

# Dharma Blogs 2016 Summer



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 third quarter of 2016, posted on Facebook and Google+.

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Here are some other links to more books, articles, and videos on these topics:

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## LETTING GO

July 1, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

The unborn Shang, also called Tsöndru Drakpa, the nephew of Lord Gampopa, wrote:

“It is said that the elaborations of the three times (past, present, future) must be cut through. This means: Don’t prolong the past. Don’t invite the future. Don’t even consider the present. Rest loosely, by relaxing into the mind’s own nature with awareness, free from contrivance.”

“If you do not know how to relax, your mind will not reach its natural state and wisdom will not dawn. For example, someone bound in shackles has only one thought: escape. If they were not bound, they would not be concerned with escaping. Similarly, if you try to hold your mind, it will scatter. If you do not hold onto it, it is impossible for it to scatter. Therefore, let your mind relax.”

“In that very instant of relaxation, it is impossible for the mind not to be clear, yet unimpeded, sharp, open, transparent, and utterly empty.”

[What is difficult to communicate in these quotes I have been posting lately of these great Buddhist masters is that they are not just another Buddhist saying, one of millions, etc. Instead, these are pith instructions that are echoed by scores of great enlightened masters who all verify their importance.

These quotes may sound so simple, so ordinary, that they go in one ear and right out the other. I don't know how to get your attention other than this, by saying that these pith instructions and teachings are among perhaps a handful of direct statements that are meant to strike at the heart of our distractions. They can shoehorn us into being more alert and aid us in seizing this moment to become more aware, rather than (figuratively) put it aside for later reading.

The Buddhist masters say that in the middle of the endless rounds of experience we are in, "realization" can arise, just like that. And it most often arises by recognizing for ourselves how the mind actually works. Few admonitions or recommendations are more important to consider than that of true relaxation, basically letting go and giving our distractions a rest! I spent years imagining that what the Buddhist teachers meant by "relax" was some kind of spiritual relaxation that I didn't yet know about. However, in truth when they say "Relax," they mean exactly what we mean when we relax. The good news is that we already can do this, like at the end of a long workday.

We have to also relax in our spiritual training. Just relax as it is!]



## THE REST IS EASY

July 2, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

The great Siddha Orgyenpa taught:

“To rest in uncontrived freshness means: rest without tension, like a Brahman spinning thread. Rest unrestrained, like a bundle of hay whose cord has been cut. Rest lightly, as if you were trampling on fleece.”

“On the other hand, even though you may bind yourself, like a silkworm in its cocoon, or force your body and mind together, like a person gathering wood on a steep rocky ledge, your mind may not want to remain still.”

“Within a state free from an object of meditation and a meditator, simply post the watchman of non-distraction, without taxing your mind. Let your mind be free to go where it will and, like a loose mother camel returning to her tethered calf, it will come back to its own place. The essential point for concentrating the mind is this single profound point: know how to relax in a state of non-distraction without meditating.”

[Not to belabor the importance of allowing the mind to just rest, it so very much is the key to success in meditation and dharma practice. Of course, in the beginning we have to make efforts and learn the techniques of meditation, but you can't “try” to

meditate. Effortful-meditation is an oxymoron. Sure, we practice meditation technique, but that is not meditating. Once we learn the basic technique, we must throw effort to the winds and just allow the mind to rest in its own nature, effortlessly and naturally.

The whole process is like “Hurry up and wait,” only here it is “Hurry up and learn to meditate, and then relax as it is.” For me, the relax part was harder than learning the technique. It took me years, and then one day I realized that they really mean just relax, and heaven knows I needed to do that. Once I started to give it a rest, things went better. Actually meditating was not as easy as riding a bicycle, but once I got the hang of it, from there on in, it was automatic. Learning the technique was the stick; the carrot was that nothing else in life is as clear and luminous. IMO, nothing could be as addictive as Insight Meditation.]

## HARD SCRABBLE DAYS

July 3, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

A traditional dharma teaching states:

“If you do not, from your depths, turn away from fixation,  
Even good meditation experiences can disguise the intrinsic state.”

[The operative phrase here to consider is “from your depths,” at least in my opinion. Over the last couple of decades, one particular stark truth has intruded into my consciousness from my own experience. Now, it could just be my problem, but I sincerely doubt it. More than likely, this is a universal principle that does not get much airplay because it is not a pleasant thought.

The idea is simple. We spend a lot (perhaps most) of our time, as the occultists like to say, “out of the body,” as opposed to “in the body.” We kind of float above it all. I guess this is what the Buddhists call “ignorance,” at least the part where we consciously ignore what we find too difficult to keep in mind. We agree to forget what we find so hard (painful) to remember.

What I have learned is that most of my dharma “breakthroughs” (or whatever progress I have made) came, not in good times, but in hard times, painful

times, times when I was forcibly popped out of my normal bubble of complacency and had to scramble to survive, psychologically and/or physically. It was in those harder times that I finally was ready, willing, and able to learn about the nature of my own mind. That does not speak well of me or, perhaps if I am not the Lone Ranger, of the human condition in general.

In other words, I am surprised at what it takes to get my complete attention about simple things like the reality of death and/or, for that matter, life. It's like I live in a bubble of ignoring, willing to do almost anything to not have it popped. Then, when something heavy happens, like the death of a loved one or some event that is truly sobering, I break through all of that ignorance and start to wake up.

The phrase “Even good meditation experiences can disguise the intrinsic state” is not meant to instill doubt about our meditation progress. That's not the point, which is that without a deep conviction at core level, it is all too easy to end up endlessly rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic, instead of irrevocably entering the path of dharma realization.

So, what level of conviction does it take and how do we measure it, when we have yet no actual realization ourselves? How can we know? Thankfully, there is a clear answer to this question, which is that there is a singular event in our dharma training, which the Tibetan Buddhists call “Recognition,” referring to our recognizing the true nature of the mind, finally and for the first time.

“Recognition” is the result of what are called the Pointing-Out Instructions (as to the true nature of the

mind) that are given by an authentic dharma teacher, and not something that we can stumble on ourselves by trial and error. So, in my understanding, the phrase “from your depths” refers not to some sliding scale of experience (or to experience at all), but rather to the unique, singular, and once-on-a-lifetime recognition of the true nature of the mind -- how the mind works. And, since the great Mahasiddhas point out that only an authentic dharma teacher can point the true nature of the mind out to us, rather than trying to go it alone, our time is best spent searching out a dharma teacher that we can actually understand and learn from, and then cultivating that relationship.

I am not saying that there are no other Buddhist paths, but only that traditional Vajrayana Buddhism, sometimes called the “short path to enlightenment,” involves working with an authentic teacher who has Recognition and thereby can point it out to us. This is what I understand to be the case.]

## CONNATE?

July 6, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

Dakpo Rinpoche said:

“In regard to connate union, one may ask: ‘What arises in union?’ Awareness and emptiness are connate. They are not separate. Because awareness, clarity, and bliss are unified with emptiness, they are connate union.”

[This word “connate” is important to understand in Buddhist training, but it is unfamiliar to most of us. The statement that appearances (awareness) and emptiness are “connate,” means that they exist from birth (or from the beginning) innately, as in: already closely-joined. Sometimes this concept is spoken of as “connate union,” the union with the natural state, where all manifestations, like a many-headed hydra, are bound or connected as one.

In other words, it is not that connate implies that two things have joined up or come together as one, but rather that one undivided thing (that has always been together) can have different qualities, just as one coin has two sides. Appearances (or awareness) and emptiness are connate.

As I like to say, it’s not just that appearances that arise in life are empty; It’s that appearances themselves are the emptiness arising. The emptiness

actually appears physically. In other words, the emptiness is not empty of appearance. And conversely, appearances do not appear empty. Appearances are emptiness and emptiness appears. That is because of their being connate.]

## MAHAMUDRA

July 8, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

Just as all roads traditionally lead to Rome, in the Karma Kagyu tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, all dharma training leads to the practice and realization of Mahamudra Meditation. The word Mahamudra is Sanskrit, but in Tibetan the term for Mahamudra is “Chak-Gya Chenpo” or just “Chak Chen” for short, and it is endlessly talked about, even though it cannot be expressed in words.

“Chak-Gya” means mudra or seal and “Chenpo” meaning great, “Chak” is an honorific word for hand, referring to the hand of a guru, Lord of the Realm (Chakravartin), or deity, while “Gya” means “seal,” thus the seal or sign of the hand (mudra). If we put this all together, Mahamudra is the great seal or symbol/sign that asserts that nothing extends beyond the nature of the mind itself. There is no “beyond.” If we keep on going out, we end up turning inward, like the form of a “torus” as seen in the works of M.C. Escher or like a container that also contains itself, such that there is nothing beyond what is, including nothing.

In the Western occult tradition, there is the term “Ring Pass-Not,” referring roughly to a similar concept, that nothing extends beyond “this.” All that is (and isn’t) is included within the Mind itself.



This is why Mahamudra is often called the "Great Seal," the "MAHA Mudra," the mudra (or seal) that encapsulates all other mudras.

The Glorious Ninth Karmapa, Wangchuk Dorje put it this way:

"Whatever varieties of dualistic phenomena manifest, whether positive or negative, they do not pass beyond emptiness; thus they are sealed (gya). For example, no matter how many birds fly in the sky or fish swim in the distant oceans, they do not pass beyond the sky or the water "

## **“Ordinary Mind” or “ordinary mind”**

July 11, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

For sure, what is called “Ordinary Mind” (with capital letters) by the Tibetans (Tamal Gyi Shepa) is something most of us have yet to realize. What we are more familiar with is our own ordinary mind, unrealized, and with all its attendant confusion. I am sure it is the same mind, either way, only one view is unrealized, etc.

How many of us can actually meditate as opposed to practicing (learning) meditation? As the great rinpoches continually point out: when we are not meditating (or thereabouts), our mind reverts to being perfectly ordinary once again, just like that! In that ordinariness, all of our fears, expectations, and countless feelings are just what they always have been, or close to it. Thankfully, there is a point beyond which we don’t revert and go backward, but that point is hard to reach and, as the teachings state (at least in our lineage), it can’t be reached without an authentic teacher. Sure, over the years I have met many who tell me that they are their own teacher or that having a teacher is a weakness, but that kind of arrogance is early to despair; and I have seen it.

There does exist a path; I do know of a way, where, through dharma practice, the world eventually conspires to wake us up and clarifies our mind instead of confound us. I would say “Buddhism,” but

there are so many different kinds of Buddhism that this could be misleading. What I can say is that authentic dharma training is something that you can trust. And the only way we know if the dharma we are encountering is authentic is if, when we hear or read it, we understand, take it to heart, and it actually changes us. There is no other way that I know. Dharma is as individual as we are each individuals, but when it speaks to us and we hear it deep-down, that is authentic.

It is true that in beginning dharma practice, what little we understand or experience through our practice is dwarfed by the sea of emotions and life-experience that still turbulently surrounds us. In some ways, it can seem easier to just give up practicing meditation and forget about dharma. Our dharma progress seems dwarfed by all of our habitual confusion. However, the vicious up-and-down cycles of samsara do not just up and go away; instead, they continually wash us up on the shore of whatever kind of suffering we have exposed ourselves to. The reemergence of suffering of our up and down cycles eventually drives us on (as the Buddhists term it) to seek “refuge” from the cycles of samsara in the Dharma. Refuge means just that, shelter from samsara and a safe place to bloom dharmically. We will all eventually find it, we must; it is only a matter of time.

Officially seeking refuge (the Buddhist Refuge Ceremony) is something we can request from an authentic teacher and they will offer it to us. This short formal ceremony typically happens when we reach a point where we see that the dharma can be an actual path for us, a refuge. In other words, before the refuge ceremony, we have already taken refuge.

## AWAKENED HEART

July 12, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

Bodhicitta is a Sanskrit term not everyone is familiar with. For years, after just reading the word (this was in the 1950s), I never even tried to pronounce it. Like so many foreign words, when my eyes found it on a page, I would just say to myself “that word.” In the 1950s, it was too foreign and hard to even hazard a guess how to pronounce it. And later, when I dared to read it, I kind of made up my own pronunciation of the word, and it took many years to unlearn that when I finally heard it said out loud properly.

Bodhicitta is pronounced “bō-DEE-cheat-ah,” but what does it mean?

Bodhicitta is often translated as “Awakened Heart” or “Enlightened Heart.” There are traditionally two main types of Bodhicitta, and it is important to know the difference, Aspirational Bodhicitta and Engaged Bodhicitta.

From “Engaging in the Conduct of a Bodhicitta,” we read:

“To summarize this bodhicitta,  
It should be understood to be of two types:  
Aspirational bodhicitta and engaged Bodhicitta.

Just as one understands the difference between,  
Wishing to go and going,  
So the wise should understand,  
The difference between these two types of bodhicitta,  
respectfully.”

What a great definition! In other words, aspirational Bodhicitta has to do with a result, a change we want to see in ourselves, what it will take to prepare us for “engaged” Bodhicitta. Meanwhile, “Engaged” Bodhicitta is what happens when we have realized Bodhicitta enough to care and be concerned about other (and all) sentient beings. Engaged Bodhicitta is literally feeling for ourselves the compassion that drives us to want to be of use to others. When we have even a little realization, compassion for others arises automatically. So the good advice, IMO, is to go for the realization, and let the compassion arise on its own from that.

## **“THEY SHOOT HORSES, DON’T THEY?”**

July 13, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

We don’t euthanize people, at least not much. But we do euthanize dogs and other pets... like, all the time, almost as a default. I should know; I did that with almost all of my dogs until now (had them put down), and I have had dogs since before I could walk. When their quality of life and visible suffering became more than (probably I, not the dog) could bear, I would take my dearly beloved pet to the vet and have it put down, sometimes in my presence.

I won’t even mention swatting mosquitoes and flies, stomping on spiders, and all of that. On my first trip to Tibet, I clearly took in that Tibetans did not harm any beings. I watched as they gently brushed mosquitoes from their arms and went out of their way to not step on ants or they picked up worms crossing a highway and would carry them to safety on the other side. I was never raised to do that.

Note: This is a sensitive topic. Certainly, here is where we can be free to differ and find our differences, hopefully in an informational manner. Just because I do one thing does not mean I have anything against you for doing the opposite. What I do ask is respect and non-aggression in this discussion. This argument about euthanasia reminds me of the NRA and the kind of emotions even talking about gun reform involves.

The Buddhist position, at least in my experience, is that all beings should die naturally, as opposed to being put down. One Tibetan teacher said that it is OK to put an animal down, provided you are willing to take on the karma of killing another sentient being. He went on to describe the particular kind of hells you would visit for euthanizing another being. That is one way of saying it. His view was it was killing, plain and simple.

When I asked my teacher of 33 years about our dear Molotov (“Molly”), who is dying these days... slowly, asking him at what point in his pain he might be put down, his response was that it is important for each being to live out their karma, to the fullest extent. Otherwise, they are reborn and have to go through it all over again until their karma has fully ripened. He went on to say that euthanasia not only makes it that the karma has to be ripened in another life, but also that it will be more difficult, as well. Of course, he mentioned, that we should do all that we can to make them comfortable, including pain medication, and so on, but we don’t cut their life short.

Since I am in the middle of this these very days, I probably am a little sensitive on this issue just now. I have been sleeping in the same room (on the couch) where Molly has been for many months. Now Margaret and I are on 24x7 duty, helping him up, carrying him outside since he can no longer walk, cleaning up after him, and cleaning him with soap and water when he messes. Also, we have to hold the water bowl up to his chin, and feed him with a spoon, every meal. As we wind down here, I am up half the night comforting him when he cries out. I have learned a couple of things.

I have learned (more than I knew) that a sentient being is a sentient being... is a sentient being. We all want love and care. I thought that Molly's pain was his worst suffering, but over these last weeks it is clear that loneliness and not being in the same room with him, holding his head, massaging him, and so on is even more important. We are his family, his everything, and when we are not near, he suffers even more. We are all he knows.

Last night, we carried him into my office, where we often watch movies, and placed him between us on the couch (on a waterproof blanket) and watched a movie together. Molly has slept in my office for many, many years. He has slept on this very couch with me when I would nap, and in the cold of winter, he would crawl under the same blanket I have and cuddle up. It was clear he was comforted to be in the office with Margaret and myself. I am learning this.

So, that is my report. You may feel differently, which I respect. Please respect how I feel and how (and why) I feel it is important for Molly to live out his karma, without my trying to alter it.

OM MANI PADME HUM.



