

Training the Mind: Book I

By

Michael Erlewine

© Copyright by Michael Erlewine

ISBN-13:
978-1516960118

ISBN-10:
1516960114

Michael@Erlewine.net

Many free e-books and articles at
DharmaGrooves.com

CONTENTS

What Is Meditation?.....	5
Practicing Meditation	9
What Really Makes Me Sad	12
Don't Prolong the Past	16
What Practice Really Is	21
The Posture.....	27
Tonglen: What about Hate & Fear'	31
Tonglen: Mental Feng Shui	39
Practicing Meditation	43
Off the Cushion	48
Aspirations & Dedication of Merit	53
Mother Nature and Compassion	60
Impermanence	63
Urgency in Dharma Practice	69
The Four Thoughts.....	77
The Function of the Teacher	85
The Two Accumulations Merit and Awareness	90
Why Buddhism is Not a Religion	94
Why Study Meditation	99
Don't Fear Appearances.	105
Practice is Practice.....	108
It's Like Riding a Bike	111
Merit & Awareness	114

Cutting the Cord	118
WHAT ABOUT GOD'	121

What Is Meditation?

Mind training is going secular. It no longer has to be associated with a religion or even with spirituality. And it won't be long before corporations realize the very great advantages to having employees with some mind training and then meditation will go public big time. It will no longer be "alternative" and it will no longer be an alternative. It will be mandatory. As I like to say: what college diplomas are today, mind training certificates will be tomorrow.

What I am pointing out here is that although mind training is an integral part of Asian religions like Buddhism, it can also stand alone by itself (secular) or be used with other religions. As I have tried to explain in previous blogs, mind training is a method to develop greater awareness and not a religion or religious by itself. However mind training combined with a spiritual practice can be very potent. It is unfortunate that the general public is confused about just what meditation is.

The confusion stems from the fact that here in the west we have a single word for meditation and that word has to cover the enormous variety of practices that people actually do that are called "meditation." I want to mention just a few of them here. I imagine each has its own use and value.

For example, many people understand the word "meditation" to mean something like contemplation, taking a concept like "compassion" or "impermanence" and turning it over and over in the mind, looking at it from all angles - contemplating it.

Others speak of "guided meditations" where someone (a guide) talks them through a guided tour or journey into some section of the mind or experience, usually with the eyes closed. Still others speak of levels and going deeper and deeper into Beta and Theta, and so on.

There are many Christian meditations that are forms of prayer and Muslim methods of meditation that tend to focus on Allah, often by reciting the Holy Scriptures from the Qur'an. Many forms of meditation make use of sound or mantra, reciting a short series of Sanskrit (or other language) syllables in a constant (but clear) manner and focusing on the sound.

There are dozens of New-Age meditations which tend to focus on sitting quietly, eyes-closed, and touching on or into our common spiritual essence and thereby refreshing the mind. And incense and candles often help to set the mood.

And there are even other methods of meditation that recommend the ending of all thought, while still others point out that any meditation method and effort to meditate is not meditation, and that "no-meditation" is meditation. And methods like Transcendental Meditation, once used by The Beatles, advocate the

silent use of mantra with eyes closed, practiced 10-20 minutes twice a day, and going deep within that. I could go on and on.

My point here is that there are scores of meditation methods and it is no wonder that anyone interested in mind training is immediately confronted with their own ignorance of these many methods. How would you choose? And, since each method requires patience and lots of time before results appear, who could afford to shop around? It is easier just to avoid the topic altogether.

And I may have one up on my readers, because I was introduced to meditation at a very early age. And this method was popular when I was a child. My very first mantra, which my father presented to me, was "O Wah Tay-Goo Si-Am," which he told me to recite over and over. I did that and he had a good laugh on me. That was his take on all things spiritual. It didn't help me a bit. It is no wonder that many of us have avoided any type of meditation for most of our lives. We don't want to look foolish.

Trying to sort out and judge the merits of the many forms of meditation out there is not my goal here. For one, I have not tried most of them and so have no opinion. However, there is a kind of consensus as to what meditation is, so let's start with the word itself. "Meditation" comes from the Latin word "Meditari" which simply means "to concentrate." Most or at least the majority of meditation methods involve concentration of one sort or another.

To my understanding, the most common form of meditation as used in Asia, in countries like India, Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, Japan, and many parts of China is called "Shamata," a Sanskrit word that means "calm abiding." It is about learning to let the mind just rest. This is easier said than done as most of us who have tried it well know.

"Shamata" is the main form of meditation used by Buddhists, including the Tibetan and Zen Buddhists and, although names for it may differ, this is the one we will be considering here. If you want to know about the most prevalent and ancient form of meditation (2500 years or longer), it appears to be Shamata of one kind or another. And there are different kinds of Shamata but they all accomplish the same function, that of allowing the mind to come to rest naturally.

Practicing Meditation

And let's be perfectly clear here that meditation is a habit that you learn and nothing instantly in itself. In other words, we do not just sit down quietly and call what we do meditation. That is called "sitting down quietly." Traditional meditation is something that we must learn and practice. Meditation requires effort on our part and the "effort" part is not meditation. That's why it is called "practice". We "practice" meditating. Learning meditation is trial and effort, and is not usually relaxing for beginners by any means.

Those who light a candle or some incense and retire to a cushion in a corner, close their eyes, and go deep within, only to emerge 20 minutes later refreshed and relaxed are not doing Shamata meditation. They are just relaxing a bit and we all could use that, but this is not what we are looking at here.

Shamata meditation (and I will just call it "meditation" from this point onward) is a habit that has to be formed and it requires diligence and work. You may enjoy it, but I seldom did. I found it boring, irritating, exasperating, and painful much of the time. But I felt the same way as a kid playing piano scales. I have trouble with rote learning. How about you?

I have never been a good student, at least in school. And I was not a good student in meditation. It took me years to develop what I hope others can do in a much shorter time: gain some proficiency at meditation. I

wish someone had told me what I am trying to point out here. It would have helped.

I did not know back then that meditation practice was "practice" and not the final result. I called it "practice" like everyone else did but the word never registered as "practice". I wish someone had explained to me that meditation is a habit we have to build, much like we practice music, learn our times tables, or anything else. If I had known that, I would have relaxed into that and probably gotten the hang of it a lot sooner. After all meditation is all about developing awareness by letting the mind naturally relax and rest.

Meditation is a habit that has to be learned, a habit that has to be repeated until it becomes habitual (pun intended). Meditation practice is like scaffolding that will eventually be removed once we begin to actually get a real feel for it. It is like learning music. We practice fingerings and scales until we have learned them and then we are free to just play music. Practicing meditation is like that. Practicing is not the music.

And I did not understand back then that the habit of meditation writ small on the cushion looms large in real life, in the rest of my day. I thought I was going for those twenty minutes of enlightenment and that if I didn't get that or some result right there and then, my meditation was no good. I went around for years thinking that my meditation practice was lousy, when actually my meditation, with all its trying, groaning, impatience, irritation, and avoidance, was just fine. I

was doing exactly what I was supposed to be doing - getting to know my own mind. But 37 years ago when I was taught to meditate there was no support structure that I had access to that could explain this to me. I was taught to meditate by no less than the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche himself, but I never saw him again. I was on my own for many years.

And as for feeling bad about my meditation practice, I assumed that I was just being delinquent, failing to get what others perhaps easily got, and generally missing the point. I missed the point alright, which was that everything I was experiencing (that I tried to deny or felt ashamed of) was simply par for the course and totally normal. This too was meditation. It is hard to learn to meditate for many of us. That's the way it is. We are building a habit and that takes effort in the beginning.

I will close this blog by reminding readers that the whole point to meditation is to become more aware each moment in our lives. The two key concepts to proper meditation are called mindfulness and awareness. Awareness is the goal or result of meditation and mindfulness (being more mindful) is how we get there. Having after all these years learned to meditate a little I can say that the increased awareness that comes from meditation practice, however small it may be, could be all the difference in the world between ignorance and awareness.

What Really Makes Me Sad

Two people I care a lot about recently had a horrible fight, one that they can't even begin to get over. What makes me sad is how we deal with a situation like this (our "past") when something bad has happened.

Almost everyone I know spends so much of their time digging in that past trying to figure out why whatever happened "happened". It is like trying to put the toothpaste back in the tube. You never will figure it out.

Meanwhile there is a way to deal with whatever has happened in the past that has been tried and found true for many centuries. And it is simple compared to rejiggering the past. What is done is done. You can't relive it and it is not even the same you that did whatever you did that you regret. Don't look back. I disagree with those who say that those who do not understand the past are condemned to repeat it. I understand their point but there is a better way or at least another way.

I see often see this in couples when they argue and fight. It happens to me as well, but also to many of my loved ones. They spend hours and days until they are completely exhausted trying to figure out where they went wrong. Some even go into therapy, consultations, and remedial work of various kinds. While this may help, it never seems to give them all the answers they seek.

It is true that the past is prologue to the future; we all know that. We don't get an award for realizing this because that's how we define the past, as "past", as what came before. And you can't change the past. Period. You can only change the present AND what we do in THE present totally determines our future.

The Buddhists taught me how to deal with arguments, fights, blowouts, and all the other kinds of scenes we sometimes find ourselves in the middle of. And it works every time and is relatively (compared to sticking your finger in the past) easy as well. This is it:

When you discover that you are off base, have made a mistake, hurt someone you love, got carried away, or whatever... the moment you realize that something like this has happened, you simply stop. You don't dwell further on what just happened. You don't think about it, anguish over it, or even waste time regretting it. You just drop it and take your mind back to trying to do your best, to its normal state of being peaceful and kind. And you start over.

You make a new beginning. If two minutes later you wake up and find yourself angry all over again or bringing up the past, no matter what happened, you simply do the same thing: Stop, take your mind back to where you would like it to be, and start over. You make a new past in the present.

You do this all day long, all night long, continually, and nothing else. In other words you don't prolong the past, whether it was good, bad, or indifferent, and you

don't vilify your actions or the way you behaved, even if they were really wrong, even if you are totally to blame. You just drop it, bring your mind back to the way it should be, and start over. You do this again and again.

This is very similar to the 12-step plan of the alcoholics in that you take it a day at a time, only here it is moment by moment -- a moment at a time. And this actually works because by creating an ever more perfect present, by starting over, you automatically create a new and better past and a better future, just like that. You are building a new habit, even if it takes time. And here is the kicker:

This is precisely what is called in Tibetan and Zen Buddhism: "Meditation." It is sad that the word "meditation" is used for so many different things when it is so simple. The most common form of meditation is called Shamata Meditation, from a Sanskrit word meaning calm-abiding, just letting the mind rest. In that form of meditation we do exactly what was described above. We sit and let our mind rest on an object (or no object). When we find ourselves carried away thinking about something else (like our next dentist appointment), we simply stop right there, drop that thought and bring our attention back to resting the mind. We start over.

This kind of meditation builds a habit that is useful on the cushion, but much more useful as described above in life itself, because we gradually learn to catch ourselves when we are carried away, drop it,

and bring our mind back to the moment and start again. By doing this we create a present that is better than the past and one that turns into a good future.

In summary, it is easier IMO to build a new past by making a good present, than it is to fiddle with the past trying to figure out where we went wrong. After a while, we identify with the new present we are building and the past is no longer even important to figure out. We are no longer "that". We are what we are doing now.

This, friends, is why people meditate, to develop this habit and to build a secure future from the present moment. Give it a try.

Don't Prolong the Past

The great 19th Century Tibetan master Patrul Rinpoche wrote:

Don't prolong the past,
Don't speculate about the future,
Just dwell in present awareness.

The question is how best to do this? How do we not dwell on the past or the future but somehow be mindful of the present, the one place where a future (and therefore a new past) can be built. The traditional way to do this which has been taught for over 2500 years is Shamata meditation. And there are many, many other forms of meditation.

Sitting quietly in meditation for a few minutes each day may give me a greater sense of calmness and clarity, but that is not the only or even the main reason to meditate. That is certainly not why I meditate. The primary reason to learn to meditate is to build a mental habit of working with mindfulness and awareness so I am not so easily distracted and carried away all the time, so that I can be present.

The habit of meditation is not just about sitting on a cushion. While it is important to sit and learn to meditate, that is not the main reason to meditate. Sitting on a cushion builds a habit that we can then use on the cushion but we also can use that habit the rest of the day when we are engaged in our regular life. We sit and meditate to learn mindfulness and to

make mindfulness into a strong habit, but we use that mindfulness and the awareness that stems from it (that we learn while sitting practicing meditation) everywhere else and all the time. We need it to live clearly.

Sitting meditation is about learning to remain mindful and in the present as opposed to being endlessly distracted by thoughts of the past or the future. The first thing most people learn when they begin to meditate is that they are in fact easily distracted, that is: they can't just sit and let the mind rest. The moment they sit down the mind is running all over the place. When beginners try to sit in meditation they experience their day-to-day distraction first hand and are mostly helpless to do anything about it. They have built no meditation habit.

Practicing sitting meditation each day, while it can be nice in itself, is all about building a habit of being in the present. This is why yogis call their meditation "practice." We "practice" meditation and that practice prepares us for the rest of our day, the time we are not meditating on the cushion. And that rest of the day is when we need the habits built through meditation the most.

In my opinion many people have meditation just backward. They believe that the relative calm of ten minutes or a half an hour of meditation is why they meditate, when the reality is that those ten minutes are our time to "practice" meditation not a result, the

time when we "learn' to meditate and the rest of the day is when put that practice to work.

Unless we have practiced meditation on a cushion long enough to actually acquire the habit of being mindful and present, we have nothing to help us keep that awareness the rest of the day. It is a Catch-22. We can't just skip meditation on the cushion and expect to have its results in our daily life. We soon end up right back where we first started, lost in the midst of our endless distractions

It takes actual time sitting on the cushion to build the habit of being present, of being mindful at the times we are distracted, and then learning to bring our attention back to whatever we are doing - practice. This habit is especially beneficial during our post-meditation time, that is: when we are just living life.

I don't know about you, but I get carried away just all the time. I go too far. I say things I don't mean. And I don't always catch myself when I should. Things get out of hand easily for me and I am often not aware of it until somewhere farther down the road. I lack enough mindfulness. Sitting meditation is about building (practicing) a habit of mindfulness that alerts me when I am distracted and allows me to drop that distraction and quickly return to whatever I am doing. It is a simple habit that over time becomes automatic, but it requires practice.

