustrated by the following examples:”

“The mental ease once work is over; the relief experienced after an illness has cleared up; a sheaf of hay with when its cord is cut; a small child with a full stomach; the sun and moon free from clouds; or a candle flame without wind.

[It took me years to grasp that when the Tibetans say “Rest” and “Be at Ease,” they mean rest just like we do, like: take it easy. Just allow yourself to rest. It came home to me with the image of the old-fashioned sheaf of hay or straw, bound in the middle by a thin cord. I saw plenty of these in the barley fields of Tibet. When the cord that binds the sheaf is gently cut, the straw does not just fly all over. Instead, when the cord is cut, the sheaf of straw just very gently slumps and takes on the shape of whatever is around and holding it up. This is what rest is like. So, when we allow the

mind to rest, we let go of whatever tension we have and just slump naturally. As simple as this may sound, not serious meditation can be attempted without being able to just let go and rest.'

“A HOUSE DIVIDED AGAINST ITSELF CANNOT STAND”

April 6, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I would love to jump right in and extol the virtues of Insight Meditation, because it is so incredibly amazing, but before that can be practiced, a certain amount of preparation is required. This involves recognizing and getting a handle on our apparent duality and dualisms in general.

The above headline is a quote from a speech by Abraham Lincoln, itself a riff on a Bible quote (Mark 3:24). It's about duality and dualisms, in simple terms the “Us” and the “Them,” the divided sense of our Self against the world. The quote points out that division cannot stand, but so far, in our day-to-day consciousness, duality seems to be holding its own.

A great deal of dharma training, especially in the beginning, is learning to recognize dualisms in our behavior and thus enable their ultimate collapse. It takes effort to divide and to be divisive. Some forms of dharma practice are little more than elaborate ways to exhaust this sense of divisiveness until it can be swept away by the tsunami of actual awakening. Zen masters are particularly good at this I am told. In Tibetan Buddhism, there is some exhaustion by repetition, but in my experience it is more of a byproduct than a theme or intent. It's the same with

koans; we don't train with them, but they are indeed brilliant.

In the Tibetan preliminary practices, the approach is to become aware of where we are being dualistic and carefully disenable that tendency, instance by instance. Tibetan Buddhism goes so far as to differentiate practices as those that deal with what they call "relative" truth from those dealing with "absolute" truth. Relative truth is dualistic (us against them) thinking as opposed to absolute truth, which is that "they" are part of "us," and vice versa. This dualism has to be removed or dissolved.

A very important kind of mind training, called "Lojong," is based almost entirely on relative truth, on resolving our existing mental dualisms as a first step toward absolute-truth (non-dual) practices such as Insight Meditation.

In other words, first we have to break up the log-jam of our dualistic thinking and, once that is done, we begin what has been called the main practice, starting with "Insight Meditation." "Lojong" training is remedial by definition, a form of purification practice that resolves dualisms to the point where they are no longer an obstacle, at which time Insight Meditation becomes possible.

I am trying to get to presenting more about Insight Meditation, so Lojong and its training with relative truths will not be dealt with further here, but I have a number of free e-books on the topic, including "Tong-Len: The Alchemy of Reaction" here. Just scroll down:

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

Tomorrow I will present more on Insight Meditation if, as they say around here, “The good god is willing and the creek don’t rise.”

A MORAL WITH A STORY

May 27, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

This has got to be funny; if not that, then sad. I have been spending time around home (not that I am ever very far), waiting until I am physically more mobile, i.e. still recovering. And so I busy myself as best I can, including photographing or at least gathering and putting together the equipment I will need for the summer to photograph images, etc.

Yesterday I needed a particular adapter for a camera mount, but that particular adapter was an import, hard-to-find, and one of those things that once you buy it, you can't return it, a Special Order. You wait for it to arrive. None of the online shops had it or, as mentioned, it was a special order that would take weeks to get from Europe. Then I thought, as a last resort, why not look on eBay. While not likely, there is always a chance there could be one.

And the amazing thing is there was one, and at a good price, but that was just the beginning. To my complete surprise, the seller also lived in Michigan, just as I do, which means it might ship fast, and then when I looked closer, I was further amazed to find that the seller lived in the very same little town that I do, Big Rapids. How improbable was that, to find a rare camera adapter being sold by a seller who lived in the same town? I had to meet this person, just because we must have so much in common.

I tried to ask the seller a question on line. I wanted to make him an offer below what he was asking. He might go for it, but try as I might, the darned eBay would was not working properly. It would not let me email the seller, make my offer, and I planned to offer some friendship as well. I could drive across town and pick the item up in just a minute or two.

Well, as it turned out, when I read the even smaller print, the seller was already someone I knew, none other than myself; I had posted this adapter for sale maybe a year ago and had left it up there and then forgotten all about it. In a split second, I had no one to bargain with and no new photo friend, but I did have the adapter, and always did. And I had to really laugh. Talk about getting old?

And there must be some allegorical meaning here about looking for your Self outside yourself, not unlike what Narcissus did when he saw his own reflection in a pool. Only here I saw my reflection in the Internet and wanted to meet this guy. We had so much in common. I also wanted to find out if he would take less for what the adapter he was selling. LOL.

Well, that house of cards came tumbling down and here I sit clear-minded, my reflection-doppelganger having vanished

A SIMPLE PRAYER

April 24, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

With our root guru firmly in mind, we put our two hands together in the prayer mudra and place them at our third eye center, which is brilliant white, with the letter OM. We place them at our throat center, which is deep red, with the letter AH, and we place them at the center in our chest, which is dark blue, with the letter HUM. As we say these three syllables, we connect each of our three centers, one at a time, with the corresponding center in our root guru.

In response, like the mothership responding, coming from our root guru, all three centers simultaneously radiate back to our three centers with an OM, AH, HUM, and we absorb this.

Then, we dedicate any merit from our prayers to all the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and sacred beings that they may bless and guide all sentient beings in the three times, the ten directions, and the myriad worlds to complete well-being and enlightenment.

That's what we can do. Do it as often as you feel it.



OM



AH



Hung

ABSENT WITHOUT NOTICE

May 28, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Back in the early 1970s in my home town of Ann Arbor, Michigan, I had a morning radio show (much like this blog) called “StarTime with Michael Erlewine.” I was the local astrologer and would tell everyone what was going on the inside of ourselves each day.

I would pre-record a week’s worth of blogs on my little cassette recorder and the local radio station would play them along with a wonderful music theme by the group “Camel.” The music would come on the radio and I would give a short account of the astrological weather for that day. It was quite popular around town.

Well, some days I would tune in and listen, if only to hear my own voice. You know how it is. The show had been running for quite a while and I happened to tune in one day, just to hear my favorite astrologer hold forth.

It was 9 AM and I heard the theme music playing as the intro. But when the music faded and my voice was supposed to start up, instead of hearing yours-truly, they had a different astrologer giving the daily reading. I was crushed. How and why would they do this to me?

What made it worse was that this new astrologer had a deep resonant voice rather than my old crackly voice. As I listened to the deep radio-voice of this new guy, it was clear that he was more than just a reader of astrological blurbs. And this is what really hurt: I could tell from the way this guy phrased words that, astrologically, he really knew what he was talking about. He was as good as or maybe even better than I was. I would have said the same (or similar) things about the current astrological weather as he was saying. Ouch!

When the show was over, an upset me called the radio station to find out why they had done this, and not even bothered to tell me that I was history. I soon found out that, by mistake, they were playing my own tape but at a slower speed, so it sounded like a completely different person, someone with a deep and calm voice. It just shows you how crazy our minds are. To me, that is my idea of funny.

AD-HOC ADDENDUM

April 7, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I am not happy with yesterday's (previous) blog and it is my own fault. I tried to follow the English translations for the various Tibetan terms that are in common use, even though I know they can be (and are) confusing. I am talking about the two terms "Relative truth" and "absolute truth." Both terms have so many connotations in English that is next to impossible to make sense from the terms, at least not easily. Here is how I would express it, although it may miss a few of the finer meanings.

What the Tibetan Buddhists call "relative truth" just boils down to the familiar concept of the Self and all the ramifications of selfishness. To the degree that the dictates of our Self obscure or limit freedom of the mind, that is what relative truth is all about – removing those relative obscurations until what is left is the absolute truth. In the Asian view, what we call the Self is basically something each of us makes up. You could say that our attachment (or hatred) for this or that person or thing is the glue that holds our self-image together. The Self is made up of our likes and dislikes.

I joke to myself that undue dependence on our Self's limited inclusiveness (shutting out what we don't like) is like the ventriloquist taking directions from his dummy, and forgetting who created whom. Relative

Truth amounts to whatever interference our Self and all of its attachments (likes and dislikes) causes to actual clarity. We all should know exactly what is being pointed out here, our ongoing likes, hatreds, prejudice, bias, etc., everything that obscures the actual reality “as it is.”

It should come as no surprise that much of what are called the Preliminary Practices in dharma training is little more than the process of becoming aware of our own intervening self-attachments and removing or neutralizing them. It is common to say “Our attachment to our Self,” when a better phrase might be “Our Self’s attachments” or projects. We are more than just our Self and its preferences. We project our attachments and prejudice on the outside world and then watch that movie as if it was the actual reality.

It is these self-projections, to the degree they are unreal or not true, that have to be straightened out and removed before we can proceed with our dharma practice. Relative Truth becomes Absolute Truth, when the difference between our prejudices and bias are reduced so that they agree with actual reality. That is not so hard to understand.

So, when considering the relationship of Tranquility Meditation to Insight Meditation, instead of saying relative and absolute truth, we could rather say that Tranquility Meditation is concerned with our self’s relation to reality and Insight Meditation is only concerned with the reality itself, the true nature of the mind.

Without removing our Self's biases, we cannot practice Insight Meditation. Is that clear enough? Let me know if this helps.

ANOTHER STORY: A LITTLE PERSONAL

May 29, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I've been telling a couple of stories lately, and here is another one, this time perhaps less humorous, but much more touching and life-changing, if that is OK with you. I want to share with you the story when I first met His Holiness the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, high in the mountains of Tibet. I am going to jump ahead in our story and get right to our visit with His Holiness, the 17th Karmapa at his ancestral home in Tsurphu Monastery at about 15,000 feet in Tibet. For those who would like to read the whole story of Margaret and my first visit to Tibet, with most of our kids, the free e-book is here:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Our-Pilgrimage-to-Tibet.pdf>

... So, we waited out the three days in Lhasa until we got used to the altitude and felt ready to head toward Tsurphu Monastery and see His Holiness the 17th Karmapa. I still had altitude sickness, but it was now time to go on with our trip's schedule, and so we headed northwest, out of Lhasa, in a large van. The road was paved, but became progressively more bumpy, including sections where it consisted of just squares of rock laid together. I asked about the bumpiness and our guide said that it gets a little bumpy after we turn off the road we were on. "Gets a little bumpy. What then is this now?" I wondered. But

he was so right. It did get bumpier. After some time, we made a sharp left turn across a very narrow bridge above a river and began to head up the Tolung Valley on almost no road at all, moving very slowly. We soon got used to the steady pitch and roll of the vehicle creeping along the valley trail. It was like an endless series of speed bumps, placed side by side.

Bumps and sickness aside, the 3-hour journey up the Tolung Valley toward Tsurphu Monastery was brilliant and fresh. It was early autumn and all the barley fields were golden ripe and ready for harvest. The barley from the Tolung Valley is reputed to be the best in Tibet and there are hundreds and hundreds of small fields and tiny plots.

We moved slowly along the rocky road toward Tsurphu, mile by mile, so there was plenty of time to see. Everywhere, mountain streams rushed by, over, under and even on the road itself. At places the road became a stream bed. As we moved farther upstream, yaks appeared both up close and far off – sometimes scattered on the mountainside around us. As to other cars: there were none. As soon as we crossed the bridge from the main road, we were just out there by ourselves. Here and there were small villages and everywhere people were working in the fields. Harvesters and workers waved to us; children raced toward us, waving and saying “Hello,” perhaps the only English they knew.

We continued on, heading up the valley toward where the two mountain skylines converged before us, always moving very slowly. After crossing the arch of a lovely stone bridge, our guide pointed to a speck on a mountain in the distance. “Tsurphu,” he announced.

And I could almost see it, something sparkling on a mountainside. And as we moved on (time now slowed by our eagerness to arrive), that speck grew steadily larger. Now I could see reflecting golden roofs in the sunlight, but it was still so far away. And then it would be lost for a long while around yet another curve. Would we ever actually get there? We were ready.

I am cutting out a lot here, but we finally made it to Tsurphu Monastery, where we waited to be led into the presence of His Holiness, the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa. Every day at 1 PM, His Holiness has a public reception, where a procession of visitors file up, offer a white scarf, and get his blessing. We wanted to go to that, but were told to wait and that we would see him privately. The time ticked away on the slow track as we all waited, filled with anticipation. I had last seen His Holiness in 1974, in his previous incarnation (a different body), but we felt like we had been in endless touch with him through the lineage, all this time. Like the Dalai Lama, the Karmapa is the spiritual and temporal leader of a complete lineage of Tibetan Buddhists. Until one month before, we had little hope of ever seeing His Holiness, since it is very uncertain when the Chinese would ever let him leave Tibet. And now, here we were at his ancestral home, at a towering 15,000 feet in the mountains, and about to meet him in person.

And at last, the summons came. The Karmapa would see us now. So, off we went, in single file toward his interview room, some two stories up from where we were. And remember that I was right in the middle of the worst of my altitude sickness, with bronchitis, and I was still sick, and getting sicker. This was before the antibiotics.

As I climbed the steep stairs toward His Holiness, I had to stop and do heavy breathing just to keep enough oxygen in my lungs. Every few steps, I would find myself gasping for breath, as I climbed upward toward the interview room. And please understand that the average Tibetan stairway is more like a ladder (like on a boat) than the kind of stairs we are used to, and steep at that. You actually climb with hands on the rails.

We came to a small open courtyard outside where His Holiness was, where we took off our shoes. I had to sit down and pant. How embarrassing. And then another short ladder of steep stairs to the room itself, where I arrived, still breathing hard. I sat down at the back of the room, while everyone else was up front prostrating to the Karmapa. I was so bushed that I did not (at first) remember to do the three traditional prostrations that practitioners do before any great lama. All I could see was this young man kind of inset in this wall of golden brocade at the far end of the room. I gradually moved forward, still breathing hard.

And there he was, the Karmapa, looking better than I could even imagine and I had imagined he would be great. All of 12 years old (by our calendar) and five feet tall, but seeming seven feet tall and ageless, he filled the room with his presence. Boy, was I glad to see him. All I can remember is kind of getting through the prostrations and fumbling to offer him a white scarf, while kneeling down before him. He looked at me like I have never been looked at before. His eyes look straight into my eyes and then he upped the ante by focusing intently within me. His dark eyes seem most like the ever-adjusting lens of an auto-focus camera, moving in and out at high speed, trying to get

the right focus. I have never seen eyes do that, be able to lock gaze with you and then still move in and out, getting a fix on you. But, that was just how it was. The Karmapa examined me for a few seconds, as if time stopped in the grip of his eyes, and then all relaxed and time moved on again. He placed the white scarf over my head, gave me a welcoming, kind look, and I sat down in front of him with the rest of our group.

In this short interview, we presented ourselves and what questions we had. In my case, I had written out two questions in Tibetan (or had them written out for me, since I cannot write Tibetan). These I presented to Karmapa through our translator. We all offered our scarves and whatever presents we had brought along. It was not a long interview, but we were told that he would see us tomorrow for a longer time, and that we should come back then and he would have answers to our various questions.

We had also requested to stay overnight at Tsurphu, although this was no longer – in general – allowed, because there were too many liability problems that might reflect badly for Karmapa with the Chinese. However, they said that they would talk it over. Just before we left, they said that we could stay the following night and so, after spending a number of hours at the monastery, we started back down the Tolung Valley toward Lhasa over the same slow, crawling, bumpy road that we had come up on. It was a glorious sunny afternoon with all the barley fields golden in the breeze. Our heads were filled with Karmapa. Although it was not raining, all the way down the valley, we were greeted by a spectacular series of rainbows, one after another, some of them

even double rainbows, a traditional sign of beings like His Holiness. We were high in the mountains of Tibet and we were just high.

In the next afternoon, we were again summoned to His Holiness and I slowly climbed the multiple sets (three) of ladder-like stairs, huffing and puffing. As we entered the interview room, there was a puja (ritual) going on, with his holiness leading the practice, accompanied by a small number of monks. We were encouraged to sit up front and settled in. Gradually I realized we were in the middle of the Mahakala puja, perhaps the most important daily practice for the Karma Kagyu Lineage. Later we found out that we were experiencing a special form of Mahakala, one for insiders, complete with the Tsok, the ritual feast offering. Karmapa was sharing this with us.

It was very intense, with His Holiness leading the chanting with an intent and often fierce look.

Mahakala is a wrathful practice, as some of you may already know. And this one was complete with drums, cymbals, and the various Tibetan horns. Of course, I had experienced the Mahakala puja before, but never one quite like this. I don't really know how to describe what happened next.

I begin to identify with this puja as not much different from my own practice and my mind ranged over that practice, examining where I was within it and what it was about for me. I had done it, without fail, every morning and afternoon/evening for many years. I was to do it until my death or until I completed it by realizing the essential nature of my own mind.

Now, here in the midst of Karmapa's mind, his mandala, I began to explore the true meaning and

nature of my practice, of my mind. What was that practice and what was the essence of it? In my own mind, I was somewhat of a tough character and I carried that strength or toughness into my practice. In fact, I loved the fierce wrathful deities, somehow identifying with them. And now, there in that room with Karmapa, that same strength, toughness, or we might even say fierceness came to mind and began to be examined inwardly, but in a new light. And this was no idea that I was playing with. Instead, I was examining myself or, to be more exact, I was realizing part of my self for the first time, in this case the part that had been doing my practice, the one who did the practice.

And as this realization took place, I saw how my fierceness or toughness was but a shell covering up this extremely sensitive inside. I was tough, because I was so ...so sensitive and, at heart, even kind. I was flooded with a state of compassion or rather: the realization that I was (and always had been), at my deepest part, compassionate, concerned, and caring, and that this was my natural state. Not something to strive for, but already in fact the case -- the state of my being, something to be uncovered, opened up, recognized. I did not have to strive to be compassionate, for that was already my natural state. All I had to do was to relax, become aware of it, and let it shine through.