## FRESH BREAD

July 14, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

Nothing strikes me to write about, so I will write about writing. Like Insight Meditation, I will look right at the question of what to write about itself, and how.

When it comes to writing these blogs, something there is that drives me from within, like an itch I need to scratch. I can't get at the root or heart of it deep inside there, but I can work it out each day by allowing what is inside to take one (or even many) external forms. Superficially, I may think I want to do this (or want to do that), but often that's just the superficial result (the outer effect) of this inner urge and drive I'm talking about.

The interesting point (to me) in what I am trying to say here is that I wake up in the morning, not with a specific thing or idea I want to accomplish, but rather with this "itch" or yearning to express myself. It is something deep inside that is uncomfortable until I find some way to satisfy it. Take for example these daily blogs:

I don't usually have a topic in mind and I don't write them days ahead, but literally make them up on the spot, like you would do something to clear your head or perhaps how simple exercise can relax us. I follow my intuition as I feel around in there for something, an idea or direction that "feels" right and then throw that

up against the wall. And like the sculptor who adds clay to make a form, I build from that, until there is a form and direction, after which I assemble the blog.

In other words, I prefer a spontaneous expression. I seldom know where a topic is headed, even if I have written about it a hundred times before. Yes, the topic may not be new, but the particular expression of it is, just as we make a fresh cup of coffee each morning, rather than warm up what we had yesterday. The topic may be old, but this view or run at it speaks of the moment. I am seldom happy with what I have written even a day or so before. It does not satisfy me unless it is of the moment. I write it now.

I have come to believe that my intuition (and inner cauldron) is always fluid and malleable. Like the Sun, it husks itself and throws off stuff from inside outward that takes on form as it hits the air; it is emitted as flares and other forms of mass ejection. So, my internal intuition has no name and no particular form. Maybe it's like lava from a volcano, coming from deep inside and taking on different forms as it reaches the outside world. Who can say?

As I get older, I have a longer and longer list of things I have to do each day, just to stay even, but none is more essential than clearing my channels through some kind of spontaneous creativity in one form or another. It has become an actual (and important) part of my dharma practice, because this type of creativity was how I first learned to do Insight Meditation. The result of successfully doing Insight Meditation is a combination of extreme clarity and luminosity. Creative writing is my way of clearing my inner passages and setting my winds and channels in

order. The other method I have is the process of photography, which serves the same purpose. I don't know about "Be Here Now," but I do subscribe to "Do Here Now."

## DHARMA BEYOND WORDS

July 16, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

What's beyond words or as the Tibetans say "beyond elaboration?" Well, for sure it wouldn't be words or could not be put in words, as I just pointed out, so what is it? I guess it's like the difference between shuffling our feet (just talking about it) as opposed to letting go and doing it, living life directly. The irony is you can't really talk about it until you first have experienced it, but we do just the opposite. We talk about it forever, but never get around to shoving off and just doing it. It reminds me of Shakespeare's Hamlet, when in his soliloquy he says:

"And thus the native hue of resolution  
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,  
And enterprises of great pith and moment  
With this regard their currents turn awry,  
And lose the name of action."

"And lose the name of action" is what I am referring to. We never get around to it, life ends, and we still have only our big toe in the swimming pool. We never could make up our mind. Forget about determination, because we remain undetermined or worse, our lack of determination is our form of determination. It happens... a lot.

Understanding dharma is often claimed after just reading and talking about it, and that kind of

intellectualization will take you right up to the point where words are unnecessary and can no longer cut it. From that point onward, it just goes without saying.

And that's what we're talking about here, post-verbal, as in: beyond words. Once again, it's not that we are not allowed to speak, but rather that it is impossible to express what we are experiencing. Part of it is that, as mentioned, we can't find the words, but the other part is that no one can hear us. Remember that old saying "If you lack the faculty, you can't see the phenomenon? Well, that is the case here. Those without the realization have little to no idea what a realized person is talking about... plus, as mentioned, those with realization can't find the words. So there it is: a double-bind.

The dharma road of intellectualization and word-play is a crowded highway that bunches up when it reaches an event called "Recognition" (Kensho in Zen). The remains of endless talk and intellectualizing, consonants and vowels, pile up like bleached bones on a beach. This is where words end and realization begins. Intellectual understanding can only take us so far and no farther. Beyond that, we, ourselves, must realize. The endless koans and pointing-out-instructions are the gatekeepers to realization and, unlike so many things in life, we can't fake recognition. We either actually recognize the true nature of the mind for ourselves or we do not. Only with actual "recognition" can we know what to do next. Much has been made (and should be made) of this key transition point.

The dharma path beyond words is similar to a single drop of water falling on a very still pond. The mirrored

reflection in the still surface of the water begins to break up as the first drop hits, and concentric circles widen ever more inclusively, taking in more and more of the pool. That first drop is “Recognition.” Deepening and widening our realization is what our dharma path becomes once recognition is achieved.

I know. I sound like a preacher. Sorry about that but, I’m just sayin’.

## **SURPRISE BIRTHDAY PARTY**

July 18, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

Talk about a magical illusion, where reality appears as like a dream... I am hard to surprise, but yesterday was just that and I never saw it coming, a surprise birthday party, something I have never experienced before. I mentioned yesterday our immediate-family reunion, with 18 of us gathering at our home here in Big Rapids, Michigan for the weekend. Little did I know that was just the tip of the iceberg, and the whole reunion thing was just a ruse for a surprise party for my 75th birthday, which is today (Monday).

I don't know where to begin, so I'll start with the surprise. I was busy taking care of our aging dog Molotov, who is in the process of passing away. I was also waiting for my daughter May and her husband Seth to arrive (with their daughter Iris). Everyone else was already here. Then, my son Michael came in and said that May was down at our studio, where she had a present for me. I had no idea (nor did I stop to think) what that might be, but May is known for making special birthday cards and whatever, so I just got up and jumped in the car with my son and we headed for the studio, which is about a block away.

As we got close to the studio, I could see that all the parking spots were all taken. I knew May was on tour these last days, playing at The Ark in Ann Arbor and other places, so I thought maybe her band was here

with her and they might play me a song. As the car pulled up, I began to see that next to the studio there was a big blue and white tent taking up the entire side yard and it was literally filled with people. I guess this was the point where I began to figure out that this was a surprise party, but it was more like the sun coming up than a flash flood.

What was happening in my mind as all this dawned on me is that in the crowd I was just beginning to recognize one person after another and I was amazed. If you could have cherry-picked from all the folks I know, the most cherished, these are some of the folks I was recognizing, one by one. I guess this where the whole event began to take on the appearance of a waking dream. My idea of a surprise party probably came from watching too many movies, you know, where everybody jumps out and shouts out "Surprise!" and you are surprised.

Certainly this too was like a movie, but one in which many of the folks I most care about starred. As my eyes swept over the group, I kept discovering (person after person) these very special people in my life. I must have looked stunned, standing there being amazed at what was happening to me. Many of these people came a long distance both in space and time, flying in from places like Colorado and India, and friends from the neighborhood, the town, and all over Michigan. How could I have time to express to each one what they meant to me and what value they have brought to my life? The best I could do was go around and hug them. I wish I could have sat down and have a real talk. Anyway, I was moved by the impact of recognizing these friends, one after another. There must have been sixty or more people there.



And there was a special surprise. I believe someone said “Look who’s here.” I looked, and there was someone coming up the aisle, but clearly they were hiding behind the person in front of them so that I could not recognize them. Then out stepped one of my dearest friends, all the way from India, Ngodup Burkhar, who had been the translator for our teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche for over 12 years. Of course, those of you who know Ngodup understand that he was instantly the life of the party.

There was also a huge natural-foods feast and set up at the far end was a little stage where music was to be played. I just went around from person to person thanking them for coming, wishing I could spend more time with each one. Then May and Seth played a set of music just for me, some of my favorite songs and a couple requests from me as well. Of course, perhaps my favorite of the set was “Sweet Days,” of which this day was one. Here is a live recording of it from 2011:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E\\_z0Nxyu2Gk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_z0Nxyu2Gk)

An enormous amount of work went into pulling this off and I am humbled to have such friends. Later we went back to our home and talked until late. I was in the living room, where Margaret and I cared for our failing dog Molotov, with a circle of friend surrounding him. It is now the middle of the night as I write this and I have to stop writing every five minutes and care for Molly dog. I am very tired, but very happy.

Well, just as life gets surreal from time to time, it also gets real.

[A photo snapped of the party. At the lower right are my son-in-law Seth Bernard, with my daughter May and my granddaughter Iris. Next to them is my son-in-law Michael Lee, who is the partner of my daughter Michael Anne. Lots of Michaels around here.]



## OUR FRIEND NGODUP BURKHAR

July 19, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

One of the highlights of my surprise 75th birthday party was the appearance of my dear friend Ngodup Burkhar. Margaret and I met Ngodup Burkhar the very day I first met my dharma teacher of 33 years, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. Ngodup was then serving as translator (and often attendant) for Khenpo Rinpoche, which he did for over 12 years. And previous to that he had been translator for H.H. Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, the 16th Karmapa, just as he continues today to often serve the 17th Karmapa, Orgyen Trinley Dorje. Ngodup was also very close to His Eminence Jamgon Rinpoche and served as a translator for him, as well as many years with the Ven. Bokar Rinpoche.

So, when Ngodup expectantly turned up at my surprise party two days ago, I was not only double-surprised but also very happy to see him. For one, Ngodup is about as fun to be around as it gets and he no sooner arrives somewhere than he immediately delights whoever is there. I don't know why two people who meet become friends, but Ngodup and I are good friends. There is not enough space here to tell you all I should about Ngodup's qualities, but I would like to give you a sense of the man. I know you would love to meet him.

Way back at the beginning, decades ago, Ngodup and my teacher Khenpo Rinpoche travelled together... everywhere. This was before many of us knew how to care for a high lama or perhaps even had the facilities, so Rinpoche spent many nights on couches, tiny rooms with curtains for doors, etc., while Ngodup slept on the floor. I know that whenever one of my kids was really sick or somebody was dying, I could make the long-distance call and wake Ngodup up (even at 2 o'clock in the morning) and he never complained about being disturbed. He would get up, go to Rinpoche, and bring back the answer we so desperately needed to hear. Ngodup always had an awareness for and compassion for others, their needs and suffering. He could put himself in their place. It is something that is just innate in him and that kind of gift is rare, at least in my world.

I could go on for pages reciting stories about the merits of Ngodup Burkhar, but instead I will tell you part of just one Ngodup story, an important one for my family and me. It happened on our first trip to Tibet and India, back in 1997. We were traveling from Katmandu, Nepal into India, on our way to West Bengal. And we took a small plane, but somehow the name of the town of our destination got mispronounced and instead of arriving at Bhadrapur near the southern border of Nepal and India, we got dropped off in Bharitpur smack dab in the jungles of Western Nepal, a good ten-hour drive from the Indian border.

And when I say dropped off, I am not kidding. Before the tiny plane landed, they had to drive the cattle off the runway so we could land. And then, with about a five-foot pile of our luggage sitting in the middle of this

field, we watched the plane take off leaving us there, only to find at the same moment that we were in the wrong town, and so it went. The whole story is a riot and it found us riding elephants through the jungles of Nepal, breaking our own trails, and running into wild rhinoceros and so on. And there were tigers there but we did not come across any, thankfully. For those who would like to read of our adventures, they are here in a free e-book.

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

Anyway, back to our journey. When we finally got to the border crossing into India, we had to run the gauntlet of a dangerous strip of road near the wild-west-like town of Karkavitta, where if you slowed down robbers could commandeer your car, rob you, and they even killed folks from time to time. And the robbers had put in speed bumps everywhere so you would have to slow down. You get the idea.

We finally got through that and off the hot Indian plains and up into the cool mountains of West Bengal where tea is grown. We were on our way to the town of Mirik and the monastery of the Ven. Bokar Rinpoche, where our dear friend Ngodup Burkhar was serving as translator to Bokar Rinpoche. And we were at least a day late, so I knew Ngodup would be worried.

And so he was. And here is the point. We were there to visit our friend Ngodup at his home at the monastery as part of a larger plan to reach Sikkim and other places. The long and the short of it is Ngodup, who was very busy with his own schedule,

quickly figured out that we were pretty-much rubes and easy pickins in a country where we were total strangers. Without hesitation, he dropped what he was doing and insisted on going with us for about a week, making sure that nothing happened to us and making the way easier than what we could have done for ourselves. And so he did.

Thanks to Ngodup clearing the way, and with his help, all of our plans were fulfilled. He introduced us to the rinpoches we wanted to meet, saw that we got the empowerments we needed, and so on. As mentioned, this is one story of many that I could relate pointing out the extraordinary qualities of Ngodup Burkhar. To my mind and in my experience, Ngodup treads the path of (and in-fact is) a true Bodhisattva, and I don't mean that figuratively. He will always deflect such comments with his humor, but behind that I sense the presence of someone becoming a real Bodhisattva.

And so these last couple of days with Ngodup were wonderful. It was hard to say goodbye to him this afternoon as he headed for the airport and on to New York City, where he would see his wonderful family.

So, that's an update. Most of the eighteen members of my family that were here are safely back home and the three remaining will head out tomorrow. Meanwhile, I am still (along with Margaret) pulling all-night vigils with our aging dog Molotov.

[Photo of Ngodup and me in Tibet in 1997.]

## BEST FRIEND

July 20, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

We can't replace,  
What there is,  
Only one of.

MOLOTOV: OM AMI DEWA HRI

Our much-loved dog Molly passed away this night. The last year has been “a long day’s journey into night” for me, as Molly more and more was forced by old age to give up his hold on life. He did not go gently into that good night as the poem says, but very much resisted every step of the way, making it harder for him and certainly more painful. Molotov and I were particularly close, because he slept and spent most of his time in my office with me. That was his den, my den too.

The following is something I wrote about Molly years ago, but it has the flavor of my old friend, so some may appreciate it. As for me, I am sick at heart to lose him. It was a good sign that my friend Ngodup Burkhar arrived for his last days. Sitting around Molly, we recited various prayers, including the Amitabha Sadhana as chanted by H.H. the 17th Karmapa. At other times, a whole bunch of us would sit around the living room (where he spent his last days) talking way into the night. He liked that. Anyway, not sure how

much I will be writing for a few days; my life just shifted in a real way. I will miss him so much

## A DOG STORY: RETOLD

I want to tell you a little something about a very close friend of mine. To look at him, you might see just a little black dog. If you did, you would be far away from the truth, for this dog has probably seen more of the world than most of us reading this now. He has traveled the length and breadth of the country. He has hitchhiked, walked, hiked, driven in cars, and hopped freight trains going who-knows-where. He has busked in cities from the east to the west coast and played music at coffee shops, bars, colleges, and (of course) most often just out on the street.

His full name is Molotov, which should tell you something right off, but most of us just call him Molly. He was born the smallest (and only male) of a litter of half-breed pups, I believe in Ann Arbor, Michigan. His mother was killed by a passing car when he was one week old and still too young to even walk, leaving him helpless. My daughter May, who was brought up raising baby animals (we were part of a local wildlife-rescue team) and returning them to the wild, took compassion on these tiny puppies, and she knew just what to do.

Molly and his sisters were raised in the bottom of an old sleeping bag, hand fed, hand pooped, and carefully kept alive. And to this day, Molly loves to get inside and under anything soft and warm, the original 'underdog'. If there is a blanket or coat laying around with a tail sticking out from under it, that probably is



Molotov. And how I came to have Molly is a short story in itself.

Today, my daughter May is a professional singer/songwriter, known all over the Midwest, heard on the radio, appearing at concerts, festivals, A Prairie Home Companion, etc., but back then she was just a struggling musician out on the road. Her hair was usually in dreadlocks and it could be pink, blue, or both colors. She had all kinds of rings, chains, and what-not hanging on her person and about the only gift she might cherish would be a really cool Swiss army knife. And we did not see as much of her as we would have liked.

May was on the road all the time, traveling from city to city, busking for money, and playing music anywhere people gathered and would listen. As an old hippie myself, I took this in stride, but Margaret and I worried about her just about all the time. Her protector was Molotov, who was always by her side, and she even trained him to bark fiercely to ward off whatever. And, although not a big dog, he can sound just like a big, nasty dog, one that you would not want to tangle with.

As mentioned, Molly and May did everything together, hitchhiking from town to town, hopping freight trains, camping out, sleeping wherever they could, and eating whatever was around or going without food. This went on for some years. We saw them both a few times a year, if we were lucky. They would roll into our home, usually with a bunch of friends, all dressed down and punked out, and funky as could be. They would stay for a few days, and then just take off for somewhere else. To them, we must have appeared as the great 'washed' ones.

