

"As one of Pema Chödrön's grateful students, I have been learning the most pressing and necessary lesson of all: how to keep opening wider my own heart."—ALICE WALKER

START WHERE YOU ARE

A Guide to Compassionate Living



Pema Chödrön

author of *When Things Fall Apart*

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“As one of Pema Chödrön’s grateful students, I have been learning the most pressing and necessary lesson of all: how to keep opening wider my own heart.”

—Alice Walker

ABOUT THE BOOK

Start Where You Are is an indispensable handbook for cultivating fearlessness and awakening a compassionate heart. With insight and humor, Pema Chödrön presents down-to-earth guidance on how we can “start where we are”—embracing rather than denying the painful aspects of our lives. Pema Chödrön frames her teachings on compassion around fifty-nine traditional Tibetan Buddhist maxims, or slogans, such as: “Always apply only a joyful state of mind,” “Don’t seek others’ pain as the limbs of your own happiness,” and “Always meditate on whatever provokes resentment.”

Working with these slogans and through the practice of meditation, *Start Where You Are* shows how we can all develop the courage to work with our inner pain and discover joy, well-being, and confidence.

PEMA CHÖDRÖN is an American Buddhist nun in the lineage of Chögyam Trungpa. She is resident teacher at Gampo Abbey in Nova Scotia, the first Tibetan monastery in North America established for Westerners. She is the author of many books and audiobooks, including the best-selling *When Things Fall Apart* and *Don’t Bite the Hook*.

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Start Where You Are

A GUIDE TO
COMPASSIONATE LIVING

PEMA CHÖDRÖN



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To my mother, Virginia, and my granddaughter, Alexandria

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PREFACE

THIS BOOK is about awakening the heart. If you have ever wondered how to awaken your genuine compassionate heart, this book will serve as a guide.

In our era, when so many people are seeking help to relate to their own feelings of woundedness and at the same time wanting to help relieve the suffering they see around them, the ancient teachings presented here are especially encouraging and to the point. When we find that we are closing down to ourselves and to others, here is instruction on how to open. When we find that we are holding back, here is instruction on how to give. That which is unwanted and rejected in ourselves and in others can be seen and felt with honesty and compassion. This is teaching on how to be there for others without withdrawing.

I first encountered these teachings in *The Great Path of Awakening* by the nineteenth-century Tibetan teacher Jamgön Kongtrül the Great. Called the *lojong* teachings, they include a very supportive meditation practice called *tonglen* and the practice of working with the seven points of mind training, which comes from an old Tibetan text called *The Root Text of the Seven Points of Training the Mind* by Chekawa Yeshe Dorje. (See appendix.)

Lojong means “mind training.” The *lojong* teachings are organized around seven points that contain fifty-nine pithy slogans that remind us how to awaken our hearts. Working with the slogans constitutes the heart of this book. These teachings belong to the mahayana school of Buddhism, which emphasizes compassionate communication and compassionate relationship with others. They also emphasize that we are not as solid as we think. In truth, there is enormous space in which to live our everyday lives. They help us see that the sense of a separate, isolated self and a separate, isolated other is a painful misunderstanding that we could see through and let go.

Tonglen means “taking in and sending out.” This meditation practice is designed to help ordinary people like ourselves connect with the openness and softness of our hearts. Instead of shielding and protecting our soft spot, with *tonglen* we could let ourselves feel what it is to be human. By so doing, we could widen our circle of compassion. Through this book I hope others may find such encouragement.

When I first read the *lojong* teachings I was struck by their unusual message that we can use our difficulties and problems to awaken our hearts. Rather than seeing the unwanted aspects of life as obstacles, Jamgön Kongtrül presented them as the raw material necessary for awakening genuine uncontrived compassion. We can start where we are. Whereas in Kongtrül’s commentary the emphasis is primarily on taking on the suffering of others, it is apparent that in this present age it is necessary to also emphasize that the first step is to develop compassion for our own wounds. This book stresses repeatedly that it is unconditional compassion for ourselves that leads naturally to unconditional compassion for

others. If we are willing to stand fully in our own shoes and never give up on ourselves, then we will be able to put ourselves in the shoes of others and never give up on them. True compassion does not come from wanting to help out those less fortunate than ourselves but from realizing our kinship with all beings.

Later I heard these instructions presented in a more contemporary mode by my own teacher, Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche. (These have now been published in the book *Training the Mind and Cultivating Loving-Kindness*.) Trungpa Rinpoche pointed out that he had first been given these teachings when he was quite young and that it was a great relief to him to find that Buddhism could be so practical and so helpful in everyday life. He was inspired to find that we could bring everything we encounter to the path and use it to awaken our intelligence, our compassion, and our ability to take a fresh look.

