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 fear-  
ing that we’re bad and hoping that we’re good, the  
identities that we so dearly cling to, the rage, the jeal-  
ousy and the addictions of all kinds—never touch  
our basic wealth. They are like clouds that temporar-  
ily 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  
your'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.  
  
  
No Escape, No Problem  
  
With the practices presented in this book, you can  
start just where you are. If you're feeling angry, pov-  
erty-stricken, or depressed, the practices described  
here were designed for you, because they will en-  
courage 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, 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 our-  
selves 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 mo-  
ment 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  
  
No Escape, No Problem 3  
  
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 dis-  
covered that their pain and our own pain are not dif-  
ferent.  
  
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 wis-  
dom 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, igno-  
rance, 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.  
  
  
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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 out. It requires precision to be right there  
with that breath. On the other hand, it’s extremely re-  
laxed 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 talk-  
ing 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  
  
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harshness simply label it all “thinking,” and do that  
  
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with honesty and gentleness.  
  
The touch on the breath is light: only about 25 per-  
cent 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 some-  
  
one 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 giv-  
ing yourself a hard time, say it again and lighten up.  
It’s not like trying to down the thoughts as if they  
were clay pigeons. Instead, be gentle. Use the label-  
ing 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 tathe ways  
  
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that you hide out, all the ways that you shut down,  
deny, close off, criticize people, all 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 be-  
gins with kindness to ourselves.\*  
  
Lojong Practice  
  
The heart of this book is the lojong practice and  
teachings. The lojong practice (or mind training) has  
two elements: the practice, which is tonglen medita-  
tion, 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  
  
\*If you've never tried sitting meditation before, you may wish to  
seek the guidance of a qualified meditation instructor. See the list  
of meditation centers at the back of the book for help in finding an  
instructor.  
  
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way, something in us that may have been buried for  
a long time begins to ripen. Traditionally this “some-  
thing” 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. That  
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 to-  
ward unwanted stuff: if it’s painful, you become will-  
ing 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 ex-  
periencing, to think of other people and wish for  
them to feel that. Share the wealth. Be generous with  
  
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& No Escape, No Problem  
  
your joy. Give away what you most want. Be generous  
with your insights and delights. Instead of fearing  
that theyre going to slip away and holding on to  
them, share them.  
  
Whether it’s pain or pleasure, through lojong prac-  
tice 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 in-  
terwoven 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 noth-  
ing 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?  
  
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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 | 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  
  
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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 get-  
ting gray, | 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 oth-  
ers,” 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 no-  
tice 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 slo-  
gans, such as “Always meditate on whatever provokes  
  
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No Big Deal  
  
Te 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 cu-  
riosity 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 com-  
passion—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  
  
I2  
  
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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 as-  
pect of our genuine heart, and this is called the rela-  
tive 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 train-  
ing is “First, train in the preliminaries.” The pre-  
liminaries are the basic meditation practice—benefi-  
cial, 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. Sha-  
matha-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 de-  
  
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scribe 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 bod-  
hichitta. These point to the fact that, although we are  
usually very caught up with the solidness and seri-  
ousness of life, we could begin to stop making such a  
big deal and connect with the spacious and joyful as-  
pect of our being.  
  
The first of the absolute slogans is “Regard all dhar-  
mas 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 pass-  
ing 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.  
  
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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 con-  
template the fact that perhaps things are not as solid  
or as reliable as they seem.  
  
Sometimes we just have this experience automati-  
cally; 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  
  
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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 mem-  
ory. 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 sce-  
nario of feeling defeated and hurt, and then some-  
how, 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 hap-  
  
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pens 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 be-  
cause 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 some-  
thing. 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 re-  
unite. 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 fol-  
low the instructions faithfully, but within that form to  
  
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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 re-  
laxing 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 tremen-  
dous 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, re-  
gard 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 mak-  
ing a really big deal, just notice that with a lot of gen-  
  
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tleness, 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 no big deal. You can loosen up,  
lighten up, whatever.  
  
That's the essential meaning of the absolute bod-  
hichitta 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.  
  
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3  
Pulling Out the Rug  
  
A? I SAID BEFORE, the main instruction is sim-  
ply to lighten up. By taking that attitude toward  
one’s practice and one’s life, by taking that more gen-  
tle and appreciative attitude toward oneself and oth-  
ers, 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 un-  
derstood the previous slogan. If you feel proud of  
yourself because of how you 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, in-  
cluding our beloved identity, this precious M-E. Who  
is this me?  
  