When May's music began to be noticed, things changed. For one she and Molly were around more. She often lived out back of our house in a tiny cottage, either by herself or with a boyfriend. They did all kinds of things, like make stringed puppets, puppet theaters, build small livable-sized tree houses (I mean two room affairs), and all kinds of stuff like that. We just watched and took it all in, happy to have our daughter around us at least once in a while. And then people began to REALLY love her music.

As a professional music critic (founded: All-Music Guide -- [allmusic.com](http://allmusic.com)) and publisher of music books, I did not know at first what to think of my own daughter playing music. Of course, I loved it. I was her dad! But I soon also knew that her great songwriting abilities had nothing to do with my being her father, especially when famous musicians began playing her music. She was just a natural, just that good. We loved it.

Around the same time, May began to be gone on gigs more and more of the time, and it became increasingly difficult for her to take Molotov with her, especially in winter because there were no dogs allowed in most places she was now playing. She was no longer busking on the streets where dogs can be tolerated. So Molly stayed home with us more and more of the time. This was not a problem, because if there is one thing I like, it is dogs (better than most people), and soon Molly and I became closer and closer friends. May really loved Molly, but she also could see that I did too, and it made it easier for her to leave him with us much of the time. And Molly and I just hung out a lot, and I mean A LOT.

Molly would spend most of his time in my office sleeping on the couch there (the only couch in the house he was allowed on), and when I took a nap, Molly was right there crawling under the blanket with me, pushing me to one side. You remember that he loves to be under cloth of any kind. And so it began, a real friendship.

And some years ago Molly officially became my dog when I downloaded some legal adoption papers from the Internet, filled them out, and had May sign them. I even checked the box that said he was part Native American, which added some clout to his pedigree IMO. We all would like a little Native American in us. And sign them she did. After that, Molly did not travel any more, but he walked with us a lot.

Many years have passed and Molly, like me, is getting older. You would never know it, because he is as bright and sharp as ever, but he does have a distinguished white muzzle these days, like many of us elders do.

I have to tell you that Molly is all about food. He really does live to eat or at least he looks forward to his meals even more than I do, and I can understand. Years ago I discovered how to tell a puppy from an adult dog. You hold a treat up between the dog and yourself and then move the treat sideways to the right or left. If the dog continues to look at you, it is still a puppy, but if it follows the food, it is officially now a dog. And Molly will eat anything, any old grape that has fallen, carrot tops, and once in a while even a piece of lettuce. That is how much he appreciates food.

I tend to get up very early in the morning, often around 2-3 AM. When I come downstairs to my office, there is Molly curled up on the office couch, but he does not acknowledge my arrival. No way. He seldom looks up when I come in. Why? Because he wants everyone to know that he is definitely sleeping now. There he is curled up, head tucked out of sight, and there are no friendly “Good Mornings!” or wagging of tails.

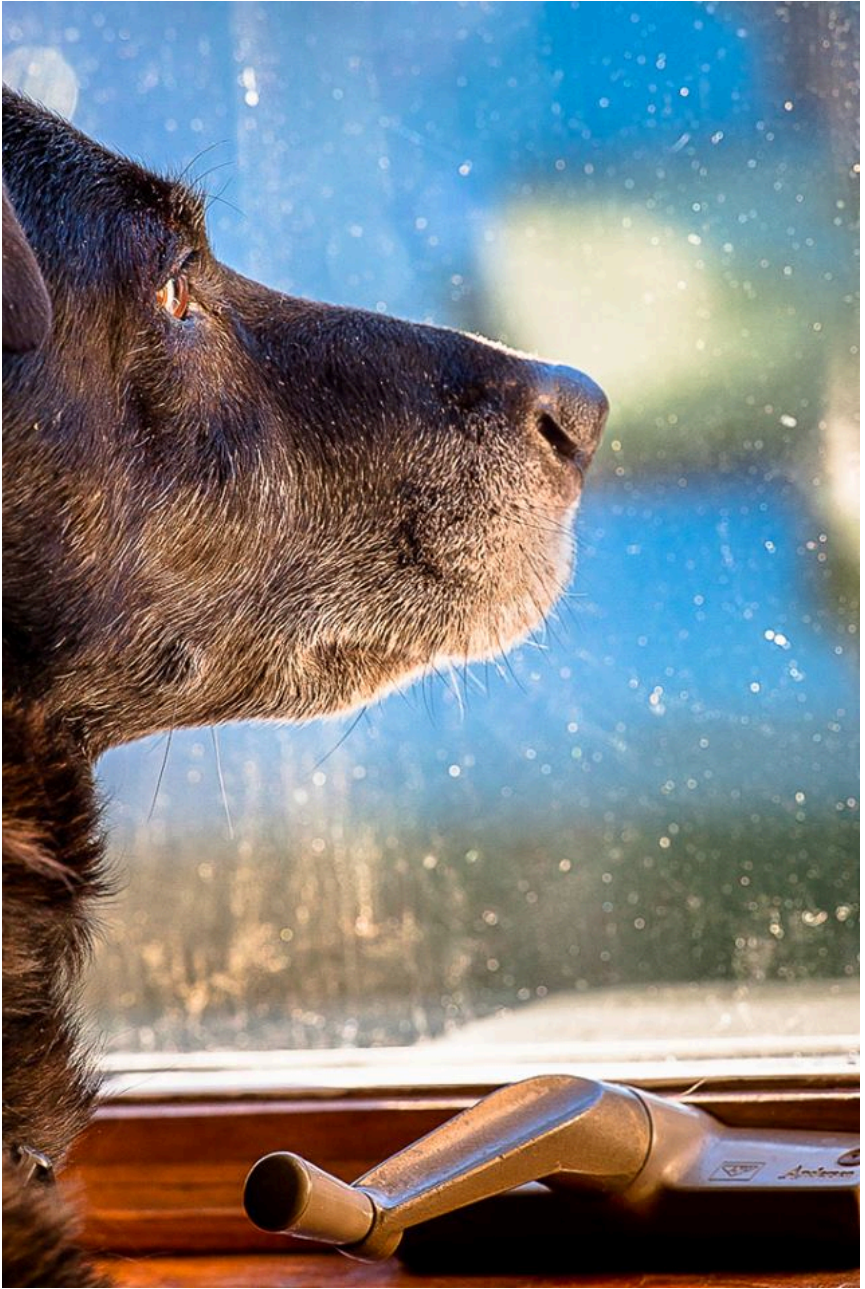
However, around 7 AM, he is up, standing at my feet, wagging his tail, putting his head on my knee, and just as bright and happy as he can be. This is not so much a hello as his message to me that it is time to feed him. He happily escorts me to the kitchen, leaping and prancing the whole way. His meals mean a lot to him and he never forgets to remind us when that time is.

And Molly is a sun dog. An easy way to find him is to look for even the least patch of sunlight that enters the house. There is where you will find Molly, for he is all about the sun. Aside from food, the other thing Molly really loves is walking in the meadows and woods with or without us. He can suddenly take off and disappear on a walk, just when we are distracted for even a brief moment. He just loves to imagine that something is up and needs his attention, the tiniest movement or sound. He will take any excuse to dash into the underbrush and be gone for way longer than we want him to. But sooner or later, at least up to now, he appears, often way behind us on the trail, but running as fast as he can to catch up.

And he loves water and getting into it. He will spend long periods of time in our local creek feeling around

on the streambed with his front paws for rocks or sticks – anything down there – like a raccoon. I could go on but I have already written way more than most people have time to read, except maybe other dog lovers.

Anyway, thanks for listening. I have to go, because Molly wants his breakfast!



## SENTIENT BEINGS AND ME

July 23, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

I have received requests to make our relation to other sentient beings a little more clear.

It is very simple. Here in the West we are raised thinking that life has a hierarchy of importance, something like a caste system. In such a view, the life and consciousness of a dog (or an ant) is not “worth” as much as a human birth. Obviously in America, all sentient beings are not equal; look how animals are treated, pets especially. Since I live in a university town, students treat dogs and cats like a commodity, and a disposable one at that. The cruelty toward animals in this country has been painful to watch and it is rampant. Ignorance is not bliss or an excuse, dharmically. We do what we do and accrue the consequences.

In other countries, this can be different. In Nepal, for example, the punishment for running over a cow on the road can be life imprisonment. The Tibetan Buddhists go to great effort to point out to us that, due to the cycle of rebirth, every sentient being we encounter has probably been our mother or our child in the past. For most people, such a stunning concept goes in one ear and right out the other, correct? Who among us even reflects on the concept, but less realizes it as a fact? Do you? Lip service doesn't count.

In Tibetan Buddhism, because of the karma we accumulate, we have no guarantee of taking rebirth as a human again. It is perhaps more likely that we be reborn as an animal of one kind or another. If we are reborn as an animal, we will not have the ability to do as much about things as we do now in human form. It is very hard (I am told) for an animal to regain a human birth, once it is lost. Of course, I pray and wish that our dog Molotov could take what the Tibetans call a "Precious Human Birth," and have all the options that you and I have.

What do you think all the stories of the many lives of Buddha are all about, where he took different rebirths for one reason or another, all of them karmic? I found it difficult (next to impossible) to, on the one hand, look my Tibetan teacher of 33 years in the eye, and at the same time maintain this idea that all of these Tibetan concepts are just folklore, stories made up that have no real purpose or meaning for modern society.

I reached a point where I switched over from being some kind of benevolent Tibetan folklorist to realizing that Rinpoche was trying to tell me something real and actual that was important, important to me. When he explains that animals and other sentient beings have previously been our mothers (and our children), he means it. How do we rationalize that? Being born as a dog, as Molotov was, and being found and raised by someone like my daughter May is very auspicious. Then being transferred to Margaret and me (and living with us all those years) adds to that. The blessings of lamas and rinpoches that visited (and so on) just further it more, and so on.



Molotov is now free of his dog body (and has finished his dog karma) and, as far as sentient beings are concerned, is equal to someone like you or me... equally a being, ready to take on and animate another form, be it higher or lower.

When I see kids (and adults) stomping out insects and spiders, deliberately killing other sentient beings, or being cruel to their pets, I can only say prayers for them. They know not what they do. I have deep regret that for so many years I fed my dogs kibble, and not much else. Then, when Molly was sick, I fed him the kind of food you and I eat and he not only loved it, but he thrived on it, as we do. We would not feed any other guest in our home kibble, etc. I just never thought about it. I am ashamed at my thoughtlessness.

Every sentient being you meet has been your mother or your child in the past. That is what we need to consider.

## WHEN THE WORM HAS TURNED

July 24, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

I was trained, early-on (in my twenties) by a Rosicrucian initiator who pointed out to me a number of what are called “climatic” events in the human life. A climatic event is a life event that is natural to all of us, one that marks time in an indelible way, but one that is not necessarily celebrated (or even noted) in many societies.

As luck would have it, I was prepared by this esoteric teacher before one of the most major of life events happened, an event often called “The Saturn Return” by astrologers. I was able to go through that event more or less with my eyes open, witnessing it in real time, rather than figure it out years later, as most apparently do. I had this 82-year esoteric master as a guide.

Among other things, I call this event “The Point of No Return.” This point happens to all of us, whether we are aware of it or not. Since it involves awareness, it is possible to (more or less) miss the whole point entirely or just stumble on in, as the Bard put it, “no direction known.” In other words, the point of no return is in a very real sense a “turning point” in life that we all experience. This climatic event happens to each of us at thirty years of age (29.4 years), but our awareness can take years to dawn or not dawn consciously at all.

The point of no return is when we turn around in life (180-degrees) and literally begin to go back the way we came in. This simple reversal is celebrated in the world's poetic literature under a hundred names. In dharma practice, it is the point when we recognize that what we see as the outside world is, for the most part, simply our own inner projections writ large on the movie-screen of life, like sky-writing. When we begin to see through our dualistic method of viewing life (me against the world), when this duality starts to collapse around us, we are then ready and able to take the dharma more seriously. At that point, we start to grasp the problem as one very much of our own making, rather than something imposed on us from outside, the "me against the world." We literally begin to "realize" the actual nature of life.

Words are so glib, so easy to say, and the reality they point to can be, in fact, so hard to swallow. It's no wonder that the Tibetan lamas tell us that the true nature of the mind is ineffable, well beyond the scope of mere words and concepts. It often seems that I live in a world of words and thoughts that, like flies, whirl around my head, any one of which could start a train of thought that would find me riding it who knows how far and for how long. I easily get carried away with thoughts. There is an antidote.

Luckily, I was fortunate to receive some direct mind training that addresses this point, so I am at least somewhat skilled at grasping thoughts as they arise and looking through (and beyond) their content (what they are about). With the proper training, we can use thoughts that come up as a stepladder toward realization. Like a spider climbs across a web, handhold by handhold, thoughts offer us grips

(opportunities) to cross the web of life toward enlightenment. There really is no other way, and I am surprised we don't talk about the value of thoughts and how to use them in dharma training more than we do. After all, thoughts are right there with us 24x7, waiting to be used for something other than distraction or entertainment.

## BEYOND THE PHYSICAL: METAPHYSICAL

July 25, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

Back in the 1960s, a very young me wrote this rather melancholy poem and dedicated it to the philosopher Parmenides, because it was he who said “Being Alone Is.”

### PARMENIDES

Each to each the sorrow tells:  
Find another.

Alone is borne the pain,  
Alone the sorrow,  
Alone the joy,  
Today's tomorrow.

The topic of the Saturn Return (returning back to where we came from) is echoed throughout the poetry and literature of the world. In a way, it's the only story to be told, and we never tire of hearing it. As I used to joke to myself, “It goes without saying, or you can say it again.” In my case, I prefer to say it again.

I spent years teaching astrology, not that all that much was learned. In the 1970s, much was made of the outer planets, those planets beyond Saturn: Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto. They were, among other things, called the Transcendental Planets. My spiritual teacher used to click his teeth together and say

“Transcendental, beyond the dental,” meaning beyond physical reality. Another nickname for the outer planets was the “Metaphysical Planets,” again: outside the physical. We all remember the cliché “Far out!” It seems that back in the 1960s everyone wanted to be far out.

Back then, many books were written about the outer planets, but almost no one seemed to know what these transcendental planets were all about and could tell their story. Having lived through my first Saturn Return (29.4 years) consciously, I knew their true story from experience because I witnessed it, at least as best I could. My esoteric teacher taught me to witness and go through this climatic event with my eyes open.

These planets beyond Saturn are not romantic, and if you will study them carefully, they are, as their names suggest, not even physical. They are “metaphysical,” beyond the physical as we know it, and that is mostly all that we know. The outer planets are a rendition of what I spoke of yesterday, the point of no return, and the turning around (changing one’s mind) necessarily involved in that. Yes, these three planets (Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto) tell a coherent story, but in Western society that story is mostly whispered, if spoken of at all.

It is the story of impermanence, of reaching the prime of life, after which (physically speaking) there is nothing further. After the age of thirty years, our physical trajectory sustains for a while and then goes into a slow, but steady, decline. Physically, we literally wear ourselves out of existence over time. Like a chrysalis that breaks open, the physical breaks down

and from that we emerge spiritually and, like a butterfly, gradually take flight. We rise from the grave of the physical and are, as the Christians like to say, quite literally born again, but not physically. It is a spiritual or psychological birth.

Otherwise, beyond Saturn's return at 30-years of age, there is nothing else out there. The point of no return is when we realize this and stop looking outward toward the outer planets (stop wanting to grow older) and, instead, turn and start to look inward. We do a 180 and begin to embrace that from which we ourselves emerged, much like a mother cradles a child. In the esoteric world, the inside is the outside, and the outside is what is formed from the inside, just as a baby forms (or crystallizes) within a womb of fluid. We grow from the inside out, rather than vice versa. We crystallize.

The main point here is that there is a change of vantage point, a transmigration of view that happens sometime after the age of thirty, whether or not we are aware of it. We go from being on the inside looking out to being on the outside looking in. The beauty of it (or the terror) is that over our lifetime we play both parts and each with a straight face. "Now you see me, now you don't."

When we reach beyond the physical (age beyond 30 years), the only thing we see (like the astronaut up in space) is Earth itself. From space, Earth is most obvious. The mysteries of the outer planets are as simple as breaking out of (going beyond) the physical (Uranus), embracing that from which we emerged (Neptune), and finally realizing that we are going to do it all over again, and again (Pluto): rebirth. So, the

outer planets (from the standpoint of the physical) are nowhere. They are meta-physical, and are nothing other than the stages of turning around and walking it back once we have reached the point of no return. This is why no matter how many new trans-Neptunian planets are discovered, their story will not change.



