

REACTIVE ALCHEMY

October 27, 2013

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Like going to school for a single class or to church only on Sunday for an hour, with that amount of practice we get what we pay for. An hour or so a week gets us an hour or so a week of training, nothing more. Think it through. If we practiced an hour a week on guitar, we would not exactly be the musician we envisioned.

I don't intend this to sound too harsh, but even an hour a day of practice leaves 23 hours to unravel what we have done and generally accumulate karma. Part-time solutions seldom satisfy full-time needs.

I knew early on I needed to spend more time than that on mind training, but who has the time? In truth, it was not only the time, but also the tedium and boredom I often experienced just sitting there struggling with my mind, usually waiting for the clock to run out. It was pretty much self-defeating and I had no idea then that the struggle was a good sign! Dharma practice should not really be clocked. So what's the solution?

Obviously the solution requires more (not less) time spent, but perhaps in short bursts. Most of the great meditation teachers and texts say to do many short sessions rather than one long session. And they say that we should be careful not to overstay a session by pushing it longer than we feel like. Sure, we can push the limits to see if we like it, but if we don't like it, if we want to cut and run, that is not a good sign. In that case we need to regroup. A certain amount of joy, at least enthusiasm, is required to practice dharma properly. So what are our options?

I already mentioned many short sitting-meditation sessions, but that may be difficult to arrange, fraught with scheduling problems and perhaps self-consciousness. What is needed is a method to practice whenever and wherever we are that does not draw undue attention to itself. Fortunately there is a handy and portable solution at hand, your own moment-to-moment reactions.

It was no accident that my Tibetan dharma teacher (with whom I have been working with for 30 years now) did not first suggest that I learn basic sitting meditation (Shamata). Instead he pointed out a technique called Tonglen in a Tibetan text and suggested I might practice that.

Now Tonglen, when done properly, is a complete dharma practice that we can do

anywhere and anytime, so it is very portable. And it is a perfect example of Buddhist psychology, which can involve going against what we would think is the usual flow, going counter to what our personal preference might be. Our self is used to always going for the good stuff, getting more of whatever we like, not less, and certainly not giving anything away. It is almost like the prime rule of self is that we can always add more attachments, but never take any of them away. Left to its own devices, self-attachment is cumulative.

But Tonglen looks the ego right in the eye and suggests just the opposite, to give out with the good stuff and take in what we normally would totally avoid, like the suffering and pain of others that we see in this world. With Tonglen practice we send the best that we have in us out to another, and take in all of the pain and suffering that they have on ourselves. This is not something most of us would think to do, right? It is counter-intuitive to our upbringing.

However, in Buddhist psychology Tonglen is an express route to spiritual growth, a complete form of meditation all by itself. And it is a lot easier for westerners to learn than basic sitting meditation. I am not going to say much here about how the whole idea of Tonglen freaked me out when I first read about it. I have told the story several times in blogs, but it sure disturbed me. It was counter to everything I had been taught up to that point. And I am not even going to go into much detail about the practice of classical Tonglen. You can find it in the free e-book section at this link, the book "Training the Mind: Dharma Practice," (book one) or on the web in many places. Pema Chodron is an expert on Tonglen, and what she writes is accurate.

<http://dharmagrooves.com/e-Books.aspx#Dharma>

Suffice it to say that IMO Tonglen is tailor-made for Americans and, better yet, we all already kind of instinctively know how to do it. What I want to explain here is a subset of standard Tonglen. But those of you who respond to this idea, by all means learn the classic Tonglen as traditionally taught, because it is very powerful and totally useful. What I present here is but a refinement, but it may be an easier approach for many of us.

I learned this method from my first true dharma teacher, who shared with me a little trick he did with a piece of string. The secret was that you could add on as much string as you wanted, but you could never take any string away that was once given. At the time I wondered why he would bother with such a trick, but over time I found the profundity in it. And here is the key.

In western psychology the emphasis is often on removing self-attachments by force, often before we are willing to give them up. Deny ourselves, diet, etc. Tonglen (on the other hand) takes the opposite approach. Self-attachment is removed not by limiting our attachments, but rather by expanding what we identify as self until we identify the entire world (and everyone in it) as part of our self. The more our self becomes identified with everything and everyone, the less hold our attachments have on us and they begin to break down and we see through them. There is no more "self and others," because others have become part of our self. What a brilliant solution to an age-old problem! It is worth thinking this through.

In essence, Tonglen is a method to identify that which we don't already identify with, like everything "else" in the world outside ourselves, especially what we positively reject or don't like -- the "them" is not "me" kind of thing. In other words, as I present it here, this form of Tonglen is about pinpointing our reactions and doing something about transforming them incrementally and on the spot. And it is true alchemy that gives a pure result.

Like all mind training techniques, Tonglen depends on awareness to make it work, so it does require that we wake up enough to notice our own reactions, like if we flinch when someone we really don't like walks into the room. That's a reaction. But it does not have to be another person. It can be a thing or an event, like the wince that comes when we remember we have a dentist appointment -- that kind of experience.

If we wake up to our reactions and begin to watch them carefully, we have a chance to identify and make friends with parts of ourselves that we have somehow excluded from what we could call the inner circle of our self. And I am not talking about an isolated event or two a day. If we are aware, we find ourselves reacting almost constantly to all kinds of stuff all day long. These reactions are perfect opportunities for dharma practice and we can't seem to avoid them anyway. They offer a very rich field of opportunity for transformation.

The point I like to keep in mind is that each reaction that we have is recording its karma in our mindstream. Of course karma leaves its mark, but that is not the whole of it. Karma is also a seed that always grows and ripens in the future. Therefore, every time we react negatively to someone or something, we not only lay down a track in our mindstream, but we reinforce (or underline) that mark by repetition and guarantee that this very thing we try to push away from us will reappear in a larger and stronger version down the line. That is just how it works. And karma grows exponentially, not linearly.

So "reactive Tonglen" is the practice of becoming aware of what we react to, making

friends with it, and eventually no longer recording that particular reaction as karma that will (literally) haunt us down the line.

If you want to remove the accumulation of loads of karma, monitoring your reactions as described here is a good way to go. And it is so portable. We can do it on or off the cushion, anywhere we are, and all the time. It adds up to real practice beyond what we might otherwise be able to do. And the best thing is that no time is wasted. This may perhaps be the perfect post-meditation dharma practice.

Now I am sure to get a comment or two that this method is all about us, and very selfish on our part, just freeing ourselves from recording more karma. What about helping other people? The answer is very simple. Certainly any person that you make friends with in your mind, that you used to dislike, benefits from your practice. And until we deconstruct the self and its attachments, until they are transparent, we will never gain greater clarity.

And my Buddhist teachers have always encouraged me to first become less attached myself and then try to help others, and not vice versa. Instead, the accent is always on our own practice until such time as we free ourselves and become clear enough to actually be of use to others, and not to just muck things up more than they already are.

Anyway, I have found that monitoring my reactions, recognizing what I am habitually excluding or find negative, and then soothing or making friends with that part of myself is enormously beneficial. And it is portable and easy to do. And best of all, once we identify with our negativities and neutralize them, we no longer record that particular karma. Clarity improves.

Sometimes it is good to start small and work outward, like dropping a pebble in a still pond. As with the "string trick" mentioned earlier, "if you can't beat em', join em'," meaning: if we can't remove our attachments by attrition, try expanding what we include as our self by identifying our negative reactions, making friends with them, and including them as part of who we think we are. It is like blowing up the balloon of the self until it bursts of its own accord by inclusion instead of denial.

Is this not worth trying?