In the winters of 1992 and 1993, I led one-month practice periods, called *dathuns*, completely dedicated to these lojong teachings and to the meditative practice of tonglen. Most important, those of us participating wanted to put these instructions into practice continually as the inevitable frustrations and difficulties of daily life arose. We saw the *dathun* as a chance to take the instructions to heart and apply them in all situations, especially those in which we usually prefer to blame or criticize or ignore. That is, we saw it as a chance to use the teachings to relate on the spot with an open heart and an open mind to the aggression, the craving, and the denial that we find in ourselves and in others.

Even for those who are unfamiliar with meditation, the lojong teachings present the possibility of an entire change of attitude: we could relate compassionately with that which we prefer to push away, and we could learn to give away and share that which we hold most dear.

For those who feel prepared to practice sitting meditation and tonglen meditation and to work with the lojong slogans in an ongoing way, doing so may be the beginning of learning what it really means to love. This is a method for allowing a lot of space, so that people can relax and open. This is the path of unconditional compassionate living. It is designed especially for people who find themselves living in times of darkness. May it be of benefit.

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No Escape, No Problem

WE ALREADY HAVE everything we need. There is no need for self-improvement. All these trips that we lay on ourselves—the heavy-duty fearing that we’re bad and hoping that we’re good, the identities that we so dearly cling to, the rage, the jealousy and the addictions of all kinds—never touch our basic wealth. They are like clouds that temporarily block the sun. But all the time our warmth and brilliance are right here. This is who we really are. We are one blink of an eye away from being fully awake.

Looking at ourselves this way is very different from our usual habit. From this perspective we don’t need to change: you can feel as wretched as you like, and you’re still a good candidate for enlightenment. You can feel like the world’s most hopeless basket case, but that feeling is your wealth, not something to be thrown out or improved upon. There’s a richness to all of the smelly stuff that we so dislike and so little desire. The delightful things—what we love so dearly about ourselves, the places in which we feel some sense of pride or inspiration—these also are our wealth.

With the practices presented in this book, you can start just where you are. If you’re feeling angry, poverty-stricken, or depressed, the practices described here were designed for you, because they will encourage you to use all the unwanted things in your life as the means for awakening compassion for yourself and others. These practices show us how to accept ourselves, how to relate directly with suffering, how to stop running away from the painful aspects of our lives. They show us how to work openheartedly with life just as it is.

When we hear about compassion, it naturally brings up working with others and caring for others. The reason we’re often not there for others—whether for our child or our mother or someone who is insulting us or someone who frightens us—is that we’re not there for ourselves. There are whole parts of ourselves that are so unwanted that whenever they begin to come up we run away.

Because we escape, we keep missing being right here, being right on the dot. We keep missing the moment we’re in. Yet if we can experience the moment we’re in, we discover that it is unique, precious, and completely fresh. It never happens twice. One can appreciate and celebrate each moment—there’s nothing more sacred. There’s nothing more vast or absolute. In fact, there’s nothing more.

Only to the degree that we’ve gotten to know our personal pain, only to the degree that we’ve related with pain at all, will we be fearless enough, brave enough, and enough of a warrior to be willing to feel the pain of others. To that degree we will be able to take on the pain of others because we will have

discovered that their pain and our own pain are not different.

However, to do this, we need all the help we can get. It is my hope that this book will supply that help. The tools you will be given are three very supportive practices:

1. Basic sitting meditation (called *shamatha-vipashyana* meditation)
2. The practice of taking in and sending out (called tonglen)
3. The practice of working with slogans (called the seven points of mind training, or lojong)

All these practices awaken our trust that the wisdom and compassion that we need are already within us. They help us to know ourselves: our rough parts and our smooth parts, our passion, aggression, ignorance, and wisdom. The reason that people harm other people, the reason that the planet is polluted and people and animals are not doing so well these days is that individuals don't know or trust or love themselves enough. The technique of sitting called shamatha-vipashyana ("tranquillity-insight") is like a golden key that helps us to know ourselves.

Shamatha-Vipashyana Meditation

In shamatha-vipashyana meditation, we sit upright with legs crossed and eyes open, hands resting on our thighs. Then we simply become aware of our breath as it goes in and out. It requires precision to be right there with that breath. On the other hand, it's extremely relaxed and extremely soft. Saying, "Be right there with the breath as it goes out," is the same thing as saying, "Be fully present." Be right here with whatever is going on. Being aware of the breath as it goes out, we may also be aware of other things going on—sounds on the street, the light on the walls. These things may capture our attention slightly, but they don't need to draw us off. We can continue to sit right here, aware of the breath going out.