The armor we erect around our soft hearts causes  
  
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a lot of misery. But don’t be deceived, it’s very trans-  
parent. The more vivid it gets, the more clearly you  
see it, the more you realize that this shield—this co-  
coon—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 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 fur-  
ther 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, un-  
charted, and shaky—that’s called enlightenment, lib-  
eration. Krishnamurti talks about it in his book  
Liberation from the Known, Alan Watts in The Wis-  
dom of Insecurity. It’s all getting at the same thing.  
  
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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,” ex-  
amine is an interesting word. It’s not a matter of look-  
ing 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 restless-  
ness. Much joy comes from that.  
  
“Examine the nature of unborn awareness.” Sim-  
ply examine the nature of the one who has insight—  
contemplate that. We could question this solid iden-  
tity 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 ques-  
tion 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?  
  
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a Pulling Out the Rug 23  
  
%  
  
The next slogan is “Self-liberate even the antidote.”  
In case you think you understood “Examine the na-  
ture of unborn awareness,” let go even of that under-  
standing, that pride, that security, that sense of  
ground. The antidote that you're being asked to liber-  
ate 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 every-  
thing 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 af-  
firmations, 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 uncover-  
ing the whisper, realizing that it’s passing memory,  
and moving closer to all those fears and all those edgy  
  
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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  
  
labeling  
then  
things will not appear to be so monolithic. We will  
  
regard all our thoughts as passing memory  
  
them, “Thinking,” touching them very lightly  
  
feel a lightening of our burden. Labeling your  
thoughts as “thinking” will help you see the trans-  
parency 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 tak-  
ing you elsewhere, label that “thinking.” Then you  
will be able to see how all the passion that’s con-  
nected 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 com-  
passion, our heart, our innate softness, relative bod-  
hichitta. 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  
  
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of whatever you come up with. Whatever bright solu-  
tions 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 hap-  
pens, 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  
follow the breath and label your thoughts, you learn  
  
you'll think forever. Nevertheless, if you  
  
to let things go. Beliefs of solidness, beliefs of empti-  
ness, 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  
  
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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 sys-  
tem, 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.  
  
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4  
Let the World Speak  
for Itself  
  
HE 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 de-  
fine. The way it’s 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 environ-  
ment that you're in, with the quality of your experi-  
ence. 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.  
  
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28 Let the World Speak for Itself  
  
These absolute bodhichitta slogans present the view.  
“In postmeditation, be a child of illusion” or “Regard  
all dharmas as dreams” for example, are pithy re-  
minders 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 sugges-  
  
tion 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 sup-  
ports. 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 outbreath, 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 re-  
ally are can’t be taught; no one can give you a for-  
mula: A + B + C = 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 be-  
hind. That’s an interesting image, but in experience  
it’s more like the raft gives out on you in the middle of  
  
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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  
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 empti-  
ness 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 al-  
  
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the World Speak for Itself  
  
lowed 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 our-  
selves 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 as a child  
of illusion.  
  
Being a child of illusion also has to do with begin-  
ning to encourage yourself not to be a walking battle-  
ground. We have such strong feelings of good and  
evil, right and wrong. We also feel that parts of our-  
selves 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  
  
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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 clean. 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-sink level, it simply  
means that as you see things in yourself that you  
think are terrible and not worthy, maybe you could  
reflect that that’s Buddha. You're proud of yourself  
because you just had a good meditation or because  
you're having such saintly thoughts. That’s Buddha  
too. When we get into tonglen practice, you'll see just  
how interesting this logic is. Tonglen as well as basic  
shamatha-vipashyana practice leads us toward realiz-  
ing that opposites coexist. They aren't at war with  
each other.  
  
In meditation practice we struggle a lot with trying  
to get rid of certain things, while other things come  
to the front. In order for the world to speak for itself,  
we first have to see how hard we struggle, and then  
we could begin to open our hearts and minds to that  
fact. The view and the meditation—both shamatha-  
  
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vipashyana and tonglen—are meant to support a  
softer, more gentle approach to the whole show, the  
whole catastrophe. We begin to let opposites coexist,  
not trying to get rid of anything but just training and  
opening our eyes, ears, nostrils, taste buds, hearts,  
and minds wider and wider, nurturing the habit of  
opening to whatever is occurring, including our shut-  
ting down.  
  