And, again, I should point out that this was not a concept or idea, but a realization that totally involved me. I realized that the essence of my practice, of my fierce presence, was none other than compassion. It was as if, like a glove, I had turned myself inside out. Tears just flowed, as I was overcome with this, now so obvious, realization. I was, in essence, very simple

-- just a soft-hearted, easy mark for this world. I was easy and all of my toughness, my fierceness, was nothing more than an attempt to cover over and shield myself from responding too much to all the suffering I saw around me. In that moment, I feel I understood myself and my practice, right there in midst of that Mahakala puja with the 17th Karmapa at 15,000 feet. I was clear and at peace.

After the puja, we spent some time together, during which Karmapa gave the answers to the questions that we had brought to him the day before. He did not skirt the tough questions, but was clear and unequivocal in his answers. I was deeply relieved, both from the experience I just described and to hear the various particular answers. And His Holiness gave me a name, which is Tenzin Nyima, which means "Keeper or Holder of the Sun." And although I had told him I was an astrologer (Tsi-Pa in Tibetan), he had no way of knowing that here in the west I am known as one of the very few heliocentric (sun-centered) astrologers. I was knocked out by that he could come up with something like that, but I should have known. That is why he is His Holiness.

ARE YOU DEVOTIONAL?

May 11, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Sometimes I hear talk about a secular Buddhism, a Buddhism without spiritual overtones. There are many forms or types of Buddhism, but they all refer to the same dharma. I can see that such a secular-style Buddhism will arise, but never a secular dharma. Dharma is already as secular as it can get and it definitely still has spiritual overtones. Many people I meet, especially younger liberals, are wary of devotion, which is a shame. Whatever we really care about, we are devoted to, so hear me out on this, please.

What on earth are “spiritual overtones” anyway? My guess is that this refers to any devotional aspect that either dharma-practice itself engenders or that is required to make dharma actually work. Both are true, and I favor the later, i.e. that without devotion, our particular dharma will remain fallow. And I have reasons to back this up.

My argument revolves around our determining what the main point of doing dharma practice is. Why are we doing it at all? Thankfully, I don’t have to guess at what that is, because the great Indian Mahasiddhas have made it expressly clear that the point of dharma practice is to prepare us to recognize for ourselves the true nature of the mind. As I understand it, that is the focus of all dharma practice; only recognition of

the true nature of the mind opens the path to our eventual enlightenment. There is no other avenue I have ever seen mentioned.

If that is understood, then it follows that everything we do prior to our recognition of the true nature of the mind is done without such recognition. In fact, in dharma practice, such activities are appropriately called “The Preliminaries.” They are preliminary because they come before any recognition of the nature of the mind on our part.

As mentioned, if “Recognition” is pivotal in dharma practice (and the pith texts say it is), then everything we do up to that point is without “recognition,” done in the dark of the mind, so to speak. Without knowing the actual nature of the mind, we are just guessing, conceptualizing, and creating ever more elaborate expectations. We have never been otherwise, yet.

So, my question becomes: if we have not yet attained recognition, how in the world are we going to do that? The great Mahasiddhas clearly point out that in order to achieve “Recognition,” we must have it pointed out to us by a realized master, someone who has themselves achieved recognition. We cannot find it by ourselves, i.e. on our own. The teachings clearly point this out. After all, that is what the Pointing-Out Instructions are all about, to point out the nature of the mind to us once and for all.

And this just brings me back, face-to-face again, with the idea of devotion and the supplication to our guru, whoever that teacher is for us, and our request to them that they point out to us the true nature of the

mind so that we can finally get it. Without that, we will be forever in the darkness of Samsara.

So, we need the attention of a guru to achieve “Recognition,” since without a guru, recognition will never happen. The connection with our teacher, which is called “Samaya” (meaning bond) is, to put it mildly, all important. Am I to think that such a connection will arise through distraction on our part, or does it require our attention and perhaps even our supplication? And do we want this recognition of the mind’s true nature enough to ask for it, to supplicate it, and should we devote energy to that end? In other words, are we devoted, and to whom and about what?

My point here is that when it comes to “recognition,” devotion is unavoidable, but need have no religious overtones of the blind-faith variety. As for faith and confidence in our teacher’s ability to point out the true nature of the mind? Yes, that is, by definition, required.

So, if you are one of those folks, and I meet them, who tell me that they don’t need (or want) a teacher and will do it on their own, I wish you good luck! We will wait for you, but when I say wait, I mean for a very, very long time. The Buddhists say the wait to chance upon recognizing the true nature of the mind will take untold Kalpas, and a Kalpa is, according to the texts, about 4.3 billion years!

The Tibetans also have another analogy for how precious and rare the opportunity of this human birth we have is. It goes like this:

The world is a sphere completely covered by water. On the surface of the water floats one small ring with a hole in its middle. In that water is one turtle, who only surfaces for air once every one-hundred years. It is more likely for the turtle to accidentally poke its head through that ring when it comes up for air than for us to be born a human being.

Even with that human birth, it is still very rare for us to recognize the true nature of the mind. Metaphorically, successfully receiving the Pointing-Out Instructions is a bit like brain surgery, but without the brain. It involves someone with actual realization working with us and with “The Mind” itself. The guru must tweak our view away from all our distracting layers of obscuration, so that we snap into synch with the actual way the mind is, and that is not child’s play.

In my case, different teachers presented the pointing-out instructions to me, but only one was able to carefully get my attention until I actually managed to realize something. Do I feel some devotion and thankfulness to my teacher who took the time to care for me enough to assist me? Yes, I am very thankful for this help and, at the very least, I am devoted to him for what he has gratuitously done for me. There is no way I can hope to repay him for his kindness other than to help others, as I can.

As it turns out, the Karma Kagyu Lineage has what they call the “Lineage Prayer,” which is a short text with the requirements (and their supplication) for entering the path to Mahamudra Meditation. It is often the first prayer a practitioner says in the morning and it is a complete practice in itself. This prayer says it all so succinctly, and it is brilliant as well. The Lineage

Prayer likens different activities to the parts of the body, and the head of the body is linked to devotion, which should tell you something. It goes like this:

“Devotion is the head of meditation, it is taught.
The lama opens the door to the profound oral
teachings.

To the meditator who always turns to him,
Grant your blessing that uncontrived devotion be
born within.”

ARE YOU SANGHA?

May 10, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I grew up feeling that the “sangha” are my brothers and sisters in the dharma. However, I have been reminded more than once now that, technically, that is not what the sangha is. The sangha most generally refers only to the community of ordained monks and nuns, not to the rest of us, who are also dharma practitioners. So, what are we?

Of course, I found this a little disappointing, in particular coming from an ordained monk, who was definitely (and rightly so) counting himself in and my family and I (and others like me), well, out. Stupidly I am sure; it kind of hurt my feelings. Well, then what are the rest of us if we are not Sangha?

I also came across another definition of “sangha,” but have not bothered to run it past this particular monk, and that is: the scriptures state that the sangha are those practitioners who have at least directly realized the true nature of the mind (emptiness), what is called “Recognition.” That would suggest that even some monks and nuns may not be members of the sangha. This seems to level the playing field a bit.

Personally, and probably ignorantly, I still feel that all who sincerely practice the dharma are sangha, my fellow brothers and sisters, and this on the premise that “dharma is what dharma does.” Perhaps this

technical definition of “sangha” that the monk quoted to me several times is just that, semantics, and the more popular concept that we are all brothers and sisters in the dharma is operatively what sangha is, at least in my common sense take of it all. Of course, I have repeatedly been told this is not so.

I believe the monk was saying the truth, including whatever the technical definition of sangha is, but I would add that he might have been more gentle or tactful when the truth includes himself, but not me or most of the dharma folks that I know. He could at least have given me a little hug. <G>

I continue to see the dharma as uniting and not divisive. In this case, I did not like being left out of the term “sangha,” but I know in my heart that I am part of the sangha, although perhaps someone could please tell me what the name of my group is.

AWAKE IN OUR OWN DREAM

June 21, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@EErlewine.net)

From the siddha Orgyenpa:

“Appearances do not need to be blocked. Emptiness does not need to be produced. Although many appearances arise, they are one taste within the essence of the one mind; therefore, the many are of one taste.”

“Appearances are not to be set apart as something only external, and awareness [of them] is not to be set apart as something only internal. They are realized to be unified. By sustaining this, it is as said, “One taste arises as many.” Dependent-arising appear like brocade silk glistening in the noonday sun.”

[Wow! Orgyenpa is pointing out that appearances are nothing more than awareness arising and our awareness of them arising is also just awareness. Duality is a simple miss-take. There is no inside looking out at what is outside itself, as we imagine. We are literally asleep in our own dream. We can wake up!]

BEFORE PRACTICE, THERE IS THE PRACTICE

April 11, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

As I have written about rather extensively, in beginning dharma practice there are two basic levels, what are called The Preliminaries and what can be called the Practice itself. Usually, the dividing line between these two levels is an event called “Recognition,” meaning the recognition by the practitioner of the actual nature of the mind. Before we can do the Practice, we have to complete the Preliminaries, and there is a reason for that.

The preliminaries are in essence purification practices, a wide range of practices whose intent is to render our dualistic and confused notions singular. It is like helping us to uncross our eyes, so that instead of seeing double, we see things as just as they are. That is how the two levels relate to one another, and why the Preliminaries are preliminary.

Here in America, most of us start out with sitting meditation, often before we are really ready for it. This is what happened to me, for sure. I quickly found out that I was way too distracted to master Tranquility Meditation, although I labored away at it for several decades. How’s that for stubbornness.

However, while I was trying to learn Tranquility Meditation, I also did all of the Preliminaries. I later found out that in Tibet, they don’t usually start

Tranquility Meditation until students have completed The Preliminaries, which include “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma,” “Lojong: Mind Training,” and “The Ngöndro.” After these have been completed, they then undertake Tranquility Meditation, which is basic sitting practice, itself to a marked degree a preliminary or purification practice.

The goal of all these preliminary practices is to weaken our ingrained dualistic conceptual thinking of the “us versus them” variety, until it no longer is an obscuration. We begin to see through it., When I first tried to learn Tranquility Meditation, I was so distracted by my own obscurations that I could get almost nowhere with meditation until I learned to tone my reactions down.

So, like it or not, even while I still kept sitting, most of my time was eventually taken up by undertaking the various preliminary practices, which, as I mentioned, essentially are designed for purifying the mind. Only when I had done some years of the preliminaries did I ever get anywhere with meditation. So, for me it was a case of a “pay me now or pay me later” kind of thing.

I would have been much better off had I followed the practice sequence that they still use today in Tibet, of first tackling the preliminary practices, purifying obscuring distractions, and then learn Tranquility Meditation. However, the Tibetan lamas who came to America, so I am told, had already found that Americans were not about to do the preliminary practices because they had gotten it into their head that Buddhism was just sitting meditation, and, of course, they wanted to do that. The Preliminaries

(such as Ngöndro) appeared to westerners as something almost Medieval. Remember that Zen preceded the Tibetan approach, and had already embedded certain Japanese ideas in the American Mind. The Ngöndro was not one of them.

So, the traditional sequence in Tibet, as mentioned, was to first undertake The Preliminaries, after which to learn Tranquility (sitting) Meditation, and when that was mastered to some degree, then to work with an authentic teacher on Insight Meditation, via the Pointing-Out Instructions. And it is with Insight Meditation that real practice finally begins, IMO.

The Tibetan practices have a new take on the old phrase that “Hindsight is 20/20.” Once “Recognition” is realized, which is the result of being trained in Insight Meditation, all of what comprised the Preliminaries are automatically cleaned up and perfected. I have not seen this mentioned much, if at all, but from what little experience I have had with Insight Meditation, I can tell you it is true.

No sooner had I grasped Insight Meditation than my struggle with Tranquility Meditation vanished, and I automatically could do it well, without further practice. It all just fell into place naturally. It is almost like Insight Meditation heals or completes whatever went before it.

I am told that my writing is very repetitive, and that is true, but hopefully I am repeating things from different angles for a reason. If I did not crisscross back and forth over the same topics, I'd have been done and out of here long ago, so bear with me, those who can get something out of this.

DHARMA PRACTICE AND RESULTS

May 10, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I want to talk about results, or the lack thereof. And I want to say where I put my confidence. For many years, I practiced dharma without much of any result I could see. My perseverance was based entirely on my continued faith in my dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. My wife Margaret and I both felt so strongly about Rinpoche that for 27 years straight we have traveled 1600 miles (round trip) to attend a 10-day intensive with Rinpoche on Mahamudra Meditation, not to mention many other times we visited his monastery. Every time I saw him or attended a teaching, I knew all over again that this was whom I wanted to be like.

Unfortunately, but not unusual for beginners, I built up huge conceptual expectations about what the results of dharma practice should be, without any actual knowledge or real experience of those results to back it up. Certainly, I was feeling around in the dark for about 35 years, yet I trusted that Rinpoche knew what was best for me. About all I could offer was to do what Rinpoche asked me to do. When I managed to finish a fairly arduous practice that took a number of years called Ngöndro and Rinpoche asked me to do it again, I did it again. And, as a person who, aside from nature walks, seldom leaves home, when Rinpoche suddenly asked us to go to Tibet to see His Holiness

the Karmapa, who lived in a remote monastery at something like 15,000 feet, and to go there right away, within a month, Margaret and I did, and took most of our family with us. My point is that Rinpoche inspired that kind of confidence in someone like me.

Trusting Rinpoche was something I had no trouble doing, not because I am a naturally trusting person, but because, to me, Rinpoche is an exemplary being, and from that first day we met he commanded my respect. Without a doubt Rinpoche tamed me and from that initial meeting.

As for my dharma practice, I have not fared so well. Of course I did it, and religiously at that, but as far as results or what I would call any success, it seemed I was like a dry well. Many, many years went by. For sure, I had all kinds of incredible dreams and striking spiritual experiences, but if you asked me where they were two-weeks later, I had no idea. Gone. And of course, I told all this to Rinpoche, who never batted an eye, and always answered “Those are just experiences. Pay no attention to them. Keep practicing.” And that was that.

I had what I believed was the finest teacher in the world for me, but very little to show for my years of practice, other than respect and love for my guru. I had been practicing or toying with practicing Buddhism for decades (since the 1960s), and had worked closely with this particular Rinpoche for some 22 years (at the time), when to my surprise something finally actually happened in my practice, and it changed my life. I have told this story a number of times, and won't repeat it here, but it had to do with

what is called “Recognition,” meaning recognizing the true nature of the mind.

As mentioned, when, after all that time I finally got a bit of a clue, everything changed. The process of what leads to “Recognition” is called the “Pointing-Out Instructions. The teacher, with their authentic realization, has a view of the actual nature of the mind, while the student has “some” view, but one that is, to say the least, obscured. Anyway, the two views do not match up. The Pointing-Out Instructions by an authentic teacher are what is required to bring the student’s view into alignment with the realized view of the guru that an authentic teacher holds.

Although it still may be a ways down the line, I feel it is important to know what the Pointing-Out Instructions (‘ngo-trö’ in Tibetan) are, as well as exactly what it is that is being pointed out. Starting with the second point first, what is pointed out is called “Ordinary Mind” (‘tamal gyi shepa’ in Tibetan). “Ordinary” does not refer to our day-to-day mundane consciousness, but rather to the Mind in its natural state, totally un-fabricated. That is the meaning of “ordinary” here. Of course, the student must be ready to receive these instructions and also act on them, which in my case took a very long time. Yes, I received the pointing-out instructions, but no, I did not recognize the nature of the mind.

The Pointing-Out Instructions in the Kagyu Lineage consists of two parts, which I will not go into here in any detail, but I will try to give you a general idea. The first part is called the “Analytic Meditation of the Pandita,” which has the idea of “analysis” in its title, but this analysis is not primarily conceptual, as we

might “think.” Instead, it requires actually working with the mind, much as if it were a muscle -- exercise. This approach is unique in my dharma experience.

And the second part is called the “Resting Meditation of a Kusulu,” and this requires using the mind to look directly at itself. Needless to say, this approach is beyond words or mental description, so I won’t even try. However, it does require familiarity with a number of preliminary practices, including the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind toward the Dharma,” and others.

Also, invaluable, is contemplation on and incorporation of what are called the “Six Words of Advice” of the Mahasiddha Tilopa, as also taught by the great Patrul Rinpoche in the following quote:

Don’t Prolong the Past
Don’t Invite the Future
Don’t Alter the Present

The above three lines are precious beyond words, and are worthy of great reflection. I wish I could communicate how important those three lines are to incorporate and realize, but all I can do is tell you about them.

It was said by the Mahasiddha Saraha, as recorded in one of his Dohās (songs of spiritual experience), that what is called “Recognition” is just the realization of the Mind’s co-emergent nature through having it pointed out by an authentic guru. Sounds like a lot of hard-to-grasp words, but this type of presentation of Mahamudra was first publically introduced (as I understand it) by Lord Gampopa, who openly taught it to lay and ordained people alike. It was later

thoroughly written down and presented in three texts on Mahamudra by the glorious 9th Karmapa (Wangchuk Dorje).

We can receive the pointing-out instructions many times and not get it. As the great Dzogchen master Tulku Orgyen Rinpoche said “Once one has received the pointing-out instruction, there is the chance of either recognizing it or not.” I should know, because I received the instructions a number of times and failed to get it, including one time when one of the four main Kagyu regents took me alone into a little room, sat me down on a chair, and tried to point it out to me. To my embarrassment, I didn’t get it that time either. Years later, I finally managed to get a little something.

My point here is that having faith and devotion for your teacher is, IMO, perhaps the best practice one can do. The great Mahasiddha Saraha said “He in whose heart the words of the master have entered, sees the truth like a treasure in his own palm.”

DOING WHAT I DON'T WANT TO DO

May 7, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Now, I could write the book on NOT doing what I don't want to do, and I started very young. My mother told me that even in Kindergarten I didn't like school, and apparently I skipped out or wandered away one day. They found me standing at the edge of an excavation, watching earth-moving equipment move earth.

And apparently that was not an isolated incident, because I managed to not-get-educated for the next 12 years of grade and high-school. Actually it was 11 years, since I never finished high school, but just finally dropped out and hitchhiked across the country to Santa Monica, where I lived on Venice Beach in an abandoned walk-in cooler in the basement of a Beat art gallery called the Gas House, but that is another story.