However, like all habits it has to actually become a habit. You can't just think it and have it be so. You

have to practice meditation until it works for you and you can't just sit and count the minutes until your practice time is over. You have to actually do it. It is no different from practicing a musical instrument, except here the instrument is your own mind and attention.

My point is that while sitting on a cushion for a short time each day can be calming and relaxing in itself, that is not the main reason to meditate. The main reason is to "practice" being mindful, to practice recognizing when you are distracted, and learn to bring your attention back to whatever you are trying to do, what we have set out to do, whether on the cushion or in our day-to-day work.

The key word here is "practice" as in "practice makes perfect." If we find practicing meditation calming, fine, but for most beginning meditation practice, that is not the case. It is just the opposite. Within moments of sitting down on a cushion we find just how easily distracted we can be.

This is not to say that we can't just sit and mull things over or let the mind cool out and just run like a quiet stream, or light a candle, some incense, and kick back in the mind. Of course we can.

There are many ways of soothing the mind, but the technique I am pointing out here is about being mindful, about mindfulness.

Shamata meditation as taught by Tibetan and Zen Buddhists is about being mindful and alert. This takes practice and, like all methods of practice, it is not often at first relaxing. It takes effort to meditate effortlessly, if that makes sense. And it takes time, lots of time... our time and consciously.

I wish I could tell you that the results of meditation practice are instantaneous and appear the first time we sit, but this is not the case in my experience. Like all habits, meditation and mindfulness have to be built through effort and time.

Playing music on a guitar is not the same as practicing scales and fingering. The analogy to meditation is a good one. Meditation is your practice and its results (over time) will affect your whole life.

I have found this to be true. I have been meditating for many years and it has been hard work much of the time.

Practice can be boring. For me these habits don't come easily and I am a genius at rationalizing on any given day why I should wait until the next day to practice meditation. The only one I have harmed is myself. It just took me much longer than average for the results of mediation practice to kick in. Enough said.

What Practice Really Is

I want to discuss here something about practice. I don't mean just dharma practice, but any kind of practice, like learning to play a musical instrument or whatever. Of course this also is true for dharma practices like sitting meditation, Tong-Len (exchanging yourself for others), and so on. Practice almost by definition can be boring so it might help to learn a little more about what happens when we practice anything.

I first learned about the true nature of practice back in Ann Arbor in the Sixties when I was propelled out of my body by an LSD trip and never came back, or came back over a period of many years. My mind was pretty open then, actually very open. There was a little church in Ann Arbor off of South University and Forest Avenue, up near and just south of Washtenaw Avenue, which is now a little dogleg. I think it might have been called the "Campus Chapel." Anyway, it was open all night long, left open. No one was there late at night except sometimes me. I would be up late nights just as I am today up early mornings.

Anyway, I would go there at times when all else was closed or when I wanted to be alone and just play music. In that chapel they had a small grand piano in the basement and a real organ console up in the chapel. I would play those or play at those. I can't really play the piano but that was not the point those nights. I wasn't playing the piano or organ; I was

playing music, music from my soul. Life was squeezing me and in those late nights I was playing music like some animal calling out to life.

I especially loved playing that church organ because the many different voices and registers would pierce my mind and set up all kinds of resonances that transported me. In fact I once owned a large Hammond B3 (jazz organ) for some time when I lived in small room. It took up almost my entire room until they came and repossessed it for lack of payment. I just ran out of money and was not willing to work at that time. It was all I could do to monitor the changes in my consciousness each day.

Anyway, late nights I would go to the chapel and play my heart out. It really was beautiful (to me) music, but I will allow that it might have sounded strange to others. I did this for years and no one else was ever there. I did have another and different experience at the U. of M. School of music. One time I wandered through the music school where there were dozens of small practice rooms, each with a piano and most of those rooms were empty of students.

As I walked through the halls the sounds of different instruments filled my ears.

Now here was music. And I felt music well up within me. I was filled with emotion and feeling. Slipping into one of the empty rooms, I closed the door behind me and sat down and played as I would at the student chapel. Only this time I was not alone.

I had no real piano technique and was forced to help my fingers find their way along the keyboard. Still, I played very carefully, searching for each note. I played what I was feeling. It came from deep inside. I did not stop to think how this might sound or whether this was in some acceptable music style or another. I just played and poured out my feelings.

Nor can I say that this was happy music, but how could I measure that? It was the music of me at the time. With each note and chord I built a sound image of my mind, at least my state of mind. I am sure the sounds could appear unconventional to anyone listening in as they were from my heart and fit my feelings and mind. And sure enough, as luck would have it there was a listener-in although I was not playing all that loud. I was jolted out of my mood by a knocking at the tiny glass window in the door and then the opening of the door itself.

It was some kind of woman-official for the school. She asked me what I was doing? I said I was just playing the piano. "We have no time for music of that sort in this school. Some of us have work to do. You will have to leave now," she said. Somehow she was objecting to the "kind" of music I was playing or the way I was playing it. Her subtext was that the music was disturbing, not because it was too loud, but because it was too unorthodox. It was as if I was not welcome there because the mental journey I was on and the music it induced was troubling to others.

Perhaps it was. How she knew I was not a music student I don't know. Perhaps it was because I couldn't play the piano. But I took it that my music (and mind) was hard for others to hear. I left.

I tell this story because I am getting around to my topic of practice and practicing. There is no such thing as standard electrical voltage. That is why we have regulators, surge protectors, and all that stuff. Electricity surges. It ebbs and flows and we try to control it as best we can. In a similar way, our internal energy moves in spurts and lags - cycles. Much like electricity, life brings moments of great clarity when there is energy for all ideas and action plus also moments of drag and darkness. The energy grid upon which our being is based also ebbs and flows. It is anything but constant. In fact, change is the order of the only constant. We are kind of at the mercy of our life energy flow, bobbing around in its ups and downs.

I explored this idea when I began to learn to play the piano on those late nights back in the 1960s. I also had an upright piano in the narrow hallway to my room at 114. N. Division. Learning to play the piano requires practice and lots of it, but how does practice really work? Is there something more to practice than the benefit of rote memory and repeated actions on the keyboard? I found there was indeed another factor.

The idea of piano (or any other kind of) practice is nothing more than a method of exercising and waiting for the will to develop confidence, for those energy surges I mentioned. What is accidental almost we

build confidence and will- power about. Energy and insight come in blossoms and streams and are not regulated. I would spend the long practice time waiting for the moments of forward push or opening and then cling close to the new ground that opened into me. That is how I learn. During those moments of openness I can see to do anything, piano or otherwise. The mind is open in those surge moments. There is a way in. At those times I can see into myself and perhaps learn something new. That is the true result of practice: taking advantage of open moments to dart past where we were before into new ground, our passageway to the future. We build a habit through practice. We gain ground by taking up the slack as we leap ahead through those open gaps of insight. We know that good habits are learned through practice, but I am trying to explain how practice actually works.

Just as the practice of waiting for the energy or spirit-surges can benefit piano playing, that same waiting-practice style can allow us to take advantage of these natural gaps or energy surges for other uses. The same kind of attention that we might pay to practice piano is worth paying to our mind-training work - just sitting there being alert. Things happen. Gaps or openings naturally occur and if we pay attention we are there to note them. That is practicing, what is more commonly called "mind practice" or meditation. Meditation is just the sort of mind practice we are discussing here.

In basic meditation we sit there and attempt to allow the mind to rest. When we become distracted, we gently bring the mind back to rest once more. It can be boring and it is just practicing, but we are building a habit that will benefit us in everything we do later, off the cushion. Once we have a habit of catching our own distractions in real life and bringing our attention back to what we want to be accomplishing, the merits of meditation become clearer to us.

It takes time and it takes those moments or surges of opening during practice when resting the mind is easy or easier. The moments of real energy and clarity that come in the normal course of life is when most real progress is made.

Practice is the process of forming a habit (imprinting) by repetition and taking advantage of whatever openings in our mind present themselves. We leap through those gaps into our own future and lock it down, make it our own. This is what practice is really about, waiting for those moments and then confirming what we see and experience when they come. This is why and how I practice anything.

The point of meditation practice is not to suddenly experience light or even to get some mental relaxation or time out. The point is to creatively build a habit through careful practice, a habit that will in time become automatic and be as useful to us in our day-to-day life as it is sitting in meditation.

The Posture

What follows is the traditional posture, but don't let it scare you. You can always start out by just sitting in a way that does not take all your attention but let's you relax. You need your attention for the practice.

Traditionally there are seven points to the posture, often called in the Kagyu tradition the "Seven Point

Posture of Vairocana (emptiness)." Here they are:

(1) Cross-legged: If you are one of those rare human beings that can sit in "full lotus" position, with each foot resting on the opposite thigh, that is

best. The rest of us can sit cross legged, but with both legs on the floor, one in front of the other. Again: sitting on a straight back chair is fine also.

(2) Abdomen-In: Pull your belly in a bit and tighten your anal sphincter and urethral muscles for just a few seconds, and then relax them slightly. This prevents energy loss.

(3) The Back: Sit up with your lower back straight and hold that position, gently. There is congruence between a straight spine and the subtle inner energies that run along the spine. When the spine is straight, the energy flows most freely. Do your best.

(4) Hands: If you are a beginner, place your thumb on your palm at the base of your ring finger and close your hand into a loose fist. Place fists palm-down on the corresponding knee and slightly above the knee

depending on the length of your arms. Straighten the arms out, but not so much that they hurt.

If you are already accustomed to sitting then an alternate hand position is to place your two hands palms up against your abdomen and just below the navel, right hand on top of the left, with the tips of the thumbs barely touching.

(5) The Gaze: Direct your gaze to a spot on the floor a foot or two in front of you. Hold that gaze, gently.

(6) The Chin: Tuck your chin up close to your throat, just a bit, like you were making a double-chin.

(7) Tongue: Place your tongue up against the roof of your mouth, just behind your front teeth. This will help to control the saliva. The teeth can be slightly closed (but not clenched) and the lips very slightly parted.

Sitting in Meditation

That is the posture. Now try to arrange yourself in that posture and sit comfortably. It may be a little like rubbing your forehead and patting your tummy at first, so don't strain yourself. If you can't do it yet then relax and just sit normally until you can manage everything. Be comfortable.

To begin, just sit there for a minute and relax until you begin to feel thoughts rise. At that point take a deep slow breath, breathing in. Follow the air as it comes in all the way down into your lower abdomen. And slowly

breathe out. After that breathe normally but keep your attention on the breath going in and going out.

Continue breathing like this (following your breath with your consciousness) for the duration of the meditation period.

Thoughts will come and you will probably be distracted. This is not only normal, but to be expected. When you are distracted to the point of being carried away, that is, you find that you have forgotten to focus on the breath but are thinking of lunch or an appointment you have later on, just catch yourself and let that thought go. Then very gently bring your mind back and focus (rest it) on the breath. Don't spend one millisecond feeling sorry or worrying that you are not performing properly, because you are. This is normal. This is the practice. Gently drop the thought, any thought about the thought, any worry about your behavior, etc. and refocus on the breath, gently.

Continue following the breath.

Try to remain relaxed but not too relaxed, and certainly not tense. My teacher uses the analogy of holding a raw egg. If you hold it too tightly it will break and if you hold it too loose it will fall and also break, so you have to hold it just right, tenderly. This is mindfulness.

If you are uncomfortable and have physical pain, try to ignore it. If it persists, shift your position to see if that helps. You are free to find the happy medium,

which some days might be giving up and stopping altogether. You don't want to be a sissy, but you also don't want to associate meditation with physical pain. Be reasonable. This poem:

Testing the Rest

Learning to rest the mind,
Really puts my practice to the test,
So sometimes I just need to take a break,
And simply get some rest.

I received my Shamata meditation instruction from an authentic source (Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche) and I have been given permission by my root lama to teach this to others, as his teacher did before that all the way back down the lineage. If and when you can, it is worthwhile to meet a certified teacher in person and get these instructions and the blessings that go with the instructions that stretch back over one thousand years or more. The authentic blessing is very special, so do make an effort to get it sometime. You can find a list of authentic centers at: Kagyuu.org. I am sure there are others that are fine too. I just don't personally know them.

Tonglen: What about Hate & Fear'

This is about dealing with what you hate and fear in life -- a superior way to work with these. It is clear from comments from students that most of you know something about meditation. It is equally clear from your notes here that not many of you have even heard about "Tonglen," which is a totally different (and equally valuable) Tibetan mind- training technique from that of sitting meditation.

Tonglen has to do with your personal mandala, the mini-world you have created around yourself and what you include in that world and what you consider as definitely outside of that world. And while Tong-Len can be done while sitting on a cushion (like meditation), it is most often done off the cushion while we are walking around doing our everyday things. You can use it all the time.

Tonglen has to do with the people and things we don't like, whatever comes up on our radar screen that is "other," awful, threatening, or just different. It is also an approach to all the suffering in the world, but I will get to that. This technique is particularly useful when we "hate' something or are repulsed by a person, event, or thing. Sound useful' It is very useful. In fact I am surprised that more of you don't know about it.

Along with regular sitting meditation, Tong-Len is part of the mental toolbox of every Tibetan Buddhist. For some reason here in the west most people have never heard of it, much less learned how to use it.

Let's rectify that now. I have to warn you that Tonglen is (from a western perspective) a radical technique. In this sense it is advanced. It is so direct that it scared the bejesus out of me when I first heard about it. I wanted to run screaming from the thought and I almost did, so be prepared for something a little different. In fact, here is the story of how a great rinpoche presented Tonglen to me many years ago.

I had met this wonderful Tibetan lama and rinpoche during his visit to Ann Arbor and Margaret (my wife) and I were so moved by that meeting that we had to see him again, but he lived high in the mountains above Woodstock, New York and it was the dead of winter. In fact it was during those weird bardo-like days after Christmas and before New Year.

You know those days. My wife and I piled our three kids (at the time) into our little car and began an 800-mile drive across the country in a terrible cold spell. Our youngest daughter was only about one year old at the time and normally we would not take such a young child that far away from home in the bitter cold. But we did. That was how important it was for us to meet the rinpoche again.

It was a long trip that took two days and by early evening of the second day we had reached Woodstock, New York. Darkness had set in and the cold was so intense that then entire front inside windshield of the car was frosted over; I was using a business card to scrape a tiny hole in the glass to peer out of. We were driving up the narrow three-mile

mountain road to the Buddhist center. It was slow going. Finally we pulled into a small parking lot outside of the large building that used to be a resort. This was before the monastery was built, although they were beginning to pour the foundation when winter had set in.

