tricycle

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS

10 Ways to Train Your Mind

A Tricycle E-Book

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GOT ATTITUDE?

Overcome blind reactivity to develop a skillful mind with Buddhist anger-management techniques.

Steve Armstrong

At this point in practice, the feeling of instability often challenges the assumption that meditation should make one feel calm and peaceful. We may then question why our meditative experience isn't what we had thought (or hoped) it would be. This questioning attitude is a common manifestation of doubt. Mahasi Sayadaw said, "This doubt is so subtle that it is rarely detected, but is instead mistaken for investigation. This doubt masquerades as analytical knowledge."

Thinking does not resolve doubt; engaging with the content of the doubting thoughts only reinforces them. Rather, simple awareness of the "figuring out" attitude of mind exposes and momentarily purifies the observing mind of the defilements of frustration, disappointment, attachment, and doubt. The increasing stability of mind—through continuity of attention to the arising (and ceasing) defilements—keeps us on the path of insight.

With this, a new challenge arises. While the continuous awareness of momentarily shifting objects supports insight, it also gives rise to tranquility, aloofness, or seclusion of mind. We can experience well-being, bliss, pleasantly distorted perceptions of ordinary reality, exquisite clar-

ity, effortless energy, overwhelming confidence, and gratitude. We feel peaceful and spacious; indeed, with a sense of relief, we might interpret these effects as it—the long-sought goal of our practice!

But these "spiritual goodies," as Sayadaw U Pandita calls them, are pseudo-nirvana, and when first met almost always give rise to attachment. Indulging in these feelings is attachment. Believing "This is it!" is delusion. Thinking "Now I've got it!" is wrong view. Concluding "I've done it!" is the voice of pride. These are defilements. Here, it is helpful to remember the adage "The stronger the awareness, the subtler the defilements," and to practice, as Mahasi Sayadaw encouraged, "by ignoring the dramatic displays, and paying more attention to the awareness."

Increasing stability of mind uncovers the terrain of the mind, including the elevated peaks and the deep crevasses. Whether what emerges is exquisitely pleasant or numbingly unpleasant, physical or mental, gross or subtle, familiar or novel, wisdom understands that each moment is "just another experience being known," even the "spiritual goodies." With an attitude of "It's just joy. Just bliss. Just ecstasy," Sayadaw U Pandita promises that "there are better things ahead."

Wisdom (*pranna*)

With faith and energy, awareness grows, and the various lenses of the mind through which life is seen become exposed. Concentration temporarily tranquilizes the mind, leading to less reactivity, and we can see more deeply. It is then that the wisdom of understanding (*pranna*) correctly disentangles the mind from the story and releases us from suffering. As Sayadaw U Tejaniya has noted, "Awareness alone is not enough."

Observing our lives is like viewing a large tapestry on a distant

wall. From far away, we see the images that create the narrative of the tapestry. We have many stories—about ourselves, about others, about why and how things happen, about our past, about our future, about our likes and dislikes. Unconsciously, we usually weave every personal experience into the tapestry of "me," replete *my* attitudes, *my* aspirations, *my* foibles, *my* fears, *my* strengths, *my* limitations, *my* irritations, *my* beliefs, and *my* delusions.

With some awareness, we can begin to see our stories, at first like the tapestry across the room. When, because of suffering, our attention is repeatedly called to look more closely at a particular piece of our experience, gradually the knotted threads of our unadulterated experiences woven into the story become apparent. Seeing the narrative of life close enough to recognize the individual threads out of which it is created offers the understanding that liberates. Personal suffering has no footing when understanding the view of moment-to-moment experiences arises. Then wise understanding dissolves the suffering.

In my early years of dharma practice, a previously unseen narrative of self-pity arose in my awareness. Associated threads of this story were my perceived inability to do the practice, the blame I cast upon my alcoholic father, my judgments in my personal relationships, and my deepest fears that I was not up to the task I had set myself. For days I struggled not to become entangled in these thoughts. I did this by affirming my aspiration, arousing thoughts of self-love and acceptance, taking refuge, and just observing the feeling of self-pity, the sense of failure, blame, judgments, and fears.

With increasing stability of mind, I began to recognize these previously unseen tendencies of unconscious self-pity and react less dramatically. The habit was such a frequent visitor, it had moved in and almost owned my mind. At times, the line between indulging in the old

habit and awareness blurred and shifted. When indulging had the upper hand, I felt oppressed and suffered with a bad attitude. When awareness was present, confidence and equanimity arose with a good attitude. All attitudes of mind need to be acknowledged in practice.

Over time, I came to understand that self-pity, sense of failure, blame, judgments, fears, indulging, awareness, confidence, and equanimity were just physical and mental experiences being known. They were ever-changing. Whether they appeared or not was the result of a confluence of conditions beyond my immediate control. I suffered when they were not seen. When they were seen, suffering ceased. The slightest turn of the mind toward appropriating or identifying with any facet of the process or narrative was seen and understood as impersonally conditioned phenomena. As the Buddha said, "Not me. Not mine. Not who I am."

In the end, just observing and acknowledging, with an attitude of taking it all in stride, gives rise to wise understanding and disentanglement. This amazing journey of discovery through insight knowledge is the path of liberation. Right attitude in practice fearlessly inquires, "What story of suffering am I telling myself?" When awareness observes the threads of the story, wisdom dissolves the suffering. Sayadaw U Tejaniya tells us, "Awareness alone is not enough," and he concludes, "It is not you who removes the defilements, wisdom does that job."

It is up to each one of us to choose whether to take the journey. As Don Juan encouraged Carlos Castaneda, "We either make ourselves miserable, or we make ourselves strong. The amount of work is the same."

Steve Armstrong and his wife, Kamala, founded and maintain Ho'omalamalama, a dharma sanctuary on Maui where they live and plant trees. He oversees the Burma Schools Project.

2

TOUGH TEACHINGS TO EASE THE MIND

Do we respond to physical pain in the wisest way? Fleeing it, we get caught in it. A Thai meditation master has another answer: Get to know suffering to be free of it.

Upasika Kee Nanayon

People lying in bed ill are lucky because they have the opportunity to do nothing but contemplate stress and pain. Their minds don't need to take up anything else, don't need to go anywhere else. They have the opportunity to contemplate pain at all times—and let go of pain at all times.

To contemplate inconstancy, stress, and not-selfness [in Buddhism, the three marks of existence—*anicca, dukkha*, and *anatta*—more commonly known as impermanence, suffering, and no-self] as they appear right to you while you're lying here ill, is very beneficial. Just don't think that you're what's hurting. Simply see the natural phenomena of physical and mental events as they arise and pass away. They're not you. They're not really yours. You don't have any real control over them.

Look at them! Exactly where do you have control over them? Whatever disease there is in your body isn't important. What's important is the disease in the mind. Normally we don't pay much attention to the

fact that we have diseases in our minds—the diseases of defilement, craving, and attachment. We often pay attention only to our physical diseases, afraid of all the horrible things that can happen to the body. The medicines you have to treat the body can give you only temporary respite. Even people in the past who didn't suffer from major diseases are no longer with us. Everyone has to part from their bodies in the end. When you continually contemplate in this way, you see the truth of inconstancy, stress, and not-selfness correctly within you, and you'll grow more and more disenchanted with things, step by step.

You have to examine your pain very carefully to see that it's not really *you* that's hurting. The disease isn't your disease. It's a disease of the body, a disease of physical form. Physical form and mental events have to change; you must focus on them as they appear to you, watch them, and contemplate them in their most elemental components. A clear insight into the nature of physical forms and mental events will release you from all suffering and stress.

Some people, when they're healthy and complacent, die suddenly and unexpectedly without knowing what's happening to them. Their minds are completely oblivious to what's going on. This is much worse than it is for the person lying ill in bed who has pain to contemplate as a means of developing disenchantment and non-attachment. You don't have to be afraid of pain. If it's going to be there, you can let it be there—but don't let the mind be in pain with it.

So when you're ill, consider yourself lucky. Lying here, dealing with the disease, you have the opportunity to practice insight meditation with every moment. It doesn't matter whether you're here in the hospital or at home. Don't let there be any real sense in the mind that you're in the hospital or at home. You don't have to label yourself as being anywhere at all. Just take the opportunity to watch phenomena arise and pass away.

You can't go preventing pleasure and pain, you can't keep the mind from labeling things and forming thoughts, but you can put these things to a new use. If the mind labels a pain, saying, "I hurt," you have to examine the label carefully, contemplate it until you see that it's wrong: the pain isn't really yours. It's simply a sensation that arises and passes away, that's all.

Investigate whatever arises—a sensation, an emotion, a thought—and let it pass without clinging or attachment. Start by exercising restraint over the mind, focusing your attention and contemplating the phenomena of stress and pain. Keep this up until the mind can maintain its stance in the clear emptiness of the heart. If you can do this fully, the final disbanding of suffering will occur right there, right where the mind is empty.

Keep your awareness of the pain right at the level where it's no more than a mere sensation in the body. It can be the body's pain, but need not be the mind's. First protect the mind, let things go, and then turn inward to look for the deepest, innermost part of your awareness and stay right there. You don't have to get involved with the pains outside. They may simply be too much for you to endure. Look for the aspect of the mind that lies deep within, and you'll be able to put everything else aside.

If the pains are the sort you can watch, then make an effort to watch them. The mind will stay at its normal neutrality, calm with its own inner emptiness, watching the pain as it changes and passes away. If the pain is too extreme, turn around and go back inside, for if you can't handle the pain, craving is going to work its way into the picture, wanting to push the pain away and to gain pleasure. This will keep piling on, piling on, putting the mind in a horrible turmoil. If the pain is sudden and sharp, immediately turn around and focus all your attention on the mind. You don't want to have anything to do with the body and its

pains. Focus on staying with the innermost part of your awareness. Get to the point where you can see the pure state of mind that isn't in pain with the body, and keep that state constantly clear. Once the mind is constantly clear, then no matter how much pain there is in the body, it's simply an affair of mental and physical events. The mind, though, isn't involved. It puts all these things aside. It lets go.

You have to keep practicing this way continually. Whenever pain arises, regardless of whether it's strong or not, don't label it or give it any meaning. Even if pleasure arises, don't label it as your pleasure. Just keep letting it go, and the mind will gain release—empty of all clinging or attachment to "selfness" with each and every moment. You have to apply all your mindfulness and energy to this at all times. You should see yourself as fortunate that you're lying here ill, contemplating pain, for you have the opportunity to develop the Path to Awakening in full measure, gaining insight and letting things go. Nobody has a better opportunity than what you have right now. A person lying ill in bed has the opportunity to develop insight with every in-and-out breath. It's a sign that you haven't wasted your birth as a human being, you know, because you're practicing the teachings of the Buddha to the point where you gain clear knowledge into the true nature of things.

People in general tend to reflect on the fleeting nature of life with reference to other people, when someone else grows sick or dies, but they rarely reflect on the fleeting nature of their own lives. Or else they reflect for just a moment and then forget all about it, getting completely involved in their other preoccupations. They don't bring these truths inward and reflect on the inconstancy occurring within themselves with every moment. Insight meditation is not something that you take a month or two off to do on a special retreat. That's not the real thing. It's no match for what you're doing right now, examining your pains all day every day and

all night, except when you sleep. When the pain is strong, it's especially good for your meditation because it gives you the chance to know once and for all what inconstancy is like, what stress and suffering are like, what your inability to control things is like.

Insight meditation is not something you wait to do when you die or are just about to die. It's something you simply keep on doing, keep on "insighting." When the disease lessens, you "insight" it. When it grows heavy, you "insight" it. If you keep on developing insight like this, the mind will get over its stupidity and delusion. In other words, things like craving and defilement won't dare hassle the mind the way they used to.

When the mind gets disenchanted with things, the next step is to contemplate the mind skillfully to see how it's empty, all the way to the point where there's no concocting of thoughts, no arising, no passing away, no changing at all.

So focus in and contemplate at the right spot, right at the mind, right at consciousness itself, and let there just be *the knowing that lets go of knowing*. What this means is that you let go to the point where consciousness has no label for itself. There will be no sense of good or bad or anything at all. Dualities will no longer have an effect. But because this lies a little deep, you have to make sure that your awareness is shrewd and skillful. Make sure that this skillful awareness keeps going continuously. You'll see that when you don't latch on to labels and meanings, thoughts of good and bad will just come to a stop.

So when the Buddha tells us to see the world as empty, this is the way we see. The dharma is right here in our body and mind, it's simply that we don't see it—or we see it wrongly. If we look at things with the eyesight of mindfulness and discernment, what is there to make us suffer? Why is there any need to fear pain and death? If we understand

that the latching on is what makes us suffer, then all we have to do is let go and we'll see how there's release from suffering right before our very eyes.

From *A Good Dose of Dhamma for Meditators When They Are Ill*. Translated from the Thai by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, © 1995 by the Khao Suan Luang Dhamma Community. This teaching is available in its entirety on www.accesstoinsight.org.

Upasika Kee Nanayon was one of the foremost women teachers of dharma in modern Thailand. Born in 1901, she started a practice center for women on a hill in the province of Rajburi, to the west of Bangkok, where she lived until her death in 1978.

3

WHAT YOU'RE MADE OF

Bodhipaksa guides us through the Buddha's powerful Six Element practice to equanimity, pure and bright.