But being with the breath is only part of the technique. These thoughts that run through our minds continually are the other part. We sit here talking to ourselves. The instruction is that when you realize you've been thinking, you label it "thinking." When your mind wanders off, you say to yourself, "Thinking." Whether your thoughts are violent or passionate or full of ignorance and denial; whether your thoughts are worried or fearful, whether your thoughts are spiritual thoughts, pleasing thoughts of how well you're doing, comforting thoughts, uplifting thoughts, whatever they are, without judgment or harshness simply label it all "thinking," and do that with honesty and gentleness.

The touch on the breath is light: only about 25 percent of the awareness is on the breath. You're not grasping or fixating on it. You're opening, letting the breath mix with the space of the room, letting your breath just go out into space. Then there's something like a pause, a gap until the next breath goes out again. While you're breathing in, there could be some sense of just opening and waiting. It is like pushing the doorbell and waiting for someone to answer. Then you push the doorbell again and wait for someone to answer. Then probably your mind

wanders off and you realize you're thinking again—at this point, use the labeling technique.

It's important to be faithful to the technique. If you find that your labeling has a harsh, negative tone to it, as if you were saying, "Dammit!," that you're giving yourself a hard time, say it again and lighten up. It's not like trying to down thoughts as if they were clay pigeons. Instead, be gentle. Use the labeling part of the technique as an opportunity to develop softness and compassion for yourself. Anything that comes up is okay in the arena of meditation. The point is, you can see it honestly and make friends with it.

Although it is embarrassing and painful, it is very healing to stop hiding from yourself. It is healing to know all the ways that you're sneaky, all the ways that you hide out, all the ways that you shut down, deny, close off, criticize people, and your weird little ways. You can know all that with some sense of humor and kindness. By knowing yourself, you're coming to know humanness altogether. We are all up against these things. We are all in this together. So when you realize that you're talking to yourself, label it "thinking" and notice your tone of voice. Let it be compassionate and gentle and humorous. Then you'll be changing old stuck patterns that are shared by the whole human race. Compassion for others begins with kindness to ourselves.

Lojong Practice

The heart of this book is the lojong practice and teachings. The lojong practice (of mind training) has two elements: the practice, which is tonglen meditation, and the teaching, which comes in the form of slogans.

The basic notion of lojong is that we can make friends with what we reject, what we see as "bad" in ourselves and in other people. At the same time, we could learn to be generous with what we cherish, what we see as "good." If we begin to live in this way, something in us that may have been buried for a long time begins to ripen. Traditionally this "something" is called *bodhichitta*, or awakened heart. It's something that we already have but usually have not yet discovered.

It's as if we were poor, homeless, hungry, and cold, and although we didn't know it, right under the ground where we always slept was a pot of gold. The gold is like *bodhichitta*. Our confusion and misery come from not knowing that the gold is right here and from always looking for it somewhere else. When we talk about joy, enlightenment, waking up, or awakening *bodhichitta*, all that means is that we know the gold is right here, and we realize that it's been here all along.

The basic message of the lojong teachings is that if it's painful, you can learn to hold your seat and move closer to that pain. Reverse the usual pattern, which is to split, to escape. Go against the grain and hold your seat. Lojong introduces a different attitude toward unwanted stuff: if it's painful, you become willing not just to endure it but also to let it awaken your heart and soften you. You learn to embrace it.

If an experience is delightful or pleasant, usually we want to grab it and make it last. We're afraid that it will end. We're not inclined to share it. The lojong

teachings encourage us, if we enjoy what we are experiencing, to think of other people and wish for them to feel that. Share the wealth. Be generous with your joy. Give away what you most want. Be generous with your insights and delight. Instead of fearing that they're going to slip away and holding on to them, share them.

Whether it's pain or pleasure, through lojong practice we come to have a sense of letting our experience be as it is without trying to manipulate it, push it away, or grasp it. The pleasurable aspects of being human as well as the painful ones become the key to awakening bodhichitta.

There is a saying that is the underlying principle of tonglen and slogan practice: "Gain and victory to others, loss and defeat to myself." The Tibetan word for pride or arrogance, which is *nga-gyal*, is literally in English "me-victorious." Me first. Ego. That kind of "me-victorious" attitude is the cause of all suffering.

In essence what this little saying is getting at is that words like *victory* and *defeat* are completely interwoven with how we protect ourselves, how we guard our hearts. Our sense of victory just means that we guarded our heart enough so that nothing got through, and we think we won the war. The armor around our soft spot—our wounded heart—is now more fortified, and our world is smaller. Maybe nothing is getting in to scare us for one whole week, but our courage is weakening, and our sense of caring about others is getting completely obscured. Did we really win the war?