We generally interpret the world so heavily in  
terms of good and bad, happy and sad, nice and not  
nice that the world doesn’t get a chance to speak for  
itself. When we say, “Be a child of illusion,” we’re be-  
ginning to get at this fresh way of looking when we're  
not caught in our hope and fear. We become mindful,  
awake, and gentle with our hope and fear. We see  
them clearly with less bias, less judgment, less sense  
of a heavy trip. When this happens, the world will  
speak for itself.  
  
I heard a story about Trungpa Rinpoche sitting in a  
garden with His Holiness Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche.  
People were standing around at a distance, close  
enough to hear but far enough away to give them pri-  
vacy and space. It was a beautiful day. These two gen-  
tlemen had been sitting in the garden for a long time,  
just sitting there not saying anything. Time went on,  
and they just sat in the garden not saying anything  
and seeming to enjoy it very much. Then Trungpa  
Rinpoche broke the silence and began to laugh. He  
said to Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, pointing across the  
  
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lawn, “They call that a tree.” Whereupon Khyentse  
Rinpoche started to laugh too. Had we been there, |  
think we might have had a little transmission of what  
it means to be a child of illusion.  
  
We can practice this way in our postmeditation  
now and for the rest of our lives. Whatever we're  
doing, whether we're having tea or working, we could  
do that completely. We could be wherever we are  
completely, 100 percent.  
  
Take the whole teatime just to drink your tea. I  
started doing this in airports. Instead of reading, I sit  
there and look at everything, and appreciate it. Even  
if you don't feel appreciation, just look. Feel what you  
feel: take an interest and be curious. Write less; don’t  
try to capture it all on paper. Sometimes writing, in-  
stead of being a fresh take, is like trying to catch  
something and nail it down. This capturing blinds us  
and there’s no fresh outlook, no wide-open eyes, no  
curiosity. When we are not trying to capture anything  
we become like a child of illusion.  
  
In the morning you feel one way; in the afternoon,  
it can seem as if years have passed. It’s just astound-  
ing how it all just keeps moving on. When you write a  
letter, you say, “I’m feeling crummy.” But by the time  
the person gets the letter, it’s all changed. Have you  
ever gotten back an answer to your letter and then  
thought, “What are they talking about?” You don’t re-  
member this long-forgotten identity you sent out in  
the mail.  
  
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There was a Native American man called Ishi,  
which in his language meant “person” or “human  
being.” He was a good example of what it means to be  
a child of illusion. Ishi lived in northern California at  
the beginning of the century. Everyone in his whole  
tribe had been methodically killed, hunted down like  
coyotes and wolves. Ishi was the only one left. He  
had lived alone for a long time. No one knew exactly  
why, but one day he just appeared in Oroville, Cali-  
fornia, at dawn. There stood this naked man. They  
quickly put some clothes on him and put him in jail,  
until the Bureau of Indian Affairs told them what to  
do with him. It was front-page news in the San Fran-  
cisco newspapers, where an anthropologist named  
Alfred Kroeber read the story.  
  
Here was an anthropologist’s dream come true.  
This native person had been living in the wilds all his  
life and could reveal his tribe’s way of life. Ishi was  
brought on the train down to San Francisco into a to-  
tally unknown world, where he lived—pretty happily,  
it appears—for the rest of his life. Ishi seemed to be  
fully awake. He was completely at home with himself  
and the world, even when it changed so dramatically  
almost overnight.  
  
For instance, when they took him to San Fran-  
cisco, he happily wore the suit and tie they gave him,  
but he carried the shoes in his hand, because he still  
wanted to feel the earth with his feet. He had been  
living as a caveman might, always having to remain  
  
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hidden for fear of being killed. But very soon after he  
arrived in the city they took him to a formal dinner  
party. He sat there unperturbed by this unfamiliar rit-  
ual, just observing, and then ate the way everybody  
else did. He was full of wonder, completely curious  
about everything, and seemingly not afraid or resent-  
ful, just totally open.  
  
When Ishi was first taken to San Francisco, he  
went to the Oroville train station and stood on the  
platform. When the train came in, without anyone  
really noticing, he simply walked away very quietly  
and stood behind a pillar. Then the others noticed  
and beckoned to him, and they all got on the train to  
San Francisco. Later, Ishi told Kroeber that for his  
whole life when he and the other members of his  
tribe had seen that train they had thought it was a  
demon that ate people, because of how it snaked  
along and bellowed smoke and fire. When Kroeber  
heard that, he was awestruck. He asked, “How did  
you have the courage to just get on the train if you  
thought it was a demon?” Then Ishi said, quite sim-  
ply, “Well, my life has taught me to be more curious  
than afraid.” His life had taught him what it meant to  
be a child of illusion.  
  