Bodhipaksa

I first learned the reflection on the Six Elements thirteen years ago, on a four-month retreat in the mountains of southern Spain. It was my first introduction to insight meditation, and although at times since then the practice has given rise to uncomfortable experiences, it has more often brought a sense of lightness, freedom, and expansiveness as well as a greater sense of connectedness to the world.

The Six Element practice—a profound contemplation on interconnectedness, impermanence, and insubstantiality—is one of the most significant insight practices in the Pali canon. The Buddha recommended it as a way of "not neglecting wisdom," and taught it as a technique for developing equanimity and cultivating meditative absorption, or *jhana*. In the Six Element practice, we contemplate in turn earth, water, fire, air, space, and consciousness, noting how each element is an ever-changing process rather than a static thing.

One of the most striking features of this practice is the thorough way in which it deconstructs our experience. By contemplating every aspect of our physical and mental being, we begin to understand its true

nature. In classic insight meditation, we notice the impermanence and insubstantiality of sensations, thoughts, and feelings. We do that in this practice, too, but we also develop a literally visceral sense of the body's impermanence and insubstantiality by contemplating the various processes by which its elements come into being and pass away. The Six Element practice is highly analytical, but it's also intensely poetic, bringing us into contact with the reality of our interconnectedness with the world. It is experiential, focusing on our present-moment experience, and it is imaginative, encouraging us to envision ourselves as part of a wider process of change and flow.

This isn't a meditation I do every day, although it frequently becomes the cornerstone of my practice while I'm on retreat. It's not a practice that I teach to complete beginners, as I believe that the Six Element practice needs both a reasonable grounding in tranquility practice (*samatha*) and a healthy sense of emotional positivity. Most often I teach it on retreat, to students who have at least a few months of solid practice behind them.

Simply reading this article will give you no more than a faint flavor of the practice. If you want to experience it more strongly, read through it again, pausing frequently and giving yourself time to turn the words into felt experiences. I do most of my meditation, including this practice, with my eyes closed. You may wish to do the same. As with any sitting practice, we need to find a posture that's comfortable yet dignified, and that allows the chest to be open so that we can remain alert and focused.

Usually I spend a few minutes cultivating lovingkindness *(metta)* before launching into the practice. I'll contact my heart, see how I'm feeling, and encourage a sense of acceptance for whatever emotions happen to be present at that time. Then I'll wish myself well by repeating phrases such as "May I be well. May I be happy. May I be at peace,"

before taking that well-wishing into the world, sensing that my loving-kindness is radiating outward. Although the Six Element practice is often affirming, it can also be challenging, and it's best to be in at least a minimally positive state of mind before we start reflecting in depth on our own impermanence.

Earth

First we call to mind the earth element within ourselves. The earth element is everything solid and resistant, everything that gives us form. Notice first of all those aspects of the body that you can directly experience: the physical presence and weight of the body, the feeling of the sitting bones pressing into the cushion or bench, the hands resting on the lap, the knees on the floor, the teeth. Simply notice these experiences of solidness.

Besides noticing our immediate sensations, we enter into an imaginative exploration of the whole of the body. Even though we can't experience all these objects directly, in sutta 140 of the *Majjhima Nikaya* the Buddha encourages his students to call to mind the flesh, sinews, bones, bone marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, diaphragm, and every other conceivable solid matter in the body, including the feces in our intestines. Rather than starting trains of thought about the various organs of the body, discursively talking to ourselves about our anatomy, we can think more in terms of visualizing the organs, or simply knowing that they are there and that they're composed of solid matter.

Having reflected on the earth element within, we now call to mind the earth element externally—everything that is solid and resistant outside of ourselves—starting with the floor upon which we sit, then expanding outward to recall buildings, vehicles, roads, mountains, rocks,

pebbles, soil, the bodies of other beings, trees, wild plants, and crops growing in fields. Again, we don't aim to start trains of thought, but simply aim to evoke memories in the form of sensory impressions, letting images, sounds, and tactile sensations come into consciousness, and mindfully experiencing them.

Then we reflect that everything solid within the body and everything solid externally is the same earth element. There's really no "me" earth element or "other" earth element—it's all the same stuff. We normally think of our form, our body, as being us, as being ourselves, but here we recollect how everything of the earth element that is within us comes from outside and returns to the outside.

Being of a scientific bent—and I think the Buddha was, too—I often call to mind the process of conception. My body started with the creation of one cell from the fusion of a sperm and an egg from my parents, who are not me. The fertilized ovum divided and grew into an embryo as it absorbed nutrients from the world outside—from my mother's bloodstream, but ultimately from the plants and animals she ate. Those foodstuffs weren't me, either. And from that point on in my life, every molecule that has contributed to the earth element in this body similarly has come from outside. We can visualize the flow of the earth element from fields and soil into the body, and know that there's not a single molecule of solid matter within this body that is self-originated. It's all borrowed.

And we have to give it back. In fact, we are giving it back, every moment of our lives. The earth element within us is returning to the outside world, right now. We shed hairs and skin cells, and we go to the bathroom and defecate. We visualize all this in the practice. Solid matter is combusting within the body and being exhaled. Even our bones, which we may think of as the most solid and enduring part of the body,

are involved in a continuous process of dissolving and rebuilding. There are cells in your body that have no other function than to dissolve the surrounding bone, while other cells are involved in building it back up again. Even your bones are processes rather than things.

So the earth element within is borrowed, and it's always returning to the outside world, flowing through us like a river. And as we recollect the earth element flowing in this way, we can reflect: "This is not me, not mine, I am not this." There's not even any question of "letting go." The earth element never was "us." It never was "ours." We never were holding on to it, because how can we cling to something that's flowing?

The earth element provides the paradigm for the remaining physical elements, which are all treated in the same way—recollecting the element within us, recollecting the element outside of us, reflecting that everything that is "us" is really just borrowed from the outside world and constantly returning to it, and finally noting, as we contemplate the element flowing through us that this is not me, not mine, that I am not this.

Water

We started with the grossest element, and we will progress through the rest—water, fire, air, space, and consciousness—in order of increasing subtlety. So now we call to mind the water element within the body—that which is liquid. Starting with those manifestations that we can directly experience, we feel saliva in the mouth, mucus, the pulse of the blood, sweat, the feeling of moisture in the outbreath, the pressure of urine in the bladder. Then we move on to those things we can only experience more imaginatively: lymph, fat, synovial fluid in the joints, cerebrospinal fluid, and all the liquid that permeates and surrounds every

cell in the body. Even though you can't experience these things directly, you can know they're there.

Then we contemplate the water element outside of ourselves: calling to mind the oceans and rivers and streams, the water that permeates the soil, the rain and clouds, the water inside plants and animals. We see, hear, and feel these things as we recall our experience of them. Then we recognize that all of the water within the body, which we think of as us, and ours, as ourselves, is in reality simply borrowed for a while from the outside world, that it's quite literally flowing through us, and that we don't own it. There is only one water element—there's no "me" water and there's no "other" water. And so we reflect: "This is not me. This is not mine. I am not this."

Fire

The Buddha defined the fire element as "that by which one is warmed, ages, and is consumed, and that by which what is eaten . . . gets completely digested." In other words, the fire element within is metabolism. It's our energy. So sitting in meditation, we can experience the heat of the body, feeling the cooler air we inhale contrast with the warmth of the air as it leaves the body, feeling the heart pumping, and calling to mind the myriad chemical combustions taking place at the cellular level, sparks of electricity in the muscles, nerves, and brain. And knowing that all of this energy is borrowed from the fire element outside of us.

The fire element outside is the raw physical energy in the universe, from the nuclear fusion in the sun to the warmth of a cup of coffee, from the molten core of our planet to the chemical energy stored in our food as fat, sugars, and proteins. We feed the body by taking in the sun's energy stored in plants or flesh. We warm ourselves in the rays of the sun,

either directly or through burning fossil fuels that grew in the sunlight of ages past. And we have to keep replenishing the body's fuel, because the fire element is forever leaving: radiating from our skin, wafting away on our exhaled air, lost in the warmth of our feces and urine. And so the fire element, like earth and water, simply flows through us, unstoppable. We observe and reflect on this. And as we observe the energy within the body, we can be aware that it's actually another river—a river of energy—passing through this form, that it's really not ours at all. "This is not me. This is not mine. I am not this."

Air

As soon as we call to mind the air element within the body—the air in our lungs and other body cavities, even the gases dissolved in our blood—we're immediately aware of the breathing, aware that air is flowing rhythmically in and out of the body. So almost simultaneously we recall the air element outside of us—the air surrounding us and touching the skin in this very moment, the winds and clouds and breezes that we hear and see moving branches and grasses. We're taking in and giving out this element right now. Right now, the air element is entering and leaving the body. Right now, air is entering, oxygen is dissolving in the bloodstream, being taken to cells to provide energy, and carbon dioxide is being exhaled.

Where's the boundary between inner air and outer air? There is only one air element, and what's within us is simply borrowed for a few moments. We can't hold on to the air element any more than we can hold on to any of the others. In fact we can only live by letting go, never by holding on. To hold on is to die. And so we reflect that the air element, like the other physical elements, is not me, not mine, that I am not this.

By this point in the practice I usually sense in a very immediate way the impermanent, transient nature of the body. I have a heightened appreciation that what I normally assume to be a relatively fixed and solid physical form is actually a dynamic process. I often find myself thinking that to watch the elements flow through this body is rather akin to sitting by a river. I can watch the water pass "my" stretch of the riverbank, and I say "that's me, that's me," but in every moment of claiming, of grasping, what I'm trying to cling to flows inexorably past. Clinging is futile and painful. Letting go is to recognize how things are. Letting go is to be free and open.

There's a sense of curiosity, wonder, and openness. The world is more alive. I'm less attached to my physical form, and my sense of identification has expanded outward: everything that has ever passed through my body—the solid matter, air, water, and energy—is now "out there" in the form of fields, clouds, forests, and soil. In a way, those things are all me. And because this very body is made of these same things, I am them. Having this direct sense of interconnectedness is enlivening and empowering. I'm no longer separate and small, but an intimate part of the vast cycle of the elements.

Space

Space is a strange and different element. It's just there. We can't see it, we can't touch it, we can't say how far it extends. We can't even say what, if anything, it's made of. According to Einstein, it expands and contracts depending on what velocity we're moving at, and it gets bent out of shape by the presence of solid matter. That's all very hard for me to get my brain around, conditioned as it is to think in a paltry three dimensions. But there is one thing that my deluded mind "knows" about

space, which is that there's space that's "me" and there's space that's "not me." Cut to Einstein, in one of his less mathematical and more religious moments:

A human being is part of a whole, called by us the "Universe"—a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts, and feelings, as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness.

This very basic distinction—or delusion—of there being an inner world and an outer world is so fundamental that we rarely question it. This stage of the Six Element practice gives us an opportunity to question that assumption. So first of all, as we're sitting with our eyes closed in meditation, can we feel any sharp division between "me space" and "not-me space"? I've noticed that without the "optical delusion" of there being a delineation between inner and outer, the body loses its sense of having fixed boundaries. The hands no longer have five fingers; they have become just a mass of interwoven sensations—tingling, warmth, pressure. The whole body becomes a fuzzy ball of energy. That passing car I hear: Is the sound inside me or outside? The sound waves are happening in the air outside, but all hearing takes place in the brain, which is inside. The assumptions begin to show cracks.

Even if the boundaries of my space are fuzzy, I still have some space I can claim as my own, right? Well, maybe not. Even when I'm sitting absolutely still, I'm moving. The planet is spinning on its axis and revolving around the sun, the whole solar system is swinging around the galactic core, and the galaxy itself is rushing away from every other galaxy at an incomprehensible velocity. So although I think there's a "me space," I'm never actually in the same space for two consecutive moments.

Space isn't really divided into "me space" and "not-me space." It's all one space, and it flows through us. Space is just borrowed. We can't own it.

Consciousness

It isn't obvious that consciousness is an element like the physical elements or even space. Perhaps even more so than with space, we can't even say what consciousness is. But somehow in the evolution of the material universe life has arisen, and in the evolution of life consciousness has come into being. Perhaps we could say that consciousness is the other elements knowing themselves.

The Buddha introduces the element in this way: "Then there remains only consciousness, bright and purified." It's just possible that he was referring here to mind's intrinsically empty nature, or he may simply have meant that the mind has been brightened and purified by letting go of grasping after the other five elements. In any event, we've started to realize at this stage of the practice that there's nothing we can grasp hold of and so our mind now turns its attention to itself: the grasper.

In this stage of the practice we notice—and reflect upon—the way in which sensations, thoughts, images, emotions, and habitual patterns come into being, persist for a while, and then vanish into emptiness. None of them is permanent, and all are simply passing through us in the same way that the earth, water, fire, air, and space elements are flowing through our physical form. So these "elements of consciousness" are not intrinsic to us, are not a fixed part of us, and are not us. Just as there is nothing we can grasp, there is no one, ultimately, to do any grasping.

When feelings of fear or discomfort arise in the practice, as they sometimes do, we treat them in just this way, experiencing the feelings in a nonattached way, surrounding them with mindfulness and loving-kindness, and realizing that they are not ultimately a part of us.