On the other hand, our sense of being defeated means that something got in. Something touched our soft spot. This vulnerability that we've kept armored for ages—something touched it. Maybe all that touched it was a butterfly, but we have never been touched there before. It was so tender. Because we have never felt that before, we now go out and buy padlocks and armor and guns so that we will never feel it again. We go for anything—seven pairs of boots that fit inside each other so we don't have to feel the ground, twelve masks so that no one can see our real face, nineteen sets of armor so that nothing can touch our skin, let alone our heart.

These words *defeat* and *victory* are so tied up with how we stay imprisoned. The real confusion is caused by not knowing that we have limitless wealth, and the confusion deepens each time we buy into this win/lose logic: if you touch me, that is defeat, and if I manage to armor myself and not be touched, that's victory.

Realizing our wealth would end our bewilderment and confusion. But the only way to do that is to let things fall apart. And that's the very thing that we dread the most—the ultimate defeat. Yet letting things fall apart would actually let fresh air into this old, stale basement of a heart that we've got.

Saying "Loss and defeat to myself" doesn't mean to become a masochist: "Kick my head in, torture me, and dear God, may I never be happy." What it means is that you can open your heart and your mind and know what defeat feels like.

You feel too short, you have indigestion, you're too fat and too stupid. You say to yourself, "Nobody loves me, I'm always left out. I have no teeth, my hair's getting gray, I have blotchy skin, my nose runs." That all comes under the category of defeat, the defeat of ego. We're always not wanting to be who we are. However,

we can never connect with our fundamental wealth as long as we are buying into this advertisement hype that we have to be someone else, that we have to smell different or have to look different.

On the other hand, when you say, "Victory to others," instead of wanting to keep it for yourself, there's the sense of sharing the whole delightful aspect of your life. You did lose some weight. You do like the way you look in the mirror. You suddenly feel like you have a nice voice, or someone falls in love with you or you fall in love with someone else. Or the seasons change and it touches your heart, or you begin to notice the snow in Vermont or the way the trees move in the wind. With anything that you want, you begin to develop the attitude of wanting to share it instead of being stingy with it or fearful around it.

Perhaps the slogans will challenge you. They say things like "Don't be jealous" and you think, "How did they know?" Or "Be grateful to everyone"; you wonder how to do that or why to bother. Some slogans, such as "Always meditate on whatever provokes resentment," exhort you to go beyond common sense. These slogans are not always the sort of thing that you would want to hear, let alone find inspiring, but if we work with them, they will become like our breath, our eyesight, our first thought. They will become like the smells we smell and the sound we hear. We can let them permeate our whole being. That's the point. These slogans aren't theoretical or abstract. They are about exactly who we are and what is happening to us. They are completely relevant to how we experience things, how we relate with whatever occurs in our lives. They are about how to relate with pain and fear and pleasure and joy, and how those things can transform us fully and completely. When we work with the slogans, ordinary life becomes the path of awakening.

No Big Deal

THE PRACTICES we'll be doing help us develop trust in our awakened heart, our bodhichitta. If we could finally grasp how rich we are, our sense of heavy burden would diminish, and our sense of curiosity would increase.

Bodhichitta has three qualities: (1) it is soft and gentle, which is compassion; (2) at the same time, it is clear and sharp, which is called *prajna*; and (3) it is open. This last quality of bodhichitta is called *shunyata* and is also known as emptiness. Emptiness sounds cold. However, bodhichitta isn't cold at all, because there's a heart quality—the warmth of compassion—that pervades the space and the clarity. Compassion and openness and clarity are all one thing, and this one thing is called bodhichitta.

Bodhichitta is our heart—our wounded, softened heart. Now, if you look for that soft heart that we guard so carefully—if you decide that you're going to do a scientific exploration under the microscope and try to find that heart—you won't find it. You can look, but all you'll find is some kind of tenderness. There isn't anything that you can cut out and put under the microscope. There isn't anything that you can dissect or grasp. The more you look, the more you find just a feeling of tenderness tinged with some kind of sadness.

This sadness is not about somebody mistreating us. This is inherent sadness, unconditioned sadness. It has part of our birthright, a family heirloom. It's been called the genuine heart of sadness.

Sometimes we emphasize the compassionate aspect of our genuine heart, and this is called the relative part of bodhichitta. Sometimes we emphasize the open, unfindable aspect of our heart, and this is called the absolute, this genuine heart that is just waiting to be discovered.