We got out of the car and stood huddled by the door and knocking. A high wind on the mountain was blowing and sharp as we waited. At last someone came and the door was opened by a very nice lady; we were invited inside. I guess I should tell you now that we had no appointment. No one knew we were coming. We just had winged it. Even so, the lady (her name was Norvie) was very kind and led us into a small waiting room; she would tell the rinpoche and see if he was available.

I will spare you the whole story of that visit and just cut to the chase to save time here. Suffice it to say that the Rinpoche was very kind but firm. I wanted to know what I should do in order to become his student. Margaret felt similarly. We liked him that much! And pushy me, because I had been an astrologer and done "spiritual" things for many years, I was hoping to place out of "meditation 101" and get right to the advanced stuff. That tells you how foolish I was. Rinpoche very gently told me that he could see that I had never harmed anyone with my astrology, but that when it came to learning meditation, because I knew little to nothing about it (and had done little to nothing

with it so far) that it was best if I started at the very beginning. This was the fastest way. The fastest way'

Well, I had to think twice about that, because my arrogance was being rash again, but I respected this man so much that I was willing to do just as he said.

OK, I would start at the beginning. And now I am getting to the point about Tonglen here. When we left, Rinpoche gave us a small book called "The Torch of Certainty" by a high lama named Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche. It turned out to be one of the classic mind-training texts used in the Karma Kagyu Lineage. And I believe Rinpoche pointed out the section on Tonglen for us to consider, the technique I want to tell you more about here.

When Rinpoche had said goodbye and was gone, we went outside. In the dark we could see the bare cement walls of the monastery being built and the high winds were whipping the plastic covering that was hanging from the newly poured cement. It was a little eerie and there were no stars out.

Anyway, we drove our little car back down the mountain and managed to find a motel where we could stay the night.

There we were, crammed into one room that had a single (and very small) infrared wall heater that barely kept the bitter cold outside where it belonged. Anyway, there with our little kids we opened this little book and began to read the section on Tong-Len, a

technique we certainly had never heard of before. And it was a shocker.

Maybe it was just the night and the fact that we were huddled together with our babies 800 miles from home around a tiny heater on one of the most bitter winter nights of that year. What this book said was to breathe into yourself all the darkness and suffering in the world and breathe back out whatever good feeling and well-being you had. In fact the Tong-Len technique is often simply translated as "Exchanging Yourself for Others."

Well, this suggestion went 180-degrees against what every spiritual person and technique had taught me up to that point. In fact, I had been taught to not take in anything dark, negative, or fear-filled, and to keep such things as far away from me as possible. Psychics had even shown me how to wash my hands after doing an astrology reading and let the harmful and negative thoughts that might otherwise accumulate just go down the drain. So Tong-Len was saying just the opposite, and I mean totally the opposite: that I was to breathe in the bad stuff and give others or whatever was out there any good stuff I had. What'

I know Margaret and I looked each other in the eye and wondered what had we gotten ourselves into' It was scary and very hard to get our mind around it. At first my gut feel was to just cut and run, and to get the hell out of there. Yet here we were shivering together in this tiny hotel room so far from home. There was no

instant solution. But we read on. We had nothing else to do.

Gradually we learned that Tong-Len, despite how it appeared to us at the time was an advanced shortcut to compassion and the handling of suffering and negativity. All my life I had tried to keep as far away from anything negative (people and things) as I could. I mean: who wants that? And here was a technique telling me to do just the opposite, to welcome and breathe all this bad stuff into me and exchange it in the outbreath for whatever good stuff, feelings, and thoughts I had. These Tibetans get right to the heart every time. It got my attention.

Well, we got through the night, back on the road, and finally made it all way the home and with the concept of Tong-Len still intact. We would give it a try and we did. So there you have the story of how we came upon Tong-Len. Now: something more about the technique.

The idea of Tong-Len is very simple and it has to do with your personal mandala, what you consider yourself and what you consider not yourself - outside you. It has to do with when you encounter anything outside yourself, anything other, foreign, negative, opposite, "bad", scary, horrible, hideous, etc. When you recognize something as definitely "not- you," instead of crossing your fingers at it and trying to keep it at a distance, you do just the opposite.

Instead of pushing it away, you pull it toward you; you breathe and take it in. You absorb it willingly and in return send out, breathe out, and let go of all that is good, kind, loving, fresh, fine, etc., inside you. You send that back in exchange for all that bad stuff. This is true for anything you consider outside yourself, especially if it inspires fear, loathing, disgust, hatred, anger, or what- have-you - any "otherness." The concept is easy to grasp.

And you don't just breathe in and out just once, but continually until you have neutralized or normalized or made friends with whatever is outside. Of course you do this with whatever suffering you see in the world. You take on the pain and suffering, breathe it in, and breathe out or send your goodwill and kindness back out. And you do this anytime you find yourself being critical, judgmental, nasty, mean, and so on to something outside yourself, something "not you." I could go on, but let me summarize.

Tonglen is an incredible technique for removing duality, otherness, and extending your personal mandala or world view to accept and in fact embrace more and more of what has been shut out by you as "otherness." Just think about it and (more important) try it. This is a shortcut to greater compassion and kindness.

As to whether breathing in all this darkness, anger, and negativity is physically harmful' It is not. In fact, it removes your own negativity by shifting the limits of

your tolerance in the direction of greater compassion and acceptance.

Tonglen is taught and used hand-in-hand in Tibetan Buddhist mind training along with sitting meditation. These are the two main pillars of practice. Tonglen is a brilliant way to gradually remove whatever separates you from the real world around you. You can do it all day long wherever you are and whenever you encounter anything strange or "other." You can do Tong-Len and start right on the spot to make friends with whatever is out there and perceived as other, alien, or against you.

It is especially good with enemies or not-so-friends. Instead of shutting them out and taking offence, you open up to them, take in whatever offends you, and give out kindness, goodwill, and your own good energy. You do all of this in your mind, but physical hugging and kindness is also allowed. Check this most potent technique out for yourself. Try Tong-Len.

Tonglen: Mental Feng Shui

I can see from your previous comments that I have to give a little more detail here about Tong-Len. Let's take an example that is easy to understand.

Let's say I see a small puppy or child being hurt or suffering. It is quite natural for my heart go out to such an innocent creature. I am instantly compassionate. I wish I could lessen the suffering and take the small creature in my arms and hold it, giving it comfort. Tonglen is like this.

We recognize and take on the suffering or pain wherever we find it and send back all that we have that might be comforting and kind. As mentioned, our heart goes out in these situations. This is the process. And while it is easier to imagine with something like a hurt puppy, the same transaction can be practiced with all who suffer. This is what Tong-Len is all about, regardless of whether the object is a cute puppy or a gnarly old what-have-you' All beings are deserving of compassion, even more so if they are mean and hurtful.

Somewhere in there someone is suffering. And while learning to have compassion wherever suffering is found is where Tong-Len shines, it can have other practical uses throughout our life each day. It is easy to see where we would have compassion for a hurt child or puppy, but perhaps less easy to see where we ourselves are constantly hurt, often by our own biases and prejudices.

It can be as obvious as the not-so- friendly co-worker that we suddenly meet as we round an office corner. What is our reaction? You know what it is. There is nothing kind about it and we tend to react with dislike and probably fear of the unknown. It can be painful when we know someone has singled us out and made a point of not liking us.

When they suddenly appear in our day, the tendency is to shrink back and put up defenses. Am I right? Use your own words.

Tonglen would have us do just the reverse from reacting in fear or dislike, rather to open up and take in all that we fear or loathe, breathe it in, and absorb it, and then send back whatever we can manage that is kind and open in return. It would seem that we are being vulnerable by doing so, but in fact it is we who become stronger through the process. This is what Tong-Len is all about. This is mind training folks!

Our prejudices and biases define the boundary between what we consider safe (our self) and everything "other" outside ourselves. When we do Tong-Len in a situation we are gradually moving those boundaries so that they are more inclusive and embracing of others. What was once "other" is slowly weakened

and eventually vanishes, becoming known and part of us. We have made friends with the "other" parts of ourselves. We are more inclusive.

Tonglen is exactly the opposite of being divisive or polarizing. It weakens and breaks down duality rather than strengthening it. Instead of reinforcing fear and hatred, Tong-Len gradually removes the otherness out there somewhere and reclassifies it as part of ourselves as something now known. We are making friends with ourselves through Tong-Len.

Are the others we are doing Tong-Len for (and with) helped by our action? They are certainly not hurt by it and the fact that it makes us a friendlier and more compassionate being can't help but be useful to all who have to come to know us. I would say yes it is helpful to others as well as to us.

Let me summarize please: Many of us are busy; we don't manage to find enough time for sitting meditation and/or we may not have done enough meditation to begin to reap the rewards of doing so. Sitting meditation takes time until a habit is formed that can really be of use to us. Tonglen is something we can do at anytime and anywhere. It does not take long and we don't have to interrupt whatever else we are doing.

And it works.

Tonglen need not only be a somewhat drawn-out affair with lots of breathing in and breathing out. We only do Tong-Len until we feel that we have weakened, neutralized, and otherwise softened the duality we experience, the "us' and "them' of it, until we make friends with that other part of ourselves.

It can also be used for smaller and smaller events like wincing, grimacing, and so on, whatever we come across in a moment that provokes us. In fact, Tong-Len is like mental Feng Shui in that when we encounter something that disturbs or upsets us we change its location from outside our mandala to within our mandala. Tonglen allows us to rearrange our self just as Feng Shui lets us rearrange our home.

Practicing Meditation

It can be helpful to know something about the difference between meditation practice and the results of that practice, realization. Many times when a building is built it requires scaffolding to complete it and when completed the scaffolding is removed. Meditation is a little like this.

If we learn to play music, we practice playing scales and other complex finger and musical exercises. Yet the scales and finger exercises are not considered the final music. Meditation is also a little like this.

As kids we learn to draw the alphabet, but we don't write out the alphabet often later on once we have learned it. Meditation is like this too.

In almost every area of life learning, some practice is involved, but the actual form of the practice is not usually equivalent to the final result. It is "practice". Meditation is like this. In fact, many call their meditation period each day "practice," as in "I just did my practice." Please take that word "practice" to heart.

Learning meditation involves practice, but the practice itself is not the result of meditation any more than playing scales is the result or the final music we play. It is, rather, vice versa. The music is the result of or enhanced by the practice.

Some form of "awareness" is the desired result of our Shamata meditation practice. My point is to not fixate on your practice of meditation as if it were the result of meditation and don't expect the FORM of the practice to also be the form of the result of practice any more than the rubbing of two sticks together is the fire we seek. The fire results from rubbing the two sticks together, but the fire is not itself the process. It is the result of the process. Shamata or awareness meditation practice is not the same as the eventual awareness that results from Shamata meditation.

When we learn to meditate, we don't yet know and cannot possibly have a correct idea of what that awareness is without having the awareness itself. It is easy to fall into the habit of expecting awareness to somehow be just like our practice, only better. Meditation practice is just that, "practice," and not the awareness itself that eventually comes from practicing. Shamata practice is like the scaffolding on the building, something that will help shape our realization, but that ultimately will be removed. We won't need it, at least as we know it now.

This is not to be interpreted as "We don't need to practice." Without learning how to practice, we would get nowhere at all. Of course we need to practice, but practice if too forced can be counterproductive. We need to leave some room for awareness to grow. We need to leave the door open for what we do not yet know, and most of all we need to know that we do not know what awareness is. We have not experienced it

yet. By definition, we have no idea. Otherwise we would already be aware to that degree.

We each know something about what practice is, but we do not yet know what the result of practice is, so at the very least we need to know that we DO NOT know and also something about what we do not know. In that way we leave the door open for spontaneity and freshness. At least there is a question mark in our mind. We don't want to paint ourselves into a corner with our practice by assuming we know what the outcome of our practice is supposed to be, because we don't. If we view our practice as just that, "practice", it helps

us to keep in mind that our practice is not just going to turn into awareness all by itself. Practice is not awareness, but just "practice" to become more aware. Like the workmen take down the scaffolding when a building is completed, a day will come when we will realize the difference between our practice and what we are practicing to achieve, the result of practice, some form of awareness. Practice and awareness are related, but not identical.

One of the features of Buddhism is that it is non-theistic, which to me means there is no one else up there pulling the strings. I have read and been taught that even if Buddha were here in the same room with us he could not enlighten us simply by touching our forehead. If he could, Buddha and his followers would have enlightened everyone centuries ago because they care for our welfare. It would have gone viral.

The entire dharma is about Buddha pointing out to us how to do what he did, which was to enlighten himself. We each have to do the same: enlighten ourselves. No one will ever come along and save us, do it to or for us no matter how long we wait. Our teachers may point out the way, but we each have to walk the path ourselves. And this especially relates to our meditation practice.

If we are practicing because we have been told to practice, feel obligated to practice, or think we should practice, but are not all that personally motivated to practice, nothing much will happen. We also have to practice having proper motivation. We know when we are motivated. Our practice will wait for us as long as it takes for us to do it right, and that includes wanting to practice instead of just practicing by rote. If we are just going through the motions, counting the minutes until practice is over, waiting it out (so to speak) each day or thinking that tomorrow we will do it better, nothing much will happen.

Realization is waiting for us to practice correctly, eons if necessary. Shamata meditation is about resting the mind, for sure, but it is also about learning to get to gradually know the mind in all of its qualities. We need to inquire into the mind. We need to be interested, to be alive in our getting to know the mind. The whole point of meditation is awareness of the nature of the mind, and we actually have to develop that awareness ourselves. If we cut corners with our meditation practice, can't manage to really get into it

or are paralyzed so that we can't give it 100%, nothing will happen to us except 'nothing'. Our practice waits for us to do it properly. This is a real Catch-22. You can't outwit yourself any more than you can sneak up on a mirror.

Off the Cushion

Learning to meditate takes time. If you have trouble practicing, finding the time to practice, or have run into some of the various roadblocks to practicing, there are ways to supplement your on-the-cushion practice when you are off-the-cushion during the rest of your day. This is called "post meditation" practice and while not a substitute for your regular practice, post-meditation practice can augment your normal practice. It can also inspire you to practice correctly.

Meditation is all about awareness and mindfulness. Mindfulness is about remembering to be aware and awareness is being aware. If we don't have enough time in our busy schedule to devote to meditation or if we are too self-conscious in our meditation, there are things we can do at other times that may augment our practice. In particular, if we spend a lot of time in front of a computer or on any kind of task that requires actual concentration, we may be able to extend our daily practice.