Having explained that the contents of consciousness—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—arise and pass and cannot be clung to, "there re-

mains," in the words of the sutta, "only equanimity, purified and bright, malleable, wieldy, and radiant."

This is the equanimity that comes from letting go, from ceasing to identify with our experience. It's the equanimity that comes from not getting caught up in our inner dramas, from not reacting to unpleasant feelings with aversion and by not responding to pleasant feelings with grasping. It's the equanimity of acceptance. Through the Six Element practice, we come to the insight that we're not the physical elements, nor the space that contains them, nor again the consciousness that knows those things. So we may well ask, what exactly are we? This is a question that, in this meditation, we can consider experientially rather than through discursive thought. Rather than try to work out an answer in logical terms, we simply ask the question, and sit, and listen patiently for the heart's intuitive response.

Sometimes what arises is a sense that we are the universe become aware of itself; that we are nothing more than conscious, living energy; that the mind is inherently pure, luminous, wise, and loving; and that we are beginning to know our intrinsic nature, which is emptiness.

Whatever arises from our reflections, we simply continue to sit and to experience the fruits of the practice, until we feel ready to move on. I'd encourage you once again to engage with this practice as an experiential exercise in letting go. To live is to let go, and in order to live fully we must learn to let go fully and to embrace the flow that is the universe.

Bodhipaksa was born in Scotland and now lives in New Hampshire. He runs Wildmind, a leading online meditation resource.

4

THE FORM OF COMPASSION

An introductory Tantric visualization practice of the deity Chenrezi, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. Translated from Tibetan and adapted by Pamela Gayle White.

Sherab Gyaltsen Rinpoche

It is said that the Enlightened Ones possessed of the omniscient eye of wisdom can state with certainty exactly how many drops of water have fallen during an uninterrupted twelve-year rainfall but that they cannot calculate the benefit that comes from a single sincere, perfectly focused, and pure recitation of the six-syllable mantra of Chenrezi, the Bodhisattva of Compassion: *Om mani padme hung.*

I believe that anyone who is inspired by the practice of Chenrezi (Avalokiteshvara in Sanskrit), the deity who embodies compassion, can begin to do his meditation. While the importance of compassion is common to all Buddhists, the Mahayana tradition accentuates actively benefiting others. Our ability to do this depends on the strength of our *bodhicitta*, the awakened mind that is fully focused on attaining enlightenment and helping others. To develop an awakened mind, we need to develop compassion. And to develop compassion, we need to develop basic kindheartedness. Kindheartedness is an essential human quality

that should be cultivated by everyone, Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. It should always be present, whether we are engaging in everyday activity or formal practice.

Every Mahayana practice exemplifies various aspects of bodhicitta—there are no exceptions—but I am convinced that there is no greater practice than Chenrezi for developing kindheartedness and compassion. Moreover, no deity meditation is superior to Chenrezi when it comes to ensuring temporary, relative happiness here and now, and for laying the groundwork for ultimate happiness in the future. This is why I think that it is very beneficial for all who are inspired by this practice to have access to it.

In principle, if we do deity practice according to Vajrayana, or Tantric Buddhism, we first need to have formally taken refuge in the Three Jewels—the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha—as a confirmation of our commitment to the Buddhist path. Then we can request the empowerment, reading transmission, and instructions connected with a given deity meditation. Once we have received them, their combined presence gives the practice its full potential, as the door to blessing is wide open. In the case of Chenrezi, however, if we are truly inspired by and have confidence in the deity and his mantra, *Om mani padme hung*, his meditation-recitation will undoubtedly be beneficial even without these prerequisites. Of course, those who find they are interested in pursuing and deepening their practice should seek instructions from a qualified teacher.

In Tantric Buddhism, deity meditation is a method that allows the mind's inherent goodness to manifest, to increase constantly, and to never decline. The goal of all deity practices is to develop qualities in the practitioner that mirror those represented by the deity. Clearly, loving-kindness and compassion—the qualities associated with Chenrezi—are

present in our own hearts, our own minds. All the same, when we are motivated to develop them further, it is helpful to have a method.

Although he is the basis for our practice, Chenrezi's form is in fact emptiness; ultimately it has no more reality than anything else, including our own forms, our own bodies. Because a body, thing, or self is a composite that can always be broken down into smaller bits, none of them can be said to exist substantially in its own right. In fact, the "self " or "thing" that is the basis for experience has no tangible reality whatsoever—it's just a mass of infinitesimal particles, an amalgam of aggregates.

Until we have experienced this truth, until we have realized the absolute, empty nature of reality, we continue to perceive our universe in terms of ultimately fictitious dichotomies such as self/other, mine/yours, good/bad, worldly beings/enlightened buddhas, and so forth. Our perception is rooted in confusion, but we can make use of these illusory distinctions when we direct our aspirations and prayers to those who can convey blessing, the buddhas.

As ordinary human beings, we sit down with our ordinary bodies and mental patterns and begin to meditate on the extraordinary, ageless form of Chenrezi: dazzling white, one face, four arms, two hands holding a wish-fulfilling jewel at the level of his heart, the others holding a crystal rosary and a white lotus by the stem, and so on. By supplicating him, we develop qualities of devotion and trust. By doing his meditation-recitation, we develop both lovingkindness and compassion toward beings, along with nonreferential lovingkindness and compassion. By training in exchanging our ordinary vision of our environment and all who inhabit it for a vision based on enlightenment, we develop our ability to realize the truth.

On a relative level, of course, the practitioner visualizing Chenrezi

is me; the specific objects of my lovingkindness and compassion are all beings; and my practice consists of imagining them being freed from suffering and established in happiness. On an absolute level, I, the practitioner, am not "real"; the beings that are the object of my compassion are not "real"; and my Vajrayana practice method is not "real." It is when this realization arises and our practice becomes absolutely free of any focus or reference point that ultimate lovingkindness and compassion have truly dawned. Ultimately, there is no one to pray to, no prayer to express, no blessing to receive. Ultimately, there is absolutely no difference between Chenrezi and the enlightened quality of our own mind.

The Practice: Three Phrases of Chenrezi

While there are a great many different forms of the deity and his practice, the form given here is rooted in a short daily practice text called *Extending throughout Space for the Benefit of Beings,* composed by the fifteenth-century dharma king Tangtong Gyalpo. This meditation-recitation is practiced by all schools of Vajrayana Buddhism in Tibet and beyond, and it is certain to convey blessing. The further meditation instructions provided are based on *A Continual Rain for the Benefit of Beings,* a commentary on Tangtong Gyalpo's text written by the Fifteenth Karmapa, Khakhyab Dorje (1871-1922).

Taking Refuge and Developing Bodhicitta

Whether we do Chenrezi or any other form of practice, we always begin by recalling our objectives. As practitioners, what should our goal be? Buddhists will aim for perfect awakening in order to be of maximum

benefit to others. Those who are not committed to Buddhism, but who are interested in the practice, should also be clear that their motivation for practicing Chenrezi is to be able to help all beings become liberated from suffering and find happiness. This is what we mean by "loving-kindness and compassion." Lovingkindness is defined as the fervent desire to establish all beings, without exception and without distinction, in happiness and joy. Compassion is the yearning to do everything possible to save all beings from whatever suffering they may encounter as a result of the negative karma they have accumulated. We also wish to be able to prevent all beings from perpetuating the causes of such suffering: negative actions based on confusion and ignorance. With the goal in mind of benefiting others and ourselves, we begin the practice by taking refuge and developing bodhicitta.

We imagine that in the sky in front of us, seated on a lotus and moon amid a cloud of rainbows, is noble Chenrezi, just as depicted in paintings or statues. We ourselves are the principal figure, surrounded by a great gathering of all beings, including our enemies, loved ones, and all those in between.

We develop awareness that Chenrezi embodies the Three Jewels: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. The awakened mind of Chenrezi is Buddha, the Enlightened One. His speech is the Dharma, the teachings of the path, as expressed by the *Om mani padme hung* mantra garland. His fully ornamented body is the Sangha, the noble assembly of realized practitioners. Understanding that Chenrezi is the one who can protect us all from the great ocean of suffering, we recite the first two lines of refuge shown below.

Then, with the aspiration to continue to practice until the suffering of all beings has been completely alleviated, we affirm our commitment to awakened mind by reciting the next two lines expressing bodhicitta.

These four lines should be recited three times or more:

Until I have reached full awakening,
I take refuge In the Buddha, the Dharma, and the supreme Assembly.
Through the merit resulting from this meditation practice,
May I attain enlightenment in order to benefit beings.

As innumerable light rays shine forth from Chenrezi's body and touch all the beings we have visualized, their negativities, veils, and pain are purified and they all experience great joy. The field of refuge then melts into light and dissolves into us. In this way, our mind-stream has been blessed.

Deity Meditation and Mantra Recitation

We begin by transforming our ordinary vision, thinking that our everyday environment appears as a pure and excellent Buddha-realm, the blissful realm of Buddha Amitabha called Dewachen (*Sukhavati* in Sanskrit). Those unfamiliar with the idea of pure realms can simply imagine a beautiful, blissful place where every last being is perfectly contented, where terms such as *pain, suffering,* and *misery* are unheard of, and where the minds of all who abide there are wholly infused with goodness.

We envision ourselves seated in the center of this Buddha-realm, with our father of this life sitting to our right, and our mother of this life to our left. In front of us are all those who might be inclined to harm us. We imagine that this inner group is surrounded by an incalculable number of sentient beings of every kind, as if we had all come together

in an enormous marketplace.

Above our heads and the head of *each* being, there appears an eight-petaled white lotus with stamens in a halo of rainbow-like light. Upon each lotus lies a flat white moon disk, and on this stands the white letter Hri, Chenrezi's seed syllable, which symbolizes the essence of his mind-stream.

Light rays emanate from the Hri and travel to Buddha-fields of all directions, making offerings to the buddhas and bodhisattvas who abide there. The light rays then return from these Buddha-fields laden with the blessing of the buddhas' and bodhisattvas' enlightened bodies, speech, and minds, and melt back into the seed syllable Hri.

Once again, light rays leave the Hri and touch all sentient beings of all realms, relieving them of physical and mental suffering, purifying the obscurations of their bodies, speech, and minds, and establishing them in the blissful, awakened state of Chenrezi himself. The light rays return again to the Hri and dissolve into it. With this, the Hri instantaneously transforms into the deity Chenrezi.

When we visualize him, we are aware that he is not solid or substantial, yet he appears with the clarity of a rainbow in the sky, or of the moon's reflection in water. We should picture him with precision and in detail, being careful not to imagine a tangible, physical form.

With the conviction that he is the very essence of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha brought together, we recite:

Upon the white lotus and moon above the heads
Of myself and all sentient beings throughout space
Is HRI, from which noble, supreme Chenrezi appears,
Gleaming white and radiating five-colored light.
Lovely and smiling, he gazes with eyes of compassion.

The first two of his four hands are held in prayer,
The lower two hold a crystal rosary and white lotus.
Adorned with silk and jewel ornaments,
His upper body is clothed with a deerskin.
He is crowned by Buddha Amitabha,
And seated in the adamantine posture,
With an immaculate full moon as his backrest.
In essence he is the union of all sources of refuge.

Taking our time, we read and visualize distinctly each aspect of his body. Then, in unison with all the beings that we have envisioned around us, we address noble and supreme Chenrezi. Our minds perfectly focused, we think, "You know what must be done. With full trust we surrender ourselves to your wisdom. Kindly deliver us from the conditioned realms rife with suffering, and guide us to the omniscience of enlightenment."

Then we recite the following verse at least three times:

Lord of pure white, undefiled and flawless,
Your head is crowned with the perfect
Buddha.
You behold beings with the eyes of compassion:
Chenrezi, I bow down before you.

Then, innumerable light rays, predominantly white, and also blue, green, yellow, and red, emanate from the body of the Noble One above our heads. The instant they touch us, it is like the light of a torch that illuminates and dispels the darkness. All of the veils and obscurations that exist due to negative karma accumulated through the misuse of

body, speech, and mind are eradicated. Then the deluded, dualistic karmic tendency that has fostered clinging to self and other as subject and object since beginningless time is purified, and the blessing that creatively manifests as inseparability from the body, speech, and mind of Lord Chenrezi is granted.

We imagine that the outer environment has become the pure realm of Dewachen, and all beings who inhabit it have effectively become Chenrezi, the embodiment of compassion. All sounds, including the sounds of living beings—speech, animal sounds, and so on—as well as those of the elements and inanimate objects, are perceived as the sound of the mantra *Om mani padme hung*. All thoughts that arise in our minds—good thoughts, bad thoughts, pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—are perceived as being inseparable from the awareness-emptiness that is the perfectly pure mind of Chenrezi. This is the main visualization of the Chenrezi practice. All of the more extensive visualizations belonging to the different versions of the Chenrezi meditation are condensed and included in this one.

We recite:

Having prayed one-pointedly in this way,
Light emanates from the body of the Noble One,
Purifying misperception and impure karmic experience.
The outer universe manifests as Dewachen,
And the body, speech, and mind of the beings who live there
Are the enlightened body, speech, and mind of Lord Chenrezi.
Appearance, sound, and awareness are inseparable from emptiness.