The first slogan of the seven points of mind training is “First, train in the preliminaries.” The preliminaries are the basic meditation practice—beneficial, supportive, warm-hearted, brilliant shamatha-vipashyana practice. When we say “First, train in the preliminaries,” it's not as if we first do shamatha-vipashyana practice and then graduate to something more advanced. Shamatha-vipashyana practice is not only the earth that we stand on, it's also the air we breathe and the heart that beats inside us. Shamatha-vipashyana practice is the essence of all other practices as well. So when we say, “First, train in the preliminaries,” it simply means that without this good base there's nothing to build on. Without it we couldn't understand tonglen practice—which I'll describe later—and we wouldn't have any insight into our mind, into either our craziness or our wisdom.

Next, there are five slogans that emphasize the openness of bodhichitta, the absolute quality of bodhichitta. These point to the fact that, although we are usually very caught up with the solidness and seriousness of life, we could begin to stop making such a big deal and connect with the spacious and joyful aspect of our being.

The first of the absolute slogans is “Regard all dharmas as dreams.” More simply, regard everything as a dream. Life is a dream. Death is also a dream, for that matter; waking is a dream and sleeping is a dream. Another way to put this is “Every situation is a passing memory.”

We went for a walk this morning, but now it is a memory. Every situation is a passing memory. As we live our lives, there is a lot of repetition—so many mornings greeted, so many meals eaten, so many drives to work and drives home, so many times spent with our friends and family, again and again, over and over. All of these situations bring up irritation, lust, anger, sadness, all kinds of things about the people with whom we work or live or stand in line or fight traffic. So much will happen in the same way over and over again. It’s all an excellent opportunity to connect with this sense of each situation being like a memory.

Just a few moments ago, you were standing in the hall, and now it is a memory. But then it was so real. Now I’m talking, and what I have just said has already passed.

It is said that with these slogans that are pointing to absolute truth—openness—one should not say, “Oh yes, I know,” but that one should just allow a mental gap to open, and wonder, “Could it be? Am I dreaming this?” Pinch yourself. Dreams are just as convincing as waking reality. You could begin to contemplate the fact that perhaps things are not as solid or as reliable as they seem.

Sometimes we just have this experience automatically; it happens to us naturally. I read recently about someone who went hiking in the high mountains and was alone in the wilderness at a very high altitude. If any of you have been at high altitudes, you know the light there is different. There’s something more blue, more luminous about it. Things seem lighter and not so dense as in the middle of a big city, particularly if you stay there for some time alone. You’re sometimes not sure if you’re awake or asleep. This man wrote that he began to feel as if he were cooking his meals in a dream and that when he would go for a walk, he was walking toward mountains that were made out of air. He felt that the letter he was writing was made of air, that his hand was a phantom pen writing these phantom words, and that he was going to send it off to a phantom receiver. Sometimes we, too, have that kind of experience, even at sea level. It actually makes our world feel so much bigger.

Without going into this much more, I’d like to bring it down to our shamatha practice. The key is, it’s no big deal. We could all just lighten up. Regard all dharmas as dreams. With our minds we make a big deal out of ourselves, out of our pain, and out of our problems.

If someone instructed you to catch the beginning, middle, and end of every thought, you’d find that they don’t seem to have a beginning, middle, and end.

They definitely are there. You're talking to yourself, you're creating your whole identity, your whole world, your whole sense of problem, your whole sense of contentment, with this continual stream of thought. But if you really try to find thoughts, they're always changing. As the slogan says, each situation and even each word and thought and emotion is passing memory. It's like trying to see when water turns into steam. You can never find that precise moment. You know there's water, because you can drink it and make it into soup and wash in it, and you know there's steam, but you can't see precisely when one changes into the other. Everything is like that.

Have you ever been caught in the heavy-duty scenario of feeling defeated and hurt, and then somehow, for no particular reason, you just drop it? It just goes and you wonder why you made "much ado about nothing." What was that all about? It also happens when you fall in love with somebody; you're so completely into thinking about the person twenty-four hours a day. You are haunted and you want him or her so badly. Then a little while later, "I don't know where we went wrong, but the feeling's gone and I just can't get it back." We all know this feeling of how we make things a big deal and then realize that we're making a lot out of nothing.

I'd like to encourage us all to lighten up, to practice with a lot of gentleness. This is not the drill sergeant saying, "Lighten up or else." I have found that if we can possibly use anything we hear against ourselves, we usually do. For instance, you find yourself being tense and remember that I said to lighten up, and then you feel, "Basically, I'd better stop sitting because I can't lighten up and I'm not a candidate for discovering bodhichitta or anything else."

Gentleness in our practice and in our life helps to awaken bodhichitta. It's like remembering something. This compassion, this clarity, this openness are like something we have forgotten. Sitting here being gentle with ourselves, we're rediscovering something. It's like a mother reuniting with her child; having been lost to each other for a long, long time, they reunite. The way to reunite with bodhichitta is to lighten up in your practice and in your whole life.