For example, when you finish your regular meditation session and return to whatever else you are doing that day, don't just turn off your meditation like a switch, but take whatever awareness you may have managed with you. Mix your meditation with your day-to-day work. If you are doing any work that requires focus and concentration, there is no reason why you can't just practice some of the same techniques you use on the cushion, like bringing your mind back to

whatever you are focusing on when you become aware that you have been distracted. And while this kind of exercise may lack some of the qualities of on-the-cushion meditation, like the intent to benefit all sentient beings through your practice, there is no reason why you can't easily add that to whatever you are doing during the day.

If you have a moment when you catch yourself being aware (have popped out of your routine) it is very easy to make a simple dedication like "May any merit that I have accumulated today benefit all sentient beings without exception, and my I dedicate this merit in the same way that the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas dedicate merit," something like that.

Then go back to whatever tasks you are involved in. Not only is this kind of repeated dedication throughout the day of value to your dharma practice, but the dynamic quality of repeatedly being aware and taking that awareness to your work is also very beneficial to your work, almost like another form of breathing. You are practicing!

As mentioned earlier, meditation is all about awareness and the more we can be aware throughout our day in every moment, the better our meditation practice will become. Many of us have only a short time to spend on the cushion practicing awareness each day. Many folks have maybe twenty minutes to practice, others a half hour. It might be rare to have more than one hour of free time a day to meditate. If progress in meditation is measured in terms of the

time we practice, our progress can be slow. However, if we can enhance our on-the-cushion practice with various ways of being aware the rest of our day, then we may extend that practice considerably.

I used to tell myself when I was growing up and had to go to church on Sunday, that church once a week was never going to get a rascal like me to heaven. In a similar way meditating for an hour a day is probably not really enough for me. Yet I don't have or don't seem to allocate any more time to practice meditation each day. However, as I begin to find other moments during my work day in which I can see that I am aware, and use those moments to re- focus on whatever task is at hand, my cumulative practice time actually begins to extend. My teacher has said that even the time it takes to raise a teacup to our lips and take a sip is long enough to have a brief moment of awareness.

There are an untold number of such moments in our day. Conscious use of these otherwise empty moments to focus on the fact that at that moment we are aware and then mixing that brief awareness with whatever we have to do at the time can be very beneficial.

Awareness is the very heart of meditation. If we generate some awareness during our regular practice of meditation, that is of course excellent. If we can (in addition) begin to fill in the gaps in our awareness through the rest of the day that is even better. Buddha was totally aware all of the time. For beginners like

us, the effort to remain aware can be just too tiring, as this little poem I wrote suggests:

Testing the Rest

Learning to rest the mind,
Really puts my practice to the test,
So sometimes I just need to take a break,
And simply get some rest.

You get the idea. All practice requires some effort, and effort is often counter-productive to free-awareness, so there is a Catch-22 here as this little poem notes:

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.

I have found it important to extend my meditation practice off-the-cushion and throughout the rest of my day. By doing this I have gone a long way toward compensating for my tendency to cut short my regular meditation periods or to find some excuse not to practice at all today - whatever. I am a genius at rationalization. There is always a little bit of a war going on inside me when it comes to anything I "have" to do, even if I am the one that said I have to do it. Extending my practice off-the-cushion has been a wonderful way to actually do more practice and to

also to deescalate the warring factions within myself about my regular practice times.

Aspirations & Dedication of Merit

I have been meditating for some 37 years and in that time I have come up with scores of reasons to put off until tomorrow the meditating I just can't seem to find time to do today. As busy as I am, I always seem to find time to rationalize away my meditation time.

What does this say about my meditation or me?

For one, it is never good for me to get on bad terms with my meditation practice such that it is easier for me to avoid it than to do it. Just what is it that I am avoiding? For me, the answer is: all kinds of things, for example:

Some days when I approach my meditation cushion I seem to put on all kinds of baggage that I can avoid by just skipping meditation that day, like the many layers of arrogance I can somehow manage, one after another.

For example, there is the person of Michael the "dharma practitioner"; I get sick of him. And there is the "I am now going to meditate" pose or perhaps I don't want to review the high expectations that I have set for myself or compare my last imprinted good meditation practice against how I feel at the moment or review my lack of any signs of progress in who knows how long, etc. The list goes on.

These, then, are just a few reasons it is sometimes easier to walk on by the door to my practice area than

to just go on in. In fact, almost anything is preferable to meditation (like taking out the trash) when I get into this frame of mind. Of course this is just part of meditation, but I tend to forget that.

When I get stingy with my practice, what is this a sign of? I could point out a lot of possible reasons but the long and the short of it is that something has come between me and my original wish and reasons to practice. What to do? The first thing is not to add insult to injury. It is bad enough that practicing dharma for me can at times drift into a stalemate or standoff situation. It is worse if on top of that I feel bad about it; this only widens that division. There are things that I can do.

I am not suggesting you stop your formal sitting practice but you may need to give it a break for a day, as if you have not already given it a break by just not doing it joyfully or consistently. It is hard to do any kind of "practice" joyfully. This too is just part of meditation practice. By "give it a break" here I mean give it a rest, let it go for today.

But usually I have already tried that. <G>

Meditation is all about learning to let the mind rest and if we have managed to get our practice into a bundle so that it is not restful then the least we can do is relax a bit and start over. Remember: when we are distracted, we drop it, and gently bring the mind back to rest on the breath. Same thing here. In this case

this includes not only allowing yourself not to meditate that day (or to shorten your meditation), but also not holding this or your recent lapses against yourself. You have painted yourself into a corner, so take a break and start over, like with Shamata meditation. There are other forms of practice that may be easier to do at the moment.

This whole delinquency thing, if you are being delinquent, is probably not new with you. If you are like me, you do it whenever you have exhausted your goodwill on any project and turned what was a good thing into just another something to avoid. And on top of that you are nagging yourself.

Sometimes I manage to avoid practice until the amount of it I do in a week amounts to something like only going to church on Sunday, one day a week's worth (or less). I know that this won't get me to "heaven' anytime soon, as in: too little, too late. The goal is to make our entire life our practice but how to get there' Sitting meditation is all about building the tools and habit to do that.

Some of us manage to screw up what we set out to do by micromanaging ourselves right out of the spirit of doing anything at all. I do this. There is another approach but it is off-the-cushion or post-meditational, so take note. I am not suggesting that you stop your daily sitting practice but rather augment in ways that will enhance that practice. This method has to do with gaps in our daily life that we can't avoid anyway. Put them to work.

An example of a gap is any event that distracts us from our normal distractions - whatever we are doing at the moment. For example: we are busily working away at something or other and we get disturbed. We wake up from that. It could be that the doorbell or phone rings, a door slams, an alarm goes off -- you-name-it. Life is filled with these events. The point is that whatever the interruption, it creates a gap in the otherwise smooth flowing of our routine so that we pause and look around, even if for a split second or short minute.

These kinds of awareness gaps are perfect opportunities for quality dharma practice. Here is what I do with these gaps:

First, for starters, you can just rest in the gap for a moment and enjoy the gap.

You are already not doing what you were supposed to do, so take a mini- break. Here you are, awakened (disturbed) in the flow of your day and suddenly aware of that. This is an opportunity. Rest in that moment. By

"rest" I mean just relax and let yourself be there in that gap for a second. And the next part is very easy too.

Before you resume whatever task you were just on (and interrupted from), simply dedicate whatever merit you may have accumulated up to now doing it (however small that may be) to benefit all sentient beings in some way. If you are a Buddhist, you can

dedicate this merit to all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (wherever they may be) that they may better assist all beings everywhere in finding true happiness and enlightenment. Then pick up your task and go on. It is as simple as that. And this is a form of dharma practice, so you have done some today if you do that!

And the next time you are interrupted and snap out of your concentration, do the same thing again. Use that natural gap, that sudden awareness that you have in the moment, to dedicate the merit of what you have done up until then. This kind of dedication is a very real practice and it fits into even the busiest schedule. And the spontaneity of it precludes our "gaming" it like we tend to do to our daily sitting practice. It happens too fast for that. One moment you are startled awake, distracted from your normal distraction, and just in the moment awake. Use that moment to do a very small practice like dedicating the merit to all beings.

What is merit? Ideally merit is something you have managed to do to benefit not only yourself but all beings, something wholesome and good. When we are doing mundane business-like tasks, there may not be much of that merit present. Still, there is probably some teeny-tiny bit of merit in whatever we do well. Dedicate that. You don't even have to know what it is. You just say to yourself "Whatever merit I have accomplished, however small, dedicate that to the welfare of all beings." That is enough.

And if you can manage it, you can end the dedication of merit by making a simple ongoing aspiration to yourself that whatever you are about to do, continue to do, whatever merit may eventually be involved in the work you are doing (however miniscule) may it be of some real use to benefit all sentient beings. Trust me; this very small effort on your part can bring great returns.

I have been studying and practicing meditation for over 37 years. During that time I have read in and studied many hundreds of books and taken literally many hundreds of teachings. In all of those books and teachings the most profound secret that I have seen presented over and over again as a method for accumulating merit in dharma practice is the aspiration we make before undertaking any work and the dedication of merit we make after any work. It is so easy to do when we are interrupted anyway and only takes a few seconds to do it. Try it.

Of course, this is especially true when it comes to actual dharma practice, as in making an aspiration before a dharma practice session and a dedication after that practice. Dharma practice is the most worthy of all tasks we might have because if we can become more aware, we can better benefit the beings we encounter in life and ourselves in the bargain. However, unless we are openly doing something destructive, there has to be at least some merit in whatever else we are doing during our day, hopefully. Even if we have been destructive, the attempt to

dedicate is meritorious in itself. And when these natural gaps arise in our workflow, dedicating even that tiny bit of merit is, well, meritorious, especially if we dedicate it to the wellbeing and enlightenment of all sentient beings.

This kind of aspiration and dedication practice takes only a few seconds here and there, and it occurs only when we are forced to take a momentary break in our workflow, as in: we wake up from whatever we are doing for a moment. In that moment, we are free to make this dedication and aspiration almost effortlessly.

Mother Nature and Compassion

I was fortunate to be introduced to the world of nature at an early age, thanks to the kindness of a woman named Peggy Dodge, a graphic artist and a friend of the family. My mother and Mrs. Dodge would meet with a small group of local artists at the Dodge farm which was located in a rural area that included a small pond, meadows, and fields.

Mom would take me along. Peggy Dodge also had a true love of nature and all its creatures, a love which she was kind enough to share with me when I visited. I was six years old.

From that age (until I was about sixteen) I studied nature with an intense passion pretty much all the time. School was lost on me for I was way too busy thinking and planning what I would do each afternoon out in nature when school was over for the day. I had my own mini- nature museum in my room where I kept all kinds of animals, insects, snakes, and you-name-it, including rattlesnakes, copperheads, skunks, spiders, boa constrictors, and anything I could manage to keep alive. I had insect collections, rock collections, leaf collections, fossil collections, shell collections, and so on. It would be true to say that any real education I got (at least what actually sank in) came from what I learned from observing nature. And it never occurred to me that everyone else was not getting this same education!

Let me begin by pointing out that I realized quite early-on that there are real differences between natural law and human-made laws. Human laws are made by people and they can be bent, twisted, and even broken at times. This is of course what lawyers do so well. Yet nature's laws cannot be broken. If we break them, they break us. No one defies the law of gravity with impunity.

What goes up, comes down. What is born eventually dies. We all know this, at least in principle. Because I grew up with my eyes glued on natural law, that was the law that I came to revere as the "truth" - the bottom line. Society's laws were far less consistent and frequently just plain confusing for me. But it is only in recent years that I have realized what a great teacher nature was to me and how lucky it is that I put my trust in what I saw in nature rather than only in the various rules and laws society wanted me to learn which often seemed to contradict one another.

There is something wonderful about consistency, especially when one is young and trying to get a handle on life and, if nothing else, Mother Nature is consistent. Her laws are always the same and there are no arbitrary variations and no exceptions. What you see is what you get. There are no behind-the-scene or backroom deals being made. Nature demonstrates perfect equanimity. Everyone and everything is treated equally. This fact alone avoids the confusion that society's laws can instill in us. In nature, a rose actually is a rose, is a rose...

And nature keeps no secrets. She openly shares the facts of life and death with anyone who cares to observe. Unlike society, where death, dying, sickness, and all of the suffering-side of life is for the most part either sanitized or swept under the carpet, nature never blinks. It is all right there for us to see if we will just take a peek. I am not saying here that what nature shows us is always a pretty sight, but with nature you never have to figure out what is real and what is not. It is obvious. For a little kid (or even an adult!) this can be an extreme act of kindness. What society does not care to discuss with us, nature is only too ready to reveal. And nature has other messages for us as well.

Impermanence

I can't say for those of you reading this, but in my experience too much of the time the sheer busyness of my life causes me to forget many of the more important things. I am ashamed to say that it takes some really sobering event like the death of someone close for me to snap me out of my busybody trance and take even a day or so of time to really consider life itself. And while I never expect or welcome such events, I do very much appreciate the time out at those special times to consider the bigger picture and the ability to remember deeply once again what is really important.

Nature on the other hand is a constant reminder of how impermanent this life we are all living is. I can never forget the time I was traveling through India and was saying goodbye to a great Tibetan meditation teacher, who said to me:

"Tomorrow, or next life, Michael, whichever comes first." His words woke me up a bit and the message was much like the one that nature is consistently offering us: awareness of our own impermanence. None of us are about to live forever and we might keep that in mind at least once in a while.

Nature points out impermanence to us all the time. It is hard for me to take a morning walk along a country road in the early morning dew and see the thousands of earthworms and slugs trying to cross the tarmac before the fierce summer sun rises and fries them to a

crisp. These creatures made a bad decision to cross the road just at that time and, though sometimes I try to pick them up and carry them to the grass on the roadside, it is almost impossible to save them all. I just can't do it. And some of them are crawling in the travel direction of the road itself so they will never make it! This is just one instance of the kind of impermanence nature demonstrates. It is all around us.

And as mentioned earlier nature never blinks. We blink. Nature shows us precisely how cause and effect works, what the Asians call "karma" - action and the results of that action. And the equanimity of it all! No one breaks the law of gravity, neither person nor creature. All are treated to the same result if we break that law. Nature brooks no lawyers.

And as we get closer to nature, as we take time to actually look, we see that every form of life, every sentient being, is not unlike ourselves. Every creature out there wants to be happy (to just live) and no creature that I have ever seen wants to willingly suffer, unless it's a human being. We each seek happiness and we try real hard to avoid suffering.