This is then followed by the repeated recitation of the mantra *Om mani padme hung*. Whether we are reciting a hundred mantras, two

hundred, or thousands, we can alternate prayers to receive the blessing of Chenrezi with the visualization of light rays purifying all negativities of body, speech, and mind, and all manifestations of dualistic clinging; and with the awareness of our environment as a pure realm, of all those who people it as Chenrezi, of our speech as the mantra, and of our thoughts as the mind of the deity.

When we have finished our session of mantra recitation, the universe and its inhabitants dissolve into light. This light dissolves into Chenrezi, who himself melts into light. This light dissolves into us, and we imagine that there is no distinction between ourselves and the deity. Then we also melt into light and settle in nonconceptual meditation for as long as we can—at least a few instants.

When we emerge from this state, on the cushion and in daily life we strive to maintain our awareness of the pure dimension of our environment and those who share it with us, as expressed by the following lines:

Our physical forms manifest as the body of the Noble One,
All sounds are the melody of the six syllables,
And thoughts are the vast expanse of great wisdom.

Dedicating Merit

Finally, we dedicate the merit, the positive spiritual energy garnered through our practice, thinking, "Through this merit, may we rapidly attain a state equal to that of Chenrezi. May our merit contribute to establishing all beings, as numerous as the sky is vast, in everlasting peace and well-being: the ultimate happiness that is full awakening."

With this, we recite:

Through this virtue may I swiftly attain the state of Lord Chenrezi,
And may I establish all beings, without a single exception, in this state.

This, in a nutshell, is the practice of Chenrezi.

If the visualizations prove to be too daunting, we can simply imagine Chenrezi above our heads and facing in the same direction, or facing us in the sky, or seated at the level of our own hearts. As we recite the mantra, we supplicate him mentally, thinking, "Chenrezi, please heed me!" as we look to him for refuge in this and the following lives.

Alternatively, it is also quite beneficial to recite the mantra as we develop the awareness that our impure universe, the confused beings who inhabit it, the sounds produced by beings and elements, and the diverse nonenlightened thoughts produced by these beings are all transformed into the enlightened aspects of the deity of compassion as described. And most simply, we can recite the mantra of compassion, *Om mani padme hung,* while cultivating kindheartedness.

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5

LEARN TO TRAIN YOUR MIND

The 59 Lojong Slogans with Acharya Judy Lief

Acharya Judy Lief

There are a number of excellent translations of the Atisha slogans available. I have consulted primarily *Training the Mind* and *Cultivating Loving-Kindness* by Chögyam Trungpa with an excellent translation of the basic text by the Nālandā Translation Committee and *The Great Path of Awakening* by Jamgön Kongtrül, with an excellent translation by Ken McLeod. However, since the purpose of this article is to examine the slogans, to look at them this way and that, to chew on them and let them sink in, I have at times chosen to phrase the slogans in my own way. This is in no way meant to be a replacement for more traditional translations—it is simply a means of exploration. I hope you too will find ways of expressing these teachings in your own words.

A Little Historical Background

Atisha was a 10th century Indian Buddhist teacher, who embarked on a dangerous journey by sea in search of the teacher Serlingpa, who lived on the golden isle of Sumatra in present-day Indonesia. Serlingpa was

known to be the holder of a body of profound mind training teachings, but to receive these teachings, it was necessary to find Serlingpa and request them. And that is exactly what Atisha did. Having done so, he brought the mind training teachings of Serlingpa back to India and subsequently to Tibet.

In Tibet, the 12th century Tibetan teacher Geshe Chekawa systematized Atisha's mind training teachings into a series of slogans to produce The Root Text of the Seven Points of Training the Mind. And later the great 19th century master Jamgön Kongtrül the Great wrote a well-known commentary on this test, entitled The Basic Path toward Enlightenment.

Early on, the mind training (Tibetan: *lojong*) teachings were kept secret and were only practiced by a few. Later they became more widely available, and nowadays we are fortunate to have not only the core text and commentary available, but many contemporary commentaries, as well.

Why bring all this up, instead of launching right in? Because we forget where teachings come from—from real people, real dedication, and real hardship.

Today's Practice

Reflect on the journey of Atisha and of so many others who were willing to risk their lives in search of teachings. When dharma comes easy, when it is available in the marketplace, is it true dharma?

How to Work with the Slogans

What is the best way to work with the mind-training slogans? The short

answer is over and over again. At first the slogans may seem overly simple, even simple minded. But if you take the time to reflect slowly and carefully on each slogan, from many angles, they begin to sink in at a different level. You begin to uncover layers of depth and subtlety. What is really great is that the mundane grittiness and the subtle understanding are not opposed, but are joined. They operate simultaneously and in tandem. So the whole way we divide our world into our ordinary dealings with daily life and what we consider more important or profound is dislodged.

Before launching into the slogans themselves, it is important to review some basic principles.

The underpinning of this practice is grounding in mindfulness and awareness. Through meditation you develop the ability to settle and relax the mind. Meditation practice enhances concentration and reduces the tendency to be judgmental and moralistic. It creates the mental room to look at life more dispassionately. So when you consider a slogan, take a moment to clear your mind and come into your body. Breathe. Be patient and don't try to capture the meaning as if you were preparing for an exam.

Slogan practice revolves around a number of key themes: in particular, awareness, kindness, and openness. I prefer to look at it backwards, as overcoming three main obstacles: distractedness, indifference, and mental stuckness. Why do we distract ourselves? To avoid facing the fact that our very existence is shifting and insubstantial with no reliable solidity whatsoever. Why are we indifferent? Due to our self absorption, we have no room in our heart for others. Why are we mentally stuck? Because we are afraid of the limitless compassion and unbounded emptiness of our own nature.

Today's Practice

As you go about your day notice what arises in your mind. Pay attention to the feeling of shutting down or opening out. When thoughts arise, how many revolve around you? How many times to you think of others, and what kinds of thoughts are they?

Slogan 1: First Train in the Preliminaries

This slogan raises the question of what is the best foundation for dharmic practice. How should we prepare ourselves to dive into the slogans? This naturally leads to the further question of how we prepare ourselves to launch into anything.

Preparation is not something that we just do once and then forget about it. It is easy to enter into meditation and other practices, and just continue along. But along the way, we lose track of why we decided to do any of this in the first place. By starting with the preliminaries, and going back to that starting point repeatedly, we can reconnect ourselves over and over again our initial inspiration. Trungpa Rinpoche used the analogy of combing our hair: each time, we go back to the root.

We need to keep reminding ourselves of the human condition, both sweet and sour—and not just the human condition in the abstract, but our own human condition specifically.

On the sour side: No matter how privileged we may be, there are many things we cannot control. We experience frustration and disappointment, and we find ourselves trapped by the decisions we have made and the circumstances we are in. We experience sickness, aging, and the certainty of dying.

On the sweet side: Something makes us ask, "Is that it? Is that all?" Something inspires us to really look into our experience and recognize that we have something to work with. We see how amazing it is that we have this precious fleeting life and the opportunity to awaken its potential, and we recognize our good fortune in encountering the dharma. At the same time, we see how many opportunities we pass by and how easy it is to simply sleepwalk our way through life.

We also need to remind ourselves of what made us think that it was even possible for us to change—not just according to our wishful thinking, but in reality. That shift could come about through an encounter with a teacher. We might simply have a sudden glimpse that it is up to us and that things could be otherwise.

Today's Practice

Each time you practice, begin by reconnecting that practice with what inspired you to enter the path in the very beginning. As you go about your day, notice whether you are using the business of your life as a reminder of your inspiration to awaken or as an excuse to continue sleeping.

Slogan 2: Regard all dharmas as dreams.

If the point is not to sleepwalk through life, but to be awake to our life, why would we want to regard all dharmas, or all phenomena, as dreams? Is that not a contradiction?

It is intriguing that this slogan comes right at the beginning, because it sets a tone that is a little intimidating. If we want to work with the slogans, we need to allow our reality to be bit more shifty. This slo-

gan challenges our desire to make our world solid and reliable—solid objects, solid self, solid views, solid ideologies, solid opinions, solid relationships, solid everything!

We take ourselves and our world so seriously. Things seem so real, so intense and colorful, even overwhelming, but at the same time, everything we try to hold onto slips away. Nothing is all that substantial. It is amazing that there is anything at all! At the same time, nothing seems to be there in the way we would want.

Seeing the dreamlike quality of experience is not sloppy or vague, and it is not just spacing out. It is just the opposite. In fact, it is our habit of imagining ourselves and the world around us not to be dreamlike that is the delusion.

So the starting point of working with the slogans is to face up to our desire to make everything solid. When we lighten up on that particular scheme even momentarily, our mind opens up a bit and relaxes. And the more openness there is, the more slogan practice becomes gentle and natural rather than heavy handed or moralistic.

Today's Practice

As thoughts, emotions, experiences, and dramas come and go, try to notice the point at which you appropriate them into your solid interpretation of the way things are. Pay attention to the contrast between holding and solidifying and releasing and opening out.

Slogan 3: Examine the nature of Unborn Awareness.

In the previous slogan, "Regard all dharmas as dreams," we looked out-

ward, at our perception of the world. With this slogan we look inward—we look at the looking itself.

What is awareness and how does it arise? What does it mean to perceive a world? The question of consciousness is one that has puzzled scientists and philosophers as well as meditators and mystics. It seems to be intimately connected with the physical brain, yet not identical to it—and when you are aware of something, it doesn't seem to be the brain that is perceiving, but you! But who or what is that you?

Consciousness can be considered philosophically or studied scientifically, but in this slogan the idea is to examine it personally and directly. It is to look at your own experience. When you look, what do you see? And where does that seeing come from? What is its nature? Where does it abide? Where does it go?

Over and over look at your own mind, and then look again. Don't think too much but keep it simple, nothing but dispassionate, inquisitive observation. Is it inside you? Outside you? Both?

If the unnerving experience of dharmas being dreamlike is not unsettling enough, when you try to examine the nature of unborn awareness, it is beyond unsettling. These two slogans undermine our attempts to establish inner and outer solidity, and liberate the energy we invest in that pursuit. So whether we are applying slogan practice to meditation and in our daily lives, it comes from a fresher place.

Today's Practice

When you become aware of a thought or an object of perception, notice how solid and separate the perceiver and what is being perceived seem to be, and the seeming solidity of this and that, here and there. Then look at the nature of the awareness itself, before the arising of "this" and "that."

Keep questioning. What is it exactly and where does it come from?

4. Self-liberate even the antidote.

The problem this slogan addresses is the tendency to cling to the insight uncovered by the previous two slogans. That is, you may have recognized the dreamlike nature of the world and the ungraspable nature of awareness, but you still cling to that recognition itself, and the sense of having figured all this out.

The need to find solid ground is so strong that you can even make the groundless nature of inner and outer experience into some kind of ground. You can make emptiness into a catch-all explanation for everything. It is almost instantaneous—as soon as one thing slips away, you have already grasped onto something else. You may have all sorts of realizations, but as soon as you make a realization yours, it is no longer a realization, but another obstacle to overcome.

A rather shallow hanging on to the notion of emptiness is quite common. It can be an excuse for a kind of nihilistic laziness, since if everything is empty, why bother? It can be used to deny painful emotions by imagining that the realization of emptiness can take away their sting. It can serve as a source of pride based on the feeling that you are tuned into something profound that other people are missing.

The point of self-liberating the antidote is that you don't need to do anything to liberate it. You just need to realize that there are no antidotes. When you do so, the antidote liberates itself. It is because we keep trying to latch on to each and every meditative experience, realization, or insight that arises that this slogan is so important. It is a reminder not to do that.

Today's Practice

Pay attention to what antidotes you cling to, to take the bite out of experience. When you have a spiritual or meditative experience, how do you relate with it, and what is the result?

5. Rest in the nature of alaya, the essence.

In this weary striving world, rest is hard to come by. A luxury. From time to time we simply flop from exhaustion, but in general we don't have many chances to slow down or to stop the momentum as our life flies by.

Especially when we think of cultivating kindness, and the activities of a bodhisattva of compassion warrior, we think "Lights, camera, action!" We don't think "Rest!" But bodhisattva activities are not like regular activities—they come from a place of rest.

The previous slogans undermined not only our fixed views of the substantiality of self and other, but also any attempt to hold onto that realization or even onto the realizer. Having broken though such falsely constructed reality, we reach a desolate but beautiful place. It is by acquainting ourselves with this place that we can prepare the ground for truly compassionate action.

The *alaya*, or essence, is the open unbiased expanse of mind. It is stillness. It can be envisioned as an expanse, or simply as a gap in our ongoing preoccupations, activities, and concerns. When we meditate, we tend to think that we are doing something, but occasionally we forget and find ourselves just simply at rest. And as that quality of rest expands it begins to swallow up the notion of anyone experiencing it.

The possibility of resting in alaya is always present, and when it seeps into everyday experience, even in the form of a little pause or gap, it lightens the energy, making it much harder to be self-righteous or heavy handed. At the same time there is a bit of an edge, a tinge of fear, in that in this fresh state, habitual patterns have no support. So whatever direction we choose seems to come from a scary kind of no-man's land.

Today's practice

In your sitting practice, notice the tendency, even when you have seemingly stopped, to keep moving mentally, psychologically, and physically. As soon as you notice the impulse to move, let it go, relax, and return to stillness.