Meditation practice is a formal way in which you can get used to lightening up. I encourage you to follow the instructions faithfully, but within that form to be extremely gentle. Let the whole thing be soft. Breathing out, the instruction is to touch your breath as it goes, to be with your breath. Let that be like relaxing out. Sense the breath going out into big space and dissolving into space. You're not trying to clutch it, not trying to furrow your brow and catch that breath as if you won't be a good person unless you grab that breath. You're simply relaxing outward with your breath.

Labeling our thoughts is a powerful support for lightening up, a very helpful way to reconnect with shunyata—this open dimension of our being, this fresh, unbiased dimension of our mind. When we come to that place where we say "Thinking," we can just say it with an unbiased attitude and with tremendous gentleness. Regard the thoughts as bubbles and the labeling like touching them with a feather. There's just this light touch—"Thinking"—and they dissolve back into the space.

Don't worry about achieving. Don't worry about perfection. Just be there each moment as best you can. When you realize you've wandered off again, simply very lightly acknowledge that. This light touch is the golden key to reuniting with our openness.

The slogan says to regard all dharmas—that is, regard everything—as a dream. In this case, we could say, “Regard all thoughts as a dream,” and just touch them and let them go. When you notice you're making a really big deal, just notice that with a lot of gentleness, a lot of heart. No big deal. If the thoughts go, and you still feel anxious and tense, you could allow that to be there, with a lot of space around it. Just let it be. When thoughts come up again, see them for what they are. It's not a big deal. You can loosen up, lighten up, whatever.

That's the essential meaning of the absolute bodhichitta slogans—to connect with the open, spacious quality of your mind, so that you can see that there's no need to shut down and make such a big deal about everything. Then when you do make a big deal, you can give that a lot of space and let it go.

In sitting practice, there's no way you can go wrong, wherever you find yourself. Just relax. Relax your shoulders, relax your stomach, relax your heart, relax your mind. Bring in as much gentleness as you can. The technique is already quite precise. It has a structure, it has a form. So within that form, move with warmth and gentleness. That's how we awaken bodhichitta.

Pulling Out the Rug

AS I SAID BEFORE, the main instruction is simply to lighten up. By taking that attitude toward one's practice and one's life, by taking that more gentle and appreciative attitude toward oneself and others, the sense of burden that all of us carry around begins to decrease.

The next slogan is "Examine the nature of unborn awareness." The real intention of this slogan is to pull the rug out from under you in case you think you've understood the previous slogan. If you feel proud of yourself because of how you've really understood that everything is like a dream, then this slogan is here to challenge that smug certainty. It's saying, "Well, who is this anyway who thinks that they discovered that everything is like a dream?"

"Examine the nature of unborn awareness." Who is this "I"? Where did it come from? Who is the one who realizes anything? Who is it who's aware? This slogan points to the transparency of everything, including our beloved identity, this precious *M-E*. Who is this *me*?

The armor we erect around our soft hearts causes a lot of misery. But don't be deceived, it's very transparent. The more vivid it gets, the more clearly you see it. The more you realize that this shield—this cocoon—is just made up of thoughts that we churn out and regard as solid. The shield is not made out of iron. The armor is not made out of metal. In fact, it's made out of passing memory.

The absolute quality of bodhichitta can never be pinned down. If you can talk about it, that's not it. So if you think that awakened heart is something, it isn't. It's just passing memory. And if you think this big burden of ego, this big monster cocoon is something, it isn't. It's just passing memory. Yet it's so vivid. The more you practice, the more vivid it gets. It's a paradox—it can't be found, and yet it couldn't be more vivid.

We spend a lot of time trying to nail everything down, concretizing, just trying to make everything solid and secure. We also spend a lot of time trying to dull or soften or fend off that vividness. When we awaken our hearts, we're changing the whole pattern, but not by creating a new pattern. We are moving further and further away from concretizing and making things so solid and always trying to get some ground under our feet. This moving away from comfort and security, this stepping out into what is unknown, uncharted, and shaky—that's called enlightenment, liberation. Krishnamurti talks about it in his book *Liberation from the Known*, Alan Watts in *The Wisdom of Insecurity*. It's all getting at the same thing.

This isn't how we usually go about things, in case you hadn't noticed. We usually try to get ground under our feet. It's as if you were in a spaceship going to the moon, and you looked back at this tiny planet Earth and realized that things were vaster than any mind could conceive and you just couldn't handle it, so you started worrying about what you were going to have for lunch. There you are in outer space with this sense of the world being so vast, and then you bring it all down into this very tiny world of worrying about what's for lunch: hamburgers or hot dogs. We do this all the time.