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Poison as Medicine  
  
\ I" 7itTH THE SLOGAN “Three objects, three poi-  
  
sons, and three seeds of virtue” we begin to  
enter into the teachings on relative bodhichitta, the  
teachings on how to awaken compassion. We have so  
far been attempting to establish that the ground of all  
of our experience is very spacious, not as solid as we  
tend to make it. We don’t have to make such a big  
deal about ourselves, our enemies, our lovers, and  
the whole show. This emphasis on gentleness.is the  
pith instruction on how to reconnect with openness  
and freshness in our lives, how to liberate ourselves  
from the small world of ego. We'll keep coming back  
to this sense of freshness and open space and not  
making such a big deal, because we are now about to  
get into the really messy stuff.  
  
In the Buddhist teachings, the messy stuff is  
called klesha, which means poison. Boiling it all  
down to the simplest possible formula, there are  
three main poisons: passion, aggression, and igno-  
rance. We could talk about these in different ways  
  
for example, craving, aversion, and couldn't care less.  
Addictions of all kinds come under the category of  
craving, which is wanting, wanting, wanting—feel-  
  
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ing that we have to have some kind of resolution.  
Aversion encompasses violence, rage, hatred, and  
negativity of all kinds, as well as garden-variety irrita-  
tion. And ignorance? Nowadays, it’s usually called  
denial.  
  
The pith instruction of all the Buddhist teachings  
and most explicitly of the lojong teachings is, what-  
ever you do, don't try to make these unwanted feel-  
ings go away. That’s an unusual thought; it’s not our  
habitual tendency to let these feelings hang around.  
Our habitual tendency is definitely to try to make  
those things go away.  
  
People and situations in our lives are always trig-  
gering our passion, aggression, and ignorance. A good  
old innocent cup of coffee triggers some people's  
craving; they are addicted to it; it represents comfort  
and all the good things in life. If they can’t get it, their  
life is a wreck. Other people have an elaborate story  
line about why it’s bad for you, and they have aversion  
and a support group. Plenty of other people couldn't  
care less about a cup of coffee; it doesn’t mean much  
at all to them.  
  
And then there’s good old Mortimer, that person  
who is sitting next to you in the meditation hall, or  
perhaps someone who works in your office. Some  
people are lusting when they see Mortimer. He looks  
wonderful to them. A lot of their discursive thought is  
taken up with what they'd like to do with Mortimer.  
A certain number of people hate him. They haven't  
  
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even talked to him yet, but the minute they saw him,  
they felt loathing. Some of us haven't noticed him,  
and we may never notice him. In fact, a few years  
from now he'll tell us he was here, and we'll be sur-  
prised.  
  
So there are three things, which in the slogan are  
called three objects. One object is what we find  
pleasant, another is what we find unpleasant, and a  
third is what we're neutral about. If it’s pleasant, it  
triggers craving; if it’s unpleasant, it triggers aversion;  
if it’s neutral, it triggers ignorance. Craving, aversion,  
and ignorance are the three poisons.  
  
Our experience would write the formula as  
“Three objects, three poisons, and lots of misery”  
or “Three objects, three poisons, and three seeds of  
confusion, bewilderment, and pain,” because the  
more the poisons arise and the bigger they get in our  
life, the more they drive us crazy. They keep us from  
seeing the world as it is; they make us blind, deaf,  
and dumb. The world doesn't speak for itself be-  
cause we're so caught up in our story line that in-  
stead of feeling that there’s a lot of space in which  
we could lead our life as a child of illusion, we’re  
robbing ourselves, robbing ourselves from letting  
the world speak for itself. You just keep speaking to  
yourself, so nothing speaks to you.  
  
The three poisons are always trapping you in one  
way or another, imprisoning you and making your  
  
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Poison as Medicine 39  
  
world really small. When you feel craving, you could  
be sitting on the edge of the Grand Canyon, but all  
you can see is this piece of chocolate cake that  
you're craving. With aversion, you're sitting on the  
edge of the Grand Canyon, and all you can hear is  
the angry words you said to someone ten years ago.  
With ignorance, you're sitting on the edge of the  
Grand Canyon with a paper bag over your head.  
Each of the three poisons has the power to capture  
you so completely that you don't even perceive  
what's in front of you.  
  