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6

LONG JOURNEY TO A BOW

Overcoming the last great obstacle to awakening: the conceit of self

Christina Feldman

When news of the impending death of a beloved and esteemed teacher swept through the village, well-wishers gathered to pay their last respects and honor him. Standing around the master's bedside, one by one they sang his praises and extolled his virtues as he listened and smiled weakly. "Such kindness you have shown us," said one devotee. Another extolled his depth of knowledge, another lamented that never again would they find a teacher with such eloquence. The tributes to his wisdom, compassion, and nobility continued until the master's wife noticed signs of restlessness and kindly asked his devotees to leave. Turning to her husband, she asked why he was disturbed, remarking upon all the wonderful tributes that had showered him. "Yes, it was all wonderful," he whispered. "But did you notice that no one mentioned my humility?"

The conceit of self (mana in Pali) is said to be the last of the great obstacles to full awakening. Conceit is an ingenious creature, at times masquerading as humility, empathy, or virtue. Conceit manifests in the feelings of being better than, worse than, and equal to another. Within these three dimensions of conceit are held the whole tormented world

of comparing, evaluating, and judging that afflicts our hearts. Jealousy, resentment, fear, and low self-esteem spring from this deeply embedded pattern. Conceit perpetuates the dualities of "self" and "other"—the schisms that are the root of the enormous alienation and suffering in our world. Our commitment to awakening asks us to honestly explore the ways in which conceit manifests in our lives and to find the way to its end. The cessation of conceit allows the fruition of empathy, kindness, compassion, and awakening. The Buddha taught that "one who has truly penetrated this threefold conceit of superiority, inferiority, and equality is said to have put an end to suffering."

Although I didn't recognize it at the time, my first significant encounter with conceit happened in the very beginning of my practice in the Tibetan tradition, a serious bowing culture. I'm not talking about a tradition that just inclines the head slightly, but a culture in which Tibetans undertake pilgrimages of hundreds of miles doing full prostrations the entire way. In Tibetan communities the serious bowers can be spotted by the callous in the center of their forehead. Walking into my teacher's room in the Himalayan foothills for the first time, I found myself shocked to see people prostrating themselves at his feet. My reaction was visceral; I saw their bowing as an act of self-abasement, and I determined never to do the same. My conceit appeared in the thoughts that questioned what this plump, unsmiling man swaddled in robes had done to merit this attention. The recurrent words "I," "me," "better," "worse," "higher," "lower," "worthy," and "unworthy" provided fuel for plenty of storytelling and resistance.

Over the years, as my respect and appreciation for this teacher's generosity, kindness, and wisdom grew, I found myself inching toward a bow, often a token bow with just a slight bob of my head. Occasionally I would engage in a more heartfelt bow born of deeper gratitude, but still

an element of tension and withholding remained. I continued to practice in other bowing cultures. In Asia, I witnessed the tradition of elderly nuns with many years of practice and wisdom kneeling before teenage monks who had yet to find the way to sit still for five minutes. In Korea, I saw a practice environment where everyone bowed to everyone and everything with respect and a smile. It dawned on me that bowing was not, for me, just a physical gesture, but rather an object for investigation and a pathway to understanding conceit. The bow, I came to understand, was a metaphor for understanding many aspects of the teaching—pride, conceit, discriminating wisdom, and self-image.

My first challenge on this journey was to distinguish the difference between a bow as an act of letting go of conceit and a bow that reflected belief in unworthiness. As Kate Wheeler once wrote in this magazine, "A true bow is not a scrape." Many on this path—both men and women—carry a legacy of too many years of scraping, cowering, and self-belittlement, rooted in belief in their own unworthiness. The path to renouncing scraping can be long and liberating, a reclaiming of dignity, and a letting go of patterns of fear. Discriminating wisdom, which we are never encouraged to renounce, clearly understands the difference between a bow and a scrape. A true bow can be a radical act of love and freedom. As Suzuki Roshi put it, "When you bow there is no Buddha and there is no you. One complete bow takes place. That is all. This is nirvana."

Conceit manifests in the ways we contract around a sense of "self" and "other"; it lies at the core of the identities and beliefs we construct, and it enables those beliefs to be the source of our acts, words, thoughts, and relationships. Superiority conceit is the belief in being better or worthier than another. It is a kind of conceit that builds itself upon our appearance, body, mind, intelligence, attainments, stature, and achieve-

ments. It can even gather around our meditative superiority. We see someone shuffling and restless on their meditation cushion and then congratulate ourselves for sitting so solidly. We might go through life hypercritical, quick to spot the flaws and imperfections in others, sure we would never behave in such unacceptable ways.

Superiority conceit is easily spotted when it manifests in arrogance, bragging, or proclaiming our excellence to the world. On retreat we may find ourselves rehearsing the conversations we will have with our partner, recounting our trials and triumphs, but especially our heroism in completing the retreat where others failed. We can feel remarkably deflated when his only interest is when we're going to take out the garbage. It can be subtle in our inner beliefs in our specialness, rightness, or invulnerability. Superiority conceit looks like a safer refuge than inferiority conceit (thoughts of being worse than another), but in truth both cause the same suffering. Feelings of superiority have the power to distort compassion into its near enemy, pity, and to stifle the capacity to listen deeply. Superiority conceit disables our receptivity to criticism because we become so convinced in the truth of our views and opinions.

A traditional Buddhist story tells of the time after the Buddha's death when he descended into the hell realms to liberate all the tormented beings imprisoned there. Mara (the personification of delusion) wept and mourned, for he thought he would get no more sinners for hell. The Buddha said to him, "Do not weep, for I shall send you all those who are self-righteous in their condemnation of sinners, and hell shall fill up again quickly."

Inferiority conceit is more familiar territory for many of us, probably because a chronic sense of unworthiness is so endemic in our culture. The torment of feeling worse than others and not good enough is the daily diet of inferiority conceit. A student on retreat came in distress to

report that none of her more familiar dramas and agitation were appearing, and she was convinced she was doing something wrong. The teacher suggested that this odd experience could actually be one of calmness and was surprised when the suggestion was met with even more distress and denial, with the student exclaiming, "Calm is not something I can do." Another student experiencing rapture in her practice continued to assert that it was menopausal flashes, unable to accept that she could experience deep meditative states. Inferiority conceit gathers in the same places as superiority conceit—the body, mind, and appearance, as well as in the long list of mistakes we have made throughout our lives.

Inferiority conceit is fertile in its production of envy, resentment, judgment, and blame, which go round and round in a vicious circle of storytelling, serving only to solidify our belief in an imperfect self. This belief is often the forerunner of scraping as we create heroes and heroines occupying a landscape of success and perfection we believe to be impossible for us.

Governed by inferiority conceit, we may be adept at bowing to others, yet find it impossible to bow to ourselves, to acknowledge the wholesomeness and sincerity that keep us persevering on this path. Learning to make that first bow to ourselves is perhaps a step to realizing that a bow is just a bow, a simple gesture where all ideas of "self" and "other," "worthy" and "unworthy," fall away. It is a step of confidently committing ourselves to realizing the same freedom and compassion that all buddhas throughout time have discovered; it is acknowledging that we practice to be liberated. We practice because it seems impossible; we practice to reclaim that sense of possibility. We learn to bow to each moment knowing it is an invitation to understand what it means to liberate just one moment from the burden of self-judgment, blame, envy, and fear. Letting go of inferiority conceit awakens our capacity for appreciа-

tive joy and reclaims the confidence so necessary to travel this path of awakening.

Seeing the suffering of superiority and inferiority conceit, we might be tempted to think that equality conceit is the middle path; however, a closer look shows us that it is more a conceit of mediocrity and minimal expectations. Equality conceit is when we tell ourselves that we all share in the same delusion, self-centeredness, and greed, that we all swim in the same cesspool of suffering. We see someone falling asleep on their cushion and feel reassured. We observe a teacher dropping their salad in the lunch line, and it confirms our view that people are essentially and hopelessly mindless. Sameness can seem both comforting and reassuring. Thinking that others are also struggling on the path can make us feel relieved of the responsibility to hold aspirations that ask for effort and commitment.

Equality conceit can express disillusionment with human possibility. When we look at those who appear happier or more enlightened than ourselves and primarily see their flaws, we are caught in equality conceit. We see those who seem more confused or deluded than ourselves, and we know we have been there. We see our own delusions and struggles reflected in the lives of others and think that we are relieved of the task of bowing. The offspring of equality conceit can be a terminal sense of disappointment, resignation, and cynicism. After Al Gore's documentary, An Inconvenient Truth, was released, several newspapers responded by publishing the electric bill of his home. What wasn't mentioned was how the home's electricity was generated by solar power. It seemed there was a driving need to reduce his message and show that we're all hopeless carbon emitters.

All forms of conceit give rise to the endless thoughts and storytelling that solidify the beliefs we hold about ourselves and others. Liberat-

ing ourselves from conceit and the agitation it brings begins with our willingness to sensitize ourselves to the subtle and obvious manifestations of conceit as they appear. The clues lie in our judgments and comparisons, the views we construct about ourselves and others. Suffering, evaluating, envy, and fear are all signals asking us to pause and listen more deeply. We learn to bow to those moments, knowing they are moments when we can either solidify conceit or liberate it. Instead of feeding the story, we can nurture our capacities for mindfulness, restraint, and letting go. Instead of volunteering for suffering, we may be able to volunteer for freedom. It is not an easy undertaking, yet each moment that we are present and compassionate in the process of conceit building is a moment of learning to bow and take a step on the path of freedom.

Life is a powerful ally because it offers us the opportunities to let go of the conceit of self. There are times when our world crumbles. Unpredictable illness and other hardships come into our lives, and we face the reality once more that we are not in control. Sometimes there is simply no more that "I" can do. In those moments, we can become agitated or we can acknowledge that we are meeting the First Noble Truth: at times there is unsatisfactoriness and suffering in life. When we face the limitations of our power and control, all we can skillfully do is bow to that moment. The conceit of self is challenged and eroded not only by the circumstances of our lives but also by our willingness to meet those circumstances with grace rather than with fear.

A teacher was asked, "What is the secret to your happiness and equanimity?" She answered, "A whole-hearted, unrestricted cooperation with the unavoidable." This is the secret and the essence of a bow. It is the heart of mindfulness and compassion. To bow is to no longer hold ourselves apart from the unpredictable nature of all of our lives; it is to cultivate a heart that can unconditionally welcome all things. We

bow to what is, to all of life. By liberating our minds from ideas of "better than," "worse than," or "the same as," we liberate ourselves from all views of "self" and "other." The bow is a way to the end of suffering, to an awakened heart.

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7

FOCUSING AND MEDITATING

Bring gentle mindful awareness to the "felt sense."

David Rome

I had been a Buddhist meditator for 26 years when I happened upon a slight-looking mass-market paperback in an out-of-the-way used bookstore in Vermont. Filling the book's whole cover was a semiabstract photograph of stones of different colors, shapes, and sizes seen through the surface of a rippling stream. The book's title was a single word: *Focusing*.

I paid three dollars for the little book, and over the next several years it became the source of something that had been lacking in my life as a practitioner: a radically simple yet endlessly subtle contemplative practice that helped me to build a reliable and resilient bridge from the cushion of sitting meditation to the nitty-gritty of everyday life.

When I was learning Buddhist meditation in the 1970s, the standard response of meditation instructors when a student sought advice about any of the big three—work, sex, and money—was "Just sit!" It was good advice, too: not to fuel discursive complications but to give them a big space to settle out on their own. It would have been the perfect advice for a full-time monastic, but the emerging Buddhism of the West was not monastic. It was "householder" dharma, intended to be integrated

with complex lives devoted to earning a livelihood, being in relationship, raising a family, and so forth.

Of course, the cultivation of mindfulness, awareness, and acceptance in meditation was already a great support in dealing with life's vicissitudes. What was lacking, though, was a method—a contemplative method—for constructively engaging and solving problems in the world. Focusing filled a gap between my practice and the rest of my life that I had been only dimly aware of but that became very clear in retrospect. Like the clear water rippling over the stones on the book's cover, it was a deeply refreshing resource.

The essence of Focusing involves bringing gentle, mindful awareness to a subtle level of bodily experiencing known as the "felt sense." Felt senses, which lie somewhere between physical sensations and emotional feelings, represent a distinct kind of experience. In a certain way they are happening all the time, but for most people in our culture most of the time they go unnoticed. Felt senses are initially unclear, somatic sensations. Typically they are found by bringing awareness to the central part of the body, the torso area between neck and bottom, and orienting our attention to what is going on inside that space.

When attended to with friendly but dispassionate attention, felt senses that start out seeming vague and unnameable can show up with greater clarity and precision—hence the name "Focusing." A felt sense can come alive and open what it already knows about life situations that you—the conscious, conceptualizing you—don't yet know or have any way of putting into words. By entering into a process of inquiry with the felt sense, spontaneous flashes of insight and intuition can occur that generate novel perceptions and fresh understanding, often leading to fresh solutions to life's challenges.

The technique of Focusing begins with a step called Clearing a

Space, which is quite similar to mindfulness practice but features a more deliberate and sustained focus on the body. You settle and bring attention especially to the torso area. This process is described as "coming inside" or "dropping down" (that is, shifting awareness from the head-centered discursive mind down into the torso-centered domain of feelings and impulses). The practitioner, or focuser, brings a quality of attention known as the Focusing attitude, a friendly and inquisitive but at the same time dispassionate and nonreactive way of sensing what the body is holding in the present moment. It has been evocatively described as "caring, feeling presence."