Every sentient being feels the same way. We have that kinship with all sentient beings. Nature reminds us that life is in fact impermanent and that all life is indeed precious, and at least that those who have life don't want to lose it. And in nature it is easy to see that our every act has consequences, real results that we would be well advised to keep in mind. And all of

the above is ongoing, in fact seemingly endless. Nature is not about to change and the only actual change we can expect will be our own attitude, how "we" receive or take what is given, how we accept what is already there. Nature is the perfect teacher when it comes to attitude adjustment.

She proves that we might well adjust our attitude to her laws and how, if we do not, we will pay a very dear price. And I have forgotten perhaps the most important message that nature teaches us, and that is about love and compassion. It does exist in nature.

In what I have written so far there is seemingly no compassion in nature. She is merciless, inexorably precise about what she exacts from us and when. There are no sentimental tears shed by Mother Nature. She is indeed a harsh mistress. But she does have one soft spot and it is important for each of us to discover what that is.

If we look for compassion and kindness in nature, it is nowhere to be found, unless we could agree that her laws themselves are kind. Love and compassion are only to be found in the relationship between a mother and her children. True love and real compassion (and a willingness to do anything for another being) is pretty much limited to the way a mother feels about her child, and what she is willing to do for that child. And you see this all through nature, not just with human moms. The love of a mother for her child is the one bright spot in what otherwise may appear as the ferocity of nature's nature.

It would seem from observation that most natural creatures live in perpetual terror of being killed and eaten, while at the same time hunting, killing, and eating something else themselves. I know this is not 100% true but in general nature is not a peaceful place at all and most sentient beings do not live in serenity. My point is that the only place in nature that we find some love and compassion is in the relationship of a mother to her children. This is a rule that is remarkably constant throughout all natural realms - the love of mother and child. Can you even imagine if it were not there? We wouldn't be here.

And it is interesting to me that all of the religions of the world appear to be working very hard to have us treat each other as a mother naturally treats her child, to get us to go beyond family love (the love family members share) and extend that same love to others, to those outside of our immediate family. The Buddhists would have us extend that love to all sentient beings, and not just to humans. Christians say "Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you" and the Buddhists would agree with that, but they would add: and you make the first move! Reach out with kindness.

In nature compassion is always local, limited to that very special relationship between a mother and her children. Fathers share in that too, of course, but it is with mother and child that true love and compassion seem to be most pure and present. In this way Mother Nature is a great teacher. She does not obscure or

perfume the way things are. Truth is revealed for what it is in nature -- straight out. In nature we can see impermanence clearly, not obscured or sanitized as it is most of the time in society. It is clear through nature that life is indeed precious and is not something guaranteed to go on forever. And it is clear that our choices, our every action, bring consequences. And the situation that nature presents is not only the way things are right now but the way things will continue to be on into the future.

The way things are is the way things have always been and will always be. It is up to each of us to respond to these very clear facts, something that in most societies we never have a chance to do. Instead most of us ignore all of this and willingly prefer to remain ignorant.

The only light in this otherwise fierce darkness is, as I pointed out, the very real love, care, and compassion that a mother has for her children. Thank heaven for that! That love has been a beacon of light to all of us virtually forever. There is nothing else like it on earth. The Buddhists have tried to tell us for centuries that every person we meet, even every sentient being, has been our mother in some past lifetime and that every last sentient being has also been our child. Perhaps this is an attempt to make clear to us that we should treat each other with the same kindness, endless love, and compassion a mother will show her child. This may be the bridge we as a human race have been forever unable to cross, the key not only to

Mother Nature, but to our own nature, the two being the same anyway!

The question is how can we do this? How can we learn to treat each other with the kindness that our own mother has shown us?

Well the Christian, Buddhist, and other religions have been trying for thousands of years to show us how, to point out the way, and they all seem to agree (at least the Buddhists) that it involves treating ALL sentient beings as a mother treats a child, with that same endless care, kindness, and compassion, a universal remedy that is much easier to say than to do in real life.

And it would seem that this will not happen until the kind of compassion arises in each us for all sentient life as we find in the way a mother loves her child. And last it seems that many of us don't get really serious about all this unless something upsetting happens to us. Exposing ourselves to the truth of nature a little at a time helps to make that possible by gradually softening our obscurations and giving us opportunities to feel compassion for all beings. Our greatest teachers (saints, priests, lamas, etc.) have shown us what this might look like, but not enough of us have been able to have that realization.

May that kind of compassion awaken in all of us and may we share that kind of experience with one another.

Urgency in Dharma Practice

A Dharma "Catch 22," and the idea is simple. I am not yet enlightened yet, but am older now with probably not that many years left (at least not as many), am easily distracted, and not much into forced routines. You tell me: What are my chances of becoming enlightened before I die and why should I even worry about it'

The very great majority of dharma practitioners (not to mention everyone else) are pretty much in this same boat or WILL BE before they realize it. One thing we do know (if we are honest with ourselves) is that we are not enlightened yet no matter how we may rationalize it. If we have to even ask ourselves the question, the answer is a firm "No, we are not yet enlightened."

And we are told by the Tibetan Buddhist teachings that in the bardo passage soon after death we either will or will not get another human birth depending on how we have used our current life, this one. Sounds biblical and it is. And while another human rebirth or life is not guaranteed, we can however easily get a lower birth, one in which the dharma practice we have put off doing in this life is impossible, such as being reborn as a bewildered animal, and so on. What a thought!

On top of whatever our current will for practice is (and our hopes for enlightenment) we also have the growing pressure of this eventual showdown in the

bardo realm, where (bodiless and without all the things from this life) we will have to somehow pilot our mind through (so we are told) what is said to be (for the majority) a most terrifying experience. And just how stable are we when terrified'

And we won't even have the steering wheel of the body to guide us. In the bardo we are anything but grounded. We will have lost our body and literally be senseless! We will have no way to even come to our senses because we will have completely lost our senses. That is worth thinking about.

At the time of death we will be alone (as we are today when we dream) with our mind and even a few moments of reflection should tell us how disciplined that is. Just consider your dharma or spiritual practice and ask yourself: have you achieved the results you expected, were looking for or that you feel you need' If you are on shaky ground right here and now then just imagine what you will be like in the midst of the bardo passage.

It will be like trying to control the outcome of a dream, for we will be one big mind with no body and no common sense. Or it could be like trying to drive a car without a steering wheel. You probably won't be able to point yourself anywhere and just have it go there or the reverse: whatever comes to your mind, you WILL go there, including into your worst fears. Psychedelic drugs like LSD are just an inoculation of this state. This is not me making this up; this is what the dharma texts and teachings actually say.

Keep in mind that the outcome of the bardo experience will determine whether you or I have another human body, another chance to learn and practice the dharma or whether we will instead fall into lower realms where it will be very difficult to do much of anything at all, certainly nothing like the opportunity we have now in this life.

Forget about the pain of intrauterine life, the trauma of birth, and all the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" that Shakespeare points out. It gets a little Old-Testament like. Those of us who have not managed to enlighten ourselves in this life will have no choice but to try and qualify for yet another chance at a human life in the bardo, hoping to somehow keep what we now have and to at least come out even, but with no guarantee.

I am imagining that 99.99% of us are in roughly the same boat. We will be angling for and hoping for another human rebirth, another chance on a human life, rather than fall into what are called the "lower realms." Many people believe we don't come back at all and this life is the end of it. If it has been hard for us to get serious in this life, it may be almost impossible to practice dharma in the next. Ninety-nine percent is a good percentage, basically like: all of us.

If you have ever wondered why many of the Asian Buddhists are into the Buddha Amitabha and his "Pure Land" Buddha realm called Sukhavati (Tibetan: Dewa- Chen), it is because, of all the buddhas, the Buddha Amitabha has promised each of us an easier

access to his pure- land realm, an access that for most would take place in the bardo instead of rebirth - at what otherwise is the changing of the bodies and perhaps also changing of realms.

Sukhavati is said to not only allow us to avoid falling into lower rebirths, but also to avoid our even taking another human rebirth whatsoever. According to the teachings, if we merit it, we go directly to Sukhavati at death and we become enlightened. Period -- end of births. This is due (as the teaching say) to the compassion of the Buddha Amitabha for sentient beings, in this case we humans.

Obviously, as an unenlightened human I know nothing about this Sukhavati realm personally, but am only sharing with you what the teachings tell us. This option is very appealing compared to some of the alternatives.

Aside from trying to qualify for Sukhavati, the majority of us are practicing not only to become enlightened using the methods the Buddha taught, but also to get our minds in good-enough shape before we die so as not to lose our balance in the bardo and fail to obtain at the least another human birth complete with all its joys and sorrows. So there is some extra pressure on many of us and that pressure increases with age as we actually get closer to that deciding moment. Imagine! Have you'

My only point for even writing this is to take a look at how this urgency to qualify for yet another chance at

human life might affect our ongoing ability to become enlightened, our will and ability to practice. Getting another human rebirth after this life amounts to getting our foot in the door to do our life all over again. In itself, a rebirth provides us with nothing more than another chance at life, another opportunity to practice the dharma and to work toward our enlightenment, that is "if ' we can be born in a time and place where dharma is available to us, which is itself not certain.

Whatever skills or imprint we start out with in our next life will come from our dharma practice in this current life. It is entirely up to us and now. We set the pace. It all comes down to our actually having to DO something toward awakening ourselves, becoming enlightened. No one will or can (not even a Buddha) do it for us and we can take all the time in the world to get the job done, lifetime after lifetime if needed, and so we have up till now.

Nothing will ever change for the better, except as we change it. We are not going to somehow stumble on or luck-in to enlightenment. If that were true, we would have done it a long time ago. We are, as one high rinpoche puts it, the "stragglers," the ones who have not managed to get enlightened in all of the time in the world up to now - eons.

Fear of the bardo (and attempts to get ready for it) remind me a little of being distracted and worn out by a low-paying job while all of our hopes or dreams go unattended. Our fear and worries about our future may make that future all the more urgent, but they

also can detract from our concentration on our dharma practice. And I don't mean to be disrespectful.

We are told that the most important thing is to study and practice the dharma and move toward enlightenment, step by step. However, at the same time we have to somehow get ready to pass through the eventual bardo experience if we don't reach enlightenment before we die. And most of us apparently won't. This is not something we can just ignore or endlessly put off, as there is an end to our current life and then there we will be: in the bardo.

The two should be the same thing, meaning: if we work hard with our dharma practice in becoming more aware, that alone should stand us in good stead when we enter the bardo at death. And if the two are not the same, that is, if our fear of not being ready overpowers or paralyzes our actual practice, then the amount of actual dharma practice we did get done takes priority over the fear of what will happen in the bardo and not vice versa. In other words our fears can inhibit our actual practice and create a self-fulfilling prophecy.

At the time we die nothing we have done (with the exception of dharma practice) will be of any use to us at all. Our money, friends, all our experiences, and any and everything we have accomplished in this mundane life will be totally useless in the bardo realms.

We won't even have our familiar body and, as mentioned, absolutely no sense at all. We will be the "horseless headman", just out there (or in there) alone with our mind, driven about willy- nilly only by whatever discipline we actually have mastered, not by our intellectual understanding of the dharma. Thinking won't help there.

All the dharma talk, hopes, fears, dreams, and what-not part of our dharma practice will also be lost to us, leaving only whatever imprints and dharma skills in directing the mind we have actually acquired up to that point. In the end dharma is about action not words. All of our clever rationalizations all add up to nothing and make no sense. There will be no sense to make. We will be senseless.

And we will have no one to ask, no one to guide us, no teacher, no sangha, etc., other than whatever essence of our teachers we have recognized and internalized through our own practice.

And even that essence won't just rub off on us. We have to acquire or master even that for ourselves. Teachers can only point the way; they can't do our practice for us. They can't live our lives for us. In the bardo we will have to make up our mind on the spot based on how our mind is made up, as in: how we made it up in this life. We won't suddenly be different than we are now as far as mind training. We will be what we have done and how we have lived. We make our own karma.

So, in summary, we seriously have to figure out how to work on becoming enlightened in this life while at the same time live under the pressure and the age-ticking clock to prepare for the inevitable bardo passage. The growing pressure to meet the demands of the bardo can actually inhibit us from doing the practice needed to be confident in the bardo, a "Catch-22" if there ever was one.

The Four Thoughts

However, we do have some tools available to us, in particular the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma" and they traditionally have been called the Common Preliminaries, the very first step and foundation for what comes after in our dharma practice. All Buddhists know them. And we can learn from them. Here they are:

Precious Human Life (1st thought) Life is precious! We all know that and from time to time our own life, of course, may seem most precious to us, but the same goes for all other life, even that of the smallest insect or creature. All beings want to be happy and not to suffer.

And while that is true, the main point here is not that all life is precious, although of course it is to each being. The main point is that this human life we have is most precious and it is precious not just because it is our life. The human life is precious because it is perhaps the only opportunity to find and practice the dharma and thereby somehow awaken and move toward enlightenment. This opportunity of having a human life to learn dharma is what is most precious.

It is written that of all the realms, from low to high only the human lifetime offers the exact combination we need to meet and learn the dharma and so it is often called the "precious human birth." In every other realm we are either suffering too much to practice dharma or we are too high on one thing or another

(and not down-to-earth enough) to practice dharma. We act like we are going to live forever, etc. The human birth is the one happy medium.

Impermanence (2nd thought) "Impermanence" simply means that we have a limited opportunity here, one that like the dew on the morning grass soon will be gone. Of the "Four Thoughts," "impermanence" is the most obvious to us all, if only because life jogs our memory every once in a while and reminds us that we ARE impermanent. We all get a whiff of impermanence from time to time, perhaps as those close to us die or when we momentarily realize that we too are impermanent. I like to call "impermanence" the smelling salts of the dharma. It wakes us up.

And Mother Nature has impermanence on display all the time and the laws of nature are also clearly working all around us, not just in the fields and streams, but in the cities, homes - wherever we are. And there seem to be several aspects to impermanence.

Witnessing the heartbreaking impermanence nature displays is one way we are affected, often bringing out compassion within us for the suffering that most animals and beings experience. This helps to keep us sober. Then there is the recollection of our own impermanence, the fact that we will for sure die. This is harder for us to look at, so we tend to push it out of our consciousness most of the time.

Impermanence can also urge us to not waste time, because our own life will expire one day soon and, for all we know, it could be today. As the Ven. Bokar Rinpoche said to me years ago when I left his monastery in West Bengal, India, "Michael, Tomorrow or the next life, whichever comes first."