## SUFFERING

July 26, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

From a Buddhist pith-text:

“A single hair lying in the palm of the hand,  
Causes discomfort and suffering,  
If it gets into the eye.”

“Immature beings are like the palm of the hand.  
They do not recognize the hair of the suffering of  
conditioned existence.  
Noble ones are like the eye:  
They see that what is conditioned IS suffering.”

[This is a traditional metaphor in the Buddhist commentaries, that while a single hair lying on your palm is harmless, put that hair in your eye and that is a different story. They go on to say that those with more awareness are like those with the hair in the eye itself. Bodhisattvas see suffering everywhere. Anything that is conditioned (like everything we know) by definition is suffering. We just ignore it.]

## PITH INSTRUCTIONS

July 28, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

The unborn Shang (Tsöndru Drakpa):

“In brief, do not think about previous thoughts. Do not think about those to come. As for the present: When you think, “A thought arises,” look directly at the instant of present thought. This will decisively cut through its movement. As long as you remain undistracted, thoughts will not arise. When you become distracted and a thought suddenly arises, accept that thought and look directly at it. It will be liberated in its own place, and an experience of non-conceptuality will expand. Therefore, accept whatever thoughts you have and look directly at them. “

“Do not make your sessions long. Suspend them while your mind is still clear. Do short, frequent sessions.”

[Tsöndru Drakpa was the founder of the Tshalpa Kagyu lineage of the Kagyu order of Tibetan Buddhism. He was also very involved in military and political movements of his time (1122-93 AD). Here he offers pith advice about using ordinary thoughts to clarify the mind. Lama Shang is one of my favorite writers and his pith instructions are worth volumes IMO. This is a profound concept in as concise a form as you will find it.]

## **“RELAX, AS IT IS”**

July 29, 2015

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

The above title is from a translation of the Seven Points of Mind Training, as translated by the Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. And the great Mahasiddha Saraha said:

“If the mind-itself,  
That is twisted into knots,  
Is loosened,  
It is undoubtedly liberated.”

[This short statement is endlessly quoted in scores of dharma texts, so it must be something we should contemplate and consider important. Like so many pith suggestions, it features our need to rest easy, to let go or to let it (whatever it is) go on. After all, it is already going on. This goes well with Tilopa’s admonition not to alter the present moment in any way. In other words, let it be, or using the vernacular “Give it a rest!”

This should not be rocket-science to our ears. We already know how to relax. We look forward to it at the end of every work day and, given the chance, we let go and take it easy. It took me years to believe that when the great Rinpoches say to allow the mind to rest, that they do not mean some special kind of “dharma resting.” Finally, I realized that they mean

EXACTLY what we mean when we say to let go and have a rest. Exactly.

So, no matter how twisted we can become with worry, anxiety, and the like, the remedy is the same: let go and let it rest and what is twisted will untie itself, naturally.]

## TRYING NOT TO TRY

July 30, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

The unborn Shang taught:

“In Mahamudra Meditation, realization does not occur through fabricating, concentrating on an object, striving, or effort. It is said:

‘Whenever there is any desire or effort, there is no awakening.’

And...

‘When the mind is not altered, it is clear.  
When the water is not disturbed, it is transparent.’

“In order to put aside all mental and physical effort, rest without activity. Rest without contrivance. Rest freely. Let go and rest. Rest loosely. Rest without thinking or not thinking. Rest without an object. Rest without a reference point. Rest, settled in mind itself. Rest comfortably. Rest without any striving. “

Utterly non-conceptual experiences, not produced through effort, will dawn.”

[What more need be said? Of course, saying and “doing” are two different things, but Shang Rinpoche is not pointing to something that requires effort, although the effort to have-no-effort is a Catch-22 that

we will have to solve. How do we try to “not try?”  
Nevertheless, such a teaching is so inspiring. It  
should be clear that we can do it, if only someone  
would show us how. In Vajrayana Buddhism, that is  
what having a teacher is all about, to guide us to just  
letting go and relaxing “as it is.”]

## ENDING IN THE MIDDLE

July 31, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

The unborn Shang wrote:

“The nondual realization that worthy individuals have,  
Comes through the blessings of a sublime guru;  
The Dharmakaya arises from the middle of  
realization,  
Non-duality arises from the middle of the mind,  
Wisdom arises from the middle of afflictions,  
And Realization arises from the middle of  
experiences.”

[It is so beautiful how these teachings discourage linear thinking, like that at the end of the line there is a pot of gold. We all know that is not true, because the end of the line is the end of that line. Period.

With the dharma, it is always “in the middle” of this endless line of thoughts (or what-have-you), realization arises, and so on. It is never going to happen “then,” but can only happen “now.” If you have to “expect,” expect NOW.

## REALIZATION

August 1, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

The Great Shang Rinpoche wrote:

“Whether their experiences increase or decrease,  
Their realization remains unchanged,  
Just as a tree remains unchanged,  
Even though a monkey climbs up and down it.

“Just as the sky remains unchanged,  
Even though rainbows appear or disappear in it.

“Just as the depths of the ocean do not change,  
Whether waves rise or cease upon its surface.

“It doesn’t matter what experiences come or go,  
In the mind that is the natural presence of the  
Dharmakaya.”

[Enough can never be said about realization, if only because nothing can be said in words about realization that is anything but an approximation. Before realization, the monkey runs up and down the tree and we follow it endlessly. After realization, the monkey runs up and down the tree and it bothers us not; we remain undistracted. Why? Because we realize and rest in non-duality.]



## EMPTINESS IS THE MOTHER OF COMPASSION

August 2, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

Lama Shang wrote:

“You may have experiences or realizations and think you are special,  
But no matter how good the experiences are,  
Liberation is impossible without realization;  
No matter how high the realizations are,  
Without compassion, they will be the Śrāvaka path.”

This is a common theme in Vajrayana Buddhism, that realization supersedes experiences. Often quoted is the line “From the middle of experiences, realization arises.” In other words, from the middle of the endless cycles of experience we go through, given the right training and teacher, actual realization can arise. We can wake up.

But here, Lama Shang is going further to point out that realization, as profound as it is, is not by itself the path to the enlightenment of a Buddha. What is additionally required is compassion.

Without compassion, one becomes what is called a Śrāvaka or Pratyekabuddha, sometimes called a “Private Buddha.” By my understanding of the word “private,” here they mean enlightenment only for oneself, with no concern for others, as in: taking

others along with us. This is considered a lesser form of enlightenment than that of a Buddha and to be avoided if possible.

What is missing, the texts point out, is “Compassion,” and compassion is the product (or byproduct) of thoroughly grasping the nature of emptiness, the fact that appearances and emptiness are connate, two sides of the same coin. It’s not just that the appearances that arise around us are empty, but that the appearances we see are the emptiness itself arising. As they say, it is like a magical illusion or dream.

## THE MIND IS ITS OWN CONTAINER

August 3, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

In the “Eight-Thousand-Verse Perfection of Wisdom Sutra,” it says:

“There IS no mind in mind;  
The mind’s nature is luminosity.”

“Just this mind alone, which is completely empty, clear, aware, and lucid, is what is called “The Perfection of Wisdom,” Luminosity, Mahamudra, Dzogchen, and Dharmakaya.”

From my own poems, some years ago:

### THE REST OF THE MIND

You cannot rest the mind,  
But you can let the mind rest.  
Just let go,  
And don’t mind the rest.

[Apparently, it’s difficult to just take it easy, to let go and not try to mess with the mind. I am reminded of the old blues lyric:

“Take your fingers off it,  
Don't you dare to touch it,  
'Cause you know,  
It don't belong to you.”

I believe the Christians say “Let go and let God,” and that’s in the same vein. Personally, I love Tilopa’s admonition “Don’t alter the present.” Easier said than done, because all the time we are wriggling and squirming, always trying this and trying that. We are very trying.

And I remember the old Zen refrain “Do Not Do a Thing,” as in “Do Nothing.” It’s the same story: unlearn, undo, give up, give in, let go and, as Chögyam Trungpa said, “Relax, as it is.”

Amazingly enough, we actually have to learn (and train) how to let the mind remain naturally just as it already is. ]

## I'M TORE DOWN

August 4, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

The Venerable Shang Rinpoche:

“A swift mountain river is made pure through its flowing.

A silver mirror is made clear through being polished.

A yogi's meditation is made blissful through being destroyed.”

[Shang Rinpoche is someone after my own heart, challenging our ingrained beliefs and pointing to alternative views and antidotes for what ails us.

It is my opinion that no matter how wonderful our dharma practice and training can be, that very training itself, and all the effort involved, at some point becomes an obstacle we also have to remove.

It is like removing the scaffolding after a building is completed. Our sincere effort and our endless trying to learn and practice meditation is like the scaffolding used to raise a building. It finally has to be deconstructed.

Like a mold used to make a rupa (statue) of the Buddha, the mold has to be removed, as in the lost-wax process. In other words, practice and effort is something that we build up, only to tear it down, as the great yogi Milarepa did repeatedly, when he built

and tore down the various towers his teacher (Marpa) instructed him to build.

I am reminded of the great blues giant Freddie King and his song "Tore Down."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjtxZuvZ7oE>

## ENOUGH OR MORE THAN ENOUGH

August 5, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

Shang Rinpoche taught:

“Meditate in a great number of short sessions. When sessions are short, there can be no faults. When they are numerous, faults cannot continue.”

I learned of meditation in the late 1960s and more so throughout the 1970s. Back in the 1960s, I can remember sitting Zazen all day with Roshi Phillip Kapleau. It was something of an ordeal, to say the least. And later in the early 1970s, as the influence of the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa swept through the land, his students advocated long sitting sessions, not only all day, but also for a week and for a month at a time.

Part of me got worn out trying to push myself like that. Later I found that in the Kagyu Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, at least with the teachers I have worked with, they suggest the opposite, to sit for many short sessions. When I once asked my Tibetan dharma teacher (who is now in his nineties), how long a short session was, he responded that it can be as short as the time it takes to raise a teacup to your lips and take a sip.

Their approach is that you never want to stain your practice by pushing longer than you feel like it. They advise stopping a practice before you feel resistance

against it, rather than risk damaging your connection to it. The view is that we can gradually extend a practice that we love, but that it is very hard to continue with one we already have strained and stained. This made perfect sense to me. And it works!

I feel that I am surrounded with the exquisite beauty of the Zen tradition, with its very light touch. The same goes with the gentleness and kindness of the Tibetan approach. How could I not get the message that easy-does-it, and with gentle kindness at that?

This is not to say that I should not work hard, but rather that I could work harder at not making work hard]



## STOP PINCHING OUR SELF

August 6, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

From the Unborn Shang:

“When you rest loosely in that way,  
If the mind is unstable and has strong thoughts,  
It means you are not free of the wish to meditate.

Therefore, free yourself from a sense of purpose.  
Whether the mind is still or not,  
Do not stop anything or create anything.”

The undoing of what we’ve done is what is referred to here. All the purpose we have gathered together in order to practice may get us going, but finally it becomes an obscuration, as the Tibetans say “The one cloud in an otherwise cloudless sky.”

Back in the mid-Sixties (May 12, 1967), I had what was for me quite an awakening, and among many things I wrote this:

“I can clearly see all that clouds this stream of consciousness is but a searching, is itself but a frowning, a looking to see, a pause, a hesitation that, caught and unfurled in the eddies of time, finding nothing, becomes clear and, laughing, I leave it go clear and turn from a darkening or dimming of my mind to light. And it came to pass, and I let it pass.”

We have to let go of pinching ourselves.

## DECONSTRUCTING PRACTICE

August 7, 2016

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

An unidentified quote from an introduction by Shōnu Lha’:

“Do not draw back the mind that moves toward objects,  
But let it be, like a raven that flies from a ship.  
The wise are like cattle herders:  
They let the practicing mind roam freely.”

The point of my sharing many of these classic dharma quotes is to point out that we can (and must) discern between meditation itself and the wide variety of means and methods that lead to actually meditating. Practicing meditation (learning it) should not be confused with actually meditation.

If we don’t grasp this thought, it can lead to our never getting beyond the practice-stage to realize the goal of what the training is all about, i.e. meditation. This is “why” there are hundreds of sayings in the literature such as “do not meditate,” in the sense of don’t “try” to meditate, when in fact meditation is the whole point of the training.

Just as what awaits us at the end of a long life is death, so in meditation training we can fall into the mistaken belief that at the end of a period of long, hard dharma training, we will finally reach realization or enlightenment. This is linear thinking, that the long line of life’s hardships has a pot of gold at the end... or

heaven. It has a pot of gold, alright, but the “end result” of meditation is not at the literal end of anything, but right in the middle, whenever we can manage to do what is necessary to reach it. And we have to do it ourselves.

Enlightenment, in my understanding, is non-linear, which is why the great siddhas tell us that “in the middle of endless experiences, realization can arise.” The accent is on the word “can,” because more often than not realization does not arise, and life just goes on with its endless line of cycles of ups and down. We have ALL been there up until now.

It’s OK to be a beginner, but we are no longer beginners when we start to make a virtue out of being a beginner. By that point, we have begun and should be looking for an exit strategy from just learning techniques. Yes, dharma can be a long path if we let it, typically endless kalpas, where each kalpa is something like 4.32 billion years. That is why Vajrayana Buddhism is referred to as a short-track method, cutting through the kalpas and achieving realization in this very life or in a life coming to a body that is you soon.

Of course, it can be good to be humble, but humility should not be used as an excuse for laziness, for being caught up in a dharma practice that has become little more than treading water, while we wait and hope for something to happen. The old Roman slogan “Carpe Diem!” holds true here. It’s fish or cut bait, IMO.

This is not meant as a rant, but there is to my mind some sense of urgency to all of this, the end of this

life and our eventual rebirth, but the question in Buddhism is: rebirth in what realm? Becoming a perpetual practitioner of the dharma, but never realizing anything is much like “always a bridesmaid, but never a bride,” and this is not the point of dharma.

It is very easy to get hung up in practicing a technique that does not bring results, to the point that we are effectively sidelined, well, indefinitely. I speak from experience, because I managed to get sidelined into rote practice like this for some thirty years, when a few pointers and some encouragement to perhaps try another route would have saved decades of my life. Just sayin'.

## A SINGLE MATCH

August 8, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

The Great unborn Shang taught:

“If you understand this,  
Words and terminology will not obscure;  
You will be unstained by the faults of words.

“Therefore, without abandoning words and analysis,  
‘Have no arrogant attachment to their meaning.’”

All of the higher teachings make clear that words and concepts can never be totally clear, that clarity, luminosity, and the true nature of our own mind are ineffable, or, as the Tibetans say, beyond elaboration.

The inexpressible cannot be expressed, but that does not make language of no use whatsoever or to be shunned. Everything is something and nothing. Poetry can cut to the chase, where prose seldom seems to ever get to the point. This is why the Tibetan Siddhas wrote a special kind of poem called a Doha, which is essentially a song of spiritual realization. They do the same with the biographies of their great yogis, called Namtars. A Namtar is a spiritual biography, the story of the realizations of a great meditator, his or her spiritual changes, with all the ordinary biographical stuff cut out.

I find that words, when placed one against another, and recited just so, can articulate, as when flint strikes steel, an inner light that, like a sparkler on the 4th of July, illuminates as it hovers at the very edge of what makes sense. And it is through that clear portal that we peer at things to come or leap through to realization.

As the Tibetans say, striking a single match can illuminate the darkness of endless eons.

## WE HAVE TO LOOK TO SEE

August 9, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

From Tselé Natsok Rangdröl in “The Bright Torch”:

“... to make a distinction between experience and realization, they are, respectfully, like a fault and a remedy in a practice that is not blended with the nature of the mind, at whatever level it may be.”

“Experience” is when the meditator and the meditation appear to be separate. “Realization” is gaining complete certainty that they are not separate from the mind, but that it is the mind itself that arises as their natures. In brief, these two occur not only in meditation, but in most practices of the path, such as guru yoga, compassion, bodhicitta, and the generation stage.”

Eh Ma Ho! How well put. I tend to say that experiences come and go, but they do not remain. Here the author is saying that if we have the sense of ourselves as the meditator and meditation is what we are doing, then we are having an experience, not a realization. In other words, even if we have a sense of “our” having a “realization,” it is not a realization, but yet another experience.

Experiences take place in duality, while realizations are non-dual. I find that we can waste a lot of time trying to get the difference clear, and if we want to cut



to the chase, IMO, if there is any doubt or question, we are talking experience here. Realizations are eye-popping and jaw-dropping in the sense that there is no doubt and no room for thought, especially second thoughts. In a realization we are non-dual, totally extended in the medium of life to the exclusion of self-consciousness.