Felt senses show up as bodily-felt places, textures, shapes or inner movements, with distinct physical qualities that may be described with words like hard, soft, jittery, sinking, thick, tight, warm, or cold. It is at this point that Focusing really departs from traditional mindfulness practice. Instead of noting these internal sensations and returning to the breath, the focuser chooses to "be with" a felt sense or an issue, gently keeping it company— as one might do with a child or a friend in a state of distress or excitement. Eugene Gendlin, the father of Focusing, outlines six steps in the basic process under the names Clearing a Space, Felt Sense, Handle, Resonating, Asking, and Receiving.

Let me give an example. If I pause in writing just now to bring my attention inside in a Focusing way, what do I find? A vague squeezing . . . like a small sphere of pressure in the center of my chest . . . and under that, a sensation like a warm rising wave. I'm giving all of this my receptive, interested attention . . . the pressure feels like something trying to constrain me, holding me back. There is some sense of danger. Now the image comes of riding a horse: the horse might go too fast and buck me off. I am squeezing the reins. . . Ah, now an insight comes: there is a fear of falling on my face that writing for publication brings . . . Is it OK to be

with that? . . . Yes, now that I sense it more clearly, I can be welcoming there.

As I sit with this for a few more moments, a fresh insight comes: there is also something positive about this quality of constraint—it holds critical intelligence and a self protective energy that I need. This brings a shift in the felt sense, a slight release in the squeezing sensation. . . . Now the part of the felt sense that is like a rising wave feels clearer. It is the creative excitement I experience in writing, and it is stronger now, because the reins have been loosened and there is reassurance in knowing I have an inner guardian who will keep the creative forces from racing off in wild directions. Now I can resume my writing with greater ease and confidence.

In this example, I started my Focusing process with the felt sense itself. It is also common to start with a specific concern: a problem, a decision, relationship issues, anything that is presently occurring in our life, or about which present thoughts and feelings are occurring. In these cases Focusing can generate not only new insights and energy but also very specific action steps that we couldn't discover through our habitual thought processes.

Finding the felt sense is also a great support for analytical meditation or any form of contemplative inquiry that explicitly includes conceptual thought. The great problem with thoughts, as any meditator finds out the first time he or she tries to sit, is that one thought leads to another to another to another. This is what we call "discursive" mind, and nothing truly fresh can come of it. But thought itself is not the problem. Being able to drop awareness down into the body and check in with the felt sense keeps thoughts from gathering discursive momentum and invites intuitive knowing, or insight, as it is commonly referred to in Buddhism.

Contemplative inquiry is in effect a dialogue between the "I" of the mind and the "me" of the body that attunes us to the body's deeper knowing, its genuine experiential wisdom. Unlike discursive mind, the body has no way of being anything other than genuine. In this process of dialogue, the I-mind can ask questions of the me-body and, if it is patient and lucky, can get answers. But this only works under two conditions: that a felt sense is actually present at the moment of asking, and that the I-mind refrains from answering its own question. The active "I" has no control over the felt sense, which (like a young child) may simply ignore the question. This is why Focusing, like meditation, involves repeated practice. As we train the I-mind to be present in this special way, trust and sensitivity grow, and the felt senses come more readily and are more willing to open up and share their hidden wisdom. (Note that "hidden" here is just a metaphor; it would be more accurate to use Gendlin's philosophical term "implicit," meaning present but not yet given form.)

Focusing is a great way to begin or end a session of sitting meditation, especially in one's daily practice. At the beginning it helps in clearing space, and at the end it provides a bridge from the open receptivity of mindful awareness to the daily exigencies we face. Spacious clarity, spontaneous insight, and skillful action can arise together as we go about the business of our lives. Or we can mentally tag a problem or a felt reaction that comes up in the moment and return to it later when we can pause to give it some quality time. But as our felt-sensing is strengthened through repeated practice, it functions more and more spontaneously even in the heat of action.

Being able to access the felt sense is especially helpful in relationships. Lovingkindness and compassion meditations exercise the heart muscle but don't always tell us what exactly to do when we are at odds

with specific people in specific circumstances. The calm clarity of mindfulness and the caring warmth of compassion are great assets, but something more is called for: mindful and heartful *engagement*. This is the ability to consciously, skillfully respond rather than reflexively react and to allow ourselves to change and be changed in the process of relating. Letting go of the small self opens the way to moving forward from a deep, organismic sense of rightness. It is not just about having more space, but how to dance in the space!

And speaking of dancing, Focusing is in fact also a powerful support for the creative process. Recently as I was walking my dog, feeling rather discouraged about how persistently winter was holding on this year, I was struck by the dense green clusters of marsh marigold leaves pushing up through the crust of last fall's withered ones. This sparked the following haiku:

Late March, a cool breeze:
urgent green leaves surge up through
last year's withered brown.

Today, during my weekly hour on the telephone with my Focusing partner of more than 10 years—Focusing is commonly practiced in dyads in which the partners take turns Focusing and listening—I was touching in on feelings of discouragement about my slow recovery from a recent episode of neuropathy and also sensing some fresh creative juices starting to flow. All at once my little haiku came to mind, and I understood that what I had responded to in nature reflected what I was going through in my life.

Later that day I returned to the haiku, and now my felt sense told me that the word *surge* wasn't quite right. I had liked its echo of the sound of

urgent, but the feel of it didn't really fit my experience. I tried substituting *emerge*—"urgent green leaves emerge through / last year's withered brown." While this had the virtue of preserving the internal rhyme, it still wasn't true to either my experience during the walk or what I had uncovered in Focusing. After some more tapping and resonating with my felt sense, the words "casting aside" broke through, and right away there was a sense of relief. My felt sense was happy. I gave up my attachment to the rhyme (and serendipitously got back a new and subtler one, "cast / last"), and now my little haiku gave expression to something that felt true to my direct experience:

Late March: a cold breeze.
Urgent green leaves cast aside
last year's withered brown.

Not Basho, perhaps, but something in me had moved a little and my life was better for it.

Introduction to Focusing

Most people find it easier to learn Focusing through individual instruction than through simply reading about it. The actual process of Focusing, experienced from the inside, is fluid and open, allowing great room for individual differences and ways of working. Yet to introduce the concepts and flavor of the technique, some structure can be useful for those who have not found a certified trainer. Although these steps may provide a window into Focusing, it is important to remember that they are not the only six steps. Focusing has no rigid, fixed agenda for the inner world; many Focusing sessions bear little resemblance to the mechanical

process that we define here. Still, every Focusing trainer is deeply familiar with the six steps listed below, and uses them as needed throughout a Focusing session. And many people have had success getting in touch with the heart of the process just by following these simple instructions.

Think of this as only the basics. As you progress and learn more about Focusing, you will add to these basic instructions, clarify them, approach them from other angles. Eventually—perhaps not the first time you go through it—you will have the experience of something shifting inside. If you want to try them out, do so easily, gently. If you find difficulty in one step or another, don't push too hard, just move on to the next one. You can always come back.

Clearing a Space

Be silent, just to yourself. Take a moment just to relax. Now, pay attention inwardly, in your body, perhaps in your stomach or chest. See what comes *there* when you ask, "How is my life going? What is the main thing for me right now?" Sense within your body, and let the answers come slowly from this sensing. When some concern comes, do not go inside it. Stand back, say "Yes, that's there. I can feel that, there." Let there be a little space between you and that. Then ask what else you feel. Wait again, and sense. Usually there are several things to note even at this early point.

Felt Sense

Select one personal problem to focus on from the things that come up. Do not go inside it. Stand back from it. Of course, there are many parts to that one thing you are thinking about—too many to think of each one

alone. But you can *feel* all of these things together. Pay attention there, where you usually feel things, and in there you can get a sense of what *all of the problem* feels like. Let yourself feel *all of that*, even though it will be an unclear sense.

Handle

What is the quality of this unclear felt sense? Let a word, a phrase, or an image come up from the felt sense itself. It might be a quality word like *tight, sticky, scary, stuck, heavy, jumpy,* or a phrase, or an image. Stay with the quality of the felt sense until something fits it just right.

Resonating

Go back and forth between the felt sense and the word (or phrase, or image). Check how they resonate with each other. See if there is a little bodily signal that lets you know there is a fit. To do it, you have to bring your attention back to the felt sense there as well as the word that arose. Allow the felt sense to change, if it does, along with the word or picture, until they feel just right in capturing the quality of the felt sense.

Asking

Ask yourself: what is it about this whole problem that makes this quality (which you have just named or pictured)? Make sure the quality is sensed again, freshly, vividly (not just remembered from before). When it is there again, tap it, touch it, be with it, asking, "What makes the whole problem so _____?" Or ask, "What is in *this* sense?"

If you get a quick answer without a shift in the felt sense, just let that

kind of answer go by. Return your attention to your body and find the felt sense again, freshly. Then ask it again. Stay with the felt sense until something comes together with a shift, a slight "give" or release.

Receiving

Receive in a friendly way whatever comes with the sense of a shift. Stay with it a while, even if it is only a slight release. Whatever comes, this is only one shift; there will be others. You will probably continue after a little while, but stay here for a few moments.

If during the course of following these instructions you have spent a little time sensing and touching an unclear holistic body sense of this problem, then you have focused. It doesn't matter whether you have experienced a body shift, or an actual physical sense of some change, or not. It comes on its own. We don't control that.

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8

PAIN, PASSION, AND THE PRECEPTS

In upholding the precepts, we actualize our buddhanature

Bodhin Kjolhede

If you're looking to rest your practice on anything (other than Nothing), you can't do better than Buddhism's three essentials: meditation *(dhyana)*, wisdom *(prajna)*, and morality *(shila)*—the three-legged stool of practice. The meditation component has always been well covered in Western Buddhism. Probably for most practitioners in the Americas and Europe it's become all but synonymous with practice. And the promise of prajna, the transcendental wisdom revealed through awakening, has stirred the minds of practitioners ever since Shakyamuni looked up at the morning star from beneath the Bodhi tree. But upright conduct has never gotten equal attention in Western practice.

Ultimately, morality, wisdom, and meditation are equally vital aspects of the Way that mutually condition one another. Awakening reveals the no-thingness of things—that no thing is apart from all other things. To realize truly that there is only this nature, with no "other" outside us, is to naturally want to refrain from causing harm, just as we refrain from doing harm to one of our own limbs or eyes. The Ten Cardinal Precepts then articulate how to live up to this vision of things

as they are—as one. Conversely, by upholding the precepts even before awakening, we are allowing the afflictions that obstruct that experience to loosen and dissolve. And since the precepts collectively may be seen as a description of enlightened conduct, in harmonizing with them we are actualizing our buddhanature.

Upholding the precepts can't be called the sexiest of practices. Refraining from moral reflections—in beginners, especially—is often symptomatic of an immature practice driven by a grasping mind. But to minimize the importance of the precepts reveals a poor understanding of them.

To disregard the precepts may also suggest a reaction to the moralism at the heart of our American culture, with its deeply-rooted Puritanical strain. We are a people preoccupied with good and evil. Just ask our European friends, or count our TV shows that revolve around it, or notice the showy religiosity in our politics. But the vocabulary of good and evil is a cultural accretion we don't need. The dharma offers a more basic judgment of conduct—whether it causes harm or not. That's really the only measure we need. Moralistic concerns are superfluous.

Buddhist shila is not really a matter of being "good." It's not about being anything—any *thing*. That would imply a fixed self that either is something or isn't something. Rather, sila rests on *action*. This is how Aristotle saw morality—as praxis, or doing, as distinguished from theory. The praxis of the precepts is the work of refraining from acting, speaking, or thinking in such a way as to cause harm. In Buddhist ethics, the language of good and bad just muddies the water.

Even understanding shila simply in terms of causation, or karma, without the freight of right and wrong, doesn't make a moral dilemma easier to resolve. Each precept may be interpreted according to various degrees of strictness. For example, we may take the third of the Ten Car-

dinal Precepts, not to misuse sexuality, as prohibiting merely adultery and sexual intercourse with a mentally disabled or underage person, or, more strictly, as referring to any form of "using or abusing" one's partner. Applying the strictest interpretation to the second precept, not to take what is not given, would have us breaking it when we make consumer choices that implicate us in the misappropriation of the world's resources. Even talking around the truth may be seen, from the most stringent view, as a violation of the fourth precept, "I resolve not to lie."

No realm of life is potentially more complex than that of ethics. It involves a consensus of prohibited conduct that may be universal and timeless (such as stealing), but otherwise is culturally constructed. In fact, the consensus even within one milieu can change over time. We see how ideas about harmful behavior have shifted with respect to marijuana use, same-sex marriage, and abortion. Moreover, the precepts in Mahayana Buddhism may be interpreted from different perspectives. An action that violates the wording of a precept may actually cause less suffering, overall, than it would when considered in a broader context. Thus, with respect to the first of the Ten Cardinal Precepts, "I resolve not to kill," shooting a rabid dog could well be ethically more responsible than letting it run amok, if the choice was between the life of a child and that of the dog.

From a third perspective, that of essential nature, killing, death, and karma are altogether devoid of meaning. This is the realm of emptiness, which is unscored by any such discriminations even as it gives birth to them—indeed, to all phenomena. It was from this absolute level that Bodhidharma, the founder of Zen, declared with respect to the first precept:

Self nature is inconceivably wondrous.