Always somewhere in the back of our mind, rolling around in there, is the sense of our own mortality. Perhaps still more distracting and energy consuming is the fact that we know (have been taught) it would be best if we were not wasting time on what is ultimately unimportant, but rather were busy with our practice or at least preparing our mind in some way for the bardo passage, the confrontation that will decide what our next rebirth will be, human or some other type.

And meanwhile we all have the pressures of making a living, keeping this body alive, having food to eat and a roof over our head. These concerns are not trivial for most of us.

I want to differentiate here (for my own clarity) the urgency we have in general to use this human life we have efficiently (while we have it) and the fear or pressure that is connected with our upcoming bardo passage, the determination if we do or do not get another human rebirth.

To me, it seems that there are two kinds of worries here, one the urgency of impermanence in general and the second the urgency whether we will or won't

have another chance at a human life in the near future, and of course they are related. In my own life, I add still a third worry which is that the worry about whether the bardo decision (next human life or not) may be so strong that it will seriously detract from the ongoing process of finding a dharma practice that will move us toward enlightenment.

Keep in mind that it is only the search for a dharma practice (that will work for us) that will successfully sway the outcome of the bardo passage in the favor of another precious human life or even enlightenment. We need to be as calm and careful as we can in dharma practice, have our mind as clear and relaxed as possible, and hopefully not be too distracted by the urgency of the intra-bardo decision.

Karma (3rd thought)

Understanding karma is like tasting some fine cheese or food where there is an aftertaste, a taste and then a little later, an after-taste. In this analogy, the taste is pretty obvious: action and result. You do something in life and it provokes a reaction or result.

The aftertaste (with understanding karma in my experience) is that as you get more into looking at karma, you begin to realize that not just the big decisions or actions bring results, but that ALL actions (everything we do) brings some reaction, lay down their own track or cast some fine shadow. And if we repeat that action, good or bad for us, the track only deepens.

It took me a while for this to really sink in. In other words we would be best served if we were very, very careful in everything we do, careful in every action no matter how trivial it might appear on the surface. It reminds me of one of the most common images used to illustrate chaos theory in modern physics, the image of the flapping of a butterfly's wing in South America serving to modify the weather in Iceland - something like that. Little things can mean a lot.

Karma is not only about committing bad deeds and paying for them, but also about shaping our lives almost invisibly by every small action we do. This is perhaps best celebrated in the methodical care and gentleness shown by some of the great Zen masters in every move they make, like the traditional tea ceremony. The more we work our way into the practice of dharma, the more careful we become in our every thought, word, and deed. We are on tiptoe.

Samsara - This World (4th thought) The fourth of the "Four Thoughts" is the consistent undependability of this world, also sometimes called "the revulsion of Samsara," Samsara being this world that you and I live in. We live in a state of change that itself is changing or as I like to say it: I will never be able to quite get all of my ducks in a row. I always believe I will, but I never have yet, and the teachings suggest it is mathematically impossible.

Like the gambling casinos, it is only our own gullibility that keeps us betting on permanency, thinking we can actually game the system. Others can't, but given

enough time, we think we are different; we can do it. This is the same attitude or carrot that has led us from life to life through beginning-less time.

Only when we are severely struck by impermanence do we actually sicken and become nauseas with life as we know it; only then does it turn empty of meaning for us. Otherwise, we keep it hopping at all times.

These four thoughts: the precious human life, impermanence, karma, and the sheer undependability of life have been said to be the four friends that help to keep us awake, keep us from utterly abandoning ourselves to the deep sleep of distractions, bewilderment, and confusion.

Summary

We are juggling at least a couple of balls here. On the one hand we have the dharma practice we have been given or have discovered works for us. And we may or may not have any great signs that it is working yet. Then on the other hand we have to fight against time to get at least to somewhere with our practice that will help us to influence the outcome of our upcoming bardo experience.

As mentioned earlier, these two aspects are not only related but should be working hand in hand. However it is all too easy for them to get out of phase with one another so that the urgency of the bardo confrontation becomes dominant and distracts us from our dharma

practice enough so that we somehow manage not to get that job done with the result that our mind will not be ready to meet the bardo. This vicious cycle is not uncommon.

As mentioned earlier, the proper sequence is that with the help of a qualified teacher the true nature of the mind is introduced to us, studied, and pointed out, leading to our own recognition and the subsequent steps in dharma practice toward realization. If we can sustain that, we automatically will be ready for the bardo and need have no fear.

However, if due to advancing age or lack of faith in the techniques or teacher the urgency to get the mind in order overpowers the calm and steadiness needed to make progress in mind training, we have a problem. The tail is wagging the dog.

The Answer

As you see, this can be a serious subject, one well worth being aware of. The point of this "fire and brimstone" talk is not to imbue you with still more pressure, and not to force you to force yourself to practice harder, but hopefully to encourage you to practice smarter.

When the meditation teachings say to "rest the mind," they actually mean "rest", not push or force anything. The eventual outcome of all this (the bardo after death) is of crucial importance to us and yet mindlessly forcing ourselves forward is not restful.

Although oxymoronic, we are in a hurry to rest the mind, if that makes any sense. And forcing yourself to rest is difficult to do just as trying to get to sleep when you have insomnia is difficult. "Hurry up and rest!" does not work.

The ancient metaphor of holding a raw egg in your hand comes to mind. Too much pressure and the egg breaks, too little and the egg falls and breaks. Only mindfulness protects the egg from breaking.

If we force ourselves to practice too much, we get nowhere and if we are so lax we hardly practice we get nowhere. Like holding the egg, it takes just the right amount of pressure to make progress. So it can be helpful to examine our practice to see if at the present we are forcing it or not doing it enough. Proper practice is not a switch we can just turn on or off but something that requires constant attention and vigilance. That is the whole idea of mindfulness and meditation: remaining aware all the time and learning to do that.

Ultimately most of our practice is just that, "practice," and not the real thing. We are going through the steps and motions perhaps for years until something clicks and we actually get the idea of what we have been trying to do all that time.

The Function of the Teacher

Both the Zen tradition and the Tibetan Buddhist tradition teacher's function is to point out to the student the true nature of the mind and how it works. Everything else is secondary and not essential.

Once that job is done, once the teacher has pointed out to the student the true nature of the mind and the student has recognized it, the teacher's work is done. Period.

Perhaps the most common obstacle to recognizing the actual nature of the mind is the hope and expectation of the student. Invariably we build up an idea of what recognition or enlightenment is, based on books, teachings, and our own imagination. We "think" we know what we are looking for when by definition we don't or we would already have it.

That is why the teacher must disappoint those expectations using whatever means necessary. This is perhaps most clear in the Zen tradition, where the master employs laughter, comedy, force, surprise, a stick, etc. to upset the applecart of the student long enough for them to let go of their fixed expectations and let some light and air come in.

It is at that moment of recognition of the mind's nature that the student stops guessing, expecting, and wondering, and instead just gets it, not enlightenment, but we simply understand for the first time the actual nature of mind we have been trying to figure out all

this time. And by seeing the problem we simultaneously see the solution and know how to deal with it.

The Student

In other words, recognizing the true nature of the mind brings its own response, the chief hallmark of which is literally becoming responsible for our own dharma practice. In that instant of recognition the torch passes from the teacher to the student, not because anything has really been transmitted, but because the student is no longer looking outward to the teacher and world for direction but suddenly sees how to direct his or her own practice for the first time.

In that moment of recognition it is obvious to the student what needs to be done and recognition is not an experience that will pass, but a simple "Aha, I get it now!" It is like those figure-ground paintings where you look and look and suddenly you see the image within the image. You recognize what it is and can see it at will from that time forward. A simple recognition, not an experience that comes and goes.

We no longer need a teacher when we finally see the problem ourselves and instantly know how to deal with it and it is also clear to us that only we can do it because: we each have to enlighten ourselves. No one else can do it for us, not even a Buddha.

And while this initial recognition of the actual nature of the mind is not realization and certainly not

enlightenment, it marks a clear turning point on the dharma path and the beginning of really effective practice. In recognizing the true nature of the mind, the student also recognizes that they already have everything needed to practice properly and that in fact no one else could do it for them. There is nothing further that we need from that point onward except the time to actually and finally practice properly.

In summary, once we recognize the nature of the mind, that is, the way the mind actually works, we no longer need a teacher for we finally see that it is completely up to us. Once we see the nature of the mind we see what it is and it is obvious how to deal with it. We then respond naturally and are eager to practice, because we clearly see what needs to be done. It is not that we have been all of this time obstinate or unwilling to put in the effort. The simple truth is we did not know what to do.

Before this recognition, we had no real idea of what the task was or how to do it. We were practicing but not yet aware. In the last analysis, only we can enlighten ourselves, but we don't know how to do that. A teacher can point out how that is to be done, but it may take some time to find a teacher that we are in synch with enough to actually take direction.

Not even a Buddha can do this for us, because enlightenment by definition is something we each have to experience for ourselves. After all, that is the whole point: to experience enlightenment. But to be able to get on the path we have to know how the mind

works and that is what all the years of meditation practice and sadhanas are all about, to prepare us to recognize the true nature of the mind.

So, in closing, if any of the above strikes a note then the very first step, no matter how old you already are, is to seek out proper meditation instructions and get started. And by meditation, I don't mean the guided meditation of losing yourself in some inner dream-like realm, but I meant the sit-up-and-take-notice kind of awareness meditation as taught by the Tibetan and Zen Buddhists, and many other groups.

It is never too late to begin while we have life and breath. And although most beginnings may be a little humiliating and involve fumbling and not knowing what we are doing for a while, beginnings will soon pass into actual learning something about how the mind works and working with it.

My point here is that an effort will have to be made on our part and that only we can do it. We can wait forever but no one will ever do it for us. I started very late in life and almost did not learn to meditate properly at all because I wanted to place out of Meditation 101 due of all my previous years of spiritual work. I was gently told by my meditation teacher that I would have to start at the beginning, not because I had not involved myself in spiritual work, but because if I was honest with myself, I really didn't know how to meditate. I almost turned away and said forget- about-it for this lifetime. I am so glad some

little part of me was able to know the truth and agree to start at the beginning with meditation.

A list of centers where you can learn the proper mediation at no charge can be found at www.Kagyu.org. I am sure there are other centers that are authentic, but these I have actually checked out and worked with.

May this be of some small benefit to those who read it.

The Two Accumulations Merit and Awareness

Throughout the history of Buddhism, in particular Vajrayana Buddhism, there is reference to the "Two Accumulations" which are "Merit" and "Awareness." Merit and awareness are sometimes translated as "Skillful Means" and "Wisdom." These two are said to be the key to real progress in dharma practice. But what are they? We need to know.

Merit and awareness are not two unconnected qualities or virtues randomly grouped together but are connected as are action and reaction. One causes the other. Merit creates awareness and greater awareness makes performing meritorious actions easier, which in turn creates even greater awareness, and so on. These two are recursive like mirrors within mirrors within mirrors. They are a chain reaction that once started is unstoppable. However getting that recursion started is what dharma practice is all about. There is the rub as Shakespeare said, getting the ball rolling.

Of course a daily sitting practice is one place where merit can be created which, as mentioned above, leads to greater awareness which allows even more meritorious actions to be performed, and ad infinitum - recursion. But what if we don't find time for practice or don't yet know how to practice. What then?

In this kinky world it can be difficult to feel pure and to perform a pure action or make a pure effort. Our own past shows us up as a hypocrite, making such pure actions even harder for us. How do we break through our own inaction and baggage? How do we purify ourselves enough to get some merit accumulating?

Perhaps the most common answer is "repetition," performing a ritual of repetitive actions that purifies. Of course this is what mantra and all ritual practices are about, but perhaps we have never learned about this and don't know how to practice. What can we do?

The answer is that we are already doing it, probably just not very efficiently. I want to point out how we do this but it is up to you to get the idea and find where in your life you do this. I can only give you a pointer here. You will have to fill in the blanks with your own experiences.

There are days when we just time out and take ourselves away from whatever we are supposed to be doing or used to doing and just have a non sequitur - an anomaly in the freight-train rush of our life. We do something different. It could be as simple as taking care of something we have been putting off doing like: paying the bills, painting a room, cleaning the attic, mopping the floor, etc. Whatever it is we choose to do at these times it is purifying and often repetitive or mindless compared to the busyness we normally engage in.

That is why dharma practitioners repeat a mantra a million times or perform the action of offering everything good to all beings or whatever it takes, over and over. Remember the "Dharma" is nothing more than the method that the man called Buddha pointed out to us to become aware. "Buddha" means awareness. That is what it is all about. The dharma is not complicated, but we have to make a start somewhere.

And for most of us that means purifying or stopping what we normally do long enough to log something sincere and open on our books, to create a gap or opening beyond our usual busyness.

There has to be a break. Often we feel better if we do the dishes, mop the floor, and take care of something that has been hanging over us. That is the purifying part. And it is good to keep such actions going, like repeating a mantra or moving the mop back and forth on the kitchen floor, scrubbing the tiles, detailing the car, washing our bodies, etc. It helps if we can catch a break or find an opening and keep that opening open or even expand it. That is what the "Two Accumulations" (merit and awareness) are all about - recursion. You do something "good" or purifying and it puts you into a better space (awareness).

With that greater awareness you can see around you how to do whatever you have to do better, and you do. This creates still more awareness and (after a while) the chain reaction is going. It is getting that chain reaction started that is not easy for many of us.

What I am attempting to point out here is not for everyone but just for those of you who get it and see the value in this kind of practice. Those of us who meditate learn to practice like this while sitting on the cushion, but not everyone has time for that or has even been shown how to practice.

Yet all of us can benefit from some form of purification, from removing some of the obscurations that keep us running a rat race and move on to something clearer - something more aware.

There is a lot more to say, but this is already too long. It takes me many words to say something very simple. For this I apologize.

Merit and Awareness. Make a skillful or meritorious action and use the resulting space or awareness to make an even more meritorious actions, and so on.

That is how dharma practices starts for each of us. And once going, it fuels itself and becomes incandescent. Getting the fire started is what this blog is about.

Why Buddhism is Not a Religion

I know that Buddhism is classified as a religion, but having studied and practiced it for over 37 years I am here to say IMO it is not. I was raised Catholic and "that' my friends is a religion.

Buddhism acknowledges no higher power then my own mind. It has no "God' or deity up there that I have to please or otherwise suffer the consequences. Conversely there is no one that can save me other than my own efforts. It is up to me. Buddha was not a god and never became a god. He died like we all will and was quick to point out that he is no different from you and me. We all have Buddha Nature.