Anyway, I don't educate easily and I seem unable to learn from teachers who are not passionate about their subjects, and I was one of their subjects. Yet, that's not the end of it, either.

I was the same way about jobs, work, and career. By nature, I refused to work at anything that I was not in love with and passionate about. All of my companies were based on my love of the subject and not on how much money they could make me. I was happy living on a shoestring budget and having as much time to

myself as possible. I felt I needed that time to just watch my own mind. And that's what I did, instead of formal education. Looking back, I took an enormous risk, but for me there was no choice. I couldn't stand it any other way.

If I were to have a tombstone, which I may not, it might say "Michael Erlewine, American Phenomenologist." Phenomenology is the study of appearances (and consciousness) from the first-person point of view. Of course, this nicely dovetails with dharma, particularly Vajrayana Buddhism because that's exactly what the Tibetan Buddhist entertains, the actual nature of their own mind. And now for the topic of this blog, which is doing things when I don't want to do them.

All my life I have done my best to avoid the things I find boring and repetitive to do each day, although what those things are can change with the weather and my moods. Earlier, I mentioned a few persistent themes that have been life-long, and schooling is perhaps the best example. I don't "school" well, and have gone to great lengths to avoid rote teaching and rote-teachers, including basically all 12 years of grade-school education, which I ignored and don't regret to this day; IMO, it helped to open the door for creativity. And, as pointed out, I did the same thing with jobs and my working environment. My careers have all been built on my hobbies, things I love to do. I find it very difficult to do what I don't "feel" like doing.

And the same goes for what I have to do each day that I don't "feel" like doing. It could be anything, but if it feels boring and habitual, I tend to avoid it. At the

same time, almost anything I do that I “love” becomes totally habitual. So, as they say, “go figure.”

It varies, of course, but typical things I sometimes resent doing are taking a shower, brushing my teeth, changing my clothes, doing my dharma practice, even eating breakfast, anything if it is too robot-like, and so on. Most of the time I have no problem with these things, but every so often I balk at doing any or all of them.

So, taking a page from the book “What you fear shall come upon you,” I find it interesting (at best) that with my various recent health issues, I have more and more of a regimen that I must follow, like it or not, that is: if I want to have a decent chance of living for a while.

Obviously, I can’t just ignore these new health requirements, so I have to (instead) find a way to get into doing them. This is always my advice to others, and it goes for me as well. If it is what you “have” to do, then you might as well enjoy it. I can remember, many years ago, as a counseling astrologer, a visit by a local prostitute, who went on and on about how much she hated being a prostitute. After about the third round that day of hearing the same complaint, I finally said to her, “Why don’t you do something else instead, some other kind of work?”

Her response was, “Oh no, I could never make this kind of money doing anything else. I’ll never quit.” My response to that was, “Well, in that case, why not put your heart into your job and quit complaining?”

I say the same thing to myself today. Since I now have these very detailed exercises, diet requirements, and so forth and etcetera, that will take up a good bunch of time each day. Instead of complaining, I might as well find ways to get into and enjoy it. I can't go around this, so I have to go through it. Luckily for me, I am (at the moment) totally gung-ho about all these requirements and am shifting my priorities to include them.

Any of this sound familiar?

EXIT

June 19, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@EErlewine.net)

All personal items,
Must be checked,
Before leaving.

[A little poem, not much explanation needed. It just points out the difference between some Indian views on “reincarnation” (the exact soul and personality is reborn, more or less) as opposed to the Tibetan Buddhist view on rebirth (as opposed to reincarnation).

With rebirth, we are reborn, but our old personality, nose, hairstyle, etc. is left behind at death’s door. Instead, we draw around us a whole new persona based on accumulated deep karmic impressions that are stored in what is called the Alayavijnana, that like a great cosmic karmic barge follows us from life to life until we reach enlightenment. The differences between these two views is fascinating and worth actually looking into your own mind to see which one rings the most true.]

EXPECTING?

May 14, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Just a few words on expectations, like: don't count on them, and I don't mean just spiritual expectations. Our life can change in an instant, as I know well of late. The great Mahasiddhas, starting with Tilopa, point out "Don't Invite the Future," which is the same thing. That covers one end of the equation, and he also said "Don't Prolong the Past," which takes care of the other side.

This leaves us with the present, which is a very, very narrow moment, with the past and the future crowding it as they do. And Tilopa addressed the present moment with the slogan "Don't Alter the Present." That's a lot of "don'ts" and it doesn't leave much. At first I imagined that "Don't Alter the Present" seems obvious, but as it turns out, I missed a very important point, which is:

We already have altered the present to the degree that the state of our personal view does not line up or synch with the true nature of the mind itself. I didn't think of that, but this is the main reason we fall short of "Realization" and why there are all these different dharma practices, to bring our obscured view into synch with the way things actually are, the true nature of the Mind.

When Tilopa and Patrul Rinpoche say “Don’t Alter the Present,” they not only mean what not-to-do going forward, but obviously to rectify what alterations we have managed to accumulate in the past, including up to present moment, “Now.” These have to be “unaltered.”

Now, how can I say the following and be heard? Those slogans of Tilopa and Patrul Rinpoche are not just to be mixed in with the other vast Buddhist teachings. You may not have had time to discover this, but if you read the pith teachings of the Mahasiddhas and the great Mahamudra practitioners, those slogans are paramount, the tip-of-the-top of the pyramid of essence teachings. They are passed down and affirmed, again and again, by the greatest enlightened beings. No need to secret them, because almost no one gets them, as it is. I have told them to many people, most of whom just say, “Yeah, and....?”

That “is” the “End,” my friends. Perhaps I am just dense, but I have spent, days, weeks, months, and probably years grasping these slogans. Life brings me back to them, again and again, always deepening their message. Perhaps there is such a thing as too condensed, but there is great recursive beauty in them as they are, IMO.

Anyway, once I grasped this point, I immediately understood the reason for all of the remedial dharma practices, what are called the Preliminary Practices. And these Preliminary Practices are almost all that there are, at least until we reach what is called “Recognition,” after which what the Tibetan Buddhists call “Relative Truth” gives way to “Absolute Truth,” hard to grasp concepts, but they just mean that

dualism (conceptual thinking) gives way to non-dualism (direct perception), to the way things actually are. Insight Meditation marks our entrance into non-dualistic practice.

So, when Tilopa says “do not alter the present,” well, Oops, we already have, and long ago at that. Before we can continue to not-alter-the-present, we have to attain a present that is unaltered to begin with. We don’t yet have an unaltered (unobscured) mind, so thus we depend on the many remedial dharma practices to get nearer to what is called “Ordinary Mind,” and then keep it that way.

So, not only does our dharma teacher point out to us the true nature of the mind, but before that is possible he may suggest what remedial practices we might, in order to get to square one, which is not the same thing at all. I consider the remedial (Preliminary) dharma practices as a kind of dharma boot-camp, somehow getting ourselves into the ballpark of realization, after which the Pointing-Out Instructions are the finishing touch, actually linking us up with the Mother Ship, so to speak.

In other words, we do years of getting ready (Preliminary Practices) and then when we are getting close, we may be able to grasp the Pointing-Out Instructions, and bridge the gap between our patch-work view and “The View,” the authentic or true nature of the mind itself. Anyway, that is how I see it.

If I am not being clear, I apologize, so ask me questions, please.

EXPRESSING IMPRESSIONS THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY

May 30, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

For me close-up photography is always a challenge to express the impressions (and experiences) I have when I look at nature. A photo I am happy with is one that gives the impression I have of, let's say, a misty morning at first light, not only what I see, but also what I feel, what it does to me. And that impression (and photo) is meant to be a doorway to the experience I had when I took the photo that left its impression. Anyway, that's what I wish to convey.

I am impressed by the grandeur of the natural world, especially the spaciousness of those perfect small worlds at the close-up and macro level, like my imagined impressions of a being the size of an insect, the sheer spaciousness and vast emptiness of nature surrounding them. Perhaps my day-to-day life is not empty or spacious enough (I know it's not). Anyway, I delight in the space that these small worlds provide their micro-inhabitants.

My photographic technique has been a long and often tortuous path that has involved learning patience and the discipline of practice. If I did not get something out of peering through a crystal-clear lens at nature's miniature worlds, I would not be doing it. For me, photographing nature is a meditation practice in itself. It is its own reward, regardless of how the photos turn

out. My weakest area is finishing photos. I tend to leave them somewhat unfinished. I just don't care. Indeed, for me they are but impressions, like the impressions in the grass in these lines by Yeats:

"The grass cannot but keep the form,
Where the mountain hare has lain.

That is what I mean by "impressions." These impressions, these photos, are not an end in themselves (not just something to look at passively), but are meant to take me out of myself not only visually, but also experientially. For me, a good photo (like vertigo) thrusts me beyond its two dimensions out into the actual experience that the impression came from. Impressions are sensual; they must make sense, and always lead or point to an experience. A photographic Impression is the residue of a life experience, a freeze-dried extract that can be restored. Just add realization and experience them.

I should add that I consider all writing and language, including the language of photography, to be simply a reference or pointer from itself to a life experience we can have, and not just something in itself – a photo. In my opinion, a photographic impression should bring release and a sense of space and beauty. Photographers intuitively know this.

My photographic vision is of a clear dream, meaning a photo with some extreme clarity or resolution (something in extreme focus, at least partially), if only to send the message that anything not clear is intentionally not clear. These little islands of stacked focus are my reality check, and, unlike one-shot photography, there often is more than one focus point

in a stacked photo. That which is not in focus in a stacked image paints an impression, a gesture to the imagination as to the dream-like nature of the reality we live in. I can't forget the little round we sang as kids:

Row, row, row your boat,
Gently down the stream,
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,
Life is but a dream.

In other words, I include the areas of sharp focus to state that what we see is real and then have the bokeh (blurred areas) to remind me that all of this is also just a dream we are having, an impression. I am impressed by natural beauty and I like sharing those impressions through photography when I can. I am impressed, and that impression is what I want to see in the photos I take, an impression that beckons the viewer to an experience, to their taking the plunge into the very sense of it, to be drawn into the actual stuff which made the impression in the first place. Call it a reminder. A good photo brings increased awareness to us.

So, a photo to me is an impression, a reference or pointer beyond itself to an experience available to us in that instant of seeing. Aside from their informational value, snapshots don't interest me. A "picture" of a flower can be just that. I look for more than that in an image.

To get my attention, a photo must be a link beyond two-dimensions into three or more dimensions. It must render out an experience that I cannot avoid, perhaps reminding me of what is always just beyond

the confines of my daily grind. A good photo brings awareness beyond where I am at in the moment of viewing it. I am transported, despite myself, into a larger reality from which I return refreshed. I remember in that instant something of what life is actually about.

In my opinion, this is the function of art.

INSIGHT MEDITATION AND PHOTOGRAPHY - MY STORY

April 9, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I am frequently asked about my photography, and there actually is a story there, for those of you who have the time and interest. For me, photography is a very much a form of meditation, not meditation in the sense of contemplation (thinking about something and turning it over in your mind), but Meditation as in resting in the nature of the mind itself, all-out (or all-in), fully extended in the present. Of course, this is impossible to describe, but here is how that came about.

I have been a nature photographer of sorts since I was 14-years old, but just a photographer, nothing more. Photography became part of my dharma practice and more than just taking photos quite by accident. It was during a very difficult time for me personally.

At that time, in an attempt to lose myself from my troubles, I found myself going out into nature, and for long periods of time. I grabbed a camera as I went, almost like a cover, an excuse to be out in nature should folks see me wandering around. Nature is something I have known very intimately since I was six-years old. It had been my refuge, but one that I had put on the back burner for many years in the busyness of having a family and running a business.

However, in this hard time I found myself reaching out to it again.

Evidently I had come to a major turning point, although all I could see at the time was the disappointment of losing a job and what appeared to be a career dead-end. In my upset, I could take no solace, other than to go out into nature as I had done years before and try to lose myself. And so I did. I was out in the fields and meadows, watching the sun come up every day (unless it was raining) from May until the frost and cold drove me inside for almost six months straight.

This was a very difficult time for me, and I was in a state of psychological pain for a long time, most of a year. It had been decades since I had devoted myself to nature intensely, although natural history was my background and most formative teacher. Suddenly, there I was, immersed in nature once again and soaking it in at that, glad to find somewhere to put my mind other than into financial worry and career disappointment.

No one could help me because I could not help myself. I just had to work this through. My family did not know what to do and they watched me slowly self-destruct while I tried to find my way. It was in this dark time, when so much had been taken away from me, that I decided to throw some of the rest of me away too, and I let go of what had held my attention for so long, my career.

For many months, those early mornings would find me, out in the meadows just before dawn, crawling through the wet grass on my hands and knees,

camera in hand, peering through pristine close-up lenses at tiny worlds and the creatures that lived in them. And I didn't just look through the camera lenses at these miniature dioramas (these still-perfect worlds) while around me my own world was falling apart. I threw myself into this, full bore, concentrating with complete focus through those lenses, heart and soul, as if there was no tomorrow.

And in that time of deep change were also fused the results of a number of recent years of intense dharma practice, although I was not at first aware of this. Of course, at the time, when I was out photographing in the fields, I was not conscious of practicing dharma, nothing as conceptual as that. As mentioned earlier, I was all-in with the photography, extended out and pouring my attention through those macro lenses, concentrating and completely focused. I had nothing to lose and nothing better to do. The past was painful to remember and I could see no future, so there I was, living just for now. I was out there.

Little did I know that in those fields and streams I was in fact completing an important part of my dharma practice. Back home, my cushion and small shrine just sat there without me. I can only imagine what my wife and family must have been thinking. Michael was not on the cushion, after some 34 years of practicing.

And out there in the fields I was not even "trying" or thinking to practice -- no concepts and no thought. And there was no effort involved, no fitting my practice into my busy schedule. What schedule? I had none. There was only this deep relief to be present out there in the grass, wind, and the sun, holding my mind perfectly still for a long time until the incessant

Michigan wind died down long enough so that I could take a single photograph. I did this over and over.

Taking a line from one of my favorite songs, “Diamonds & Rust” by Joan Baez (with a little modification), “Speaking strictly for me, I could have died then and there.” There was nothing beyond the moment, nothing to look forward to and nothing worth looking back to, other than my family. There were only the fields, the wind, the sun, and this present moment.

Abandoning myself to whatever, I didn’t worry. Time held nothing for me. I did not care what others thought, not a whit. However, unknown to me at the time, rather than reaching the end of the line as I imagined, I was being forged in the crucible of that time by Mother Nature. What was happening is that almost forty or so years of dharma practice was reaching some kind of critical mass and becoming incendiary, shedding the dross of all my forced practice and leaving in its wake: Pristine Insight.

And all of this was fusing with (and happening through) my photography. For decades I had assumed that whatever would happen dharmically in my practice would happen on my meditation cushion, but like one of those birds who lays their eggs just wherever they can, once again, expectations did not serve me well. It did not happen that way. Life has its ways.

I guess the correct term for what took place is “mixing,” an amalgam of dharma and photography that would become, at first, almost impossible to separate. So, when you wonder about my photography, please know that it was through

photography that I first broke through to Insight Meditation. And photography and meditation were so thoroughly mixed that it was some years before I could extract the meditation from the photography and use it elsewhere. If I wanted a clear mind, I literally had to take my camera and go out in the fields and photograph, and I did just that.

Obviously, something important was going down, but I did not stop to think about it. Ask yourself: what would it take to get you up before dawn and out in the fields and woods to watch the sun come up for almost six months straight? When was the last time you even did it once? I say this just to point out that something very unusual was taking place. I assumed the “unusual” was just the fault of my hard times, when in fact it was the hard times that helped to precipitate what I was about to realize dharmically. Several streams of karma converged.

It was not until a Tibetan Lama, a friend of mind, came to visit that I understood. He realized what was taking place and pointed out to me that what I had found is called in traditional texts the “Lama of Appearances,” where the outside world, especially Mother Nature, successfully points out to us the actual nature of the mind itself. Traditionally, the practitioner goes out into isolated areas, which I did about as much as could, without realizing it.

The Lama went on to say that just as there is the “Lama of the Lineage” (our guru) and the “Lama of the Scriptures” (dharma texts), so there is this lesser-known “Lama of Appearances,” the natural world that is also fully capable of instructing us. This, so he said, was what I had been going through, and the moment

he pointed it out, it made perfect sense. What had gotten me out at dawn for those months was looking (and being amazed) at the nature of my own mind, the dawn of direct Insight Meditation.

This story is much abridged because of space, and it was precipitated by my Tibetan dharma teacher having given me what are called the Pointing-Out Instructions as to the nature of the mind some years earlier, at which time I actually understood something. This pointing-out was then followed by three years of intense dharma practice on my part, based on my understanding of the instructions. And finally, I had just spent time, weeks before, in person with His Holiness the 17th Karmapa, the head of our Lineage, as a camera operator, etc. during his first visit to America. So, there was a perfect kind of convergence, which had taken place that led to this mixing together of the mind and photography.

So, if my photos are, as some photographers have told me, immediately recognizable, it is because of this mixing of photography and Insight Meditation, and not just some “nice” photography. This was brought home to me again recently when, due to some health problems, I had to keep a diary of my blood pressure for a number of days. What was interesting is that the time that my blood pressure was lowest was after a session of photography. That says something.

So, that's a brief account of what happened. It's too bad I am not a Zen Buddhist practitioner, because I could probably write a book titled “Zen and the Art of Photography.” LOL.

KARMIC PLACENTA

April 14, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I have written about this before, but that's OK. This particular topic fascinates me. As I wander through the halls of Tibetan Buddhist concepts and theory, I can't help but pause where the Alayavijnana (Eighth Consciousness) is explained. Somehow, it just captivates me. Next to the concept of the Buddha Realms like Dewachen (Sukhavati), the Alaya consciousness is probably the most intriguing concept in popular Buddhism.

The Alayavijnana is also called the "Storehouse Consciousness," which is a great name for it because it is where all of our good and bad karmic traces are stored, and have been stored from life to life. Heaven knows what all is in here.

In the Karma Kagyu lineage, in which I am training, what is called the Eighth Consciousness consists of two parts, the Alayavijnana (karmic-traces reservoir) and Alaya (purified consciousness). It is said that these two alayas interpenetrate and are mixed with one another like "milk into water."