This “Three objects, three poisons, and three seeds  
of virtue” is really a peculiar idea. It turns the con-  
ventional formula on its head in an unpredictable,  
nonhabitual way. It points to how the three poisons  
can be three seeds of becoming a child of illusion,  
how to step out of this limited world of ego fixation,  
how to step out of the world of tunnel vision. And the  
slogan is just an introduction to how this notion  
works. Tonglen practice will give you a very explicit  
method for working with this kind of lojong logic or,  
you could say, big-heart logic.  
  
There's nothing really wrong with passion or ag-  
gression or ignorance, except that we take it so per-  
sonally and therefore waste all that juicy stuff. The  
peacock eats poison and that’s what makes the colors  
of its tail so brilliant. That’s the traditional image for  
this practice, that the poison becomes the source of  
  
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great beauty and joy; poison becomes medicine.  
  
Whatever you do, don’t try to make the poisons go  
away, because if you're trying to make them go away,  
you're losing your wealth, along with your neurosis.  
All this messy stuff is your richness, but saying this  
once is not going to convince you. If nothing else,  
however, it could cause you to wonder about these  
teachings and begin to be curious whether they could  
possibly be true, which might inspire you to try them  
for yourself.  
  
The main point is that when Mortimer walks by  
and triggers your craving or your aversion or your ig-  
norance or your jealousy or your arrogance or your  
feeling of worthlessness—when Mortimer walks by  
that could be like a little bell  
going off in your head or a lightbulb going on: here’s  
  
and a feeling arises  
  
an opportunity to awaken your heart. Here’s an op-  
portunity to ripen bodhichitta, to reconnect with the  
sense of the soft spot, because as a result of these  
poisons the shields usually come up. We react to the  
poisons by armoring our hearts.  
  
When the poisons arise, we counter them with two  
main tactics. Step one: Mortimer walks by. Step two:  
klesha arises. (It’s hard to separate the first two  
steps.) Step three: we either act out or repress, which  
is to say we either physically or mentally attack Mor-  
timer or talk to ourself about what a jerk he is or how  
we're going to get even with him, or else we repress  
those feelings.  
  
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Acting out and repressing are the main ways that  
we shield our hearts, the main ways that we never re-  
ally connect with our vulnerability, our compassion,  
our sense of the open, fresh dimension of our being.  
By acting out or repressing we invite suffering, bewil-  
derment, or confusion to intensify.  
  
Drive all blames into Mortimer. Someone once  
heard the slogan “Drive all blames into one” and  
thought it was “Drive all blames into Juan.” Whether  
you call him or her Juan or Juanita or Mortimer, the  
usual tactic is either to act out or repress. If Mor-  
timer or Juan or Juanita walks by and craving arises,  
you try to get together by flirting or making advances.  
If aversion arises, you try to get revenge. You don't  
stay with the raw feelings. You don’t hold your seat.  
You take it a step further and act out.  
  
Repressing could actually come under the cate-  
gory of ignorance. When you see Juan or Juanita or  
Mortimer, you just shut down. Maybe you don’t even  
want to touch what they remind you of, so you just  
shut down. There’s another common form of repres-  
sion, which has to do with guilt: Juan walks by; aver-  
sion arises; you act out; and then you feel guilty about  
it. You think you’re a bad person to be hating Juan,  
and so you repress it.  
  
What we're working with in our basic shamatha-  
vipashyana practice—and explicitly with the tonglen  
practice—is the middle ground between acting out  
and repressing. We're discovering how to hold our  
  
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seat and feel completely what’s underneath all that  
story line of wanting, not wanting, and so forth.  
  
In terms of “Three objects, three poisons, and  
three seeds of virtue,” when these poisons arise, the  
instruction is to drop the story line, which means—  
instead of acting out or repressing—use the situation  
as an opportunity to feel your heart, to feel the  
wound. Use it as an opportunity to touch that soft  
spot. Underneath all that craving or aversion or jeal-  
ousy or feeling wretched about yourself, underneath  
all that hopelessness and despair and depression,  
there’s something extremely soft, which is called  
bodhichitta.  
  
When these things arise, train gradually and very  
gently without making it into a big deal. Begin to get  
the hang of feeling what’s underneath the story line.  
Feel the wounded heart that’s underneath the addic-  
tion, self-loathing, or anger. If someone comes along  
and shoots an arrow into your heart, it’s fruitless to  
stand there and yell at the person. It would be much  
better to turn your attention to the fact that there’s an  
arrow in your heart and to relate to that wound.  
  