Lest we think that realization is an emotional rush, my understanding is that realization is much more directly clear than that. Perhaps the most talked about example of initial realization involves a major event called "Recognition," when the student (with the help of the teacher) first recognizes the actual (or true) nature of the mind. This happens.

In the Tibetan literature, they often use the analogy that "Recognition" is like suddenly recognizing someone you know in a crowd of people. Once you see them, the recognition remains. It does not go away.

I like the analogy of those old figure-ground paintings, where embedded in an image is another image, but very difficult to see. However, once it is pointed out to you, you can see it from then on, every time you look. Unlike experiences, realization is permanent. It never goes away and we couldn't even walk it back if we wanted to. And we can't lose it!

I wrote a little poem years ago about this:

LOOK SEE

If you want to see,  
You have to look.

You can look,  
And still not see.

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

We have to look to see.

## PITH INSTRUCTIONS - TILOPA

August 10, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

Words from the Most Venerable Tilopa, as written in the text “Mahamudra Instruction:”

“The king of views is liberation from the margins and extremes,  
The king of meditation is the absence of distraction,  
The king of conduct is the absence of effort  
The manifest result is the absence of hope and fear.”

These pith instructions from the great Mahasiddha Tilopa put it all together. No need to add much commentary. The Tibetan texts make it clear that hope and fear are not our friends. In the Kagyu Lineage, which I am being trained in, it is said in the lineage prayer itself that “Unwavering attention is the body of meditation.” I’ve been writing about the need to remove effort from our dharma practice for weeks and here it is pointed out again. Liberation from the margins and extremes just highlights the middle way, or as I like to say “To fail ignorance by a meter or a foot.”

And here is a little poem I wrote some years ago:

## SOMETHING FOR NOTHING

Expect nothing,  
Except nothing.  
Accept something

## PERCHANCE TO DREAM – Shakespeare

August 13, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

Here I sit, literally, on the cushion in front of the small shrine in my office. With my health crisis finally taking a back seat, I am free to consider, well, many kinds of things.

At this time of life, the various lines of health disruption all begin to converge on a single point, reminding me of those architectural perspective drawings; only here, the “single point” or perspective is my quality-of-life. Everything seems to be impinging on that. This should not be a surprise to me, but it always seems to be, regardless. I keep forgetting that old chestnut “You’ll never get out of this world alive.” We all know that, but what we don’t know are the details as to how that will be accomplished. At least I don’t.

Like a leaky boat, with this aging body, I’m bailing water as fast as I can, jettisoning more and more of the things that tie me to this life. I’m now willing to part with (and leave behind) things that even a year ago I would never think of parting with. This reminds me of a moon-shot that as it rises drops off booster rocket after booster rocket; I cut loose what I can no longer support. Is it any wonder that, much like a hot-air balloon, I find myself cutting my moorings, gradually rising up, and leaving my body behind? Without

knowing it, it seems I am already leaving this world, despite any attempts on my part to stay!

I am reminded of the local botanist, who, while showing me his lovely garden, pointed to some blooms well past their prime and remarked, "Yes, they are just finishing up." Well said, say I. People finish up too, but how?

I have mentioned many times in this blog my visit with the famous economist Kenneth Boulding, who said to me (while we sat around reading our poems to one another and shedding a few tears on life), "Michael, we must learn to fail successfully." It's like the aging honey bee, whose last act is to drag itself outside the hive, so it won't have to be removed by others.

I know, this blog may sound sad, but I am not feeling particularly maudlin here, so this is not meant to be a tear jerker. In fact, I feel very practical and am just inquiring of myself: to the degree I have any leeway or room for adjusting my exit, what's available to me? It comes down to priorities, but what is important?

For one, all the practical concerns, all of the emerging demands on the physical seem to take up more and more of my time. Obviously, when I am not well, they can seem all-consuming. Yesterday, I went through a couple of shelves filled with all kinds of pills (prescriptions and remedies) for this and that and threw most of them into a big box and packed it away.

I don't take prescription drugs anyway, but somehow I have managed to accumulate a box full, a big box. For someone who has had innumerable projects going all my life, I now find myself (telling myself)

“Enough is enough. No more projects. Stop!” For one, I don’t have enough time to learn Chinese or to more thoroughly learn Tibetan. What would be the point, other than filling time, and I seem to be rushed enough these days as it is. Time telescopes toward the far end. Perhaps as we age, the body loses the ability to register time and it begins to slip by at an alarming rate. Anyway, I am sure many of you elders know exactly what I am talking about here.

Just living has to be enough for now. Here is a tongue-twister poem I wrote about the beginning and the end, for those who can appreciate it.

#### THE BEGINNING OF THE END

The beginning of the end,  
Which is the end of the beginning,  
Begins at the end of the beginning,  
And goes straight to the end.

In other words:  
When beginning ends,  
Ending begins.

The beginning is not close to the end,  
But the beginning of the end,  
Is closer to the end,  
Than to the beginning.

At the beginning of the end,  
The beginning of the beginning ends.

Since the beginning of the beginning ends,  
Will the end of the end begin?  
Is ending also a beginning?

If so,  
The beginning of the end,  
Is closer to the beginning,  
Than is the end of the beginning.

I'm counting on that.



## PROGRESSIVE PROGRESS

August 14, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

Disease and old age are not the only things that progress. Everything does, including our eventual enlightenment, so open that door and leave it open.

Moments of insight, like those old flip books we had as kids, combine glimpses of clarity into something leading to full motion. Insight Meditation is meant to progress from brief peeks at lucidity into a real-time movie and on from there to speeding into slow motion and full realization.

The pith texts speak of “unwavering attention” on our part, not an occasional shot in the dark of clarity. The road to enlightenment is filled with light, not darkness. And, yes, there is training, but after some point it is not what you might think. There comes a time when we have no choice but to continue to stumble forward or to actually learn to walk. And that kind of training does not take effort of the try, try, try variety. In fact, making some effort eventually becomes the most effortless thing we can do at that time. We literally fall into line.

Right now, somewhere back in there, behind the scenes of our Self’s shenanigans, something organized is already gradually taking place, something so integral that it eventually will distract us from our usual distractions and become more

interesting than what our Self has to offer us by the way of our usual entertainment. We begin to wake up to what is actually going on and that is clarifying.

My point here is that this waking-up process is not like getting a picture-postcard that we look at and set aside, but rather our insight increases in frequency until it reaches the point of incandescence and lights up our entire inner sky.

“Pay me now or pay me later” is the old phrase, so I would rather cross over now, perhaps ahead of schedule, than to be eventually dragged over by the sheer force of necessity. That is what I laughingly tell myself is called “going to meet your maker.” We actually have a choice to go halfway.

So, what am I saying here? I am saying relax. We are in good hands, far better hands than our self can offer us. I am not say that we should just do nothing but wait, but rather that our clumsy attempts to practice dharma eventually get into line, just as a crowd narrows to single file at the ticket booth. Yes, we must each make an effort, but those efforts eventually fall into a line that is as natural as when the sun comes up.

## A DISCONNECT

August 20, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

What the Buddhists call Samsara, this cyclic world of ups and downs we all live in, persists to the point of wearing each of us out of existence. I am not being dramatic, but just realistic. We don't talk about it much because, well, it's obvious and painful to keep in mind all the time, a great opportunity for ignorance. We prefer to ignore what we find so hard or painful to remember.

The Tibetan Buddhists have foreign-sounding words for everything, obviously, yet what they are pointing at is only too familiar to all of us here in America. They use the Sanskrit word "Samsara" to describe the sometimes vicious cycles of ups and downs that gradually wear each one of us out of life. What do we call it? Not sure, perhaps just "life." We definitely don't use Sanskrit.

The ancient pagans taught that "The mills of the gods grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine." Buddhists would probably reserve that concept for the laws of karma. If I understand it right, most of us start accumulating and acting out karma like the traditional bull in the china shop, but we end up tiptoeing around very, very carefully, like counting how many angels might fit on the head of a pin. Or that old slogan for the month of March, "In like a lion, out like a lamb." That might be a better description of learning about karma and how we discover its effects.

We are not inundated so much by our big karmic mistakes (killing, stealing, etc.), but rather by the endless small razor-cuts that our micro-karma doles out. The Tibetans go to great length to point out that it is this incessant stream of attachments (judgments, criticism, hatreds, etc.) that finally do us in. And it does this by the sheer accumulation of small errors – micro-karma.

The occultist Aleister Crowley coined the phrase “To snatch at a gnat, and swallow a camel.” That works well here, in that we are on the lookout to not commit the big karma, while at the same time generating all kinds of micro-karma, not to mention the karma from harming other sentient beings, like stepping on ants and swatting mosquitoes.

What’s to be done? The solution is easy, but life consuming. All that needs doing is to become aware of our actions and weed out the ones that accumulate karma until we stop accumulating much, if any. The physical actions are the easiest. Don’t do harmful things, but the mental and psychological actions are not so obvious.

The Tibetan Buddhists make a big thing out of dualistic as opposed to non-dualistic states of mind. It seems that the dualistic states are when it is easiest for us to accumulate karma, and these are not hard to spot, because most of us are in them all the time. This would be when we have in mind a subject and an object, usually ourselves as a subject and something (or someone) else as the object. It is the “we” and the “them” sort of mentality. If we are the “experiencer” and we are experiencing “something,” that is the

classic definition of a dualism. There is a disconnect in all dualisms that eventually will have to be resolved.

Dualisms (and dualistic thinking) are a very big problem for almost all of us and there are special dharma practices to gradually resolve our dualistic habitual-tendencies. Perhaps the most well-known form of practice to resolve dualisms is called “Tong-Len,” which is sometimes translated as “Exchanging yourself for Others” or simply “Sending and Receiving.” And there are many forms of Tong-Len.

I have been recently made aware of how we can use special techniques (as therapy) to remove various physical symptoms that we wish to overcome. In my case, it has to do with inner-ear problems that throw me off balance much of the time. There are various physical maneuvers that can be done to remedy this, although it is gradual and takes time.

I am struck by how the many forms of dharma practice are exactly similar, specially designed maneuvers to clear up our mind well-enough so that we are not mentally so out of balance. In this case, I am pointing out the various methods of Tong-Len, which is one easy way to begin curing dualistic thinking. For those interested in learning about these methods, here is a link to a free book on Tong-Len. Just scroll down to the title: “Tong-Len: The Alchemy of Reaction” and have a read.

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

## TALKIN' TO MYSELF

August 19, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

I usually write my blogs with you, the reader, in mind. But I also end up talking to myself quite often, and this blog is one of those, a conversation I am having internally that I will share here because it is happening and other topics that I might write about are not on my mind, just now.

I spent years studying Black music, in particular the Chicago blues. That's pretty much all I did for many years, including playing it everywhere my band could. What was the attraction?

Well, I love music, but to me the blues are much more than just another form of music. "The Blues" is IMO music informed by the wisdom of life experience; it holds the residue of the experience of life that I guess could be called the "truth" or the "way it is."

As a middle-class white boy, something was missing from my own experience growing up and I knew it. I could feel it. It was like not having some essential vitamins that my body craved. Eventually, I found it in Black music, particularly in the blues, and especially (to my taste) in Chicago blues and the artists who played it. My brother Dan and I would drive to Chicago to dig through the record bins in tiny stores for old blues 45s. Better yet, we would hear the great blues players live in Chicago in places like Teresa's

Lounge, where one night I watched Little Walter and Junior Wells almost get into a fight about who was going to play. Things like that.

IMO, the Chicago blues artists dispensed with all the superficial politeness that plagues society and just got right down to it, the nitty-gritty of life -- the bottom line. I followed them down there, searching for a reality that I felt was missing in my own life, some closure to the question of what life was all about. I found it in that music, but I also found it in the Black blues players themselves. I made a point of meeting them and have personally interviewed scores and scores of them, one-on-one.

For me, the Chicago blues music is the best, but behind the music was the mind and experience of those who made that music. There are all kinds of music, but not all music is already boiled down to what life is all about. For me, the blues is nothing but that, and that is what I sensed in the music and found in the lives and attitudes of the players themselves.

I like the “best” in all music, which is why I founded the All-Music Guide, a guide to the best music of each artist. The All-Music Guide remains today the largest collection of music data, reviews, discographies, etc. on the planet. And, as I keep saying, out of all that music, for me, the quintessence, the tip-of-the-top, is the message that blues music holds for me personally, a message about life, and ultimately a message about (and to) me.

The life of America in the 1950s, when I grew up, never managed to get to the point of it all. As mentioned, something was missing. I felt I was being

shined on, just shuffled along, in one door and out the other. And for some lucky reason, I was aware (or I felt) that there was “more” to life than what I knew, whatever that might be. I didn’t know what I was missing, but I could hear it in the blues when I listened carefully. And by “more,” I mean something more real, more satisfying and truthful, both good and bad.

And so I listened and listened, eventually stepping through the blues music itself into the lives of those who played it. They had the power to play the blues and, for me, eventually I could not distinguish the music these blues artists played from the life savvy that made it possible for them to play it so convincingly. Yes, I knew their music; I sang their music several nights a week for years, but through meeting these blues artists in person, through interviewing them, hanging out with them, I understood so much more. For example, the great harmonica player James Cotton (and his entire band) lived with us for weeks on end -- that kind of thing. I have always been at my happiest when sitting at the feet of those I feel are masters. These blues artists were master musicians and masters at life, at least in the eyes of this middle-class boy from White America.

Like separating the wheat from the chaff, I did my best to cull out the wisdom of the blues players from the lifestyle that too many of them were forced by circumstances to live. I am talking about the alcohol, drugs, and poverty that swirled around the bars and clubs where blues music was played. I wanted the wisdom, but not the lifestyle that all too often was killing the blues artists I loved and respected. For me, this learning period went on from the late 1950s (first



with folk music), through the 1960s, and on into the early 1970s.

Over time, eventually, I began to respond, at first distantly, to another drum beat. There was no way I was about to give up my thirst for and appreciation of the directness and the sheer satisfaction that the truth and reality of blues music brought into my life, but, as mentioned, the “down-ness” of that scene also ate away at me.

I had known, first hand, the lack of wisdom (IMO) that appeared in my life through my schooling and (sorry to say this) the sheer vacuous mentality of 1950s White America. And I had found in Black music (and the men and woman who played the blues) the kind of wisdom of life I thirsted for. I was by that time addicted to that kind of direct truth and contact with life and had little respect for anyone who did not display it in their eyes.

I found the solution to this problem in the Tibetan lamas and rinpoches who were just then arriving in the United States. They had all the directness and common sense that I found in blues music (and those who played it), but they also had a highly organized psychology and methodology for living life that I had not seen before. The Tibetan lamas had lived life, found a real truth, and I could feel it living in them just as it lived in the great blues players. It was, for me, a simple thing to switch from studying Black music to studying and practicing Tibetan Buddhism.

And the key factor to it all was that I could respect the wisdom of the Tibetans as I had the wisdom of the Black community of blues players. I have never been

able to learn from others by just being taught, unless those teachers had in their eyes the wisdom of life that I hungered for. They knew what I wanted to know. This is why I languished through my school years and finally never even graduated from high school. For me, school was empty of wisdom. At the same time, I am an excellent student with teachers that I respect the life-savvy of.

And where was all this born? My guess is that I got that way from the fact that as a young child I lived way out in the country in rural Pennsylvania, where Mother Nature was all there was. Being trained in nature's law (which is not man's law) spoiled me for anything less than the reality that nature insists upon. Looking for something like the integrity and honesty of nature in my life teachers, I did not usually find it until I met the Black blues players, and later, of course, the Tibetan lamas. Neither of them blinked. I could trust their wisdom. And here I am, still profoundly affected by the blues, and busy practicing the dharma.

[Photo of me in the late 1960s interviewing one of my heroes, the great Muddy Waters.]



## **BLAST FROM THE PAST: MY MUSIC**

August 18, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

I am feeling a little nostalgic. I just read the newly released book on a friend of mine, the great blues guitarist-- "Michael Bloomfield: The Rise and Fall of an American Guitar Hero" by Ed Ward. Excellent book. I don't blog much on my musical background, but I have one. Here is a little taste of that.

Back in the 1960s the musicians I really loved and looked up to were players like Muddy Waters, Junior Wells, Otis Rush, Little Walter, Magic Sam, Buddy Guy, and the list goes on, mostly the great Chicago blues players. And I had the chance to meet these artists, interview and hang out with them, plus hear them playing live in clubs and other venues. I was a total fan of these folks.