As mentioned, it is in this Eighth Consciousness, the Alayavijnana, that the complete record of our karmic traces (good and bad) are recorded and thus carried forward into our next birth, and on to each successive birth after that until it is somehow absorbed prior to

enlightenment. Of course, we have floated the Alayavijnana up-river, like the karmic barge it is, from all our previous births. Every last thing that is specific to our rebirths is stored in the Alayavijnana.

I find it tempting to wonder (at least every once in a while) whether the whole concept of the Alayavijnana (and Alaya) are like catchalls, a concept that had to be discovered to explain all of the unexplainable, in particular the continuity of our particular karma between lives.

Unlike many Hindu spiritual traditions, where the personal soul or “Self” is said to continue in our next life, the Buddhists clearly state that our Self (and personality) are left at death’s door like a piece of cast-off clothing. As for having a Self in our rebirth, the texts say that we create a new Self at each birth, just as we have this life, composed of all our attachments, our likes and dislikes. The only thing that is said to come from the Alayavijnana, are certain karmic tendencies, which are picked up and, aside from the Self, drive the personality. When I asked one great lama what is an example of what is passed on, of the most personal kind, his response was that perhaps a tendency to like hot sauce is an example. I do not know for sure whether he was serious or just kidding me.

If “The buck stops here,” then the Alayavijnana gets the big bucks, because in Buddhism it is called upon to explain a lot. Or, perhaps the two Alayas are popular just because they come closest to something reminiscent of the eternal soul many of us would like to subscribe to, although the Buddhists are quick to point out that the Alayavijnana is temporary, lasting

only until we reach enlightenment, after which (or along the way) it is devoured, almost like our karmic placenta.

Yet, if it stays with us, life after life, until we reach enlightenment, that alone is probably a very, very long time for most of us. If you want to read a brilliant book on this topic, there is the book by the Ven. Traleg Rinpoche, "Karma: What It Is, What It Isn't, Why It Matters." Here is a link:

http://www.amazon.com/Karma-What-Isnt-Why-Matters/dp/1590308883?ie=UTF8&keywords=traleg+karma&qid=1460648181&ref=src_1_1_twi_pap_1&s=books&sr=1-1

If you are new to the world of Buddhist philosophy, much less to Buddhist logic, be prepared to absorb some new concepts and to take it all in by degrees, a little at a time. This whole idea of rebirth and reincarnation (and how they are different from one another) is foreign to western thought, where most of us still tend to resonate to the old slogan for the Schlitz beer commercial, "You Only Go Around Once."

Getting comfortable with ideas like rebirth, so that we can move away from living on beer slogans, is very much worthwhile. Of course, I had help. Spending years around some of the great Rinpoches more than helped. Here were some of the brightest beings I have ever met talking in great detail about death, dying, the bardo states, and rebirth. If everything they told and taught me, that I could test, out turned out to be true (and Buddhism is all about testing everything),

then why should I doubt it when they speak of rebirth
and the bardo with the same conviction.

LOSING CONCEPTUAL WEIGHT

April 27, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

In the beginning, dharma practice can appear as a wide (and sometimes confusing) avenue of different practices that somehow lead to enlightenment; it might be more accurate to view these many practices as a funnel that all lead to one major event. To use an analogy, just imagine that in order to qualify for this event, we have to bring our self-centered view down to a certain weight class. I could say that we need to reduce the size of our Ego, but it is more complex than that. If we mean by ego, dualistic-conceptual views, we are getting closer.

In this analogy, all of the many preliminary dharma practices are simply various methods to lose conceptual-weight; once we reach that weight, we are free to pass into the realm of realization. This is not a bad analogy. We could generalize and say that all preliminary dharma practices are designed to reduce our mistaken view of reality to the actuality. If “realization” is realization of how things actually are, then, of course, dualistic-conceptual views will never get us there. They have to be reduced to the point of elimination.

It is a fact that Tibetan Buddhists point at a single event as essential on our path to enlightenment, “Recognition,” meaning the point where we recognize for ourselves the true nature of the mind. The actual nature of the mind is always present, but for various

reasons we have up to now been unable to recognize it, although it is right before our eyes.

As mentioned, this transition point is generally called “Recognition” by the Tibetan Buddhists, while the Zen Buddhists in the Rinzai School of Zen call it “Kensho.” Either way, although Recognition is not enlightenment, it does represent perhaps the first appearance in our dharma path of actual “realization.” Of course, all practitioners should be interested to know about Recognition, especially if we have not yet achieved it.

The reason I write about this so often is that, IMO, there is not enough recognition about “Recognition,” and realization about “Realization.” So, pardon the repetitive droning on with the topic, but I am amazed at how little this is discussed in the literature, yet it is the key to so much.

Recognition is the point where the difference between reality, the actual nature of the mind, and our idea and concepts about reality coincide and come together. In a very real sense, our dualistic notions about reality dissolve to the extent that the “us” and the “them” just becomes “us” or “we.” And that is what the occultists might call the “Ring Pass Not” or point of initiation, beyond which dualistic conceptual thinking cannot pass. In dharma practice, this is a rather big deal.

We extend ourselves beyond “Recognition,” stripped of the relative or dualistic concepts we have entertained up to that point. In other words, we extend fully (but non-dualistically) beyond this Samsaric world into what is called the “absolute” view. And this is a realization, not just another experience that

comes and goes. Recognition is the first stage of realization, something permanent that does not revert to the dualistic, conceptual view we have labored under since who-knows-when.

By “realization” being permanent, I mean just that. While recognition admits deepening and expanding, it’s arising is the first real foothold on the path to enlightenment that we cannot lose or reverse. This fact is important to grasp.

With the realization that comes with Recognition, it becomes clear that all of the very many dharma practices that precede Recognition are relative, remedial practices that have to be exercised until the difference between our obscurations (dualisms) and the true nature of the mind are resolved. In other words, we do remedial practices until our personal view is in synch with the true nature of reality. At that point realization arises.

It is then that, as Sir Edwin Arnold put it, “The dewdrop slips into the shining sea,” at least provisionally. By provisionally, I mean that while Recognition is a realization and cannot revert, it usually has to be deepened and expanded by the practitioner. However, at “Recognition,” the Pointing Out as to the nature of the mind is completed and thus the main job of our Root Guru is finished. We are launched.

“MAKE FRIENDS WITH THE WEATHER”

June 28, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The Great Ninth Karmapa, Wangchug Dorje taught:

“When thoughts appear in these ways, they are seen to be meaningful – this is their basic abiding nature. If there are no thoughts, there is no dharmatā. Therefore, regard thoughts as necessary. Since previously you did not know the nature of thoughts, you wandered in samsara. Since now thoughts reveal the dhamākaya, regard them as a great kindness.

“Now, even though thoughts arise, if you know how to rest within them, without any effort, they are the dhamākaya. Therefore, regard them as dear to your heart. When the experience of thoughts as being dear to you develops, there is no reason for the “gathering of the dhātu” to occur. It is said that the “gathering of the dhātu” happens because thoughts are seen as faults.”

[I don't expect this to be immediately understood in all its implications. I don't understand it all myself, but it is inspirational and points the way. The takeaway is that there IS a method to use thoughts in our dharma progress to help us become more aware. The phrase “gathering of the dhātu” is a fairly arcane phrase, and here the term “dhātu” refers to what is called Bindu or tige. This refers to the inner winds (prana) and the

channels and the fact that they can be related to thoughts and the thinking process. The idea expressed here is that thoughts, when denied and not recognized, can lead to “Gathering of the dhātu,” which is basically means clogging up the nadis (inner channels).

IMO, the remarkable phrase is the “there is no reason for the ‘gathering of the Dhātu’ to occur,” and the reason stated here is that this opening occurs after the experience of thoughts as being dear to us has developed. So, instead of fending off, denying, banishing, following, and what-ever we do with unwanted thoughts, we can learn to develop not only a tolerance of thoughts, but an appreciation and sense of kindness toward thoughts. We welcome them because they are a means of liberation.

I hasten to add that this is NOT a suggestion to just “follow” thoughts as in “a train of thoughts,” but rather learn to recognize each thought as it arises and look directly at its true nature (not its content or meaning). When we learn to look directly at the thought (and its nature), it will vanish, and we then learn to rest in the gap that remains, i.e. rest in the true nature of thoughts.

This is not something many of us can do at the present, however, there is no reason we cannot, at the very least, learn to recognize when a thought arises and chose not to follow its content and message. Just drop it right there at the start, without even reading it. That effort alone will head off the “downward spiral” syndrome, where we follow one thought as it leads to the next, and to the next, and on and on, until we are miles from home and perhaps in

a funk. The phrase “lost in thought” comes to mind, but not in a beneficial way. My good friend and musician Seth Bernard has a line in one of his songs, “Make friends with the weather.” This is something we can do with the weather of our own mind and with thoughts in particular.

The fear of thoughts and the depression that often results from the content and drift of thoughts can easily put our mind into a negative mood. We can reverse this process by not getting fixated on following a train of thoughts and all its worries, but instead to just look directly at the thought itself. I know, it is new to us, but it is not that difficult to learn. Endlessly following on with thoughts is just another way to be fixated.

MANDALA OFFERING

June 9, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The “offering,”
Is not the offering.

The offering,
Is the “offering.”

It’s the giving,
Not the gift,
That is,
The mandala.

[This little poem reminds me what the offering of a mandala is all about. We have all seen the photos of Tibetan monks painstakingly creating an elaborate sand mandala. It can take days. And then they sweep it all up, in an instant, and throw it in the river. That should tell us something.

This is called a “mandala offering” and it is not the detailed finished sand mandala that is what is being offered, but rather the careful creation of that mandala; the process itself is what is the offering. The Zen Buddhists are very good at reminding us that the result we are seeking in life is to be found in the process and not the final result, which in every life is simply death. That is why the old saying says “Don’t jump to conclusions!”

When I was about twenty-five and trying to round the nadir, turn life's corner, I was at that point still very much "walking through the valley of the shadow of death." I wrote this rather dark poem that says the same thing about process.

Look at yourself, first yet first
No better, and yet not worse.
Now get yourself together in a bunch,
And call what carriage as you may,
Your hearse.

MATRIX CONFERENCES -- THE FIRST NEO-ASTROLOGY CONFERENCE

May 4, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[A number of my astrology friends have asked to see a little more of my astrological history with Matrix Software. Here is a start.]

Over the years, we held some 36 astrological and dharma-related events at Matrix and the Heart Center here in Big Rapids, Michigan. Actually, if we count all the lama-related visits, there were a lot more. The memory of the first Neo-Astrology Conference held here at the center stays with me. The conference was just that, a memorable event. It was held on July 21-23, 1989.

Not only did we bring together some of the finest research astrologers in the world for a three-day weekend of exchange and discussion, but it turned out that we had a lot of fun too. As host of the conference, it seemed that I was in constant motion.

Some of the panelists at the conference included Michel Gauquelin, Thomas Shanks, Robert Donath, Lee Lehman, Doug Pierce, Dr. Suitbert Ertel, Rob Hand, Charles Harvey, John Townley, Mark Urban-Lurain, Ken McRitchie, Alois Treindl, Robert Schmidt. Aside from the U.S., we have participants from Canada, Great Britain, France, Austria, Germany, and even three folks from Australia.

With a few exceptions, almost the entire conference was held in panel format, which permitted a liberal exchange with all present. In fact, perhaps more than any other conference I have ever attended, the difference (in expertise) between the invited speakers and the conference attendees was irrelevant. It got lively.

One memory from the conference is very vivid. I think it was Saturday night. I was worn out and took the first opportunity I could to say goodnight and crawl into bed. As I drifted off, Rob Hand and John Townley were playing some impromptu music outside my bedroom window. I knew that John Townley was a veteran musician, but I had no idea that Rob was one, too. With Rob Hand playing an alto recorder and John singing plus playing the concertina and the pennywhistle, I went to sleep to some very lovely melodies. It was a good moment.

The Heart Center guest rooms were lodging for most speakers, which meant the conference grounds were the scene for after-hour mixing. I hate to think how late our nighttime goings-on lasted. I know for a fact that one large contingent closed down the local bar and were still going strong.

There is not room here to go into all the material we went over. In general, the conference was devoted to examining the Gauquelin research methodology. And while this in fact happened, there was a lot more that went on in both formal and private sessions.

It was significant to me that Rob Hand gave me a big hug when he left. Being competitors had not always been fun, and that weekend did a lot to let us get to

know one another better. Rob told me on leaving that, although he had been apprehensive about coming here to our center, as soon as he stepped into our kitchen, he knew things were going to be fine.

Another highlight for me was meeting Robert Schmidt and Ellen Black. John Townley just showed up with Schmidt in tow. I had to take John aside and ask him, who is this guy? Does he belong on the panel or did he just come to observe. "Put him on the panel, for sure" was John's response. We did and it was great.

In a sense, Schmidt and I met each other in the middle of that first panel discussion. In those first moments, we both knew we had met one of those people in our lives with whom we not only have a strong connection, but that will require repeated meetings to satisfy whatever craving it is that draws people to one another. Schmidt, a theoretical physicist and mathematician, was not an astrologer at the time. His interest in modern Chaos Theory and his ability to turn the light of his mind on almost any problem made him an instant hit with the rest of us, most of whom had known each other for years.

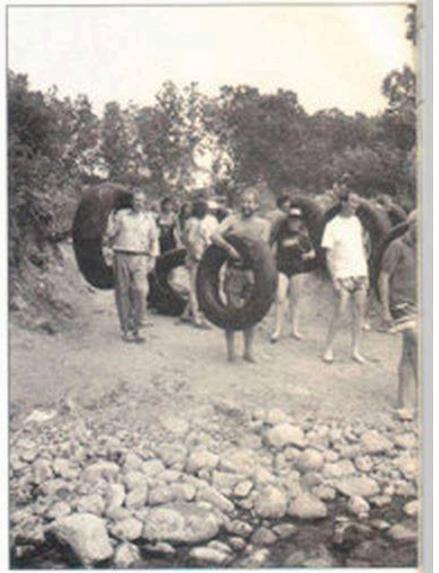
Schmidt and I had so much to go over that he and his wife (Ellen Black) decided to come back for a visit soon after the conference. We then found so much to exchange that Bob and Ellen decided to relocate and become a permanent part of our staff here for a number of years. Robert and Ellen became some of my very best friends, and still are. I would guess that I am responsible for his becoming an astrologer.

This is getting a tad long, so I will close with one event that everyone loved. On that last very hot

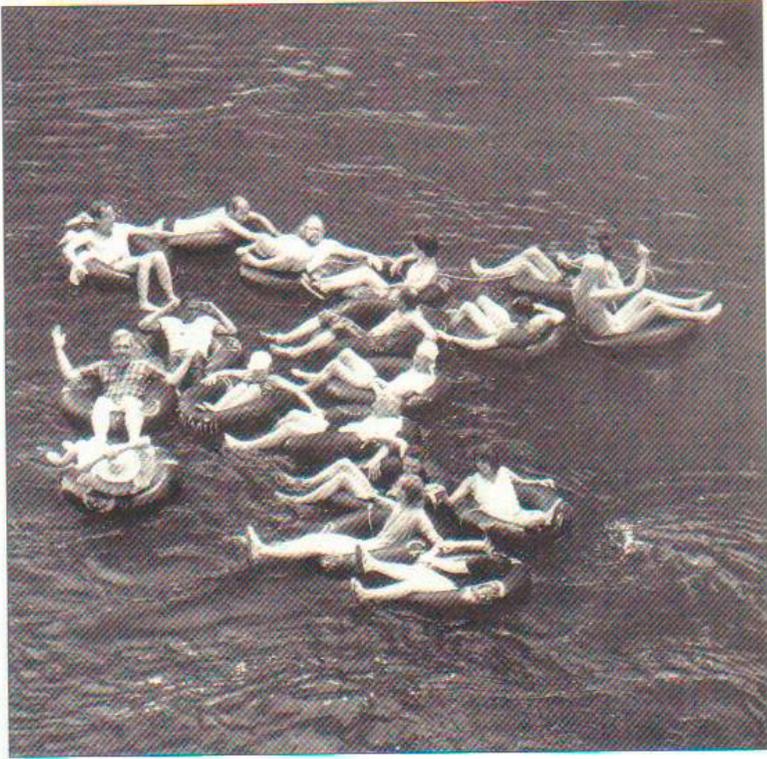
summer day, some 36 of us ventured away from the conference tables and onto the local waterway for several hours of leisurely floating down the mighty Muskegon River. What can I say? The enclosed pictures tell all. I am sure this has to be the first astrological research conference partially held on open water. Later that night, home safe and dry, the party continued.



At the table, from left to right, Robert Hand (top of head), Mark Urban-Lurain, Michael Erlewine, Michel Gauquelin, Lee Lehman, John Townley, Robert Schmidt (hidden), Not sure next one, on right, Kyle Pierce.



Drawing John Townley and Rob Hand. On the right, group heading for the river.



Part of the group floating down the river.