In the everlasting dharma,
Not giving rise to the notion of extinction
Is called the precept of refraining from taking life.

Although this world of emptiness informs everything, it is only one side of the twofold dharma. Coexistent with it is the conventional realm we're all groping our way through together, every day. At this level, our choices in conduct do indeed matter, literally—they materialize in consequences. The precepts can't spell out every answer for us, but with them we need not be left floundering with our subjective views; we don't need to reinvent the dharma wheel. It's still greed, anger, and delusion, in their myriad variants, that we're working with, and in the precepts we've inherited a map to help us navigate this long and perilous waterway of practice. On this map you can almost see the glyphs of fearsome marine monsters next to the warning signs: "Don't go here." Or "Drift into these waters at your own peril."

The essentially practical nature of shila is revealed in a common English translation of the original Pali wording. Each precept begins, "I undertake the training rule to abstain from…." No talk of principles here, much less of good and evil. In Buddhist texts, *shila* is often defined as "discipline"—and a discipline it surely is. In dharma practice, we're swimming upstream against the current of habitual consciousness (to use a metaphor of the Buddha's), and these forces of mental grasping and dispersion just keep coming. To hold our own against them requires discipline in body, speech, and mind, working—consciously and every day—with our egotistic impulses. This requires noticing those impulses as they arise— something easier said than done. But through daily meditation over long enough time we do manage to catch them sooner and sooner. Only then do we have a choice as to whether to act on the impulse

or not.

Ah, but impulses can be so tantalizing! When temptation arises, how do you avoid breaking a precept—which by definition would invite suffering? A traditional Zen method would be to marshal one's attention and simply cut through the images and thoughts that fuel such an impulse. Another classic approach would be to inquire deeply into the nature of the passion in order to see through it—"What *is* this, really?" But these and other established methods may not always work, especially in high-stakes situations involving one of the Grave Precepts (the first five of the Ten Cardinal Precepts).

Let's suppose that a married practitioner was feeling increasingly attracted to another woman, and asked for advice on how to proceed—or not. He could go outside orthodox Zen methods and enlist his imagination, pausing to visualize the pain it would cause if the transgression came to light (as such things usually do). He could start with the hurt and anger in his wife's face and body, and that of his children, and maybe of his parents and other family members, and the sleepless nights they would go through, and, when the news reached those in his sangha and workplace and neighborhood, the widespread disappointment in him that would unfold, and the pain that would roll back to his paramour, not to mention to the cheater himself.

If we find ourself mentally playing out such painful scenarios more than infrequently, chances are we're either getting obsessive about morality or living too close to the edge. But the same exercise can be deployed when on the verge of breaking any of the other precepts (and the visualization will bite all the more if charged with the memory of having stumbled in the same way before). What's required is some space in which to choose intelligently, a little daylight between the impulse and the action. When we're about to have one too many drinks (the

fifth precept), we need to claim at least a moment of our inherent awareness to reflect on the troubles that may ensue from our state of intoxication—the stupid, hurtful things we may blurt out, the reckless pleasures that may follow and wreak havoc in our life, and the physical harm we may cause others as well as ourselves, especially if we give way to the temptation to drive under the influence. When we're about to lash out at someone in anger (ninth precept), we need at least a fraction of a second in which to imagine just how destructive our words or action may prove to be. When we're about to speak of the faults of others (sixth precept), we need a bit of space before doing so, in which to picture the damage our words may cause to the reputation of the person and the waves of discord that may spread through the sangha and larger community. You don't have to be a sociopath to mentally run through these scenarios and still charge straight ahead; that's how powerful the blind passions are—and why we call them "blind." But any tool can help in avoiding unnecessary suffering.

Besides imagining the misery we risk by breaking a precept, another way to handle the impulses that bind us to suffering is through cognitive intervention. If we're behind the wheel and another driver cuts us off, leans on his horn, or otherwise drives provocatively, we can construct a narrative to explain his aggressiveness: "He's late for something, and probably not for the first time. He's desperate to get there, and you know yourself what that's like!" The same line of creative speculation works in the face of any form of hostility: "She may have just lost her job," or "He just had a fight with his wife." These kinds of stories, even if fanciful, offer us some breathing room, interrupting the reaction chain that binds us to suffering.

When struggling with our impulses, we can also draw from the "wisdom and warmth of the sangha." Just as a spiritual community will

have to share in the consequences of an individual's misconduct, it can prevent his missteps from occurring in the first place. As members of the sangha we have dharma talks and private meetings with teachers to turn to, as well as the informal guidance of others. Or, if the damage is already done, the sangha can offer its collective resources in helping the individual to accept responsibility for his actions and repent them, and thus move on and not repeat them.

Until we have the insight to see through our habit forces as they arise—to see them as the empty mental formations they are—our best ally is the self-restraint outlined in the precepts. We have to discard the idea of Buddhist morality as rules suited just to the prim and proper; they're for all of us, and they take strength to uphold. In days gone by, self-denial—the denial of one's selfish desires or pleasures—was held in high esteem. What's more, it was seen as a particularly manly asset (dubious though that generalization might be). It's ironic, then, that it's nearly always men who are behind the most spectacular cases of inveterate misconduct today, in Buddhist communities and public life as a whole.

What drives some teachers to repeatedly put their own appetites ahead of their students' welfare? It's not just the biological imperative, because that wiring is shared by everyone carrying the Y chromosome. Another contributing factor may be an elevated craving for novelty (here, in sexual partners), which is now widely regarded to have a genetic component. But these considerations aside, we have to suspect that repeat offenders have some hole within them that they are trying compulsively to fill, an aching sense of incompleteness that drives them to act against their students' interests and their own better nature.

To see persistent misconduct on the part of a teacher as the failings of the wounded healer may help us understand and even forgive

him for it, but the behavior can't be excused. Too many people get hurt. Many years ago, some of us were pressing a teacher about his series of sexual involvements with his students, finally prompting this jaunty retort from him: "You know, just because you're enlightened doesn't mean you're dead below the waist." Message: if you have a healthy libido, you can be excused for acting on your urges. Worst of all is when such teachers let themselves be referred to as Zen "masters." No one deserves such a title until having earned it through long-term self-mastery.

Historically, it was the opposite. The expectation in most spiritual traditions was that moral self-containment showed potency, evidence that you'd been able to conquer your common appetites. (Another irony: As women watch men in positions of authority self-destruct, they may reflect with bemusement on the old myth of woman as the temptress, helpless against her own innate sexual longings.) To be sure, behavioral rectitude in itself doesn't prove any special strength of character; there can be other, less-than-laudable factors at work, including a neurotic attachment to piousness. But anyone who has struggled not to break a precept knows that it takes will power—that is, "won't" power.

Just as Buddhist shila refers not to some imaginary static state of virtue but to an ongoing test of volition, so too is this true of enlightenment. Since there is no abiding personhood in any of us, rather than speaking of an enlightened person, let's speak of enlightened *conduct*. This distinction is not merely semantic but has profound implications for practice. What use is there in calling someone "enlightened" if that label is being betrayed through bad behavior? So what if the person once (or twice, or more) had an awakening if his or her manner of living belies that experience?

A corrupt teacher or other senior practitioner who repeatedly flouts the precepts either doesn't care about the damage being inflicted or jus-

tifies it as the privilege of one who lives in a higher realm, one in which the nuisance issues of moral restraint and personal responsibility don't apply. Wasn't this delusion exposed in the story of Hyakujo, in the second koan in the *Mumonkan*? We can't magically remove ourselves from the world of phenomena and the order that enfolds it—the law of causation. Some teachers rationalize egoistic behavior by conveying (usually implicitly) that since they abide now in the "unconditioned," they are beyond conventional morality. They may have seen, even deeply, that "form is only emptiness," but they couldn't have integrated that seeing into the so-called conditioned world (as if the two were separate). They miss the other half—that emptiness is only form.

Ultimately, Buddhist "morality" is a no-morality. It represents a shifting mental structure that we understand only to the degree that we grasp its essential formlessness. Yet though it has no nature of its own, this no-nature is not devoid of properties and causal effects. Upholding the precepts is simply a way of moving through life without causing unnecessary pain. There is a saying in our tradition: "Zen is above morality, but morality is not below Zen."

Bodhin Kjolhede (pronounced COAL-heed) was ordained by Roshi Philip Kapleau in 1976 and became his dharma successor and abbot of Rochester Zen Center in 1987. He leads Zen retreats at Chapin Mill Retreat Center.

9

HEALING TRAUMA WITH MEDITATION

Amy Schmidt and Dr. John J. Miller offer positive ways to transform trauma.

Amy Schmidt and Dr. John J. Miller

Many Buddhist practitioners who have experienced trauma seek relief, consciously or unconsciously, in their meditation practice. The range of traumatic experiences is broad and can include being the victim of or witness to violence, such as sexual or physical abuse, rape, assault, torture, or military combat. Trauma can also occur following a serious illness or accident. Victims of trauma may experience feelings of powerlessness, low self-esteem, and self-blame. Trauma can also affect the ability to trust, form intimate relationships, and find motivation and meaning in life.

According to clinical psychiatrist Paul J. Fink, one out of every four girls and one out of every six boys worldwide suffer significant trauma before the age of eighteen. The National Comorbidity Survey of 1992 found that 8 percent of all Americans will experience a traumatic incident at some point in their lives that will result in a condition known as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD is characterized by significant distress and psychological impairment.

At first, symptoms may arise as prolonged feelings of panic while meditating. One practitioner recalls, "Initially, I felt an inexplicable terror. I would sit in the meditation hall, and all the hair would stand up on my body. I described it as 'terror from another planet' because there was no story, but it was still completely debilitating." Following this, the practitioner experienced a series of kinesthetic flashbacks, including involuntary physical contortions related to acts of sexual abuse. Later, visual flashbacks surfaced. Family members eventually verified the traumatic experience that had spurred these flashbacks, and the meditator was able to heal significantly through therapy and meditation practice.

When flashbacks of memories arise, they tend to occur spontaneously during periods of concentration. They can be experienced through any sensation, and are commonly visual or kinesthetic. For some, a whole scene is played out moment by moment, while others experience only broken images. When a meditator experiences a flashback, often the intrusion of these painful memories into conscious awareness can be an indication that the meditator needs to stop practice and address the trauma through psychotherapy; a teacher is usually the best person to make this determination.

Survivors need to consider the potential effects the silence of a retreat environment might have on the resurfacing of traumatic experiences. On the one hand, it can reenact the feeling of being isolated and silenced by the perpetrator, the family, or society. But a retreat can also provide a stable and safe space in which they can begin to relax—often for the first time. There is a predictable schedule, no intrusions from the outside world, and a communal agreement to follow basic ethical rules. One practitioner noted that a retreat was "the first time in my life I felt without fear."

In addition to the safety of the retreat environment, the practice

of meditation offers a variety of effective tools for healing trauma. While the suggestions here are aimed at meditators with trauma histories, they can apply to any practitioner coping with difficult emotions. The following are five mindfulness tools that can help practitioners navigate traumatic experiences.

Awareness of Body and Breath

The body and breath are anchors for awareness that can be returned to again and again. Mindfulness of the breath is especially useful for trauma survivors, who tend to hold their breath as a way of not connecting with the present moment. Holding the breath is an unconscious response to anxiety, and may also be part of the process of dissociating from the experience. If, however, the trauma was related to the act of breathing (such as choking or oral sexual abuse), then the breath is obviously not the best meditation anchor. In these cases, during "sitting" periods, try listening meditation, body sweeping, mantras, or touch points (for example, notice the sitting bones touching the cushion, the hands touching the legs or each other, and the feet touching the mat, and rotate your attention among these points).

Body awareness needs to begin gradually. One way to start is by observing the body during times when it feels comfortable. One woman found that the only safe place in her body was her hands, and she would mindfully watch every sensation in each hand for hours at a time. Feeling comfort is a simple thing that trauma survivors often overlook—or sometimes aren't even aware can exist. These practices can be done for five minutes in bed, right before sleep:

Notice the sensation of gravity. Feel the weight of your body on the

bed. How does gravity feel?

Scan your body for a place that feels relaxed and even a little bit comfortable. Perhaps it is a finger, a toe, or somewhere deep in your body. Focus on that place. Notice what "comfortable" feels like. See if you can describe it.

Reverse-Warrior Teachings

People with trauma histories often have a tendency to push themselves to extremes; they are more than willing to stay up all night, fast for days, or sit for many hours without moving. Unfortunately, practices that override the body's natural signals of discomfort can end up creating further trauma. One therapist explains, "The way trauma folks survived was that they taught themselves to persevere and to be driven. It's what they learned worked. They didn't learn about kindness to themselves or their internal signals. There wasn't the sense that internal signals could be a support or were worth trusting. It takes survivors a long time to come to listen to internal, intuitive messages and believe them." One practitioner discovered, "The difficulty with trauma as it unfolded was how compelling the story was and how I was driven by the thought, 'I'm going to work through this.' I had to watch this combination of fascination and drivenness and remind myself to back off."