In "Examine the nature of unborn awareness," *examine* is an interesting word. It's not a matter of looking and seeing—"Now I've got it!"—but a process of examination and contemplation that leads into being able to relax with insecurity or edginess or restlessness. Much joy comes from that.

"Examine the nature of unborn awareness." Simply examine the nature of the one who has insight—contemplate that. We could question this solid identity that we have, this sense of a person frozen in time and space, this monolithic ME. In sitting practice, saying "thinking" with a soft touch introduces a question mark about who is doing all this thinking. Who's churning out what? What's happening to whom? Who am I that's thinking or that's labeling thinking or that's going back to the breath or hurting or wishing lunch would happen soon?

* * *

The next slogan is "Self-liberate even the antidote." In case you think you understood "Examine the nature of unborn awareness," let go even of that understanding, that pride, that security, that sense of ground. The antidote that you're being asked to liberate is shunyata itself. Let go of even the notion of emptiness, openness, or space.

There was a crazy-wisdom teacher in India named Saraha. He said that those who believe that everything is solid and real are stupid, like cattle, but that those who believe that everything is empty are even more stupid. Everything is changing all the time, and we keep wanting to pin it down, to fix it. So whenever you come up with a solid conclusion, let the rug be pulled out. You can pull out your own rug, and you can also let life pull it out for you.

Having the rug pulled out from under you is a big opportunity to change your fundamental pattern. It's like changing the DNA. One way to pull out your own rug is by just letting go, lightening up, being more gentle, and not making such a big deal.

This approach is very different from practicing affirmations, which has been a popular thing to do in some circles. Affirmations are like screaming that you're okay in order to overcome this whisper that you're not. That's a big contrast to actually uncovering the whisper, realizing that it's passing memory, and moving closer to all those fears and all those edgy feelings that maybe you're not okay. Well, no big deal. None of us is okay and all of us are fine. It's not just one way. We are walking, talking paradoxes.

When we contemplate all dharmas as dreams and regard all our thoughts as passing memory—labeling them, "Thinking," touching them very lightly—the

things will not appear to be so monolithic. We will feel a lightening of our burden. Labeling your thoughts as “thinking” will help you see the transparency of thoughts, that things are actually very light and illusory. Every time your stream of thoughts solidifies into a heavy story line that seems to be taking you elsewhere, label that “thinking.” Then you will be able to see how all the passion that’s connected with these thoughts, or all the aggression or all the heartbreak is simply passing memory. If even for a second you actually had a full experience that it was all just thought, that would be a moment of full awakening.

This is how we begin to wake up our innate ability to let go, to reconnect with shunyata, or absolute bodhichitta. Also, this is how we awaken our compassion, our heart, our innate softness, relative bodhichitta. Use the labeling and use it with great gentleness as a way to touch those solid dramas and acknowledge that you just made them all up with this conversation you’re having with yourself.

When we say “Self-liberate even the antidote,” that’s encouragement to simply touch and then let go of whatever you come up with. Whatever bright solutions or big plans you come up with, just let them go, let them go, let them go. Whether you seem to have just uncovered the root of a whole life of misery or you’re thinking of a root beer float—whatever you’re thinking—let it go. When something pleasant comes up, instead of rushing around the room like a windup toy, you could just pause and notice, and let go. This technique provides a gentle approach that breaks up the solidity of thoughts and memories. If the memory was a strong one, you’ll probably find that something is left behind when the words go. When that happens, you’re getting closer to the heart. You’re getting closer to the bodhichitta.

These thoughts that come up, they’re not bad. Anyway, meditation isn’t about getting rid of thoughts—you’ll think forever. Nevertheless, if you follow the breath and label your thoughts, you learn to let things go. Beliefs of solidness, beliefs of emptiness, let it all go. If you learn to let things go, thoughts are no problem. But at this point, for most of us, our thoughts are very tied up with our identity, with our sense of problem and our sense of how things are.

The next absolute slogan is “Rest in the nature of alaya, the essence.” We can learn to let thoughts go and just rest our mind in its natural state, in alaya, which is a word that means the open primordial basis of all phenomena. We can rest in the fundamental openness and enjoy the display of whatever arises without making such a big deal.

So if you think that everything is solid, that’s one trap, and if you change that for a different belief system, that’s another trap. We have to pull the rug out from our belief systems altogether. We can do that by letting go of our beliefs, and also our sense of what is right and wrong, by just going back to the simplicity and the immediacy of our present experience, resting in the nature of alaya.