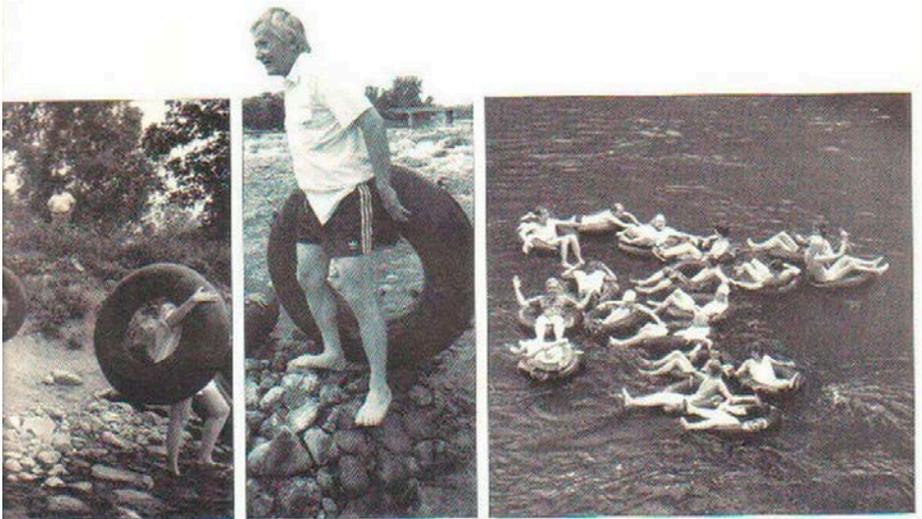
*At the NeoAstrology Conference:
 Top Left: Charles Harvey
 Top Right: Michel Gagnon
 Bottom Left: Dr. Suzbet Eitel,
 Robert Hand, Mark Urban-Lurain
 Bottom Right: Bob Schrad
 Below: The Muskegon River flows
 right through Big Rapids, and it
 provided a wonderful afternoon of
 "tubing"—a favorite way to spend
 a summer day. Matrix Technical
 Support Manager Kevin Fowler
 packed for a long trip (above).*



*On the last day of the
 conference, everybody
 took to the river to beat
 the summer heat.
 Pictured here are
 Michel Gagnon,
 Charles Harvey,
 Alos Freund,
 and Ken
 McRitchie.*

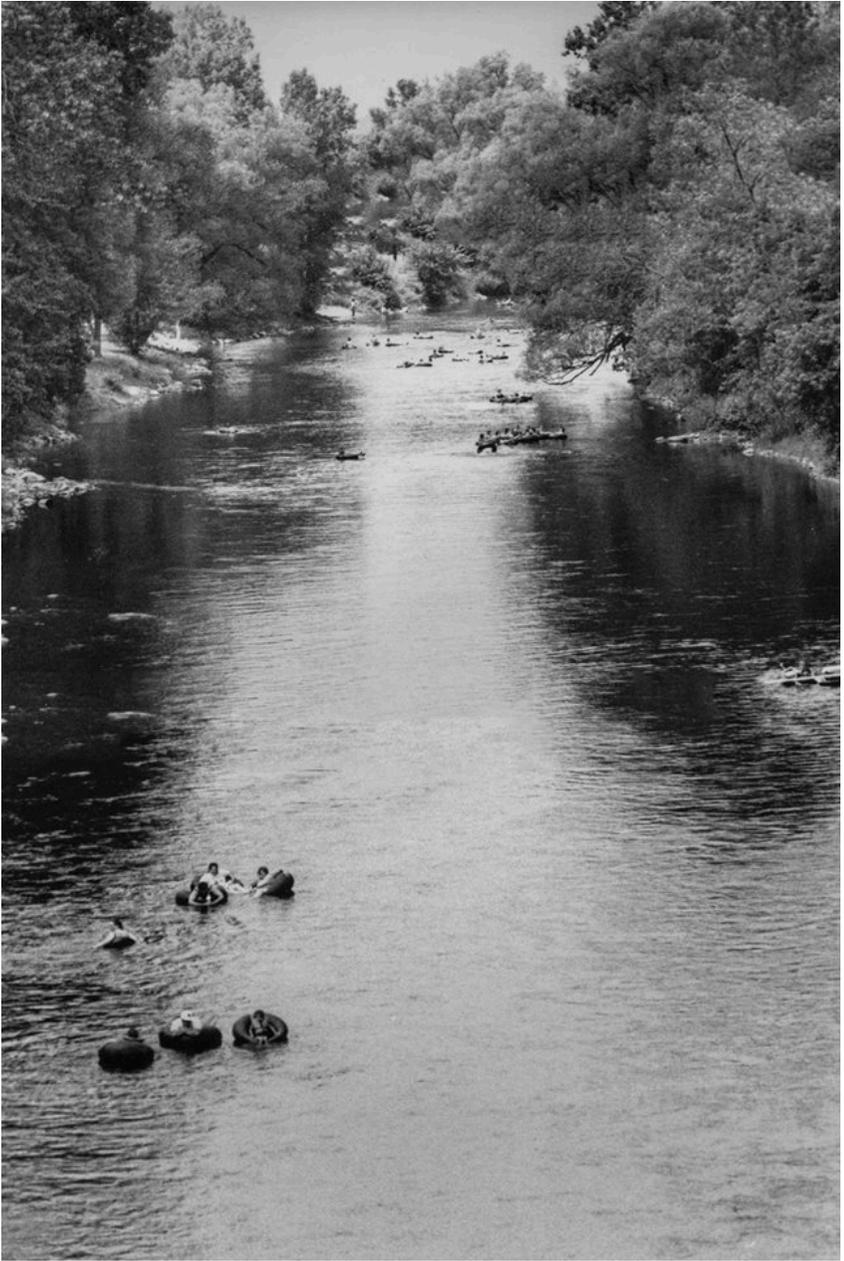


Page from original article in Astro*Talk.



Dr. Suitbert Ertel in center photo.







Getting ready to float.



Michel Gauquelin on left, Charles Harvey on right.



Left to right, Michel Gauquelin, Charles Harvey, Alois Treindl, Ken McRitchie.

MEDITATION ON A TIME-BUDGET

April 10, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The problem with dharma practice, like any other practice, is the effort involved. Effort and actual meditation are antithetical. This is not me talking, but the siddhas and mahasiddhas. Meditation is (and has to be, by definition) effortless, yet it takes some effort to learn, some practice to accomplish meditation. In a way, the term “meditation practice” is an oxymoron.

A great many people get caught in the boredom of meditation practice and never get to the meditation part of it all. My mom made me take piano lessons when I was a kid, and that meant practice and more practice. My piano playing died in the daily forced practice, not in the music itself. This same thing happens for many when they try to practice meditation. Something is lost along the way, and that is the act of actually meditating.

Like all practice, it is best to keep your hand in, to do a little every day... like it or not. More often than not, it is a case of “not like it.” Learning to actually meditate can take a long time. Crossing that bridge too often becomes a case of “a bridge too far” and we give up. This practice-syndrome and “giving up” is a symptom more than an inevitability. It is a sign for us to, instead, go another way. And what is that other way?

The whole problem with practice is the lack of enthusiasm and heart, the sheer boredom aspect of rote practicing. There is a solution, but it means stepping outside of the box and using your head.

Let's take a brief sidebar about "technique" in general, the problem of learning anything, the difficulty with any kind of rote practice. Having developed and then taught many astrological techniques, I know this experience firsthand. The key for me was to understand that any technique is only the residue of the full experience, the remains of what was a living realization. The theory is that if we carefully repeat and practice the technique (which is the skeleton of the once fresh realization) enough times, it will lead to the full realization. We rehearse and practice the technique in hopes that at some point in the practice we stop just practicing and synch into the actual realization and just live it.

The original realization, of which the residue or technique is a sort of freeze-dried shorthand, does not always easily lead, even with practice, to the original realization. Think the logic of what I just wrote through, please.

What is missing with practice, with performing some ritual technique, is the heart and enthusiasm that led to the original realization in the first place, the love. Practice can be boring. There "is" something that we can do about this as far as it relates to learning Tranquility Meditation, and here it is:

The technique of Tranquility Meditation involves learning to concentrate and allowing the mind to rest on an object, such as your breath, a stone, a twig, etc.

There is no object that is precluded or considered not usable, including none at all, i.e. formless meditation.

If we find the particular technique of sitting in Tranquility Meditation foreign or unfamiliar (and boring), we are free to select any repetitive technique we have already mastered in our life and use that. For me, this turned out to be the technique of close-up nature photography, but it could have been any repetitive technique, such as fly-tying, chess, knitting, or any other technique that requires consistent practice to learn.

It is best if it is a technique for which we had (or have) real love and enthusiasm for, like I do for close-up nature photography. It certainly does not have to be following our breath, using a twig or stone as a focus, and so on. What matters is that we have heart and love for what we are doing or, at the very least, that we be thoroughly used to the technique. In other words, use something you already know as a focus for learning Tranquility Meditation.

In other words, everything you have read or can read and study about Tranquility Meditation remains the same except that for a focus we use something that we already have mastered. This takes the worst of the learning curve out of the equation and makes learning basic meditation much easier.

In my case, I practiced learning Tranquility Meditation for something like 32 years and never mastered it. Sure, I developed some familiarity with it, but it remained something I practiced instead of something I just did. Remember, the reason for practicing meditation is to learn to meditate, not to practice for

practice sake. I never really got to the meditation part or worse, I thought “practicing” meditation was the same as meditating, which is not the case.

Meanwhile, as a confirmed computer programmer, I had practiced (and mastered) highly-focused concentration for some forty years, so I had already learned what I was trying to learn by practicing Tranquility Meditation. And best of all, I loved computer programming, but had not yet learned to love the practice part of learning meditation. And I had never advanced beyond practicing meditation to just meditating.

Then one year, my Tibetan dharma teacher pointed out to a small group of us with a comment to the effect that those who were computer programmers perhaps had a leg up on regular folks because they had mastered the patience of concentration needed to master sitting meditation. Well, of course, that hit home like a freight train and I immediately began mixing my dharma practice with my daily computer programming, which is a story in itself.

The long and the short of it is that once I did that, mixed practicing meditation with something I had already mastered (computer programming), I began to progress. It still took several years of intense practicing until I reached a place in practicing meditation equivalent to what I had realized long ago with computer programming. And that story I posted (in brief) yesterday, how I mixed meditation with my nature photography.

There is a whole free e-book on this transition that I wrote, for those who really want more detail, here:

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

The book is called “Mahamudra: A Story.” Just scroll down. Those of you who may be having trouble learning basic sitting meditation or who, old like me, want to get a head start might want to look into this approach. It is a little unorthodox, but it works, which makes it orthodox in my book. If you like, I could go into this to greater detail, if there is any interest.

MIND PRACTICE

June 8, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Not an option,
But a refuge,
Less painful than:
Anywhere else.

I found my way into dharma practice, not by accident, but as the poem says, because it is “less painful than anywhere else.” Just as the teachings point out, the Dharma is the way out of Samsara’s vicious cycles of ups and downs, like the only exit in a crowded theater when there is a fire. As often as not, Samsara is that fire for me. It also inspired the following poem:

SAMSARA

The same world,
That early on,
Makes it difficult,
To meditate,
Later,
Makes it difficult,
Not to.

What looks like an option in the beginning, later on becomes choice-less. Turn as we might, this way or that, ultimately there is but one way out, one unique attitude or orientation toward the dharma for each of

us that liberates. It is said that there are 84,000 dharma paths, and yet only one dharma.

Without an authentic teacher tweaking and helping to position us to take the true nature of the mind aerodynamically, we are dependent on guessing at our possible direction by watching our own slipstream. Unfortunately, this apparently can take many, many millions of years.

MIXING PHOTOGRAPHY AND MEDITATION

May 9, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

A number of you have commented or messaged me asking me to say something about dharma and photography, how they go together in my experience, so here is a brief outline of one approach. Because of my recent surgery, I have been unable to do much photography, much less get out in nature as I like to do. But yesterday, I took my first long walk, and probably overdid it, but I did it nonetheless. And I took some photos for the first time in a while, so I am getting back into it.

Not to disappoint you, but meditation (with or without photography) is not a way to relax, but rather a way to be intensely aware, so please note that. And the kind of meditation that I mixed with photography is what is called Insight Meditation (Vipassana), and in my tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, we reach a point in our practice where suddenly we realize Insight Meditation, so that is what I am commenting on here. It is somewhat of a big deal.

“Where were you when President Jack Kennedy was assassinated?” This question is often asked of my generation, and I know the answer. I was standing in the first room of the Michigan Union Grill (MUG) in Ann Arbor, staring at the TV that was mounted up near the ceiling. That moment is indelibly imprinted in my mind.

In a similar way, there are dharma events that are also imprinted in a similar way, but dissecting those events requires that they actually took place. In fact, they remind me of the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, where the goal is to very, very carefully remove each stick from a random pile until nothing remains. And when nothing remains, well, what then?

I am not a Zen practitioner, but I like the sound of “The Zen of photography,” because it involves not just looking through a camera lens at a subject, but rather looking through a camera lens at the looking itself, allowing your mind to come to rest in the looking at the subject, rather than just on the subject. And of course, you take a photo as part of this “looking,” but that is not why you are looking, if that makes sense.

Learning to rest the mind through a camera lens is no more or less difficult than learning to rest the mind (for the first time) in Insight Meditation while sitting on a Zafu, the little round cushion that Zen practitioners use for their sitting practice. And who knows when that first moment (or time) of true insight will come, whether sitting on the cushion or peering through a camera lens, but you won't forget it when it does. It imprints, big time.

And in that moment of initial resting, a clarity and luminosity can arise that is termed Insight Meditation, a moment that has no purpose other than itself. Now, I spent some 33 years trying to achieve this moment on the cushion, doing sitting meditation, but that is not how it came about for me. And when it did, I didn't even see it coming. I was not trying for this with photography, which is perhaps why it just “happened.”

In fact, at the time, I was taking close-up photos of nature just for the pure joy of it, which is certainly not my attitude all those years sitting on the cushion, where I was always looking for or expecting something, expecting something I did not even know how or what to expect, but I “expected” anyway. And, sensibly enough, that moment never came -- “A watched pot never boils,” and so on.

So, there is no reason why I should discover Insight Meditation through a camera lens rather than sitting on a meditation cushion, other than the fact that I was completely relaxed and yet intensely concentrating on peering through an exquisite lens at tiny creatures and dioramas, and I was in love with what I saw, and, as they say, I was “all in” to what I was doing. And that’s the key.

I can’t say the same for trying to meditate sitting on a cushion all those years, where I had formed or built-up all those expectations (and concepts) about what I was supposed to experience, and yet I had no actual knowledge of what I was looking so hard to experience. That is the danger of expectations, in general, and all the pith dharma texts point this out.

Doing Insight Meditation through photography sounds very romantic, but no more so than attempting the same while sitting on a meditation cushion. It was not the romance of photography that was operative, but rather, in my case, the fact that with photography I had no expectations whatsoever, and was totally immersed in the experience of just looking through the lens at these miniature worlds. I loved what I saw through the lens, but I also just loved the looking itself. I loved being there in the moment.

I had no expectations and, as the Bard wrote, “I’m not sleepy and there is no place I’m going to.” I was content and completely lost in the moment, while at the same time intensely concentrating and focusing. The benefit for me, compared to attempting the same thing in sitting meditation, was that nature was something I had known intimately since I was about six-years old. I was totally at home with it and all the little creatures that make it up. For me, this was like rolling off a log.

As mentioned, I had no expectations, because I was just happy being in that moment, if only as an antidote to what I was going through externally at the time, which was very difficult, in my case having just lost my job and facing finding (all over again) ways to support my family. It took something like that to serious-me-up enough to want to completely lose myself in Mother Nature and a camera lens. I was not in a hurry to get back to my personal problems, but totally content to remain in that moment with nature as long as I could. I was back-peddling as fast as I was moving forward.

As to what exactly happened, well the great dharma texts eloquently write about the fact that Insight Meditation cannot be written about. It is, as they say, ineffable, simply beyond words. What I can say is that once I learned to rest in Insight Meditation, everything about my dharma practice (and a lot about my life) just changed. It was more like something clicked, and finally fell into place, after never having been there. It was like the last tumbler in a combination lock. That is the idea.

And it had its own problems. Instead of realization coming sitting on a cushion, it came to me while peering through a camera lens at nature. Because of this, I could not just go off in a corner and continue my meditation practice as most practitioners do. If I wanted to experience the clarity and luminosity of Insight Meditation, I had to grab my camera and go out in nature and photograph. But when I did, an incredible clarity and luminosity was there, every time.

In fact, it took me some years to properly separate my Insight Meditation from my photography, so that I could also do it on the cushion and elsewhere in my life. That took time and was like separating the baby from the bathwater. I can do that now.

So, there you have a brief description of photography and meditation, as I know it. The key take away from this, IMO, is that a big obstacle to successful meditation is the expectations we have about its results, as if we had any idea. LOL. So, abandon expectations like you would the plague. Next, mix your meditation with some repetitive technique that requires real concentration (in my case, photography), a technique or method that you actually love and feel comfortable with.

Meditation has no result other than the process of meditation itself, and trying to meditate is an oxymoron. In my case, all of my brittle conceptualizations about meditation, realization, and enlightenment, the sheer amount and degree of my expectations conspired to make it practically impossible for any result to appear. And the reason was because there was no result, thanks to the expectations and the trying.

So, photography and Mother Nature became my surrogate meditation teacher, and midwived me where I could not midwife myself, due to all of the carefully lacquered layers of expectation that I had built up from books, teachings, and anticipation.

In other words, there is nothing you can simply add to your photography to make it meditative, but you can learn to meditate through the discipline of photography, or any other technique that you already know that requires concentration and repetition. At least that is my two cents. I hope this is useful.

MORE DEVOTED

May 12, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I feel I need to say something more about devotion and the process of devoting, so that we can be perfectly clear what this is and its health and value for our life. First off, the various religions have (rightly or wrongly) commandeered the concept of “devotion” for themselves, which has affected the popular use of the word. And they have Bogarted the term and, at times, use it as almost a weapon. You can’t blame them for loving the word. Those wishing to protest the often too religious and proselytizing use of the word “devotion” have stopped using it, which in itself is too bad. Years ago, I had to redeem that word from its religious use and make it my own, and I did. I am not going to be bullied into not using it.

Perhaps the surrogate word among lay people today is “Enthusiasm” or “Dedication,” but the word “Devotion” is still more correct IMO. For example, you know exactly what I mean if I say a mother is devoted to her infant. Motherhood has to be the paradigm of what devotion looks like in the world. In general, mothers of all types, human, animal, and on down the line of sentient beings, exemplify devotion.

I learned about devotion early-on, when I was perhaps six-years old, as it relates to Mother Nature and natural history, but I have no idea just how that came about. It could have been as easy as just loving

animals and, for that matter, anything that lived. Perhaps it was because we lived way out in the country, wedged between two large farms, with no other houses around. Was it the tiny nests of baby rabbits that I found (and tried to raise) after the lawn mower exposed them? Or, it could have been the puppies we raised and sold. I really don't know, nor does it matter. There it is.

But for whatever reason, I was a dedicated naturalist by the time I reached what they called the "age of reason," and have been that way ever since. When I find something I love, admire, and respect, I devote myself to it and always have. It is a natural doorway for love. And, while it started with nature study, it soon spread to whatever interests I have that I take to heart. And when it comes to devotion, why not go all the way?

Just thinking back over some of the topics I have been devoted to, I would like to tell you about them. Now, this will be all about me for the moment, so let's take a brief sidebar and talk about the "me" in you, meaning your own "me." We all have one.

ME, MYSELF, AND I

In the society we live in, we are embarrassed to talk much about our Self, and some folks go to great lengths to not even refer to themselves. It is considered too "selfish," which of course it is. LOL.