I am sometimes asked why I didn't spend more time listening to my own peers, groups like the Grateful Dead, Janice Joplin, The Band, and so on. My answer is simple. Their music didn't interest me.

If that sounds flip, it's not meant to. It was because those players who were my peers were people much like me. No matter how great they were, we all drank from the same cup. We were all derivatives, all drawing inspiration from the same musical root-sources, those great rock, blues, and jazz players

who came before us. It was not disrespect, but simple camaraderie.

For example, I met and hung out with Janice Joplin at the Grande Ballroom in the mid-1960s, where we both played. She was cool, no doubt. But I had already heard the original "Take Another Little Piece of my Heart" by Erma Franklin and "Ball 'n Chain" by Big Mama Thornton. I spent a whole late-night talking and drinking with Big Mama Thornton, so I know where Joplin was getting her stuff. Joplin was a popular singer, but she was no Big Mama Thornton. We both revered Big Mama Thornton. Joplin herself would be the first to say so.

It was the same with the Rolling Stones. Of course I like their tune "Time is On My Side," because that is an Irma Thomas song. What's not to like, but I like the original by Irma Thomas much better. Thomas is one of the greatest woman singers I have ever heard. Period. I had the chance to have dinner with her and hang out some years ago and it was out of this world. Later that night at the gig, Irma Thomas changed her set list to include many of her early songs that I especially love, just for me. We are exactly the same age. I can't say enough about what a great artist Irma Thomas is.

If you have never heard Irma Thomas (and you love R&B), here are a couple heart-stoppers to give you a taste:

Irma Thomas: "Two Winters Long"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=avfBh4Xv7tQ>

Irma Thomas: "I'm Gonna Cry Till My Tears Run Dry"  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vqvgyyp9l0>

So you get the idea. It is not that I was somehow too good for the music of my peers. It was because it wasn't their music and in almost all cases the original was better, and they knew it too. That's why they covered it in the first place.

It's the same with the Grateful Dead. We were all studying the same root music. I remember jamming with Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead in West Park in Ann Arbor one sunny afternoon in the 1960s. It was fun, but we were both reading from the same playbook of those great artists that we revered, most of whom were still living. An exception would be Jimi Hendrix. Although he too had roots, he transformed those roots into something really new, IMO. Hendrix was unique in this way.

There is one other exception, only one group I can think of among my peers that I would acknowledge myself a "groupie" of, and that was the Paul Butterfield Blues Band." When the Butterfield band burst on the scene in late 1965, we were spellbound. Although Butterfield and his band later made a number of albums, IMO none of those albums captured the experience of hearing that band live. And I should know. As a 'groupie' I heard them many times.

And we hung out with the Butterfield band and even recorded them. In the spring of 1966 my brother Dan and I recorded an early version of the Butterfield band's landmark tune East-West in "Poor Richard's" club in Chicago, before it came out as an album.

"East-West" is considered the first extended rock solo (13 minutes) ever issued on an album, and it served to fuel the future of any number of heavy-metal artists.

Our recording of East-West is the first complete rendering of this tune that is extant. If I remember right, we were sitting behind a curtain on the stage recording this, but I could be wrong. My brother Dan might remember. Anyway, the recording we made was issued on an album called "East-West Live" by the Butterfield keyboard player Mark Naftalin in 1996.

There were many reasons the Butterfield band's imprint on us was so profound. For one, they were just that good, and they were a racially mixed band as we sometimes were. That first Butterfield album stopped us in our tracks and our band was never the same again. That was probably the time we added the phrase "Blues Band" to our name, making it the "Prime Movers Blues Band." That first Butterfield album served as a wakeup call to an entire generation of White (would-be) blues musicians, a notice that we could go ahead and try to play the blues, "whiteness" and all, and so we did.

Even to this day, Butterfield remains one of the only white harmonica players to develop his own style (another is William Clarke) -- one respected by black players. Butterfield has no real imitators. Like most Chicago-style amplified harmonica players, Butterfield played the instrument like a horn -- a trumpet. He tended to play single notes rather than bursts of chords. His harp playing is always intense, understated, concise, and serious -- IMO only Big Walter Horton has a better sense of note selection.

When I knew Butterfield (during those first three albums), he was always intense, somewhat remote, and even, on occasion, downright unfriendly. He liked the persona of a Chicago macho guy. Although not much interested in other people, he was a compelling musician and a great harp player. But Butterfield liked to mess with your mind. Here is an example.

I can remember one time Butterfield and I were sitting out in our van, probably smoking something or other. He was explaining that he was left-handed and that only left-handed people would ever amount to anything in this world. The rest of us were shit-out-a-luck. That was Butterfield's humor. It is true that he held the harmonica opposite to the standard right-handed player who holds it in his left hand. Butterfield held it in his right hand, upside down, with the low notes to the right.

Michael Bloomfield (lead guitar) and Mark Naftalin (keyboards) in the Butterfield band, also great players, were just the opposite -- always interested in the other guy. They went out of their way to inquire about you, even if you were a nobody like we were. Naftalin continues to this day to support blues projects and festivals.

But it was Butterfield's lead-guitar player, Michael Bloomfield, who most stands out in my mind. Bloomfield actually was our friend. He cared about us. We could feel it. Michael Bloomfield also played lead on Dylan's album "Highway 61 revisited." Michael Bloomfield is one of the greatest guitarists I have ever heard, and I have heard a bunch. Bob Dylan thinks so too, as this quote from a Rolling Stone article (May 2009) shows:



"The guy that I always miss, and I think he'd still be around if he stayed with me, was Mike Bloomfield. He could just flat-out play. He had so much soul. And he knew all the styles, and he could play them so incredibly well. He was an expert player and a real prodigy too. He could play like Robert Johnson way back then in the 1960s. He could play the pure style of country blues authentically." – Bob Dylan

In my experience, Michael Bloomfield was always filled with light, positive, and interested in helping others into the future. If there are bodhisattvas wandering around in this world, Bloomfield had to be one of them. I am running out of space here, but let me give you just one example of Bloomfield's compassion that I personally experienced.

For those of you who are too young, the “Summer of Love” was San Francisco and the Bay Area in 1967, when more than 100,000 hippies showed up at the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco wanting to hang out. I happened to be there for that summer. In fact I made a point of it.

My entire band and I drove all the way across the country (and back) in our 1966 Dodge Van. We had our band name (The Prime Movers) all over that van, but most people thought we were a just another moving company even though across the front of the van we had the slogan “Gonna Ring a Few Bells in your Ears” a quote by legendary New Orleans performer Jessie Hill from his song “Ooh Poo Pah Doo.” Any of you remember that song? Here it is for those of you with open ears:

<http://youtu.be/3qhxE5z9xRI>

How we crammed all of our band equipment and the entire band (I think there were five of us), not to mention five suitcases into that Dodge van and managed to get it across the U.S. is beyond me. We just did it, took turns driving, and made it a non-stop trip. I can remember waking up as we crossed the Continental Divide to find us moving at a snail's pace surrounded on all sides by a huge flock of sheep. That moment was a long way from what we were going to find in San Francisco and Haight-Ashbury.

And of course we had no money and no place to stay once we got there. We just went there cold because we knew it was happening. And here is my point:

It was our friend Michael Bloomfield who cared enough about us to find us a free place to live for the summer, which turned out to be the Sausalito Heliport, where many music groups practiced. We crashed on the floor. I remember some famous woman singer gave us \$5 at the heliport for food. It might have been Gale Garnet ("We'll Sing in the Sunshine"). We had zero money.

In fact we played blues outside on the pavement next to a local Sausalito Black rib-joint for food, just to have something to eat. We ate a lot of ribs that summer. The Sausalito Heliport was just across the San Francisco Bay Bridge to the north. However, the band and I spent most of our time in San Francisco and Berkeley, where we auditioned and/or played at all the major Sixties clubs, places like the Avalon Ballroom, The Straight Theater, The Matrix, The Haight A, and even the Fillmore Auditorium. We also played in Berkeley at the New Orleans House and other places

And there is more to my Bloomfield story. It was also thanks to Michael Bloomfield that we played the Fillmore Auditorium. Bloomfield not only found us a place to stay, but asked us to fill in for his band the "Electric Flag" when they could not make a gig, at the Fillmore itself. It was August 29th of 1967 at the Fillmore Auditorium that we opened for Cream on what I believe was their first concert in the U.S. or at least in San Francisco. For those of you who don't know about Cream, it was the British rock supergroup featuring Eric Clapton on guitar, Jack Bruce on bass, and Ginger Baker on drums. Their songs included many classic blues tunes and, of course, their smash hit "Sunshine of Your Love."

In fact I watched Cream (with needles in their arms) shoot up speed in the green room before the show. And I had a shouting match with Fillmore promoter Bill Graham at that time about how to mic our amplifiers. Graham wanted to run our sound directly through these giant walls of speakers, but I wanted them to mic our amps through their own speakers, so our particular (old Fender Concerts) amp sound would be preserved. I am sure I was wrong, but at the time it seemed so right. And shouting with Bill Graham was almost required in those days.

Anyway, I wanted to share with you my history as a groupie and my undying respect for the compassion and genius of Michael Bloomfield, certainly someone worthy of my respect. Also, a bio I did on the Butterfield Blues Band here:

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewtopic.php... f823d3c2>

[A photo of me playing harmonica in the West Park band shell in the 1960s, probably the time I was playing and jamming with Jerry Garcia. ]

As to what we sounded like, we sounded like this, an excerpt from the few recordings that exist:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZO5bsagUqY>



## INCENDIARY

August 15, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

From Shang Rinpoche:

“When a flame is tiny,  
Even a faint breeze extinguishes it.  
When a great fire blazes in a forest,  
A strong wind merely fans the flames.”

[To my mind, this passage refers to Vipassana (Insight Meditation), the great steed that non-dual meditation rides upon. Once enkindled, once incandescent, like the astrophysical black-hole, everything is fuel for its fire and contributes to its perfect functioning. Everything.]

The doorway to Insight Meditation in the Vajrayana tradition is the moment when our teacher/guide first points out to us the true nature of the mind and we get it. This is called, appropriately, “Recognition.” While not Enlightenment, that is the first moment of true realization, from which we never return to not-knowing.]

It reminds me of this excerpt from the poem by the great mystical poet, William Blake:

THE TYGER

“Tyger Tyger, burning bright,  
In the forests of the night:  
What immortal hand or eye,  
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?”

## MYOPIA

August 15, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

This might get a little personal, so you have been warned. I am talking about near-sightedness on our part, looking only inward, and I don't mean visually. We are infatuated with those closest to us, and that starts, of course, with me, myself, and I, but there is more. And no, this is not a rant on selfishness. I want to talk about myopia, seeing too close, and the resulting problem of not seeing outside or past ourselves. We each need to eventually see beyond our own self to make progress in dharma training. The word "Opia" denotes a visual disorder, and "myopia," the inability to look farther than ourselves. It must be some kind of cosmic pun that the word reads "My" Opia?

I first learned of this tendency to only look inward (and to take everything personally) some 44 years ago. The following account may seem fantastic, but it could be worth a listen. This happened in late 1972 and early 1973, the weeks just before our first daughter's birth; they were for me one continuous waking vision. Here are some of my journal notes:

"The entire world of wincing pain and personal suffering has been laid open to my vision. Up to this point in my life, whenever a painful thought or "bad" feeling had occurred, I always turned inward and experienced that thought alone — took it personally.

Now my eyes are open and, as I watch people in their daily intercourse, I see that all experience these painful thoughts at the same time. They are like waves that sweep through a room – just energy. Everyone present experiences them at the same time.

As a hard thought arises in a group, everybody winces and turns inward, each taking this thought in his or her way, each taking it personally as their own fault or problem. All turn inward until the thought is absorbed, and then all open out again as might some plant or animal that has stopped to digest or absorb a piece of food. All open out again at once, like flowers (or sea anemone), and conversation goes on as if nothing has ever happened. But something did happen.”

“No one seemed to be aware that this had been a common experience. Each thought that it was their separate problem and sorrow. And in those moments of pain (or whatever we can agree to call them), I looked on through the experience and out into life itself. It was simply a moment of truth or growth, like a plant might shoot forward suddenly in a spurt of energy. Much of what we call psychological pain is, for the most part, simply the fear to share the thought openly — the loneliness of not sharing the experience.”

That’s what I wrote back then. It has been many years, decades, since that first vision, but the basic truth of it remains as true today as it was then. We all know that the Self, without the proper training, can be a big obstacle. However, it is not generally clear that when it comes to inner energetic-events, we tend to take them inwardly and simultaneously.



This is why I have studied and documented the connection between our inner life and the life energy of the Sun that reaches us with fresh change every eight minutes and twenty seconds. This downturned lotus (myopia) can be turned upward and outward with a little training.

Here is another journal entry from around that time that addresses the myopia and its remedy:

“The morning’s brightness lights the day. And when that day is gone, the quietness of evening here approaching settles to sleep this restless world. Hard can I hear the frantic rush, as I turn away from the edge out into floating rest am I. It is not my conscious direction doing this, but as a head down-turned all life now turns up a blossom to the night, the night of time urges me open, at last a flower too, open to life. Already the dawn.”

“Still, around me, urging caution, a retinue of persons set my spirit, like a jewel is set, in time. But where before my worry, now my rest. The tide rolls on beyond me. Ever changing, it rocks me now asleep. And in my sleep, awake am I, so clear a bell is ringing.”

“The smart of persons lash and crack to drive me at time’s edge. My personal ties are slipped, as floating out, I’m gently tugged. Too long have fought to force my thought, and not, at ease, arising like some cloud to pass. My work undone, yet done, I rise. Drifting through strains, I sieve and pass myself, open out to nothing thoughts to touch back not once more.

“A clear sleep is soft; its ever blooming sound is silence. Now to find my way among the slips of time. And slip I will, now lost to striving, and lounge in this room of emptiness. To lie back in time, behind its edge, and ever look eternally. No way to pass this on. This is: passing on. Slamming against the walls of time, I shove off into eternity, and spread open a flower, so wide.”

I know, I’m a poetic cuss, but some of it may be useful. As my favorite poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, put it: “Suck any sense from that who can.”

[Photo taken by me. Here is a wonderful song written by The Yardbirds drummer James McCarty, whom I interviewed years ago, and consider now, my friend. This is the essence of the Sixties in a song, IMO.]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xBbXwK02TVc>

## FACE TO FACE

August 30, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

This year's teaching is unlike any that I can remember, and I have been with Rinpoche since 1983.

In this intensive, Rinpoche is presenting the life story of Karma Chagme, a great teacher who lived in the 17th Century. There are several different levels the Tibetans consider when looking at a biography. In this case Rinpoche is giving what is called the "inner spiritual biography."

So far, this has consisted of a running account of Karma Chagme's many incredible dreams, plus some of the auspicious signs he experienced.

These dreams and signs were beyond anything I ever imagined, and so in the Questions & Answers session, I had to ask about this, and the relative lack of anything similar in my own experience. Here is what went down in the shrine room. First I asked the following question, based on this account:

In the years past, in a teaching like this I might have been waiting for something that I could identify with personally. Well, that in fact happened, but not as I imagined it.

It is clear from these teachings that I have never had any dreams like those that Karma Chagme had. I don't even have the background, scholarship, much

less the dharma experience and realization I would need.

However, what these teachings have given me has made me more humble, or kind of brought me up short, and in a good way, looking at my own few experiences, much less my relative lack of realization.

What I do identify with 100% is the part where Karma Chagme said of his students that they were still too young in the dharma and perhaps still needed to grow a bit. This I could identify with. And, when I thought back over my life as to what dreams I have had, there were none like his.

I do remember one dream that I have had over and over through the years and perhaps it relates to this gathering of folks here.

I dreamed I was coming over the top of a mountain, like through a mountain pass, and about to descend into a magnificent great lush valley. I was part of a whole group of students, young adults, and we were going down in the valley to go to school together in the dharma, and we were all so very happy. Perhaps this group of us here today is that group. I don't know, and my question is:

If, as dharma students, we are still too young, if we are not yet ready... how can we stay with Rinpoche into our next life and finish our training as we have been doing.

In my case, I have been with Rinpoche for 33 years since I first met him, and am still not ready to leave him.

[The above was translated to Rinpoche, and here is his response:]

“First, to your dream. Rinpoche says there are several aspects to your account and the question with which it ended.”