Even worms do!

Buddhism has no creation myth and is not concerned about finding a beginning or an end to anything but suffering and ignorance. There is no starting point or ending point to cyclic existence and this world. Cycles by definition have no beginning and no end. Or another way to say this is that any point in a cycle can be used as the beginning or the end. There is no time of a first creation and no creator. Buddhism is concerned only that I realize the true nature of my own mind. It does not concern itself with where I first came from or when.

Instead it is concerned only with waking up from this dream of cyclic existence. It recognizes the endless cycles of existence as beginning-less and endless.

Just as in our dreams while sleeping we sometimes dream we are getting up to have a drink of water, but don't actually manage to wake up and do that, so the Buddha pointed out that waking life itself is like a dream we can wake from.

To the Buddha our take on this whole world is seen as a very real illusion, the answer to which can only be found by each one of us realizing the true nature of our own mind. Buddha can't just somehow do it for all of us. We each have to do it ourselves.

What Buddha did was point out a method or way for me (whenever I get around to it) to become more aware and to just wake up. The word "Buddha" in Sanskrit simply means "Awakened." And the teachings that the historical Buddha left are called the "Dharma," which is simply the method or path to awaken and nothing more he taught. The dharma is like a twelve-step program to train the mind from the hangovers of existence.

Now this is only me speaking, but to my mind what the dharma of the Buddha lays out is a totally scientific way to train the mind, only "Science" has not quite gotten there itself yet. Scientists too need mind training.

I am not religious by any definition of the word. I don't "worship" anything and I don't go to church other than to that of the natural world. I don't believe in a God "up there" helping or watching over me. Whatever I am, I am an equal part of what this is all about and

that is all I ask: that Buddhism treat me as a co-partner or something like that. It does.

I know that in this life I have to help myself. The Buddha, even if he were here in this room, could not simply reach over, touch me on the forehead, and enlighten me. The whole point of Buddhism is that it is a method we each have to do for ourselves. It is interactive. We must eventually wake ourselves up and Buddha pointed out how to do it.

Only we can do that.

I am embarrassed when people treat Buddhism as if it were somehow holy or other worldly and miraculous, making it simply a question of faith. Buddhism is not about "faith". The miracle is that the dharma works and that is enough. I have faith in the methods of the dharma. That's all. I was raised as a naturalist and I know nature and nature's laws quite well. Buddhism is the only spiritual method that I have found that is congruent with natural law - with the facts of science and nature. This is why I am surprised that more scientists are not Buddhists.

In fact in Tibetan Buddhism they have a term "The Lama of Appearances" that states that Mother Nature herself is like a guru and teaches the same dharma as a high human lama. Now that is congruency. And IMO the Buddhists are the finest psychologists in the world.

Yes I know that there are Buddhists (like all spiritual disciplines) that over- moralize and make everything into rules and taboos. If you follow the simple mediation that Buddha indicated, that is all that has to be done. Organized anything is asking for trouble and spiritual organizations and religions are no exception. Keep it local and small.

I won't blather on much longer, but please note my objection to classifying what is simply a practical method to become more aware and wake-up (Buddhism) as if it was a full-blown religion like Judaism, Islam, Christianity, and so on. I have nothing against religions and appreciate a sincere religious person whenever I meet them. I am not an atheist or an agnostic. I am spiritual at heart, but in this fashion:

The word religion comes from the Latin word "religare" which means to "bind back" or "tie down." In other words religion of any kind is concerned with the things that last and last longest. In that case I could accept the dharma as being religious because the dharma points out what really lasts and is genuine, like the true nature of the mind.

If our concern is to find something lasting or true in this life to set our sails by, then we all must be religious at one time or another. If when shit hits the fan we all seek for solid ground to stand on, then we are all religious when that happens. Religion is about the things that last longest when all else fades in importance. This occurs for each of us when suddenly something untoward happens in our life, like a parent

or loved one dies. Our day-to-day stuff fades fast in importance at those times and even the grittiest of us finds ourselves reaching for something more lasting that we can count on. That is all the religion I know, the things I can count on being there for me when all else fails. That is as close as I get to religion and the dharma has yet to fail me. Does that make me religious'

That being said, I am very devoted to the dharma teachers and lamas I have met in this life. I owe them an immense debt of gratitude for pointing out and introducing me to the dharma.

Why Study Meditation

Profound Four-line Teaching

I have been studying and practicing dharma for a good many years now and in all of that time I have read many dharma books, texts, and teachings.

And I have attended many hundreds of live teachings here in the U.S. and in Canada, Nepal, India, Sikkim, China, and Tibet.

Every once in a while a passage or text really hits me hard. It affects me and I take it deep within. This is the case with this very concise teaching from the dzogchen master Patrul Rinpoche (1808-1887). It is said to comprise in four lines the essence of this master's entire teachings. I can't speak to that, but I can assure you that in my experience these four lines are very profound and strike at the heart.

I want to share them here with those of you interested in this kind of mind training. Here are the four lines of Patrul Rinpoche:

Don't prolong the past,
Don't invite the future,
Don't alter your innate wakefulness,
Don't fear appearances.
There is nothing more than that!"

Again, this very short teaching may roll off the tongue easily or pass through the mind without sticking, but I urge those of you given to such things to contemplate

these four slogans. They are still "working" inside me and over the next few days I would like to talk about each one and also see how they hit you. I will start with the first one tomorrow.

Patrul Rinpoche says: "Don't Prolong the Past"

Again and again I find that the dharma confirms and gives me confidence in what I already sensed and knew but had no support in. This first slogan is the one that caught my attention and confirmed what I had discovered on my own, which went something like this:

The past has passed and is over, done with, and finished. It is only a memory for us, a memory that changes as we change our mind. This is the idea of the "Last Judgment." It is not how we view things right now that is the decider, but how we will view things when we finally get it all together that counts. In other words, everything short of our last judgment is prolog and premature. We may see it all differently as we become more kind, enlightened, or whatever-are-the-words, so why stick our finger in the wounds of the past when we can change our attitude about whatever our past is/was in the present.

I can't change my past by monkeying with it and my attempts to do so have been close to futile. My personal history is not like a time machine such that if I jigger something in my past I somehow will turn out different. I can't fix the past. It is what it is, what it

was, and it is gone. I have only the present now and it is the present that makes the past - any past.

Moreover, most attempts to analyze, re- think, re-imprint, regress, and otherwise modify the past do little to no good in my experience. And IMO this includes many kinds of therapies, counseling, analysis, and so on. I am not saying that these things don't have some benefit; they do, but it is a question of degree.

There is a much more immediate, easy, and successful way to handle the past, one that we can do now in the present. Simply create a new and (hopefully) more acceptable past right here and now in the present. We can each make a new past right now in the present moment by being mindful of what and how we act right now. The result will be a new past created now that we can more easily identify with than the one we are trying to forget, but which won't go away - haunts us with its baggage.

I have done this myself and seen it done by others. What we do right now and in future "now" moments will create a new and better past, one that we can own, live up to, and be proud of or at least accept. In even a short time our new past, if made mindfully and with care, will outshine whatever we are trying to forget, forgive, make amends to, etc. from history and time before.

I am not saying that this is easy. I am saying it is "easier" than trying to rejigger the past and somehow

smooth over whatever we are trying so hard to forget from back then. The admonition to not prolong the past is great advice and it works. It says "Don't prolong the past," don't mess with it trying to get it right and make a new start. Just make a new start and have the courage to be "pure' in what we do, even in the face of all that we have done that we are not proud of.

My greatest obstacle has been thinking I am being a hypocrite by trying now to make small efforts to be do better in the face of a past that speaks otherwise. I can remember when I was younger and I would go back to visit my parents. I felt I had made progress in being more mindful or a "better person," only to have them draw me back into my same old behavior and then point it out to me: "See, you have not changed at all." That is what I mean by the courage to make a new past in the face of all that we have done that suggests otherwise. It takes guts to change. We have to humble ourselves to our self. Anyway, let's hear from some of you on this concept.

Patrul Rinpoche says: "Don't Invite the Future"

This is sometimes translated as "Don't Beckon the Future" and we would not be far wrong to say "Don't speculate" or don't waste time dreaming if you are not going to do something to make your dreams real right here in the present.

Some of you may have your own view on what this means. I am no expert; just trying to make sense of it. Let me hear you.

Just as we cannot change the past, neither can we figure out the future. If we could, all the Wall Street investors would be rich. Oops, they already are rich, but by probably through other means than intuition. Anyway, we all would be rich too if there was a sure-fire way to predict the future. There does not seem to be. We might also rephrase this and say don't speculate or don't hope on the future. The Buddhists say that hope and fear are never our friends, but always obstacles.

Hope, dreams, plans for the future, etc. without action in the present take our energy and leave us with our pipe dreams but nothing else. For me, this slogan (just like the previous one) is saying that "now" is the only solution to anything -- past or future. When I was coming up I came up with a mantra I repeated to my self relating to my spiritual ideas: "For spirit must be made to matter." Here is a fun poem about this this concept some time ago:

WHO YOU ARE

If who you are is who you will be,
And who you will be will be,
Who you were,
Then,
Who you are is not,
Who you are,

Or
Who you will be.
So, who are you'

Patrul Rinpoche: Don't Alter Your Innate Wakefulness

This is a little more difficult to grasp, but not much. It is like the game of Pick-Up- Sticks we used to play as kids, where you carefully remove sticks until there is nothing left to remove.

Wakefulness, awareness, enlightenment (whatever we want to call it) is not something that we have to somehow get or add on to ourselves but rather an innate quality already within us. We become more aware or awake not by accumulating any more of anything, but rather by removing the obscurations and whatever other baggage we have been carrying around.

Our innate or true nature has always been there, only it is obscured or hidden by our own various bad habits and what- not - our obscurations. It is like seeing through dirty glasses. We have never managed to remove our obscurations and see clearly in all this time.

In other words we don't have to change or add or alter anything but rather just discover or uncover what is already there. We want to remove or take away what needs to be removed (whatever that is for us) revealing our innate nature.

Don't Fear Appearances.

(Don't Be Deceived by Appearances)

There are two main or primary mind training techniques that generally are taught. One of course is sitting meditation (Shamata), which is learning to relax or let the mind rest in awareness. This is not as easy as it sounds and takes a considerable amount of practice to build the habits necessary to just let the mind rest. Most readers will probably have some awareness of this technique as it falls under the popular notion of "meditation."

However the above slogan "Don't Fear Appearances" essentially points to the lesser known (but also very important) technique known as Tonglen practice. In this technique whatever appears outside of our personal mandala (be it friend or foe) we learn to recognize as outside of us (as in: we mentally put it outside) and having recognized it, we take it in or integrate it, sending out in return our very best and kindest energy back toward it. This is especially true if what appears outside ourselves frightens or intimidates us.

I am not speaking here of something frightening like a speeding car heading for us while in the crosswalk. In that case we should just step aside. I am referring here to things that appear as foreign or "other" to us, things or people that we instinctively dislike. It could be the co-worker at the office who somehow has

polarized with us and every time we see them our hackles go up in fear or repulsion.

This is what "fear of appearances" refers to and this type of polarization is something we CAN do something about and Tonglen practice is an ideal technique to work with fear or antagonism. The point of this practice is to learn to be aware when we have designated or labeled someone or something as foreign to us and reacted or created a duality with it/them.

Tonglen removes dualities in our life that we have created or that have been handed to us by society.

The Tonglen practice is the most efficient way I know to remove differences and to widen our world, learning to accept and get to know more and more of the so-called "otherness" out there as self-created. The slogan basically says not to judge from the external, not to read or take from the outside and react, and above all not to polarize ourselves from what we see out there. Make love, not war. I wrote a little poem years ago that expresses something of the nature of Tonglen practice.

OPEN

I am so round and such so,
A treading finally and letting go,
As spreading circles open so,
An even inward outward flow.

So there is a brief look at the four slogans of Patrul Rinpoche:

Don't prolong the past,
Don't invite the future,
Don't alter your innate wakefulness,
Don't fear appearances.
There is nothing more than that!"

Practice is Practice

Meditation requires practice and practice is kind of boring or can be, whether it is practicing scales and fingering on a guitar or practicing meditation. Our practice is not the result or fruition of meditation practice but only the means of forming a habit that can bring us toward that fruition, call it realization, awareness, or whatever.

The practice of meditation is like any other form of practice, preliminary by design. It is practice and not the real thing. That is why we call it meditation "practice" as in "I am now going to do my practice." That says it all.

Meditation is about learning to use the mind. It differs from other forms of mental pursuit in that instead of focusing the mind on external thoughts and matters like philosophy, science, psychology, or what-have-you, meditation focuses the mind inward on itself. The mind looks at the mind. That is the difference.

Using the mind to look at itself is not new to many Asian countries, but it is (for the most part) new to the U.S. and western countries. What do we mean when we say to use the mind to look at itself? Since most Americans don't know how to do this, how is this to be understood? We might better just say that we need to get to know the mind, to look at it.

If you want to see how difficult this is just try and look at who is reading this sentence? Go ahead and look.

At least try it. What do you find? You should find that it is very difficult to "look" at the looker, so to speak. It is a little like those little dog magnets some of us had as kids. If you try and put two of the same polarity ends of the magnets together they just won't go. They go anywhere else but there. This is a little like trying to "look at the looker", using the mind to see itself.

What we call meditation might better be called what those of us who meditate call it already, which is "practice" because that is what we are doing -- practicing or forming a habit. And it takes time. I wish someone had explained to me early on that my daily meditation was just practice and not to expect anything from it, at least not that day or anytime soon. And back then I was even calling it "practice", but never had the awareness to realize what the word meant. Now that is funny!

Meditation is all about becoming more aware but it does not just happen overnight. Sitting meditation practice gradually gives us the habit of allowing the mind to rest on whatever object we have chosen -- the breath, a pebble, and so on. Skill in meditating arises. It is like using your computer mouse to place the cursor anywhere on the screen and then taking your hand away from the mouse.

The cursor will just stay there as long as you don't want to move it. Meditation is like this. Meditation practice in time will let you to focus your mind on whatever object you wish and allow it to rest there. You can't forcibly rest the mind, but you can learn to

let the mind rest naturally. At this point in meditation, your practice is deeply relaxing. Until then it is practice.

It's Like Riding a Bike

Before we jump into the riding-the-bike photo and analogy let's talk about "awareness." We know the Sanskrit word "Buddha" basically means "awakened one" or one who is aware. So what is awareness?