Let the World Speak for Itself

THE LAST of the absolute bodhichitta slogans is “In postmeditation, be a child of illusion.” This slogan says that when you’re not formally practicing meditation—which is basically the whole rest of your life—you should be a child of illusion. This is a haunting and poetic image, not all that easy to define. The way it is phrased tends to encourage you to not define it. The idea is that your experience after you finish sitting practice could be a fresh take, an ongoing opportunity to let go and lighten up.

This slogan has a lot to do with looking out and connecting with the atmosphere with the environment that you’re in, with the quality of your experience. You realize that it’s not all that solid. There’s always something happening that you can’t pin down with words or thoughts. It’s like the first day of spring. There’s a special quality about that day; it is what it is, no matter what opinion you may have of it.

When we study Buddhism, we learn about the view and the meditation as supports for encouraging us to let go of ego and just be with things as they are. These absolute bodhichitta slogans present the view. “In postmeditation, be a child of illusion” or “Regard all dharmas as dreams” for example, are pithy reminders of an underlying way of looking at the world. You don’t exactly have to be able to grasp this view, but it points you in a certain direction. The suggestion that you view the world this way—as less than solid—sows seeds and wakes up certain aspects of your being.

Both the view and the meditation are great supports. They give you something to hold on to, even though all of the teachings are about not holding on to anything. We don’t just talk, we actually get down to it. That’s the practice, that’s the meditation. You can talk about lightening up till you’re purple in the face, but then you have the opportunity to practice lightening up with the outbreak of lightening up with the labeling. There is actual practice, a method that you’re given, a discipline.

The view and the meditation are encouragements to relax enough so that finally the atmosphere of your experience just begins to come to you. How things really are can’t be taught; no one can give you a formula: $A + B + C = \text{enlightenment}$.

These supports are often likened to a raft. You need the raft to cross the river to get to the other side; when you get over there, you leave the raft behind. That’s an interesting image, but in experience it’s more like the raft gives out on you in the middle of the river and you never really get to solid ground. This is what is meant by becoming a child of illusion.

The “child of illusion” image seems apt because young children seem to live in a world in which things are not so solid. You see a sense of wonder in all young children, which they later lose. This slogan encourages us to be that way again.

I read a book called *The Holographic Universe*, which is about science making the same discoveries that we make sitting in meditation. The room that we sit in is solid and very vivid; it would be ridiculous to say that it wasn't there. But what science is finding out is that the material world isn't as solid as it seems; it's more like a hologram—vivid, but empty at the same time. In fact, the more you realize the lack of solidity of things, the more vivid things appear.

Trungpa Rinpoche expresses this paradox in poetic and haunting language. To paraphrase *The Sadhana of Mahamudra*: everything you see is vividly unreal in its emptiness, yet there's definitely form. What you see is not here; it's not *not* here. It's both and neither. Everything you hear is the echo of emptiness, yet there's sound—it's real—the echo of emptiness. Then Trungpa Rinpoche goes on to say, “Good and bad, happy and sad, all thoughts vanish into emptiness like the imprint of a bird in the sky.”

This is as close as you could come to describing what it means to be a child of illusion. That's the key point: this good and bad, happy and sad, can be allowed to dissolve into emptiness like the imprint of a bird in the sky.

The practice and the view are supports, but the real thing—the experience of sound being like an echo of emptiness or everything you see being vividly unreal—dawns on you, like waking up out of an ancient sleep. There's no way you can force it or fake it. The view and the practice are there to be experienced with a light touch, not to be taken as dogma.

We have to listen to these slogans, chew on them, and wonder about them. We have to find out for ourselves what they mean. They are like challenges rather than statements of fact. If we let them, they will lead us toward the fact that facts themselves are very dubious. We can be a child of illusion through our waking and sleeping existence; through our birth and our death, we can continually remain a child of illusion.

Being a child of illusion also has to do with beginning to encourage yourself not to be a walking battleground. We have such strong feelings of good and evil, right and wrong. We also feel that parts of ourselves are bad or evil and parts of ourselves are good and wholesome. All these pairs of opposites—happy and sad, victory and defeat, loss and gain—are at war with each other.

The truth is that good and bad coexist; sour and sweet coexist. They aren't really opposed to each other. We could start to open our eyes and our hearts to that deep way of perceiving, like moving into a whole new dimension of experience: becoming a child of illusion.

Maybe you've heard that the Buddha is not *out there*; the Buddha is within. The Buddha within is bad and good coexisting, evil and purity coexisting; the Buddha within is not just all the nice stuff. The Buddha within is messy as well as clear. The Buddha within is really sordid as well as wholesome—yucky, smelly, repulsive as well as the opposite: they coexist.

This view is not easy to grasp, but it's helpful to hear. At the everyday kitchen

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