And with my interest in the dharma, folks are always telling me how the Buddhists don't believe in a Self, etc. If they will listen, I do my best to explain to them that is not what the dharma states. The dharmic view

is that there is nothing wrong with the Self; we all have one. If we did not have a Self, we would have to invent one, just to get through the logistics of a day. The Self is our natural interface with the outside world.

The Buddhist view is that we all have a Self; the Self is ubiquitous to humans. However, what comprises and makes up the Self is impermanent; it changes. The Buddhist view is not that there is no Self, but that we have no PERMANENT Self. As for me, I made friends with my Self years ago and stopped being ashamed to present it and no longer feel I have to hide it, and, above all, I stopped struggling with the tar baby that the self can be. The Self is just what it is. It is OK to have one, because there it is, regardless. It is not the Self that is the problem, but our fixation on it. Of course, for most of us, the Self is nothing but our own fixations, but that can be remedied. .

Instead, years ago I decided to like myself, and put my Self out to pasture like you would an old cow or bull, letting it graze, taking care of it, but not fixating on it, either positively or negatively. My Self continues on without me, or rather with my perpetual care and as much kindness as I can manage for it. After all, it is my own doing, my own step-child. Why add insult to injury by hating myself, by hating my own fixations? Instead, why not just remedy them?

We have to remember that we alone created our Self. Our own attachments, positive and negative, are the glue that holds the Self together. If I can stop fixating on what I'm attached to, then the Self becomes the interface to my active life that it naturally is, sort of like a vestibule to whatever I am doing. Right now, in that

vestibule, scattered all over the walls, are all kinds of advertisements, posters, etc., and all about me, myself, and I, literally about whatever I am and am doing, i.e. what I like and hate, and on around. And these posters and slogans change with the moment and the seasons, as my infatuations and de-infatuations change. I am the poster boy of my own Self. We all are. How funny is that?

With that said, I want to talk to you about my Self, not that I don't all the time anyway. I just wanted you to know how I feel about the Self in general, yours or mine. I want to say more about what devotion is and to go over some of the things in my life I have been devoted to, but I will have to begin with that tomorrow.

OLDER WESTERN DHARMA STUDENTS

April 12, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

That would be me. What happens to Western students of Tibetan Buddhism (like me) after many decades of dharma practice? We are and always will be a reflection (hopefully not a shadow) of our incredible dharma teachers. Thanks to the Tibetan diaspora, great lamas and rinpoches were scattered all over the globe. They brought to the West their most precious teachings. And for a brief time in the late 1970s and 1980s, rinpoches were available in America to visit a town or center near us, if they were invited. My wife and I invited them.

I have met and studied with some of the finest dharma teachers in the world, and taken hundreds of teachings and empowerments from great beings like H.H. the 16th Karmapa, H.H. the 17th Karmapa, and dozens of others, including emanation empowerments from the Four Regents of the Kagyu lineage, H.E. Tai Situ Rinpoche, H.H. Gyaltsab Rinpoche, H.H. Shamar Rinpoche, and H.H. Jamgon Kontrul Rinpoche, and Minjur Rinpoche, Bokar Rinpoche, not to mention the incredible Chögyam Trungpa and so on.

Also many have visited our center, offering teachings and empowerments, teachers like Thrangu Rinpoche, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, Traleg Rinpoche, Ponlop Rinpoche, Lama Namse, Bardor Tulku Rinpoche, and others. I have personally met

and offered a Khata to H.H. the Dalai Lama, and on and on. This is not to mention the many Rinpoches, monks, and lamas I have met during pilgrimages to Tibet.

And most of all, I have worked with my incredible dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, going on 35 years. In other words, I have been around and been exposed directly to the radiance of these great beings. I must be a little spiritually radioactive by now. LOL.

So, what to do with people like me?

I have permission from my teacher to present the dharma in my own way, and I do this through blogs and other writings, as best I can. I consider myself extremely fortunate to hold what I have gathered from the precious Karma Kagyu teachings. I consider myself a student, just like many of you, and if I have been lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time and learn something, I do my best to share it with others here in this blog and elsewhere.

I have no doubts that I am thoroughly human; my recent ongoing health issues clearly remind me of that on a daily basis. I have always tried to share my “humanness” here in these blogs. I don’t set myself up (or consider myself) as any kind of elevated “Dharma” teacher, and any older students like myself who do, who name themselves rinpoche, sit on thrones, etc., I feel sorry for, because their only-too-human qualities eventually leak out, to no one’s surprise. We are all in the same boat and can work together.

I love and respect the dharma and am devotionally grateful to the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche for his taking the time to actually find me in this world, accept me just as I am, and work with me all these years. I am not all that easy to instruct, which never fazed Rinpoche one iota. If I can in any way reflect his kindness and insight, I am grateful.

I imagine that most of you have heard the story of how His Holiness the 16th Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, responded when asked why he had come to America. He said: "If there is a lake, the swans would go there."

Every day is another day to do what I can to realize the dharma. After all these years, I still can't wait to get up each day. The analogy or image I like to use is that of a drop of water falling into a still body of water, creating by its immersion a series of ever-expanding concentric circles that increasingly include more and more of all that is. That's the relative "me" absolutely embracing all that I used to perceive as "other" than me. To use the words of the poet Sir. Edwin Arnold in his book "The Light of Asia:"

"The dewdrop slips into the shining sea."

PRACTICE DOES NOT NECESSARILY MAKE PERFECT

April 1, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Is learning the dharma and dharma practice as difficult as learning any other subject as regards the practicing required to learn it? Think about it. What if you wanted to learn to play the guitar or piano, and I mean (as PeeWee Herman would put it), what if you “really, REALLY” wanted to learn how to play?

Is it enough to casually practice the Dharma, as we would take the odd music lesson, like once a week, plus some short practice each day? I am just asking. I am not trying to make myself feel guilty for the amount of time I could squeeze out of my busy schedule for my daily dharma practice over the years. I am sincerely asking myself (and those reading this) what we can expect to get out of any practice if we can only afford to do a little each day? And, is there an alternative?

I am just being realistic, the same we would have to be if we practiced golf, tennis, the piano, guitar, or any other endeavor where we were just starting out and that required who-knows-what-amount of dedication on our part to nail it. Perhaps with dharma it is not like learning enough piano to perform a short piece at parties or being able to play a round of golf with the neighbors.

How much dharma do we need? I guess this depends on what our goal is with dharma. In my case, I was drawn into the dharma, a bit at a time. In the beginning, burning a candle in front of a statue of the Buddha, while sitting in a corner on a cushion for 5 or 15 minutes a day meant something to me, but I'll be darned if I know what it was. Later, when I became more serious, it would perhaps be 45 minutes of practice in the morning, and later still a second 45 minutes of evening practice, doing what are called the Extraordinary Preliminaries (Ngöndro).

And still later, it became a two-year, two-hour-per-day, commitment to practicing beginning Mahamudra Meditation. I don't know how I got through it with a straight face, because many days I probably just kind of waited it out until the clock said "two hours." My life was already too busy, which is why the traditional texts say to go off to a place of solitude to practice. Who does that these days?

And it was easier for me to take on these kind of practice commitments during an intensive teaching than to later carry those commitments out in daily practice. Inspired by a multi-day in-person teaching by no less than someone like Tai Situ Rinpoche, one of the four regents of the Karma Kagyu Lineage, this led to a two-hour a day commitment, but then traveling 800 miles back home, with no further direct contact with Rinpoche for a year or two, it was hard to maintain.

It's no wonder that in Tibet you find hundreds of monasteries filled with monks, where constant contact with high-level Rinpoches and teachings make for constant inspiration and communication, not to

mention with one another openly. There is less opportunity to slack off or fall by the wayside, but not here in America. When I brought a young Tibetan monk back to America with my family on what was essentially his escape from Nepal, his first words on getting off the plane and walking into the San Francisco terminal were “No monks!” Here in America, we don’t have monks everywhere as they do in Tibet and Nepal.

Back in the 1970s, dharma was ramping up in the U.S. and still is today, for that matter. There were (and are) not enough monks, much less Rinpoches, to go around and this still remains true. Where in Tibet, dharma training was a well-oiled machine, in America it is a case of catch-as-catch-can, learn a little here, and try to practice it by yourself in your little home town, and so on. There was (and still is) very little one-on-one personal interaction.

In dharma practice, there are a thousand questions, worries, and potential wrong turns. And there were few opportunities to get answers to those questions, except perhaps from other students who knew little more than I did. I can’t speak for all the other folks who were learning dharma back then, decades ago. But I can say how it was for me.

I didn’t know what I was doing and I didn’t know if what I was doing was correct, and you can’t really get that kind of information from a book or even from a general teaching. For me, I had tons of personal questions, with no way to get them answered. Yes, I did get to have an interview with a Rinpoche once a year for 15 minutes, but after you have said hello and goodbye, and talked about your family and your

general practice, there was no time left, nor could I probably bring to mind all the questions that I had from day to day in that short interview.

I understand that much of what I write here in this blog may appear at first as a bit depressing, which is not my intention. Being realistic about dharma practice is my intention, perhaps saving others from the mistakes I made learning dharma, like not knowing how to practice intensively enough to get results. i.e. going through the motions of practice, but lacking the know-how and proper motivation to convince even myself. Everything was still so unknown.

If your argument is that any kind of dharma practice is better than none, I understand. However, having wasted far too many years spinning my wheels and more-or-less pretending to practice, blindly going through the motions, I don't wish that on others. A certain amount of results are necessary to get anywhere. If there is interest, I would be glad to go over what IMO may make realization easier and more probable.

“RELAX, AS IT IS”

June 25, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The above slogan I first encountered in the writings of the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche as part of Lojong Practice (basic mind-training), and it reminds me of this quote by the great Siddha Orgyenpa:

“It is not necessary to seek non-conceptuality intentionally. It is not necessary to regard thoughts as faults. There will not be a famine of practice: this will be the beginning of a great harvest. Do not seek a quietly resting, vividly clear, and delightfully blissful mind; practice with whatever arises, without accepting or rejecting anything.”

[When in doubt, I always go back to what are called the “pith” instructions, the teachings of the great Siddhas and Mahasiddhas. I almost never read books on Buddhism, but I do read the pith instructions, the dohas (songs of spiritual experience), and whatever has been boiled down to the essence in dharma, again and again. The quotation of Orgyenpa, given above, is one of those pith teachings. In particular, that last line is something I most need to actually realize in practice. Of course I understand it conceptually, but to be able to realize it full-time is not so simple.

The “Relax, as It Is” means to accept things as they are given, literally “as they are,” and stop putting off

accepting what “IS” until it matches our idea of what it should be. That is the heart and soul of dharma training, right there. It is not “as you like it,” but rather “as it is.” Nothing could be simpler. I remember the final words of advice from Patrul Rinpoche and the Mahasiddha Tilopa, “Don’t Alter the Present.” Period.

It took me years to understand the Tibetan admonition that “Hope and Fear are not our friends.” I could pretty-much understand that fear clouds our mind, but I thought that the line from Alexander Pope that “Hope springs eternal in the human breast” holds sway and is a good thing. Well, hope does spring, but not always to our advantage. Patrul Rinpoche (again taking from Tilopa) also gave the advice “Don’t Invite the Future,” meaning not that we should abandon all hope, but that we should not allow our expectations to overshadow the reality so that we ignore it. The reality of the current moment is our only “hope” of having a future, the key to it. It is all there in that one phrase: “Relax, as it is.”]

RESTING

June 20, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@EErlewine.net)

Sitting quietly,
Properly,
With tongue to teeth,
My body invites,
The Mind.
To be,
At ease.

[The seven-point sitting-meditation posture, commonly known as the “Seven Points of Vairocana,” is there for a purpose, as this poem indicates. Of course, we can sit however we want, and mostly folks do, but there is method in the standard posture. I am not going to lay it out here, but you can find it in the books at the link given below.

And we can see it in the statues of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and the various deities, as to how the limbs are placed, and especially in the face and gaze. It is pure aerodynamics, if you will, positioning ourselves to the mind like the sails of a boat are set to take the wind, except this is mind travel, and our seven-point posture, a StarGate.]

Photo taken today.

See free books on Shamata Meditation for the seven-point posture:

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

ROOM FOR A VIEW

May 17, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The dharma is The Dharma, no matter what Buddhist (or other) view you look at it through. But don't for a moment imagine that the view through the various Buddhist viewers is the same. Not even close in some cases. This is why I find it important to know which form of Buddhism (which viewer) we are looking through. And there are scores of types of Buddhism, each with its particular viewer, so it can save a lot of time to know what form of Buddhism you are looking at the dharma from.

I only know a few viewers, mainly Tibetan Buddhism, with a little Zen thrown in, and I have looked into and passed-over some other Buddhist viewers, not because they were "wrong," but because they were not useful to me. So, when many kinds of Buddhists get together, we not only may need a translator for the language, more importantly we may need to translate one particular view of the dharma into another.

I believe that most of us know that there traditionally are three different kinds or levels that are supposed to represent the Buddha's teaching, the Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. And like those Russian Matryoshka dolls that nest inside each other, the three above levels are sometimes seen as one inside

the other. And they are also considered by some to be complete paths by themselves.

And when we pick one type or level of Buddhist practice, it may come packed in the flavor of a country other than our own. This was the case for me with Vajrayana Buddhism and the Tibetan culture. What do I know about the high plateaus of Tibet, the lack of vegetables there, or the deeply cut mountain streams that rush like no stream in America? How is the Tibetan view of the dharma, which itself came mostly packed in Sanskrit from India, affected by Tibetan culture? And even if we unpack it culturally, how will we repack it into the American idiom? These are questions.

I spent years studying Tibetan culture without realizing I was even doing that. I thought I was deciphering the dharma from the teachings, but finally this involved understanding a great deal about how the dharma was originally packed in Tibet. And you would think that, when I got it all unpacked, I would have the naked dharma, cultureless. Of course, that is not the case because, to even view the dharma I have to see it through an American viewer, which, as mentioned, means repacking it into the American package.

In this Samsaric plane we live in, at the very least, there is no dharma without a viewer, and viewers, like algebras, are designed to feature one set of attributes at the expense of another. There is no “universal” viewer, unless perhaps it is Sanskrit.

Oh well. And that is not my point here anyway, but I wanted to at least bring to mind some of the

complexities involved in all this. I'm not going to pursue this line of thought. What I would like to do is present sort of an overview of Buddhist practice in simplified form. I learned this very slowly and separately, piece by piece, without understanding how the various pieces fit together, like how the "knee bone is connected to the leg bone" and so on. For me, learning about Buddhism was a lot like some of those old images of the submerged city of Atlantis rising. I could at first only see the spires and clock towers, but had no idea of how they fit in to the overall layout of the city. That only came into view later when whole dharma began to rise into view.

For example, I soon found out that there were all kinds of practices competing for my time and I had little idea how they fit together, whether they worked together or were done serially, and so on. There were the Eight Noble Truths, the Eight Noble Paths, the Four Thoughts, Lojong, Tong-Len, Shamata Meditation, Vipassana Meditation, Mahamudra Meditation, and on and on and on. I couldn't do them all at once, so what order should I do them, and what was I doing them for?

No one bothered to explain to me that almost all of these practices exist for one purpose only, as remedial steps to purify and pull our attitude into line to recognize the true or actual nature of our own mind. It is written by the Mahasiddhas and in the pith texts that the true nature of the mind, once realized, is the same for all of us. In other words, for all practical purposes, one rinpoche's realization of the nature of the mind is equivalent to another rinpoche's realization, and so on. Of course, they may each

present it differently, but they are looking at the same thing.

However, as beginners our view of the mind's nature is not equivalent to that of a rinpoche, but is obscured every which way but loose, so to speak. So, in essence, all of the wide variety of preliminary Buddhist practices, and many others too, are designed for one and only one purpose, to work and tweak our mind until we can recognize the true nature of the mind, just as the rinpoches do. That's it, the whole enchilada.

What it takes to bring a student's mind to the point of actually recognizing the true nature of the mind varies, thus the many dharma techniques, the order they are practiced in, and so on. Different students require different practices and that they be done in a different order, etc., as you can imagine. These practices are called remedial practices or purification practices, because through them we remedy or purify our obscurations to the point where we can actually see through them and recognize the true nature of the mind itself.

“Recognition” is a major event, the result of all the remedial and purification practices. An analogy that I like is that Recognition is like those all figure-ground paintings that used to be around, where there was a second painting or image completely embedded in the first that was almost impossible to see until it was pointed out, but once you recognized the embedded image, you could see it again, at will. This is similar to recognizing the true nature of the mind. It was there all along, but you did not realize it.

In summary, all of these many preliminary practices are just preliminary to recognizing the actual nature of the mind. Once you have it, that recognition is a realization that is permanent, unlike so many of our spiritual experiences, where we are a visionary one day, but lost in Samsara the next. Realizations are permanent.

I hope this overview is useful, in that it paints almost all dharma practice on one side of an important dharma event, the recognition of the true nature of the mind, and everything else on the other side, which marks the path of realization on toward enlightenment. In the preliminary practices, we are like a prize fighter working out trying to make the required weight, only in this case we are trimming our obscurations and the prize is the Recognition and its realization

SPIRITUAL ACHIEVEMENT

May 18, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

A friend raised the issue of “Spiritual Achievement,” whatever he meant by it. Such achievement never occurred to me as an incentive for the dharma, perhaps because I have had so little results for so long. Yet, it is true that what little success I have had with dharma, I am first of all deeply, deeply grateful for, and, Yes, I imagine I am glad or proud of it, and certainly I talk about it. I have never understood why we are not supposed to talk more openly about either our achievements or our lack of the same. As they say, “Pride Rides before a Fall.” No doubt, but what about our lack of success. We don’t talk about that much either.

As I have often pointed out in my blogs, I am not so worried about (or afraid of) pride or the Self, because this life we are all living has a beginning, a middle, and an end. If our pride does not take a fall somewhere in the middle, it is sure to as we near the end. Perhaps my favorite poet is Gerard Manley Hopkins, and I am reminded of his poem “The Leaden and the Golden Echo,” which says it better than I ever could. Here I quote the first part, the “Leaden Echo,” which goes like this:

THE LEADEN ECHO

HOW to kéep—is there ány any, is there none
such, nowhere known some, bow or brooch or
braid or brace, láce, latch or catch or key to keep
Back beauty, keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty, ...
from vanishing away?