How aware are we? Of course we are all aware, but it is a question of to what degree. And we all have times of real awareness, but too often they are fleeting and we don't even realize when we lose that awareness and slip back into distraction only to wake back up days, months, or even years later. We realize then that we have been here before, been aware like this before, but where were we in between when we were not aware?

We were asleep or distracted, lost in our freight train of thoughts or just plain absent - AWOL. The gaps or time-outs in our awareness can be huge. And now we can bring in the bike analogy.

Meditation practice is something like riding a bike in that unless you plan to fall off it you need to be aware enough to stay on it, to keep with it. And life is no different! We might like to be aware of our life as well, which is why we practice meditation.

In traditional meditation practice there are two limits at which point you are no longer practicing. One of course is when we doze off, tune out, and otherwise ignore our awareness and the other when we become too excited or distracted to meditate or concentrate at

all. Either way any awareness vanishes. These then are the two extremes and our actual awareness is usually somewhere in the middle. When we meditate we have to guard against falling prey to these two extremes. They wait for us. There are antidotes but they may have to wait for another blog.

The kicker is that it is not while sitting in meditation that this is true, but also in life itself. Keep in mind that the only reason we practice meditation is to become more aware so that we can be present in our lives - be here now. And let's not confuse awareness with mindfulness. They are distinct. Awareness is the result of our meditation practice, just being more aware. "Mindfulness" (being mindful) is how we remember or know when we are not being aware, how we know when we have drifted off from awareness.

Mindfulness is the guardian of awareness, but not awareness itself. However they work together like hand and glove.

Just as we would not like to fall asleep while riding a bicycle or get too distracted while riding so that our eyes are no longer on the road, the same is true in our life. If we fail to be aware of our own life (and it passes) what are we left with? We won't even know the answer to that question because we were not there. We were gone somewhere and we can't even remember where. Time passed between our moments of awareness. As the old Dylan song says

"Something is happening here, but you don't know what it is, do you Mr. Jones?"

Sitting meditation may be what we do each day to build the habit of mindfulness to help keep us aware, but awareness is not something we only need part-time. We need to be aware full-time and mindfulness ever increasingly closes the gaps when we are gone until (with enough practice) we are mindful all the time and therefore have awareness all the time. However, it takes effort to build a habit of mindfulness. One good thing is that the curve to being aware is exponential, not linear.

In other words, meditation is hard to make a habit of in the beginning, but catches fire as we go along and finally becomes incendiary and self-sustaining. You can count on that. But we first have to get the ball rolling.

Merit & Awareness

When I ask Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche (my dharma teacher of almost 30 years) what is the main obstacle for most people in dharma practice, the answer is always "lack of merit," not enough merit has been accumulated. This is why we practice dharma, to accumulate enough merit. So what is merit anyway in dharma terms'

A quick look through a half dozen dharma teachings shows me that often "merit' is said in the same breath as the term "awareness." In other words, the phrase "merit & awareness" occurs again and again in the Buddhist literature. Sometimes these two terms are also translated as "skillful means & wisdom." Thus "merit' is synonymous with "skillful means" and "awareness' is synonymous with "wisdom." More interesting is the fact that these two terms not only occur together but they actually cause one another to appear in the world. How does this work'

"Merit" refers to skillful or meritorious actions that we make as opposed to sloppy or unskillful actions. Doing something properly or skillfully (or kindly, gently) has a different type of effect (dharmically or karmically speaking) than unskillful actions. In other words, skillful actions are meritorious and sloppy actions somehow lack merit. I guess we all know this. That is why skilled labor and skills in general are so valued in our society. Great skill in anything is inherently meritorious, so much more so when it

comes to dharma actions like saying a mantra or working on your sitting meditation practice. And now for the kicker.

Not only are skillful dharma actions meritorious, but their precise performance itself is clarifying and causes awareness to arise in us. Great skill in action, whether watching a ballet or a football receiver, enhances that activity. We instantly are more aware of skill compared to a poor execution. This is particularly true in the martial arts or, for that matter, any of the arts, sciences, etc. - everything. The more skillful our actions, the more awareness takes place or surrounds it. Somehow skillful actions create space around themselves, like an aura or awareness. And here is what is marvelous:

Increased awareness makes it easier for us to be more skillful yet, and more skillful actions bring forth even more awareness, and so it goes - recursively. This for me was an incredible concept to learn of, the dharma engine that each practitioner is working to jump start. And like spontaneous combustion or fusion, once this chain reaction is started it feeds on and propels itself onward. It becomes automatic. The problem is getting it started in the first place.

I found it helpful to understand this recursive cycle, and here is how: For years, although I was faithful in my dharma practice, I was too often just putting in the time, kind of waiting my allotted meditation period out until it was over so I could go on with the rest of my day which I was anticipating. I found meditation

boring. In other words, there was little (or very little) skillful or meritorious actions taking place and correspondingly little awareness arose as a result. I was waiting for the awareness, but like striking rocks to make a fire, I was not striking the rocks properly or skillfully, and of course there was little to no fire. Only at the time I did not know why I was getting no fire.

Had I understood the above concept, I would have been far, far better off to have had short meditation periods (perhaps more often) in which I actually skillfully participated than those longer ones in which I basically tuned out. To turn the wheel of the dharma, we actually have to turn the wheel ourselves. Otherwise our dharma practice will sit there forever with no real change or, as in my case, a change for the worse as I became more jaded and discouraged at the lack of any results.

Let me repeat the concept one more time to make sure it is clear.

"Merit & awareness" are a dynamic-duo that are the one of the keys to proper dharma practice and getting results or "awareness". If we do our dharma practice skillfully, say each mantra properly, clearly, or when sitting in meditation we gently (but firmly) bring our mind back to the breath (or whatever object) every time we discover we have again been distracted, then increased awareness will indeed arise over time. And with increased awareness comes still more-skillful actions, and thus even greater awareness, and ad infinitum.

And this effect is not restricted only to the time we spend on the cushion. Our post-meditation practice, the rest of our day, is an ideal practice ground as well for merit & awareness training. As the Zen practitioners point out so well, we can be skillfully mindful of our every action, like raising a cup of tea to our lips or greeting a fellow being, human or otherwise. There is no end to the opportunities for skillful means and there is no end to the awareness that can arise in return or response.

To become aware or enlightened, we have to accumulate merit, lots of it. What I am pointing out here is that rote dharma practice (like any other rote practice) will not take us far. The Buddha, a human being like ourselves, pointed out how to become more aware and wake up, but he also made it very clear that we each have to walk the path. No one, not even the Buddha, can enlighten us. We must enlighten ourselves. Practicing meritorious or skillful actions will cause authentic awareness to arise, but we have to be there personally in the moment for this to take place. We have to actually do it.

Cutting the Cord

In my experience, one of the chief obstacles in learning to meditate was proper understanding of the word "relax." Misunderstanding this word probably set my meditation progress back by a good 10-15 years. Yes, I said "years." Imagine that!

It is not that I did not read the words "Relax the mind," "Rest the mind," and so on. I did read the words, but I made the sincere mistake of interpreting this relaxing or resting as something that "I" had to do, something to be done. I had to "relax" the mind when I meditated... "had to do." This I believe is not what is meant in the teachings.

When the teachings say "relax" or "rest," they really mean relax and rest, just as you and I already know how to relax after a hard day's work. And the teachings don't mean that "we" rest the mind or relax, but rather that we let the mind rest...we let the mind relax. All you really have to do is relax and rest as we do when we plop down on the couch and watch TV or whatever. We all know how to relax... sometimes.

It might seem contradictory to relax when we practice sitting, as meditation is all about being alert, aware, and awake. It takes effort to meditate, right? Not necessarily and not that kind of effort. It is hard to make an effort to relax.

Rather than make an effort to focus on the object of meditation, be it the breath, a pebble, twig, or just

nothing at all, what is important is to deeply relax and let that pebble, twig, or breath float to focus on our relaxation. Allow the object of our meditation to just be. In other words, relax as it is.

Of course this is easier said than done; I know that now. But it won't hurt you to have it pointed out that Shamata or sitting meditation cannot work without true relaxation, without actually just letting the mind rest. And it feels good too!

If we "try" to make progress in meditation, that is very difficult. The more deeply we can relax when we meditate, the more actual progress is made. Actual meditation is allowing the mind to lightly rest on the object we have chosen to focus on. For most of us this is the breath, but as mentioned, it can be a pebble, a twig, a Buddha statue, or absolutely nothing at all.

My favorite analogy on how to let the mind rest comes from the great siddha Orgyenpa, who said:

"Rest unrestrained,
Like a bundle of hay,
Whose cord has been cut."

That is resting. Here are a couple of little poems I wrote about letting the mind rest:

TESTING THE REST

Learning to rest the mind,
Really puts me to the test,

So sometimes I just need to take a break,
And simply get some rest.

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.

What About God?

After so many years, after so many dharma practices, to discover in simple Shamata meditation all that is needed, the basis for it all, and to end a long journey at the place where I first started. Of course it makes sense.

The hidden secrets of Tibetan Buddhism have always been "self secret," hidden from us not by the intent of the lamas but by the fact that the very obviousness of what is said to be "secret" escapes our ability to grasp its subtleness. We lack the awareness, plus the one place we would never think to look for our essence is in plain sight. This is the sort of thing koans are made of.

I discovered that the secret of meditation is not to be found anywhere in the outer world, but only as I gradually learn to ignore life's distractions, turn my eyes away for moments from this dazzling outer display, and settle my gaze within - letting my mind rest. As my first real teacher, a Rosicrucian initiator, used to endlessly say to me: "Michael, if you spend all your time in the sideshow, the main tent will be gone." How long it took me to realize the meaning of that phrase is embarrassing. The world of Tibetan Buddhism, when I first encountered it, was so elaborate, so colorful, and well, so foreign, that I was in many ways repelled by it. Luckily, my Catholic upbringing had already accustomed me to similar colors, a foreign language (church Latin), rituals, and

extensive elaboration. But it was not the Tibetan rituals or diaspora that kept my interest, but rather the clarity of mind of the Tibetan lamas and rinpoches.

That clarity is what I most lacked and thus most wanted, and the lamas pointed out that clarity of mind can be learned through meditation practice. In other words, I was not condemned to the confusion I continually found myself embedded in. It was not my natural state or condition, but something I could work with and eventually out of.

At that time I had no money, no real job, no status, nothing much at all in worldly terms. My mind and artistic sensitivities were my most precious possessions and the Tibetans are all about training the mind. In my life up to that point no one had ever spoken to me about training the mind itself. Sure, I could learn math, philosophy, literature, and study whatever I wished (and did), but I had never before been told that the results of my interests or studies depended on the quality of my mind going in, the mind I brought to any task. I never thought of that. No schooling had ever mentioned it, not even a word.

It is like seeing the world through a pair of dirty eye-glasses but not knowing you are wearing glasses and that the pair you have on is dirty. No wonder everything looks funny. All I had to do was to clean my mental glasses.

In my life, through all those years of schooling, the quality and stability of the mind itself had never been

questioned. I, like all those I knew, naturally assumed that the mind, just as it came with birth, was perfect and good-to-go. All I had to do was apply myself. It was the Tibetan Buddhists who first pointed out to me that the mind itself, like any other instrument, requires practice and training. As they say, "Who woulda thunk it!" Not me.

An untrained mind could study Greek, Latin, and any old philosophy and still come up empty of meaning or with a meaning as through a glass darkly, which is almost no meaning at all. Of course I had observed this: the endless education by many of my friends around me, but still no real knowledge or basic common sense.

This lack of common sense and real life experience is what had sent me into years of studying Black music, interviewing scores of blues and jazz musicians in person, why? Because they had the common sense and "life savvy" I lacked and yearned for. I could see it in their eyes, hear it in their voices and music, and see it in their actions.

Monkey see, monkey do; of course I wanted this too.

My interest in Black studies gradually waned when I met the Tibetans. Not only did the Tibetans have common sense and real life experience, but they had a clearly-defined method or way for me to learn it as well. That is what the "Dharma" is all about, a way or path to greater awareness. And that path does not

depend on some higher power to get the job done, like a god or super being.

Buddhists are non-theists, which sounds kind of blasphemous until you understand it. For myself, I was raised "theist," meaning there is a god up there looking out for me. Only, in my case god and I had not been in touch much and I felt like I had been kind of lost in the shuffle of life as regards god's care. The fact is that I did not know for sure one way or the other whether god really existed. It seemed to me that I was pretty much on my own, but in truth I didn't know much either way.

My Catholic upbringing had kind of ground to a halt in my teen years, and I had been waiting for the next step to appear for a very long time. And here come the Buddhists suggesting that rather than waiting on god to rescue me, why don't I get off my duff and rescue myself. The Buddhists pointed out to me that whatever is divine or good in the world is not just somewhere out there, but also and especially something right in here, in our hearts. In fact, it takes one to know one and I was already part of the "divine', not forever separate from it. This is what I had intuitively always felt.

I wish I could tell you how many times I approached the Catholic nuns and priests during my upbringing about my idea that the best part of me, aside from the sinner, must be the same as Christ, must be like Christ. Make sense' But I was told over and over that Christ was the Son of God and forever separate from

sinners like me in all ways - always. I even went to the Jesuits (supposedly the philosophers of the Catholic church) with this same question, only to be told that the best part of me was not equal to the worst part of Christ. This I refused to accept.

Non-theists are not "anti' god or somehow heathen, but simply suggest that what they call Buddha Nature, the spiritual or whatever-we-want-to-call it, is within each and every one of us. We are already that and not separate from it. This was the answer the Catholics refused to offer me. This was the answer that intuitively made sense.

Furthermore, the Buddhists point out that Buddha was just a human like we are, but one who managed through his own efforts to enlighten himself. And the method or path he used to do that is called the Dharma and that path is open to any of us at any time. All we have to do is try it.

Anyway, while I was waiting for god to help me out I thought I might as well try to help myself and see about this path that the Buddha had pointed out, this dharma. I know, as a Christian I was taught "God helps those who help themselves." Perhaps all religions are doing the same thing, but as awesome a picture as my Catholic upbringing painted, there was very, very little there about exactly what path I personally should take to salvation, aside from faith and prayer, which were not granular enough for me. I needed a 12-step program to enlightenment and the Buddhists provided it and much more. I apologize if I

sound like an evangelist. I am just grateful to have found something that works for me.

For the Buddhists, it is all about the dharma or path, method, and the steps you can take to awaken yourself. As mentioned, while I was waiting for that revelation from god, I thought I might as well take some baby steps to help myself, and that is how I got into dharma practice. And it works.