“Going first to the dream... the dream which you report having had numerous times is a very, very good dream, because it is a definite sign that you are on the brink of the result of the path, and that is what that dream clearly means. That doesn't mean that will happen in this life... crossing over the pass and going into the pleasant valley where the dharma college where you and your companions were going to study. Maybe, and later on Rinpoche specified that it probably is a sign of a future rebirth, but I think the answer to your question that you asked really is to be found in the dream that you used to have. And I think that indicates that we will be inseparable, life after life, until you achieve awakening.”

“And then he said the most important thing to me here, and this is not limited to your asking this question, is that I'm so delighted to see you alive. He says, 'I am always happy to see you, and I am always happy to see you operating the video equipment, but I have never felt such a sense of relief and joy to see you operating the video equipment as I have this year, because as you know and I know this was kind of a near thing.'”

“As for the dream, I think that it indicates your subsequent rebirth, and you could be moving toward rebirth in a pure realm, or it could indicate a higher rebirth in some kind of god realm where there is

access to dharma...those are the two. In either case, the effect of the dream as you report and the scenery indicates that it is some kind of higher rebirth.”

“But even more wonderful than that dream is just to see you and the fact that you survived and to watch you operating the video equipment. And then he concluded by saying, ‘Even more significant than the dream I take the fact that you survived this health crisis and are here now operating the video equipment as a sign that nothing can keep us apart.’”

[Photo by me of Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche teaching, and the translator Lama Yeshe Gyamtso in the KTD Monastery Shrine room.]



## ENGULFED IN BLESSINGS

September 20, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

I can say something about the close teacher-student relationship, like the kind that takes place in Vajrayana Buddhism between a guru and a student. In our society, such a relationship is rare to non-existent, which means we don't know what it means, because we don't yet have the experience.

The word "Blessing," the common phrase in Tibetan sadhanas (Buddhist texts), is "JIN GYI LOP," which translates as "Grant your blessing." We all know something about seeking the blessing of our father or our mother in life, but the guru's blessing is something else again. It can't hurt to at least talk about it, not that I have adequate words to describe it.

The guru's blessing cannot be anticipated, either in arrival or in kind – quality. It is beyond elaboration, beyond words. Sometimes the texts speak of clouds of blessing, as in: being engulfed in clouds of blessing. Can you imagine? The fact is that mostly we cannot imagine such a thing, yet still it occurs.

The guru's blessing is not a "thing," not this or that textual point, not something we finally "get," but as the poetry says, simply clouds of blessing that engulf us.

If you read the various Namtars, the spiritual biographies of the Tibetans, you will find repeated mention of being engulfed in the blessing of the guru. And you will find much prose written in thankfulness to the guru for his or her blessing. And it is thankfulness beyond repayment, gratefulness that is a completely different order of magnitude from anything we knew before. And, as mentioned, like a standing wave, the blessing simply engulfs us, washing us away from what we were recently involved in. It is, among other things, a kind of liberation.

And it has a gratuitous quality to it, as in unearned, no matter how diligent we have practiced, no matter how good we have been, etc. Nothing we have done would deserve this blessing. It is over the top, like a swelling tide that comes in, raising our boat from where we are stuck and washing us free.

It is like a new chapter in our spiritual book, a door that swings open and we suddenly find that we have already passed through it, and with no thanks to ourselves. One of the points I am making here is the clear demarcation between what we feel we deserve (or have earned) and the blessing itself. It is no way “quid pro quo,” but as William Blake wrote “Enough, or Too Much.” In the case of the guru’s blessing, it is always the latter, “too much,” more than we can possibly imagine. Greater awareness is just like that.

Like the wave that washes the driftwood farther up the beach or, if you prefer, the tide that washes us finally out to sea, the blessing of the guru is kindness beyond measure, engulfing us, lifting us up and out of where we are and instantly changing all the rules.



It is clear that all our effort, our practice, our diligence (aside from being, of course, meritorious) is just a means of treading water until that big blessing wave comes along and engulfs us. And it is the guru alone who extends that blessing.

## VALID-COGNITION

September 21, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

The title is not as bad as taking cod-liver oil; it just looks complicated. There are many methods of meditation, in fact hundreds of techniques that pass in America as “meditation,” but only a few of them are the “awareness” meditation as taught by the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni. Of the more historical and authentic Buddhist methods, they can be divided into two main categories, Indirect Valid-Cognition and Direct Valid-Cognition, terms which might sound a little formidable, but don’t have to be.

The more common form of meditation is that of Indirect Valid-Cognition, also termed Inferential Valid-Cognition (logical analysis), where we use the mind to conceptualize, reason out, and eventually understand the nature of the mind. We do this all the time. This is a perfectly acceptable path, but it does have one drawback that we might want to be aware of, and that is that using indirect reasoning, it is said to take an almost untold number of lifetimes (years and eons) to complete.

On the other hand, Direct Valid Cognition applied to the recognition of the true nature of the mind is said to be accomplished in a single lifetime or at least within a few lifetimes. Given that caveat, it is no wonder that most practitioners line up on the path of Direct Valid-Cognition. Let’s look at these two paths more closely.

If we have an interest in learning meditation as a gateway to knowing the mind itself, chances are we have already been trying to figure this all out for some time. Inferential Valid-cognition is just a scholarly term for figuring things out conceptually, by logic and inference. In Mahamudra Meditation, the pinnacle of the meditation done in the Karma Kagyu Lineage, Inferential Valid-Cognition is an important part of introducing the student to the true nature of the mind.

So, when I say that Inferential Valid-Cognition is the long-way-around way to enlightenment, this is not to say that it is not used at all. It most certainly is, and it is used to help introduce Direct Valid-Cognition. As mentioned, it is not used exclusively as a path to enlightenment. However, it can be a stepping stone.

Inferential Valid-Cognition is how academia and the mind here in the West are studied, inferentially or scientifically. We reason things out -- logic. This is what the Tibetans call “relative truth,” a conceptual reasoning process that requires a subject and an object. We all are familiar with this.

However, Direct Valid-Cognition is not a relative truth, not dualistic, in that it has no subject and an external object, no “me” and them-or-it. The challenge is, how do we take our current dualistic approach to everything (me and the world out there), and turn it inward on itself until our habitual dualism short-circuits and we remain the single spark, kind of an all-in-one sort of thing – non-dualistic?

The simple fact is that we are, by habit, disembodied, meaning that we are frozen, rapt in attention, gazing at the external outside world, literally watching a

movie that we ourselves are mostly projecting. This is why we start with Inferential Valid-Cognition, which we are already familiar with, and use it to begin to probe at our interior.

In a way, this is an elaborate case of misdirection, using what we are most familiar with (dualistic reasoning) to kind of immerse ourselves in non-dualistic experience without at first realizing this is what is happening. In the introduction to recognizing the true nature of the mind, Inferential Valid-Cognition is used to redirect our attention from outside, as in our day-to-day world, to inside toward the mind itself.

You might imagine that redirecting our attention to the inside would be easy, but here we are not talking about what we might call simple introspection into our Self, which we do all the time. Instead, here we want to learn to look directly at the mind itself, thus the term “Direct Valid-Cognition.”

Now, if this could be put into words as a technique you could follow, that would be nice. But the “Pointing Out Instructions” defy language to reproduce, so all I can do is give you a “sounds like this,” and even that is a “perhaps.”

The mind, aside from our familiar idea of it as “conceptual,” is more than conceptual. It is beyond any concepts (or words) whatsoever, so my attempt here is bound to fail, but I hope successfully, giving you (at best) a hint or suggestion of the reality.

Beyond concepts, the mind is somewhat like a muscle that we must learn to flex, move, and bend. It is not easy, especially at first; it takes effort, effort of mind. It

is like putting two little magnets together of opposite polarities; you feel the resistance. You can experience this right now by trying to look at who is looking at this page. Just try it and you will have taken the first step to harnessing the mind directly. It is like riding a wild bronco.

In short, there is nothing just “intellectual” about the mind itself. Rather, it is a living, fire-breathing dragon, a mind-horse that we must ride if we are to tame it. I could go on, but it would be abstractions on abstractions (the soup of the soup), until nothing tangible remained. Instead, you must get the idea yourself, get a whiff of the reality, and take it from there.

If you have been living on the fumes of Buddhist conceptuality, then Direct Valid-Cognition puts the 3D back into the reality of mind-training. Non-linear or non-dualistic reality, unlike our familiar relative (dualistic) version, is a completely different animal. When our dualisms elide and their consonants collapse and are removed, what remains are just the vowels, so to speak -- the dynamics of non-linear totality. This is called Vipassana (Insight Meditation), and it is a straight shot to the heart of our conceptual dualisms.

This may sound complex, but it really is quite simple. Instead of all the middlemen, we learn to look directly at the nature of our own mind, and allow that to inform us. That is enough.

## ROI (Return on Investment)

September 23, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

Perhaps some writing about the investment and returns of our life energy is in order. Certainly, when we are young, like under 30 (and effusing energy), we can squander a little. But after 30 years of age, the wellsprings start to dry up. Our growth spurt is over and, like the trajectory of a missile, we sustain for a while and then gradually decline. This is not news to any of us, but exists peripherally (out of the corner of our eye) since adolescence, the elephant in the room. What goes up comes down.

Where before, as youths, we were overflowing, now we automatically find ourselves conserving energy as we notice our little wellsprings gradually drying up. This is why even liberals become more conservative with age. We are forced to conserve to preserve our quality of life.

And it is when we begin to conserve that we might be receptive to the difference between the kinds of meditation techniques available to us. When it comes down to ROI (return on investment), it makes a real difference which meditation techniques we practice. All meditation techniques perhaps do something, but the question is just what?

Most of what passes for meditation in America are basically relaxation therapies of one kind or another,

offering us perhaps temporary relief and a chance to relax. Others are relative techniques that allow us to reorient or adjust ourselves better to our life situation, as best we can. And a very few are techniques that can provide true realization as to how our mind actually works. Although I use all of the above, these last few are what I find most worthwhile.

To repeat, I am not against relaxation therapies, although watching a movie is all I need for that. And I have spent over 50 years studying and practicing astrology and, indeed, it has helped orient me to best working with this world of ups and downs that I live in. But both of the above techniques are “relative,” meaning they are about me, myself, and I living and working in the world I exist in. They may help me exist in this world, but they say nothing about waking up from that world, much less do they help me to realize what I can’t take with me (including the “Me” in me) when I leave this body that I now have.

It is a fact that even many of the preliminary practices of Tibetan Buddhism are mostly concerned or employ relative truths, which leaves those few Buddhist techniques like Vipassana and Mahamudra Meditation that are not relative ONLY to this day-to-day world we inhabit, in other words, those techniques that are not dualistic.

Again, by “dualistic” I refer to the habitual confusion of ourselves (in here) and our projections (out there), and the fact that what we see in the world around us is, for the most part, our own projection. Yet, we are unaware of it. This is the “me” in here and the “them” out there conundrum. That is the dualism.

Non-dualistic meditation techniques like Vipassana and Mahamudra Meditation remove that dualism, like we might resolve two images into one true one with a pair of binoculars, so that we can see clearly. The analogy I like as to the difference between a dualistic (relative) meditation technique like Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) and a non-dualistic meditation technique like Insight Meditation (Vipassana) is that of trying to thread a very tiny needle with shaky hands.

A relative technique like Tranquility Meditation can take the shakiness out of the hands so that with a non-dualistic technique like Insight Meditation we can thread the needle. As it happens to be, we all start with dualistic techniques like Tranquility Meditation because that is what we have to work with, where we come from. However, at some point, with help from an authentic teacher, we can transition to a non-dualistic technique like Insight Meditation. It is at that point that realization begins to arise.

A great deal is made, both in Tibetan and Zen Buddhism, about the moment when we go non-dualistic and recognize the true nature of our own mind. In fact, all of the many kinds of dharma practice exist only to facilitate that recognition, our first true realization.

So, if this sounds appealing to you, then I suggest that you plan your practice to achieve "Recognition." I would be glad to help however I can, but you would have to think this through and ask questions



## STOP, LOOK, AND LISTEN

September 22, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

Stop where you are, look around, and, as they say, take a deep breath. What's your next step? I guess that depends on where you intend to go, right?

It's not as simple as a checkerboard or even a chess board. There are other dimensions to our moves. I like this analogy I came up with of our life (and its meaning) as a sphere, where on the surface we sit. Most spiritual techniques, particularly the New Age variety, offer us various ways to orient ourselves on the surface of the sphere. Like a sailboat on the sea, we can set our sails and let the winds of change drive us to and fro around the globe. This is what the Tibetan Buddhists call "Relative Truth," perhaps bettering our orientation and even our direction. There are innumerable techniques for relative positioning on this earth.

If we complete this analogy of relative motion on the sphere's surface, then "Absolute Truth" would be motion from the surface of the sphere toward the center. My dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, pointed out to me many years ago that, for example, Astrology is a relative truth, one of the limbs of the yoga, so he said. However, he pointed out that it is not the root. The Dharma is the root of the yoga. Only something dharmic will move us toward the center. I find this a useful analogy.

If you are looking for something other than rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic (relative truth), then you won't find true realization in any of the spiritual traditions like astrology, palmistry, tarot, and on down the line. And please, before you send me hate mail, consider what I am saying carefully. I have spent over 50 years studying and practicing astrology and I well know both its power and elegance. I also love Tarot, I-Ching, and so on, just as you may. The truth here is simple.

If there is a subject and an object in your discipline, like where should I move or what should I do, then it is a relative truth. Of course, astrology and its reorienting can bring temporary and welcome relief. I have counseled folks for many decades and it often helps. However, it is axiomatic that a relative truth like astrology cannot liberate us from Samsara, such as the dharma can because, being dualistic, it is part of the problem. It can, at best, position us to take the winds of change with the least amount of suffering.

So, when selecting a spiritual discipline, it can be helpful to answer the question: do you want temporary relief or do you want actual realization? For me, that is the operative question and that alone determines what particular technique(s) I take up and practice.

I am knowledgeable on most of the psychic sciences, which are all relative truths, and I am relatively expert on a few, like astrology. Having tried a great many of them at length, I, in fact, bettered my life position through their use. But... and as Pee-Wee Herman put it, this is a Big Butt, I still find myself smack-dab in the

middle of Samsara with their use, albeit perhaps with some pretty nice patches of road.

It was not until I stumbled on the dharma (and its training) that any true realization began to occur for me. Realization, however small, is freedom from Samsara, this “vicious cycle of ups and downs” as the Tibetans call it that we are all lost in. So, what’s my point?

My point is that it can matter a great deal what techniques we adopt and take up for spiritual awakening. Don’t expect something like astrology to enlighten you, although it can be very much of a life guide and helper. With astrology, we can reorient and very much better our position within Samsara, but astrology by itself cannot bring an end to Samsara because it is an integral part of Samsara.

I write this to point out that the type of training we choose affects the results we can expect. Fiddling with relative truths (like astrology) can benefit us on a temporal basis, but there is an aspect to these relative disciplines that is reminiscent of rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic – ultimately futile.

Of course, use relative truths like astrology to get comfortable in your life. I do. However, like diversifying your savings, invest most of your energy in a ROI like mind-training that can provide you with some form of realization. My first actual dharma teacher used to say this to me (over and over):

“Michael, if you spend all of your time in the sideshow, the main tent will be gone.”

## THE ANTEROOM

September 25, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

The idea of enlightenment, of awakening and realization is attractive. It is responsible for drawing many of us toward the Dharma. And here we wait, figuratively speaking, in the anteroom shuffling our feet, for that inner sun to dawn – enlightenment.

By definition, pre-enlightenment is conducted in Samsara, this world of ups and downs, what has sometimes has been described as a Catch-22 of vicious cycles. Here we all are, waiting for the next train out to realization. Depending on how we respond to dharma training, this can take a long time.

It is no wonder that the great preponderance of dharma practices are relative truths, meant to be used by those of us very much embedded in the “me, myself, and I” against the world frame of mind. In fact, almost all dharma practices are of this type. Such practices act as a birthing ground to prepare us for the leap to direct realization.

The whole point of what are called the “Pointing Out Instructions” is to point out to us what we have never managed to discover or recognize on our own, the true nature and workings of our own mind. We should not feel inadequate for not having recognized the nature of mind up to now, because even the great siddhas (sages) clearly state that without an authentic

teacher to point this out, our chances of discovering it are infinitesimal and would take, at the very least, millions of years and lifetimes to arrive at it by inferential logic and trial and error. So, don't feel like the Lone Ranger. We are all in the same boat.

So, what are all of us doing here while we wait for realization? For one, we are rubbing off our hard edges, at the very least undergoing some form of purification, much like the prize fighter trying to get down to a fighting weight. Or, like the game of Pick-Up-Sticks, we are picking through the sticks until we get down to or close to nothing, at which time perhaps there is enough light to see through our own camera obscura.