Ó is there no frowning of these wrinkles, rankéd
wrinkles deep, Dówn? no waving off of these
most mournful messengers, still messengers, sad
and stealing messengers of grey?

No there's none, there's none, O no there's none,
Nor can you long be, what you now are, called
fair, Do what you may do, what, do what you may,
And wisdom is early to despair:

Be beginning; since, no, nothing can be done To
keep at bay Age and age's evils, hoar hair, Ruck
and wrinkle, drooping, dying, death's worst,
winding sheets, tombs and worms and tumbling
to decay;

So be beginning, be beginning to despair. O there
's none; no no no there's none: Be beginning to
despair, to despair, Despair, despair, despair,
despair.

Nice poem! And the second half (The Golden Echo) is
more uplifting, so look it up if it suits you. I like
uplifting, perhaps too much. A less-uplifting poem like
the above is more suited to my needs, something that
is “down-putting,” forcing me into my body, into feeling
life, living it, and giving in to dying to it. Time and age
are great equalizers or levelers, are they not?

I have probably heard most of the arguments for keeping spiritual things to ourselves, but I reject them for the most part. Coming up through the dharma, keeping things hidden or secret on others part never helped me one iota. In fact, the lack of open discussion about both achievement and failure in the dharma only made the whole journey more vague for me. It was like being encased in cotton. There were never enough handholds to grasp along the way, much like climbing a sheer vertical wall with no footholds.

Having an authentic teacher that I trust to tell me whether or not I am close to the piñata has been essential. I am humbled and grateful for the kindness of my teacher and the time he took to guide me to what I most need. Before meeting Rinpoche, what I had was like a patchwork quilt built from my own spiritual experiences, but one more filled with holes than patches.

There seems to be an eternal struggle between what we might call religious technique on the one hand, and pure free-style on the other. Yes, I had figured some things out for myself, but the bulk of it I had not figured out, much less fit it all together... I was not even close.

There was a time when my pride dictated to me (and I repeated to all who would listen) that I would figure out enlightenment on my own, thank you very much. And of course, the lamas acknowledged it was possible for someone to become enlightened all by themselves, with no external guidance from others. The problem, they went on to say, is that it will take untold kalpas (billions of years) to do so.

I was afraid of just doing rote technique endlessly, and for good reason, but in the long run I was more afraid (and tired of) my own attempts to figure this out on my own in one lifetime. The Tibetan lineage that I belong to has had many centuries to come up with the very best means and technique to expand our awareness. That technique just has to be administered carefully and by someone with realization. Think of it like psychological surgery. We need an expert.

In other words, much more timely (and convenient) is to work with a realized teacher, one who can guide us to realization much like a mother guides her infant to the breast. The process, however, is hard to do with large groups. I read somewhere where a rinpoche gave the pointing-out instructions for recognizing the true nature of the mind to a group of 1,000 practitioners. Afterward, so they went on, maybe two or three people achieved "Recognition." Pause for thought.

I am of the conviction that the pointing-out process is better done with just a realized teacher and one student, or at least a small group, where there can be questions and answers. Every student has their particular blend of hang-ups and obscurations, and these are better dealt with on a one-to-one basis, where individual attention can be given to each student.

What we need, so it would seem, are a lot more teachers that have realized the basic recognition of the mind, if nothing more. And let's not forget all the preliminary purification practices, all those remedial methods to thin out our obscurations until we can

actually grasp the pointing-out instructions. Thankfully, all of this exists, but we do have to actually make a real effort to find a teacher and a set of dharma practices that will bring our obscurations down to within striking distance of the pointing-out instructions.

THE MOTION OF DEVOTION

June 3, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Jikten Sumgön Dorje, the great Mahamudra teacher and founder of the Drikung Kagyu Lineage, said:

“Definitely, the only method for developing realization is devotion.”

This emphasis on devotion is repeated by the great Mahasiddhas throughout all the pith teachings, so we might want to know why this is so. How is devotion logical? For one, devotion is a direct measure of our sheer intent, what we are devoted to, i.e. where it is that we are devoting our attention and energy. In other words, what gets us up in the morning aside from the alarm clock? The answer to the question as to what moves us in this world can be very revealing.

In short, devotion is an absolute measure of our direction in life. What are we devoted to? What do we really care about? Unfortunately, the word “devotion” has fallen on hard times, perhaps due to equating it with religious fervor, of which it is but one example. I became devoted to my dharma teacher, not because of some blind faith or trust, but because every time I went back to that well, I found the water of pure awareness, and I liked it. Devoting more attention to Rinpoche and the dharma teachings was a habit that was easy to form, and not some kind of obligation.

When the mind moves because of true heartfelt devotion, actual change within us is the result, and such change can be hard to come by any other way. It is little wonder that in the “Lineage Prayer,” which is perhaps the most important prayer in the Karma Kagyu Lineage, it clearly states that devotion is the “head” of meditation, not the foot, not the body, but the head. That says something worth noting.

Sometimes I wish I could take an Ultrasound of my day-to-day activities, showing me the areas in it where I am most devoted, where the purest devotion of my energy occurs. Such a chart would show me pretty much the whole of what I have not hated or feel lukewarm about. Those investitures of real devotion would stand out and they are literally the “key” to my future. They are what I care about.

My point here is that far from devotion being something to be ashamed of, locating where we are truly devoted amounts to a map of our future, because it is in that direction that we are pouring heartfelt energy from this current life-phase into what will be our next life-phase. People have no trouble seeing how they are devoted to playing golf, watching baseball, and what-have-you, but when it comes to being devoted to another person, that is kind of limited to our spouse and kids, and not to just any old someone. Non-family persons are suspect.

Devotion to a dharma teacher, especially a “foreigner” espousing a strange “religion” is, in this society, somewhat unusual; it might be a throwback from excesses of the “exotic” New Age Movement of the 1970s. Yet, devoted I am to my particular dharma teacher, a refugee from Tibet who is now in his

nineties. I devote time and energy to him and his teachings, and for a good reason.

“Water, water, everywhere, nor any drop to drink,” is a line from “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. For me it was the same with finding a dharma teacher, until I must have become ready, for suddenly there he was. The power of these authentic dharma teachers is that of “realization,” not just the realization they have as our teacher, but especially for our own realization. The whole point of an authentic teacher is that they can help us to realize what has always been there, right before our eyes. I’m talking about “realization,” actually realizing what up to now we only experience perhaps once in a blue moon. It is one thing to understand a book from beginning to end, and quite another to make that understanding an actual living experience, even if it only lasts for a day or part of a day.

Yet, it is of an order of magnitude entirely greater to have realization of what we have only sometimes experienced and perhaps intellectually understood – the Mind. Realization is the gold-standard of dharma teaching, if only because when it does come, it stays with us “till’ death do us part.” That’s the idea.

As for our own realization and having devotion to the wishing well from which it comes (an authentic teacher through which we can actually realize something), nothing could be easier for me. That’s the whole point. When we meet an authentic dharma teacher, we begin to naturally realize, as in: “Oh, I get it now!”

Realization is a common word that we all know and use. We realize stuff all day long, but the dharma realization of the actual nature of the mind is a specific event along the dharma path, one that has a very clear before and after to it. It should not be confused with common realization, for example, like intellectually realizing what I am writing about here. The beginning of dharma realization starts with encountering an authentic dharma teacher who is capable of opening OUR mind to “realization” itself, by pointing out to us (and for the first time) just how to “recognize” the true nature of the Mind, which has always been with us. Before that event, even the dharma term “Realization” has not been realized. “Recognition” of the true nature of the mind is the first step on the pathway to Realization.

The point of this blog is that devotion, as the Tibetan Buddhists say, is the “head” of meditation, the sine qua non requirement or doorway to realization, which is marked by the moment when an authentic dharma teacher first points out to us the true nature of the mind so that we get it, after which we have it forever. How magical is that?

THE SPECIFIC DENSITY OF YOU

April 25, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Or the specific density of me. It varies, and this is something that can be important to be aware of. That is why there are so many different kinds of dharma practices. As for me, I'm a tough nut to crack. My obscurations run deep and they are very thick. Of course, I had no idea that I was so dense. How would I know? After all, I'm dense!

I could not understand why, if I sat down and meditated for a while, that little to nothing happened. In my case, I am ashamed to say that a "while" was over 30 years. That's how long it took for me to learn to do Tranquility Meditation properly, not because it has to take that long, but because it took me a long time to understand that I first had to do some serious remedial practice before meditation could naturally occur.

Basically, I rammed my head against a wall again and again, rather than learn to walk around or climb over that wall. I didn't know better and at that time there were so few of us, and we thought we were not supposed to talk about our practice, which was ridiculous. In Tibet, students discuss, argue, and debate endlessly about all of the preliminary practices. If there is something secret, it would be personal words between you and your dharma

teacher in advanced training and about your particular practice.

Eventually, with some help from books, teachings, and teachers, it got through to me that if sitting meditation did not come naturally, that it meant that the soil was not ready and I needed to do more remedial practices to prepare the ground. When I actually did some remedial work, this actually helped.

There are no set rules and no guarantees that this or that dharma practice will work for us, although certain classic dharma techniques seem to be perennials. It is very much a case of find out what practices do work for you, what teacher's words do resonate and work for you, and so on. The dharma can't simply be a passive wait-and-see affair, but rather we have to actively practice dharma techniques. Dharma practice is not purely an intellectual affair, something to take in and understand.

Yes, we have to understand the dharma techniques intellectually enough to be able to learn to practice them, but beyond mere understanding, we have to begin to work with the mind directly. It took me years to understand this point and to stop looking outside myself for something "dharmic" to do and, instead, begin to actually look into and work with the mind itself, like one would with clay. You have to get your hands into the mind and move it around. This is key!

Working the mind is like shaping clay. It is not primarily intellectual, but rather physical; we can call it meta-physical if we want to play on words. For years, Rinpoche would ask us questions like "Look for where the mind is located? Is it in your head? Is it in your

heart?” Each time, I would immediately think, well, the mind is not in the head. The mind is not in the heart, the mind is not anywhere, etc., and then drop the whole thing.

However, I missed the point every time. Rinpoche was not asking me to “think,” but rather to actually LOOK around in my mind for its location, its color, etc. It’s like asking someone to go down in the basement and rummage around. When, after some years, I finally got off my mental duff and began to treat the mind like a muscle that could be exercised rather than a thinking-device, everything began to change.

The mind is as much a physical place as this outer dream-world we live in. In advanced dharma practice, we have to actually go into the mind, like we would any other place, walk around, and physically get to know the place. The image I use to remind myself is like entering our mind and, once in there, erecting a circus tent, pushing up the poles, stretching the tent, creating space in there. If on actually looking around, we don’t somehow get a little sore, a bit of a mental charley-horse, we have, IMO, missed the point.

In summary, the mind is not primarily an intellectual place. Yes, concepts and ideas come from the mind, but the mind itself is not primarily conceptual. My point here is that working with the mind in meditation is not simply a matter of understanding. There is nothing to get “under” or around. We can’t get beyond, around, under, or over the mind, but we can fully extend ourselves within the mind. We can be one with it, but it is a physical experience as much as anything else.

In other words, we can't or never will "understand" the mind. We can't get our mind around the mind to understand. There is nothing beyond it, but it is not enough to just "think" that. We have to fully experience it, and even that is not enough. Moreover (and more important), finally we have to realize it. "Realization" is the be-all and end-all of dharma practice.

Unfortunately, as mentioned, we can't just understand what realization is like or come close. Even the experience of the mind is not enough. We must also "realize" that experience. According to the Tibetan Buddhists I have worked with, realization requires working with an authentic teacher, someone with some realization. Realization of the true nature of the mind is the single path to enlightenment.

THE STORMS OF THE MIND

June 29, 2016

Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The Drukpa Kagyu master Götsangpa said:

“The mind is not found through searching. It is not seen by looking. If examined, it is found to be non-existent. If grasped at, it cannot be held. If dismissed, it does not go. If placed, it does not stay. If mixed, it does not blend. If cannot be split through division. It cannot be parted by separation. It is not known through looking. It is not realized through explanations. It cannot be illustrated by any example. It cannot be arrived at through any means. No matter what name it is given, it is not contradicted.”

[So what is permitted? Left alone, the mind gathers to a greatness and presents itself to our realization. With sufficient mind-training, we develop our own internal gyroscope that, even after the worst of mental storms, sets about righting itself as soon as they pass. There is a natural balance, an inner gyroscope that knows which way is up, if we will just allow it.

This reminds me of sailing on the ocean as a kid, out to sea and lost in the fog without a compass. We couldn't see the land and I had no idea whether we were heading back toward the harbor or were on our way to England. I was all of 14-years old and I was the crew. My captain was John “Beans” Marion and we were racing Yankee Dorries in the well-known

yearly Marblehead Regatta just north of Boston, Massachusetts. This was like 1956. “Beans” Marino, who had been a jet-fighter pilot in World War II, somehow just knew which way was home. His internal compass was working.

Dharma practice is like that. After a while, no matter how hard the internal winds blow in our mind, as soon as they quiet down, we just start righting ourselves again. As a systems computer-programmer, I would sometimes, usually through my own fault, manage to delete a day’s or a week’s work at the touch of a button. In the beginning I would figuratively (or literally) jump up and down, complaining about my lot, but after a number of years I just stopped all that. When I would lose a large block of carefully written code, instead I would, without any thought or struggle, just start coding again from the beginning. Ants do this and dharma balance is like that too.

Just as the hurricanes of the mind come upon us, so does the sun come out and the wind cease to blow. I am reminded of an interview I did with the legendary Howlin’ Wolf at the first Ann Arbor Blues Festival in 1969. He too was talking about recovering from disturbing conditions.

“Just like a flower. You see, we’re trampin’ on this grass. We stay here a couple months and tramp right around here, we gonna’ kill it. Just as soon as we stop trampin’, the first warm sunshine, and then the grass gonna’ start a growin’ again.”

If you want to read the entire interview, it is eye-opening. Here is the link:

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewtopic.php?f=148&t=60>

The point here is that aside from doing this, that, and the other thing, dharma-wise, in reality we actually try to do less and less or, better yet, nothing at all. As the great Mahasiddha Tilopa said: "Don't Alter the Present." He meant it.

So we have a bit of a Catch-22 here. On the one hand we have to practice (make sincere efforts) to learn the techniques of meditation; at the same time we have not to change or alter the present, an impossible task. The old saying "Trying doesn't do it; doing does it!" comes to mind. So, you can't "try" to meditate; you can only meditate." Nevertheless, this is the task at hand.]

THE TRAIN OF THOUGHT

May 24, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

What an accurate image, the “train of thought,” something that is all too easy to just hop on and ride. In fact, that’s what we tend to do, follow the content of a thought, one thought leading to the next and before we know it we are far down the line. Like reading the daily newspaper or headline TV, we habitually follow our train of thoughts.

The Tibetan Buddhists have another way of using thoughts, one that ignores their content and focuses on what all thoughts share, their common nature. Thoughts are more than just what they mean; they are also the containers of what they mean. They have a generic form as well. We can use that.

In beginning dharma practice, it is common to find thoughts distracting, even annoying, and to do our best to keep thoughts out or stop them. That never works, because the old Uncle Remus tar-baby syndrome dictates that the more we struggle with thoughts, the more they proliferate and stick-tight to us. The Tibetans point out that thoughts are as natural as rain. In fact, they go on to say that thoughts are nothing more than the mind itself in motion, like the ocean and the waves on its surface, both only water.

Thoughts arise, last for a while, and dissolve, falling back into the well of the mind from which they came. I believe we should all know this by now. What we may not know is how thoughts can be used to advance our dharma practice. Not only that, the great Mahasiddhas tell us that at a certain stage in our practice, without thoughts we could not progress at all. Thoughts are invaluable, but how?

Thoughts are something we are all familiar with and have come to terms with in basic sitting meditation (Shamata), learning to relax and not to fixate on them. But thoughts really come into play when we begin to learn Vipassana, Insight Meditation.

Vipassana is actually a bit complicated, but I see no reason why even beginners can't at least learn something about how thoughts can be used for more than just what they mean, their content. In Vipassana training, we make use of mindfulness to become aware when thoughts arise in the mind. We learn to recognize thoughts as they come up, but there is a twist.

Instead of focusing on the content of the thought, what it means (what the thought is about), we learn to look directly at the thought itself as a container, what is called the "nature" of the thought. All thoughts have a nature and the nature of all thoughts, aside from their particular meaning, is identical. They can be grouped.

It is a peculiarity of thoughts that if a thought is looked at directly, the thought vanishes. Instead of becoming a thought-train as most thoughts tend, a thought that is looked at directly simply, dissolves and vanishes.

Poof. There is no reason why each of us can't at least try this out for ourselves. This fact, that thoughts cannot survive direct scrutiny regardless of content (what they mean), is something worth considering and checking out.

In Insight Meditation, we learn to look directly at a thought as it arises, rather than its content (what the thought is about). We look at its nature, irrespective of content. With practice, we learn to look directly at a thought as it comes up, to meet it head on, before its meaning or content even registers. We eventually have no idea (or care) what the thought is about. If we meet it head-on, the thought just up and vanishes, and we learn to let our mind rest in the vacancy left by its vanishing. There is a gap.

It is not the case that when looked at, a thought vanishes and absolutely nothing remains. Rather, we find a certain vivid clarity and luminosity in the gap where the thought was, and we simply rest in that clarity. That gap is illuminating, to say the least. This is why, in my experience, Insight Meditation might well be called the "lamp of certainty" or clarity. I don't know how "recursive" this process is, but like a bug zapper at a summer party (zap, zap, zap), with practice every thought that is met head-on vanishes, leaving us a gap of pure clarity and luminosity, one that can be widened and deepened. We rest in that gap.

The clarity and luminosity of Vipassana (Insight Meditation) is like nothing I have known. If there is anything addictive that I have ever experienced, and I have experienced addiction to caffeine, nicotine, and so on, the addiction to Insight Meditation is

overwhelming. Resting in the gaps that vanishing thoughts leave when looked at directly, the pure clarity and luminosity that arises, like a lamp or light, illuminates everything around it or anything that is brought to mind. Think about the content of that statement.