As a result of this overzealousness, it can be helpful for survivors to practice in a way that seems contrary to the traditional Buddhist teachings. In the sutras, the Buddha advocated a warrior-style practice: "Let only my skin and sinews and bones remain and let the flesh and blood in my body dry up; I shall not permit the course of my effort to stop until the end is reached." Instead, trauma survivors need to learn what one teacher calls the "reverse-warrior" practice:

Practice for shorter periods of time.

Get plenty of sleep and eat regularly.

Focus on balance and equanimity rather than effort and progress.

Build in breaks, and remember that it's not a weakness to be gradual.

Working with trauma is like having two jobs: You're doing the practice of meditation and the practice of healing at the same time. In this regard, the meditative focus needs to be on simple, small steps. One therapist notes: "Trauma survivors always feel they are not working hard enough and that's why they are stuck. But this isn't true. It's okay to relax and stop constantly trying to change."

Experiencing Strong Emotions

The core practice in healing trauma is learning how to feel strong emotions without becoming overwhelmed by them. During meditation practice, survivors often respond to overwhelming emotions by dissociating, a relic of the psychological defense they used to remove their awareness from the trauma while it was occurring. One meditator described dissociation this way: "My mind enters a state outside my body, captive in some dimension where it is at least safe and alive, yet also powerless and terrified. To settle on the breath is impossible. To get up or move in any way is impossible. After some time, my mind returns enough so that I am able to pull my blanket around me, draw my knees up, and just sit."

How does a meditator learn to feel strong emotions and bodily sensations without dissociating from them?

When a difficult emotion, sensation, or memory arises, learn to touch up against the pain in small increments. To do this, bring your attention to a place in your body that feels comfortable or neutral (see "Awareness of Body and Breath," above). Feel this comfortable place for

a few minutes. Then slowly move the attention to the difficult emotion. Feel that for a minute, then move back to the comfortable place again. Keep moving the attention patiently back and forth between these two areas. This gradual re-experiencing can modulate the intensity of the emotion and create a sense of mastery over the feeling.

Train the mind to listen to the body with tenderness and intimacy. Throughout the day, when you are engaged in activities, check in with your body, asking yourself, "Does my body like this or not? What does my body want? Is it okay to keep going, or do I need to stop now?"

Awareness of Mind

One of the characteristics of severe trauma is that past emotions and experiences invade the present and become overwhelming. A Vietnam veteran recalls, "When the memories hit, they literally knocked me off my cushion. Through meditation, I eventually found balance with them." The practice of mindfulness develops the ability to observe these memories in a way that facilitates equanimity and balance by learning that all thoughts come and go.

Notice "trauma mind," the habit of always looking over one's shoulder, expecting the worst to happen. When fearful memories arise, ask yourself: "Am I okay in this moment? And this moment?" Remember, you have resources and choices now. Try breathing in compassion and breathing out fear.

Take a day to observe positive emotions as they occur. When did you feel joy today? Curiosity? Humor? Because healing from trauma can involve repeated focus on difficult emotions, it's important to train the mind to notice the positive emotions that exist.

Try microlabeling stressful thoughts and feelings: When they arise,

meticulously note your reactions as "thinking," "imagining," "fear," and so on.

Question self-judgments and negative beliefs: "Can I absolutely know this is true? Who would I be without this thought?"

It's also useful to identify neutral moments. Were there moments today when you didn't feel difficult emotions? When you were brushing your teeth? Drinking a glass of water? Reading? Sleeping?

If you feel completely overwhelmed, try distraction. One meditator went to a 24-hour Wal-Mart and walked the aisles at 2 a.m. The noise, the lights, and the stimulation shifted his focus away from self-hatred.

Learning to Love Again

Metta (lovingkindness) and compassion practices offer essential ways to mend the heart after trauma. Trauma survivors are often plagued by a sense that they are unworthy or inherently flawed. They may have trouble doing the "normal" meditation practices or fear that they are not mindful, diligent, or concentrated enough, which can lead to self-hatred and shame.

Trauma victims have had their trust and sense of connection shattered, and often have a hard time feeling kindness toward themselves and others. Metta practice can slowly rebuild these connections.

An image from Buddhist texts that one can use to generate metta is that of a mother cow looking at her newborn calf. Imagine a young animal or pet and try extending lovingkindness toward it.

Feel your heart center and breathe from this. Gently offer metta phrases to yourself such as: "May I love myself just as I am," or "May I be happy, may I be peaceful, may I be safe, may I be free of suffering." Some people find it useful to bring to mind an image of themselves as a young

child when saying these phrases.

It's important not to force the metta. At certain points, working with the metta can feel like silencing the pain. In this case, try the following compassion practices instead.

When difficult emotions arise, try holding each one as you would a crying child.

One trauma survivor uses a form of *tonglen* (the Tibetan practice of giving and receiving): "In tonglen I was taught to breathe in the heavy, dark air and breathe out the light, clear air. When I meditate, as the memories come I breathe in the silence and terror of the mute six-year-old. I breathe in her inability to speak and her terror. On the out-breaths I send the aspiration that one day she will be able to tell her story in her own words, and I send her a feeling of my holding her—safely, protectively. She is so little that it takes feelings, not words, to reach most of her, and this takes time."

Through steady patience, facing trauma can become part of the awakening process itself, and difficult emotions can become workable. Healing trauma is a day-by-day journey requiring courage, persistence, and faith. Buddhist meditation practices offer positive ways to transform trauma**.** Although not a substitute for psychotherapy, meditation can be a crucial support in the journey from trauma to wholeness.

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10

THE SUPREME CONTEMPLATION

Practicing with the Four Reminders

Andrew Holecek

One of the best ways to prepare for death is to acknowledge that we really are going to die. We're falling in the dark and have no idea when we'll hit the ground. Buddhist scholar Anne Klein says, "Life is a party on death row. Recognizing mortality means we are willing to see what is true. Seeing what is true is grounding. It brings us into the present. . . ." We all know that we're going to die, but we don't know it in our guts. If we did, we would practice as if our hair were on fire. One way to swallow the bitter truth of mortality and impermanence—and get it into our guts—is to chew on the four reminders.

The four reminders, or the four thoughts that turn the mind, are an important preparation for death because they turn the mind from constantly looking outward to finally looking within. These reminders, also called the four reversals, were composed by Padmasambhava, the master who brought Buddhism from India to Tibet. They can be viewed as representing the trips Prince Siddhartha took outside his palace that eventually transformed him into the Buddha. During these trips, Siddhartha encountered old age, sickness, and death, and developed the

renunciation that turned his mind away from the distractions and deceptions of the outer world and in toward silence and truth.

As a meditation instructor, I often prescribe the four reminders as the best remedy to get students who have stalled on the path back on track. As with mindfulness itself, the four reminders provide another way to work with distraction. They bring the key instruction from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*—"do not be distracted"—to a more comprehensive level. The four reminders show us that it's not just momentary distraction that's problematic but distraction at the level of an entire life. If we're not reminded, we can waste our whole life.

The Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche presented them this way:

FIRST Contemplate the preciousness of being so free and well favored. This is difficult to gain and easy to lose. Now I must do something meaningful.

SECOND The whole world and its inhabitants are impermanent. In particular, the life of beings is like a bubble. Death comes without warning; this body will be a corpse. At that time the dharma will be my only help. I must practice it with exertion.

THIRD When death comes, I will be helpless. Because I create karma, I must abandon evil deeds and always devote myself to virtuous actions. Thinking this, every day I will examine myself.

FOURTH The homes, friends, wealth, and comforts of samsara are the constant torment of the three sufferings, just like a feast before the executioner leads you to your death. I must cut desire and attachment, and

attain enlightenment through exertion.

How long should we contemplate these reminders? Until our mind turns. Until we give up hope for samsara (the worldly cycle of birth and death), and realize the folly of finding happiness outside.

Most of us spend our lives looking out at the world, chasing after thoughts and things. We're distracted by all kinds of objects and rarely look into the mind that is the ultimate source of these objects. If we turn our mind and look in the right direction, however, we will find our way to a good life—and a good death. Instead of being carried along with the external constructs of mind, we finally examine the internal blueprints of mind itself.

It's often said that the preliminaries are more important than the main practice. The significance of these four reminders, as a preliminary practice, cannot be overstated. Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche said that if we could truly take them to heart, 50 percent of the path to enlightenment would be complete. These contemplations develop revulsion to conditioned appearances, point out their utter futility, and cause awareness to prefer itself rather than outwardly appearing objects. They turn the mind away from substitute gratifications and direct it toward authentic gratification—which can only be found within.

The four thoughts remind us of the preciousness of this human life; that we are going to die; that karma follows us everywhere; and that samsara is a waste of time that only perpetuates suffering. Memorize them. They will reframe your life, focus your mind, and advise you in everything you do. As Dr. Samuel Johnson, the author of the first English dictionary, said: "When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully."

What would you do if you had six months to live? What would you

cut out of your life? What would you do if you had one month, one week, one day? The Indian master Atisha said, "If you do not contemplate death in the morning, the morning is wasted. If you do not contemplate death in the afternoon, the afternoon is wasted. If you do not contemplate death in the evening, the evening is wasted." The four reminders remove the waste.

We see others dying all around us but somehow feel entitled to an exemption. In the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*, the sage Yudhishthira is asked, "Of all things in life, what is the most amazing?" He answers, "That a man, seeing others die all around him, never thinks he will die." If we acknowledge death and use it an advisor, however, it will prioritize our life, ignite our renunciation, and spur our meditation. The Buddha said: "Of all footprints, that of the elephant is the deepest and most supreme. Of all contemplations, that of impermanence is the deepest and most supreme."

Bring these supreme reminders into your life and realize that life is like a candle flame in the wind. Visualize friends and family and think, "Uncle Joe is going to die, my sister Sarah is going to die, my friend Bill is going to die, *I* am going to die." Put pictures of dead loved ones on your desk or shrine; put sticky notes with the word "death" or "I am going to die" inside drawers or cabinets to remind you; read an obituary every day; go to nursing homes, cemeteries, and funerals. The essence of spiritual practice is remembrance, whether it's remembering to come back to the present moment or recalling the truth of impermanence. Do whatever it takes to realize that time is running out and you really could die today. You are literally one breath away from death. Breathe out, don't breathe in, and you're dead.

One of the marks of an advanced student is that he or she finally realizes that today could be the day. Realizing impermanence is what

makes them advance. For most of us, however, as Paul Simon sang, "I'll continue to continue to pretend / My life will never end. . . ." We essentially spend our lives moving deck chairs around on the Titanic. No matter how we position ourselves—no matter how comfortable we try to get—it's all going down.

These teachings exhort us not to spend our lives, which most of us do—literally and figuratively. Reinvest. Take the precious opportunity that has been given to you, and do not waste your life. The four thoughts that turn the mind turn it from reckless *spending* to wise *investing*. We spend so much effort investing in our future. We invest in IRAs, 401(k)s, pension plans, and retirement portfolios. Spiritual advisors exhort us to invest in our much more important *bardo* (post-death) retirement plan. That's our real future.

Don't worry so much about social security. Finance your karmic security instead. Invest in your *future* lives now. Investing so much in this life is like checking into a hotel for a few days and redecorating the room: what's the point? B. Alan Wallace says, "In light of death, our mundane desires are seen for what they are. If our desires for wealth, luxury, good food, praise, reputation, affection, and acceptance by other people, and so forth are worth nothing in the face of death, then that is precisely their ultimate value."

On a personal note, understanding impermanence has been the greatest gift in my study and practice of the teachings on death. I'm thickheaded, but I finally get it: I am going to die—and it could be today. My life has been completely restructured because I now believe it. The rugged truth of impermanence has simplified my life, shown me what is important, and inspired me to really practice. Sogyal Rinpoche says in *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*:

"Ask yourself these two questions: Do I remember at every moment that I am dying, and that everyone and everything else is, and so treat all beings at all times with compassion? Has my understanding of death and impermanence become so keen and so urgent that I am devoting every second to the pursuit of enlightenment? If you can answer "yes" to both of these, then you really understand impermanence."

These reminders may seem like a morbid preoccupation with death, but that is only because of our extreme aversion to dying. For most of us, death is the final defeat. As Jack LaLanne, the fitness and diet guru, once said, "I can't afford to die. It would wreck my image." We live in denial of death, and suffer in direct proportion to this denial when death occurs. The four reminders remind us of the uncompromising truth of reality, and prepare us to face it.

The four reminders, joined with mindfulness meditation, instill a strength of mind that benefits both self and other. Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche says,

"The strength of *shamatha* [mindfulness meditation] is that our mind is slow enough and stable enough to bring in the reality, to really see it. Then when someone we know is dying, we aren't so shaken up. We may be sad, in the sense of feeling compassion, but we have thoroughly incorporated the notion of death to the point that it has profoundly affected our life. That is known as strength of mind."

That stability naturally radiates to stabilize the mind of the dying person, which helps them when everything is being blown away.

Dying people are sometimes jealous of those still alive. "Why do I have to die when everyone else keeps on living? It's so unfair. Why me?" At that point they need to remember that those left behind are not returning to a party that lasts till infinity. Those left behind are returning

to a challenging life that is filled with endless dissatisfaction and suffering. As you are dying, remember that it's just a matter of time before everyone else joins you, just as you are about to join the billions of others who have already left this life for another one. Those left behind are a minority. No one is going to get out of this alive.
And he who dies with the most toys still dies.

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