In the lineage I have trained in, the key to all of this is finding an authentic teacher who can point out the way for us to recognize the true nature of the mind. Without such a guide, it is like finding a needle in the haystack. "Recognition" is like those old pictures where embedded within it is another picture, almost impossible to find unless someone points it out to us. However, once pointed out, we can afterward see it every time we look.

So, the moral of this story is to waste no time and get right to finding an authentic teacher who can help point out the way. An "authentic teacher" is one whose words sink in, catalyzing you to action, despite yourself.

## THE GRASSHOPPER AND THE ANT

September 24, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

There is something that doesn't love the ant in the above title. Religions in general are rife with similar comparisons between what is easy and what is hard, between what is selfish and what is not, and any number of other such spiritual tradeoffs.

It has always chafed me to pit living for today against living for tomorrow (or for the next life), especially since we are often admonished or encouraged to "Be Here Now," not "Be Here Tomorrow." And a cardinal piece of advice in Tibetan Buddhism is "Don't Invite the Future." And yet we are often told to worry about our next life more than rejiggering this one, at least as related to the worldly comforts. There is a caveat here.

And in my recent blogs I have compared what are called "relative" dharma practices to "absolute" dharma practices. I find the term "absolute" too absolute. There must be better terminology. By "relative," it is meant that the particular method or technique is "of this world" of Samsara that we live in. Perhaps the better term is "dualistic," meaning conceptual, involving a subject and an object -- a differential. We then can contrast a dualistic approach with a non-dualistic approach, one where the distinction between subject and object is redundant

and does not have to be made. If this is still a little foggy, let me drill-down.

I believe what is intended is that dualistic (relative) practices, which are in and of this world, can help us get around and take a direction with our life, but like an endless loop, they provide no exit, no way out of Samsara. And they are ongoing, “endless” would be the word. So, skillful relative-means suggest making the most and best use of what-have-you, what we have going for us in this life. In other words, these relative truths help us best position ourselves to survive in this Samsaric world and can even be a launching pad to achieve non-relative or non-dual realization. They are, by definition, preliminary in nature, preliminary to realization.

A launching pad these relative truths may be, an exit ramp, but our actual exit must be brought about by yet other means, by some sort of transformation. And that is what the excitement (and confusion) is all about in dharma circles, crossing the bar or threshold from dualistic thinking to non-dual realization. Nice work if you can get it and... as the song goes... “You can get it if you try,” but how? This event threshold or event horizon between dualistic and non-dualistic is called “Recognition.” And by recognition, we are referring to the recognition by the student of the true or actual nature of the mind itself.

“Recognition” is an excursion or extension beyond conceptuality (with all its dualisms and confusion) to a non-dual state of realization. This will not just “come” to us passively because, by definition, realization requires not only our participation, but our grasping the nature of the mind itself. Going halfway will get us,

well, halfway, with the glass neither half full nor half empty – both. Going more than halfway on our part is what is required, reaching. And it is we who must reach. We will receive nothing unless we extend our hand.

So the queue of those waiting for Recognition (and realization) is endless, when the actual method, while perhaps conceptually understood, is realized by the very few. This bottleneck, IMO, can be widened by those waiting for realization through a better understanding of just what is involved, hopefully -- articles like this.



## NOT TAKING THE BAIT

September 26, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

Look at what is, not where it can lead to. Thoughts proliferate, endlessly arising and beckoning to be followed. Sure, I follow some of them out, like how and when I will take my car to have its tires rotated. But I sure don't follow the meaningless thoughts as I used to, not to mention the ones lying in wait to bring me down. On a gray day, negative thoughts can lead me on a downward spiral that is best avoided by just letting them go unanswered by my attention. I don't need to know what every last thought is about.

A lot of preliminary dharma training involves pruning our thought-tree on the fly, so to speak. I have pointed out in these blogs how we can regain a virtual lifetime of energy by simply noting our reactions, owning them as our own, and gradually letting them go fallow. See: "The Alchemy of Reaction"  
<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../Tong-len%20-%20Second%20Edition...>

Here I point at the technique of not adding the white-noise and increased energy loss of following every last inviting (or scary) thought that comes our way. There is no obligation. Just say no! And we say "No," not by opposing or shutting the thought out with force, but rather by dropping thoughts as they arise and reveal to us their non-importance.

As the rinpoche I work with pointed out, by the time we recognize what a thought is about (its content), much of the damage is done. We have already recorded (or partially recorded) that thought as part of our karma. Still, just dropping unnecessary thoughts when we become aware of them is a real start. We can do that with even a little practice.

Much better yet is to learn to look at the nature of a thought directly, ideally not by examining the content at all, and allow it to just vanish as it will. This technique, however, is not as easy to learn and is part of what is called Insight Meditation.

Still, I can think of little better to do with my time than to put some of these techniques to work in weeding out my thoughts as I go about my day, freeing up all of the energy they otherwise entail. These kind of “purificatory” practices result in a clarity of consciousness similar to when a fog lifts thanks to the rays of the morning Sun. Everything just clears up.

The sometimes-poet Aleister Crowley penned the line “To snatch at a gnat and swallow a camel.” Indeed, that is what we do when we are vigilant about committing gross karma (killing, stealing, etc.), while at the same time being eviscerated by the constant stream of enervating thoughts we so dutifully entertain. I am afraid our daily train of thoughts is a trip to nowhere and nothing.

And so, my advice suggests that we wake-up to this enormous energy suck that we suffer daily, put an end to a loss of its thousand razor cuts, and through increased awareness end them. We don’t have to follow out every last bleeding thought, which suck us

dry of clarity by their endless drain and obscuration. We can stop giving those extraneous thoughts our vitality by simply becoming aware of them as they arise, by noting them.

## LOUDS IN THE MIND

September 27, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

Mental hygiene, like dental hygiene, is ultimately up to us. No one else can do it for us, so if we want to ignore it, we can count on the accumulation of our mental obscurations gradually dimming out the light. If we take clogged arteries seriously, we should be even more concerned about a clogged or obscured mind, which we apparently have been accumulating for at least this lifetime and, if we are to believe the Tibetan Buddhists, for many lifetimes prior to this.

The problem is that in this society there is virtually no awareness of the fact that the mind is not good-to-go just as it comes out of the box, not clear as day. In fact, the mind is not by birth clear and its time we woke up to that fact and took remedial action to clarify the situation.

The amazing thing to me over the years is to see how we Americans assume that if we apply our mind to a subject, that our mind is just naturally crystal clear. We seem to have no awareness of the Heisenberg Principle, that in a dualism the subject who looks or witnesses affects the object of study (we have all heard of this by now), but worse is the fact that the untrained mind (as mentioned above) is more cloudy than clear and sees life "through a glass darkly." And it's not rose-colored glasses we are peering through.

As a young man, and a naturalist at that, I assumed that the mind I used for my studies was naturally clear as a bell, but what I eventually found out is that it was totally encrusted with bias, fears, and who knows what else. In fact, all that time I was busy projecting my own hopes and fears on the screen of the outside world and was rapt (fixated) watching my own movie. We are lost in dualisms. Hell, LSD taught me that in 1964. The Tibetans only verified it and filled in the holes of what I could not grasp at that initial insight.

“Trailing clouds of glory do we come,” the line by the poet Wordsworth, is just wishful thinking. The Tibetan Buddhists carefully explain that as we are reborn, we may have a fresh physical start (a new body), but we immediately proceed to draw around ourselves a persona based not only on our new physical circumstances, but also (and mainly) on the vast storehouse of karmic traces that we haul with us through time.

Before we know it, without being aware of the fact, we have colored in all our karmic tendencies, the myriad of fixations that we bring with us from previous births. The point is that there is nothing like the “clean slate” we like to imagine we start out with at birth. This fact is nothing new, but as old as time itself.

As to what to do about it, the Buddhists point out that gradually becoming aware of our obscurations and learning how to purify and remove them is in order. In fact, most of what are called the preliminary dharma practices are about just that, thinning out the sticky film of fixations that cloud our mind. This is why it is sometimes stated that “Awareness is all.”

At some point, through our own effort, we must stop the avalanche of accumulating karma and learn to reverse the process, begin the process of thinning out our obscurations so that we can see more clearly. Again, look to the Preliminary Practices to start this process. Lots of free books on working with the mind here:

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

## REST, REST, REST

September 28, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

“Give it a rest;” we’ve all heard that refrain, and rest is key in Buddhist mind training. It took me years to understand that when the Tibetans say “rest,” they mean the same kind of rest we do when we kick off our shoes, plop down on the couch, and watch a movie. Mistakenly, all that time I insisted on imaging that Buddhist rest had to be some kind of elevated or “holy” rest. Not so. Dharma “rest” (as far as resting) is the same rest as when we just take a load off. If we are talking about resting in the nature of the mind, well, that takes some training, but the “rest” part of it is just rest.

A case can be made that the main ingredient in learning meditation, beyond all the techniques, is just acquiring the ability to allow the mind to rest. Note, I did not say to “rest the mind,” because that is too easily misunderstood to mean we have to make an effort to do something, especially when it comes to rest. The great piece of advice from the Mahasiddha Tilopa “Don’t Alter the Present,” says it all perfectly: Leave things be just as they are.

Of course, we have to make some initial effort to learn meditative techniques, but carrying those efforts beyond the threshold of mastering the muscle memory involved is perhaps the main obstacle to success in meditation. Like the bobsled at the top of a

hill, make an effort and push at the start, but then hop on the sled, and go with the flow. In other words, let what is already happening continue to happen, as if we could stop it anyway.

In fact, as all the highest of dharma texts (Upadesha) celebrate, these three pith words of advice from the Mahasiddha Tilopa are precious beyond price.

- (1) Don't Prolong the Past.
- (2) Don't Invite the Future.
- (3) Don't Alter the Present.

These words of instructions are the equivalent of what passes for koans in Zen. Talk about the seal of Mahamudra expressed in plain language. If we could absorb and integrate these three words of Tilopa's advice fully, we would have all the instruction we need to become fully realized. That, and the pointing out as to the true nature of the mind by an authentic master.



## DON'T STOP TO THINK

September 29, 2016

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

In the process of learning more advanced meditation, it is important to not stain the moment with conceptuality. In other words, don't bother to think. Insight Meditation is beyond elaboration. If you get to thinking, you are no longer meditating.

How on earth do we stop thinking? Well, there is a difference between having thoughts and thinking. Thinking is a willful (perhaps habitual) act, something we do to while away the time, i.e. waste time. Perhaps it is like whistling in the dark. We are afraid to be alone with ourselves, so we hum, turn on the radio, make busy, etc. The sound of silence can be deafening.

I can't think of how many times I have had the desire to turn on the radio, only to find that it was already on and playing. Or, I try to find my glasses, when I am already wearing them. That's just nerves talking.

The five senses are pure conduit, like a video surveillance camera without a recorder. The moment we start to record the senses, it obviously becomes a recording, a memory, something already in the past and apparent only through mental manipulation. And manipulate we do, like crazy.

All past events, all history is, as they say memories of things past (and things passed). Talk about double-takes, history is only as good as what I call the Last Judgment, the latest take or judgment on the event, a movable feast of memory that is only as pure as we are. And practically speaking, most memories are whatever we make them. This makes manipulating the past very, very difficult, which is why the great Mahasiddha Tilopa said in a word of advice, "Don't Prolong the Past." Basically, the past is a tar baby.

The Tibetan Buddhist emphasis is not on the past or the future, and not even on the present in the sense of trying to "Be Here Now," etc. Instead, the recommendation is to NOT alter the present, but instead to allow it to present itself and then rest in that. The bottom line is that the past and the future are either memories (past) or projections (future). Neither is here in the present and both are subject to our prejudice and imagination to a very real degree. One is stale and the other not yet ripe.

What is fresh and poignant is the present, if we can learn to leave it just be itself. That fresh quality of the moment, that whiff of fresh air, is the product of the immediate terminals of the senses, as unadulterated by conceptualization and prejudice as possible. It's like putting our nose right up to a pure oxygen vent.

In order to achieve that freshness, there are a number of remedial dharma practices that can assist us in removing the obscurations to clarity that we have picked up over time. These techniques are not hard to learn, but they do have to be practiced until they become second nature to us.

The freshness of the present moment, when perceived directly, after some of our gross obscurations have been removed, is brilliant beyond imagination. An analogy that the Tibetan Buddhists use is that the remedial practices, like the wind, can be used to blow away the clouds that obscure the Sun, and the result is luminous clarity, the first real step toward enlightenment.

The easiest remedial practice I know of, that anyone can do with practice, is Reaction Tong-Len, which is explained here:

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

## SEEING “SEEING” ITSELF

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When we look, we are used to seeing from “in here” something “out there,” subject and object. This is the state of the relative world that we live in, dualism all the way down the pike. Somehow (and for some reason) we have never connected the subject in here (me, myself, and I) with the world out there (the “you” and the “them”), so this dichotomy or dualism definitely exists. The connection between what we see “out there” in the world and who is seeing it from “in here” has never occurred to us, i.e. that we are influencing what we see, and so we persist in watching a movie on the screen of life that we ourselves project and have created or greatly influenced. This is what the Buddhists call Samsara, this world of cyclic existence, with its ups and downs and intrinsic dualism.

This dualistic way of seeing things is habitual but not innate. In other words, there is no reason that we have to function the way we apparently do, with all these obscurations; it's like peering through foggy glasses. It can look dark out there, when it's not. The gradual accumulation of obscurations is like getting cataracts, but they can be removed.

The removal of dualisms is like focusing binoculars; the two images become one and we can see clearly. There are two main ways to do this, by inference and

by direct seeing. Using inference, logic, and indirect reasoning, we can gradually begin to remove our ingrained dualism, but this process can take, according to the Buddhists, a great many lifetimes, even millions of years.

The second (and more common) way to remove dualisms is through directly looking at the mind itself. This is the preferred method and a whole tradition has evolved around this approach based on Insight Meditation and Mahamudra Meditation. This method is non-inferential; we are on our own to personally and directly examine the mind itself. This, my friends, may be one of the last great adventures on earth.

Amazingly enough, it appears that we Westerners are totally unprepared to actually look inward at the mind itself. We just have never done it. My own approach to all of this was in the beginning, without thinking, purely conceptual, even intellectual. I thought about the mind, but had no idea how to actually see it for myself. Even when I was presented with what are called the Pointing Out Instructions by a number of dharma masters, I short-circuited their directions by conceptually generalizing what they were telling me. Conceptual (intellectual) understanding of the “Pointing Out Instructions” is not enough. You have to follow the instructions physically and completely, which for a long time I was unable (or unwilling) to do.

Experiencing the mind by actually looking at it for ourselves is like nothing we have ever done. We are used to “thinking” when it comes to the mind, instead of doing. Doing something in (and with) the mind is foreign to us. The mind is not a “place” we know to go

into. Instead, we think around it and about it. We don't go there.

Our approach to the mind through Intellectualization and conceptualization (like an architect's drawing) is assumed to be two-dimensional, not three-dimensional like real life. In fact, the mind is three-dimensional throughout and we can go in there much like we could walk into a cathedral. However, getting us to do this is another story.

Not only is it unfamiliar territory for us, the mere act of trying can be tiring, not to mention that it is unknown territory for us. A traditional way you can test this out for yourself is to, right now, look at who is looking at this page. Try it. Look at the looker. You will find it very difficult to do, but you should at least sense the resistance and feel some movement if you attempt it. And that is just the tip of the iceberg.

The Buddhist texts clearly point out that, although we cannot look BEYOND the nature of the mind, we can look directly at it. If we do this, it takes all of us to do it, meaning we must fully extend ourselves in the mind, to the exclusion of any dualism (watcher) we might have. As mentioned, it takes absolutely all of us, but that full extension is an experience (and finally a realization) we need to have on the road to greater awareness.

In other words, while we cannot see beyond the mind itself, with the proper instruction we CAN see the entire mind in its totality, exactly. And, as mentioned, it takes absolutely all of us to do this, our full projection. Learning to extend ourselves fully in this way, completely, is required to experience beyond

duality and converge it into non-duality. This is the realm of Insight Meditation and eventually Mahamudra Meditation. Each of these two forms of meditation is non-dual and requires of us non-duality for their realization.

Everything hinges on converting our approach from dualistic thinking to non-dualistic thinking. This conversion is the province all of the many preliminary dharma practices. For those interested, most of these free e-books are about one or another of these preliminary methods:

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