They call it Insight Meditation, but IMO the word “insight” hardly defines it. As mentioned above, Insight Meditation is the lamp of certainty that illuminates the mind. By that I mean that Insight Meditation is not the seeing of something (like an insight) as much as it is something to see with or by. In other words, Insight Meditation is an illuminator, illuminating not only itself, but any darkness in the mind that it encounters. It dispels darkness. Anywhere it shines (or can be shone), it brings the light of certainty to all doubts. One not only gets used to it, but we soon find ourselves seeking it out in every moment that we can manage. That’s what I mean by addictive.

These are just words you are reading on a page, but what they point at is a form of dharma realization that is profound in its ability to light up our life with certainty, where before there were only questions. This brief account of Insight Meditation is just a taste, which should be followed up by working with an authentic teacher to properly learn this.

[Photo taken by me yesterday.]

THE VIRTUE OF INSIGHT MEDITATION

April 7, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[I promised you some prose on Vipassana Meditation. I could go on all night. Here is a little bit in praise of Insight Meditation.]

The flame of a candle, when lit, does not need other light. It illuminates itself as well as all around it. Insight Meditation is such a flame, one well worth lighting.

One of the most remarkable features of discovering Insight Meditation is that we finally find ourselves in the driver's seat of life. Perhaps for the first time we are completely responsible. We can respond to our entire situation, and that includes our dharma practice. Without thinking, we know just what to do, and perhaps more important, we know that we can now do it.

Another of the blessings of Insight Meditation is the sudden availability of inexhaustible energy and devotion to the dharma. Where before, perhaps great effort was required to complete dharma practices, with very little obvious reward; now there is nothing else we would rather do. The clarity and lucidity of Insight Meditation is not only the obvious refuge, but a wellspring of inspiration and delight.

And the virtue of Insight Meditation is incendiary. It starts with the recognition of the nature of the mind

and, like the dewdrop that slips into the shining sea, soon spreads outward, encircling our entire life with ever greater inclusivity. We are home.

The Tibetan texts say that the result of Insight Meditation is clarity and lucidity. Without mastering Insight Meditation, how are we to know what is meant by “clarity and lucidity?” Clarity means absolutely clear, without any of the dualistic obscurations of ordinary Samsaric consciousness. Clarity stripped of the fog of Samsaric existence is the true nature of the mind itself, which is what “Ordinary” was meant to be, in the sense of pure.

In my understanding, “Clarity” is seeing things just as they are, with a sense of the pristine and a vividness not otherwise experienced. And “Lucid,” means immediately intelligible, self-illuminating, and easy to grasp.

I sometimes imagine life to be like a huge ball of yarn and we are looking for that one loose thread, the key to unravel it all, and that is Insight Meditation. Once mastered, Insight Meditation proceeds to reveal the universe to us one thought at a time, and the clarity and illumination is dazzling. An additional bonus is that our ordinary “Self” is not there, and that’s a good thing.

Insight Meditation marks the end of dharma as something to practice and the beginning of dharma as life itself. Insight Meditation (and the recognition of the true nature of the mind which accompanies it) is realization. No, it’s not enlightenment, but it is the doorway and the first step on the path to enlightenment.

I cannot not say enough good things about Insight Meditation.

THE WORLD OF DHARMA TRAINING

April 4, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[This blog is a little out there, but that is how I feel today, so bear with me please.]

Is there anything else but dharma training? Trying to make it real. That's what it's all about. Realization. We all try for that as best we can. This is just natural, but the formal way to realization is called the Dharma.

Our dharma practice is the perfect mirror of our intention and effort. If we practice mindfully, our practice is mindful. If we shortcut our practice or tune out, it is not.

To use an analogy I like: try as we might, we can't sneak up on a mirror. If we look, it's looking back at us. If we don't, it's not. There's no fooling it. Dharma practice is like that, exactly. It's the old GIGO, "Garbage In, Garbage Out," and vice versa. Dharma is the perfect reflection of reality as compared to "our" current reality with its obscurations.

In the hall of mirrors that is life, the dharma is the one doorway that is not just our own reflection looking back, but we each have to find it. And it seems that we do this through trial and error, through what is called "dharma practice." Practicing dharma is a process of successive approximations to reality, but we have to do it diligently, not halfheartedly. It is hard

to be diligent when we may not know exactly what we are doing.

Yes, the dharma in America is all new to us and it is understandable why we might treat it like the shot in the dark it appears to be. That may be true, but it doesn't help. The reality as to what it takes is like the old saying "Once again, but with feeling." That is what is required.

The historical Buddha is said to have turned the wheel of the dharma. I am fascinated by that phrase, because we each have to do the same, turn the wheel of our own dharma. And I am reminded that if we do not turn the wheel of our dharma, that wheel just sits there until we get around to turning it. There is no back door or other way out of life or the dharma. For each of us, it is a case of "Straight on Till' Morning."

So, we can hem and haw as much as we like, but when all is said and done, we still just have to do it individually. We can watch ourselves perform in the mirror for as long as we like, but sooner or later we have to go behind the curtain of the Self, step through the mirror, end the duality, and merge with the reality. It can happen and it is as simple or complex as turning the wheel of our own dharma.

However, we have to actually turn the wheel, do the practices, and do it on our own and with heart. It is up to us and I mean that very definitely. With so many things in daily life, where we can just put in our time, wait out the clock, and still move on. This is not true for dharma practice. We can wait as long as we want to pick up our practice, but when we do, it will be

exactly (I mean exactly) as we left it, sitting there, waiting for us.

“Through the looking glass” takes on new and enhanced meaning with dharma training. We eventually tire of always seeing only our self in mirrored reflection everywhere we look. A mirror is duality personified. Is it no wonder that, sooner or later, we each make our exit, stepping gently through the back of the looking glass, or passing through a StarGate or Wormhole into a single, non-dual dimension, thus collapsing the dualistic house of cards we have endlessly projected.

The dharma is the easy way to make it real, the path to realization, to finally removing the end of the difference between inside and out, once and for all. We can take as long as we want, lifetimes if necessary, but sooner or later we all will find the path to realization.

THINK AND DO

May 21, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

“Think and do” is not what we want. This has become even clearer through my recent dance with a health crisis. The resolves that came out of this crisis, like taking New-Year Resolutions every day of the year, can’t be faked. Resolutions can’t be just an intellectual decision, as in something that I think about and then try to do. The word even says it, “resolve,” resolution. Trying is, well, trying. IMO, with resolve, we must reach deeper than that for it to last. Anyway, these are my thoughts here in midstream.

There is a real difference between welcoming a change and forcing yourself to make one. In fact, it is a big difference, doing something because you think it is good for you instead of actually experiencing the change as good for you. In my recent health scare, I found myself welcoming a change in diet, a change in exercise, a change in outlook. I didn’t have to try. I was already there. The alternative was not acceptable.

The question I have to ask myself when a new project is on the horizon: is it a refuge or is it a sentence? Am I “trying” to do it or am I doing it naturally? It is the same old problem we have with practicing meditation, the effort involved. Trying to do something is not at all the same as just doing something. Zen masters have been pointing this out for centuries.

I face this every time I go about learning something new that requires actual effort and practice. I can't just "do it" because I "think" it would be good for me. God knows, I've tried. Learning "how" has to be done delicately, without staining the intent that brought me to want to learn it in the first place. If it is rote or a matter of brute force, I ruin it before I can even get to know it. I find it very difficult to recover from any efforts I make by brute force. Naturally-learning a technique is a bit more of an art than that. And let's not forget about love, or at least sincere "like."

I find that love is essential for practice and resolutions, especially when learning some technique blind. And when the love of learning is lost, we are left with effort without reward. The residue of forcing me to practice a technique without love is toxic. So, if you have to learn something, love of it (at least like) is not just desirable; it is essential IMO.

From where I sit now, looking back at all of the futile New-Year's-Eve Resolution-type promises I made to myself over the years, although it was not even New Year's eve, were futile, doomed from the outset, because they were just something I thought I should do, as opposed to something I wanted to do. I believe to do something that lasts, we actually have to want to do it.

I hate to think of all the stuff that got moldy or thrown out because the diet I thought I should be on was not anything I actually wanted to eat. I may have lost a few pounds, but I put them back on (with interest) a few weeks later. So, when we talk of the dangers of the mind, let's not forget what can happen because we "think" a change instead of really want a change.

We think we want to be thinner, but not enough to get and stay thin.

I know that each of you reading this know this. We all do. I am just marveling at how obvious it is to me now that many of the changes I “thought” I would take were just that, something I thought and not something I was serious about. “Serious about” to me means I actually wanted to change enough to change. And I can’t help but bring to mind the lines from Hamlet’s soliloquy to the effect that:

And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprise of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry.

Oh yeah, that would be me, and I am basically a “finisher” at heart. So, yes, my recent health event scared the Bejesus out of me, whatever or whoever Bejesus is. But I can clearly see the difference between all of my past attempts at turning over a new leaf in this or that area and the real thing, actually changing. This time I am serious as if my life depended on it, which I am told it does.

So, I comment here just to underline the level that I have to be at to get serious, actually make any real changes, and have them stick. If I’m just skimming the surface of thought with my resolutions, best not think again, but rather I should figure out what I really want to do and either do that or accept the truth that I don’t care enough (yet) to change. Anyway, folks, that is what I am seeing in this health-altered state of mind. Hope it does not sound like a rant.

TO READ OR NOT TO READ DHARMA

April 30, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I want to talk about reading and conceptualizing the dharma. Back in the 1950s and early 1960s, reading books was all that was available to us. The Tibetan diaspora had not begun and certainly rinpoches were not yet reaching America. Books such as “Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines” by Evens-Wentz and “The Way of the White Clouds” by Lama Anagarika Govinda were what we read, that and derivative books like those from the Theosophical Society. At the same time we were reading the books of Jack Kerouac like “On the Road” and “Dharma Bums.”

So, before I launch into some thoughts on reading books about the dharma, I want to state that I know something whereof I speak on this topic. Here are just two shots of some of the Buddhist library at our center, this photo taken in what we call “Rinpoche’s” room, where many great rinpoches and lamas have stayed over the years. Nowadays, aside from a few visitors, it is mostly empty. The years when a great many Tibetan lamas were traveling America were the later 1970s through perhaps the 1990s. In other areas of the center (and our house), we have additional shelves of dharma books, not to mention a pile of boxes containing even more books on Buddhism. And of course I am not even mentioning the twelve file cabinets of dharma transcripts, translations, and

publications I still have to sort through -- all written aspects of the dharma.

I can't say I have read all of these books, but I know I have read more than enough. This blog focuses on the dangers of reading about dharma and not implementing what we read. Not wanting to put too fine a point on it, nevertheless I am certainly going to put a point on it.

As beginners, before we have attained any realization, all we have is whatever conceptual and intellectual framework we have been able to cobble together by ourselves as to what realization, much less enlightenment might be like. We all do this.

The more intellectual and studious we are, the worse for wear our expectations and conjectures tend to be. We can lacquer our concepts a thousand times, layer on layer, only to end up with a heavier paperweight. One wonders whether someone with no expectations at all would be much easier to point out the true nature of the mind to than most of us. For example, it is said that in the late 1950s in Tibet, the great Khenpo Gangshar travelled the countryside, apparently blazing with light, pointing out the true nature of the mind to everyone he met along the road, monks and lay people alike.

My teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche and the Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche saw Khenpo Gangshar in person and received those teachings. Their account is that an enormous number of people were illuminated by those teachings, including themselves.

My point is that over time, our intellectual constructs, conceptions, and embroidered expectations as to the results of our dharma practice end up more as an anchor that, if it does not sink us, will at least hold us down for a very long time. Sophistication is a double-edged sword.

The problem is that we soon forget that it was we who assembled all this dharma information in our mind, and we begin to think that our expectations and conceptualizations about dharma are, in fact, the reality itself. Literally, nothing could be further from the truth.

I am not saying I no longer read dharma texts. I do, but I mostly read what are called the pith texts, source materials, which are very concise synopses of essential teachings. In my case, I read them on and off, for a time getting a lot out of them, but my ability to absorb fades, and I have to put the texts down for a few months while I work to implement what I have read, and then pick them up again. When I discover them again, they often read like I have never seen them before. So, I absorb dharma texts by degrees.

I well know that it is tempting to read one more book on dharma rather than put that same time into actual practice. Why is this? There are probably many reasons, but most of us know how to read and imagine, but perhaps feel clumsy and inadequate when it comes to actually knowing what to do, dharma-wise. I get this image of an immense number of folks, books in hand, peering beyond the pages at actual dharma practice, but unable to make the move to action.

While the dharma is beautiful in theory and written word, the results of dharma practice are repeatedly said to be ineffable, unable to be put into words. That fact should interest you. What that says is the experience of dharma, and in particular the realization of the dharma, is of another order of magnitude greater as to significance in our life than study and conceptualization.

Dharma has always been intended as a path and practice, rather than something to study or contemplate. We have to actually practice dharma, a step at a time, and go beyond conceptualization and into pure action. As Shakespeare said, "To be, or not to be," whether to struggle in the "pale cast of thought" or commit ourselves to act and total immersion.

By definition, we cannot get our conceptual thinking around the mind itself, but we can be wholly immersed and fully extended in the mind.

VIPASSANA

May 26, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewikne.net)

Thoughts,
The windows of the mind,
Are not something,
To follow or reject.

I look through them.

Wedged between,
The past and the future,
Like the eye of a needle,
Is this present moment.

That too,
We have to see through.

[A little poem written some years ago, this one about Insight Meditation (Vipassana). It points out the incredible value of thoughts to us in our dharma practice, not as things to follow the content of, but rather as portholes into the actual nature of the mind, not just something to see through, but equally something to see by, lamps that illuminate not only themselves, but equally everything in the darkness of time.

Just as we would take a candle in a dark room and hold it close to a book-page to read, all we have to do is use the nature of thoughts like lamps, shining them

on anything that is unclear, and they are certain to become clear. The last line in the poem may be a bit hidden. It suggests that this moment, "Now," is something we have that must be seen through (endured) and yet, like thoughts, we can also use its light to see by.

Sorry if my idea of poetry is always didactic. For me, it's a formula to re-create an experience, syllable by syllable, just by reciting it. The photo, taken today, is part of an ongoing series on Calla Lilies, why? Because I am not totally mobile yet, and here these lovely flowers are. What else can I do?]

WHEN THE TWO BECOME ONE

April 28, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Like Jambi, the floating-head in the Pee Wee Herman Show, who always wanted a pair-of-hands, we too lack hands-on experience when it comes to the realization of the mind. In the “Lineage Prayer,” perhaps the most important prayer of the Karma Kagyu tradition, a whole section is devoted to not being stuck in conceptuality. The line goes:

“To the meditator who rests there in naturalness, grant your blessing that meditation be free from intellectualization.”

That’s saying something, and getting “free” of intellectualization is easier said than done. In my own experience, I know only too well the dangers of thinking things instead of experiencing them first hand, much less actually realizing them. Throughout the history of dharma, “realization” has been the key to enlightenment, and nothing else. “Realization” is not intellectual understanding and realization is not an experience that comes and goes. Conceptual study can be important, but a little study goes a long way. Unless you are a scholar, texts and books are just a road map, and little more.

Unless we want to study them professionally, road maps just help us get to where we are going. So, those who have huge Buddhist libraries and would rather read another book about dharma than practice

it had better think it through. Putting off practice in favor of study is nonsensical. It's like sitting by the swimming pool reading books on swimming and never entering the water. What's holding us up?

I believe that the single reason more folks don't get into the dharma is lack of guidance and perhaps a little fear of the unknown or perhaps looking foolish. And, as we don't want just anyone doing brain surgery on us, it may take a special person to be able to point out to us the true nature of the mind. We have to be prepped and ready to receive the pointing out instructions, so a lot of it is ultimately on us.

If you have ever watched how space orbiters maneuver to lock together in a docking bay, this is analogous to what happens in the pointing-out instructions. And it is very simple in concept. The true nature of the mind is just what it always has been. However, our expectations and concepts as to what that nature is do not synch with the reality. To the degree that they are out-of-line or synch, that is what has to be pointed out.

In other words, an authentic (realized) teacher has to determine how "off" we are with our expectations from the reality and, like docking those space stations, carefully maneuver us until we successfully grasp the reality. It is like how a mother guides the nipple to the infant's mouth. Once we latch on to the reality, we automatically let go of all our expectations and conceptual thinking. They vanish in the reality. Why? Because when we realize the actual nature of the mind, there is no more guesswork or conceptualization. There is just the reality itself.

This, then, is the job of the realized teacher: to guide and tweak us so we can grasp the reality (the true nature of the mind). We don't grasp how much our expectations are just conceptualizations until, through the pointing-out instructions, we recognize the true nature of the mind, after which they are abandoned instantaneously.

“THIS IS IT!”
June 30, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

From the Hevajra Tantra:

This is called “Samsara.”

This is called “Nirvana.”

Nirvana will not be realized somewhere else,
By abandoning Samsara.”

[This is an almost constant refrain in the writings of the great siddhas and mahasiddhas, not only that there is no back door to enlightenment, but more specifically that Samsara and Nirvana are two sides of the same coin. Like the Macrobiotic literature explained to me many years ago, “The bigger the front, the bigger the back.”

Or, as my first true dharma teacher would say to me so often “This is it! Sometimes he would say “This can be hell, Michael. We have to make heaven in a little corner of it.” And the choir of enlightened beings seem to endlessly sing that the place to start is right where we are, meaning that we can’t change what we refuse to accept as our reality. It is all about recognizing the true nature of the mind.

The entire Vajrayana tradition is basically about alchemy, all about transforming lead into gold, turning our current situation into the means of liberation, because: it is the exact means for liberation that we happen to have at hand.

I spent many years working as an astrological counselor, giving readings, and if I had to sum up what the reading process is all about, it is helping the client to accept their situation as the means to change it. The typical reading scenario is like a template. The client arrives complaining about their particular situation, whatever it may be – kids, husband, job, etc. Their mind is made up (and fed up) not to take it anymore, not accepting their particular situation. Then, as they gradually realize that they are trying to get as far away from their problem as they can, like attempting to climb out of a deep lake from the middle, they finally break down. The tears flow and they let go of whatever death grip they have on their personal reality, trying to keep it at bay. As they start to come back into their body (or the body of their circumstances), they are able to take a new grip by accepting their own situation for what it is, not as the end result of their life, but as the only means to change it.

The dharma quote above is saying pretty much the same thing. You can't change or transform what you refuse to accept.