When we do that, the three poisons become three  
seeds of how to make friends with ourselves. They  
give us the chance to work on patience and kindness,  
the chance not to give up on ourselves and not to act  
out or repress. They give us the chance to change our  
habits completely. This is what helps both ourselves  
and others. This is instruction on how to turn un-  
  
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wanted circumstances into the path of enlighten-  
ment. By following it, we can transform all that  
messy stuff that we usually push away into the path  
of awakening: reconnecting with our soft heart, our  
clarity, and our ability to open further.  
  
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Start Where You Are  
  
TT HERE ARE TWO SLOGANS that go along with the  
tonglen practice: “Sending and taking should be  
practiced alternately. / These two should ride the  
breath”—which is actually a description of tonglen  
and how it works—and “Begin the sequence of send-  
ing and taking with yourself.”  
  
The slogan “Begin the sequence of sending and tak-  
ing with yourself” is getting at the point that compas-  
sion starts with making friends with ourselves, and  
particularly with our poisons—the messy areas. As  
we practice tonglen—taking and sending—and con-  
template the lojong slogans, gradually it begins to  
dawn on us how totally interconnected we all are.  
Now people know that what we do to the rivers in  
South America affects the whole world, and what we  
do to the air in Alaska affects the whole world. Every-  
thing is interrelated—including ourselves, so this is  
very important, this making friends with ourselves.  
It’s the key to a more sane, compassionate planet.  
What you do for yourself—any gesture of kind-  
ness, any gesture of gentleness, any gesture of hon-  
esty and clear seeing toward yourself—will affect  
  
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how you experience your world. In fact, it will trans-  
form how you experience the world. What you do for  
yourself, you're doing for others, and what you do for  
others, you're doing for yourself. When you exchange  
yourself for others in the practice of tonglen, it be-  
comes increasingly uncertain what is out there and  
what is in here.  
  
If you have rage and righteously act it out and  
blame it all on others, it’s really you who suffers. The  
other people and the environment suffer also, but  
you suffer more because you're being eaten up inside  
with rage, causing you to hate yourself more and  
more.  
  
We act out because, ironically, we think it will  
bring us some relief. We equate it with happiness.  
Often there is some relief, for the moment. When  
you have an addiction and you fulfill that addiction,  
there is a moment in which you feel some relief.  
Then the nightmare gets worse. So it is with aggres-  
sion. When you get to tell someone off, you might  
feel pretty good for a while, but somehow the sense  
of righteous indignation and hatred grows, and it  
hurts you. It’s as if you pick up hot coals with your  
bare hands and throw them at your enemy. If the  
coals happen to hit him, he will be hurt. But in the  
meantime, you are guaranteed to be burned.  
  
On the other hand, if we begin to surrender to our-  
selves—begin to drop the story line and experience  
what all this messy stuff behind the story line feels  
  
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like—-we begin to find bodhichitta, the tenderness  
that’s under all that harshness. By being kind to our-  
selves, we become kind to others. By being kind to  
others—if it’s done properly, with proper under-  
standing—we benefit as well. So the first point is  
that we are completely interrelated. What you do to  
others, you do to yourself. What you do to yourself,  
you do to others.  
  
Start where you are. This is very important. Ton-  
glen practice (and all meditation practice) is not  
about later, when you get it all together and you're  
this person you really respect. You may be the most  
violent person in the world—that’s a fine place to  
start. That’s a very rich place to start—juicy, smelly.  
You might be the most depressed person in the world,  
the most addicted person in the world, the most jeal-  
ous person in the world. You might think that there  
are no others on the planet who hate themselves as  
much as you do. All of that is a good place to start.  
Just where you are—that’s the place to start.  
  
As we begin to practice shamatha-vipashyana  
meditation, following our breath and labeling our  
thoughts, we can gradually begin to realize how pro-  
found it is just to let those thoughts go, not rejecting  
them, not trying to repress them, but just simply  
acknowledging them as violent thoughts, thoughts of  
hatred, thoughts of wanting, thoughts of poverty,  
thoughts of loathing, whatever they might be. We  
can see it all as thinking and can let the thoughts go  
  
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and begin to feel what's left. We can begin to feel the  
energy of our heart, our body, our neck, our head, our  
stomach—that basic feeling that’s underneath all of  
the story lines. If we can relate directly with that,  
then all of the rest is our wealth. When we don’t act  
out and we don't repress, then our passion, our ag-  
gression, and our ignorance become our wealth. The  
poison already is the medicine. You don’t have to  
transform anything. Simply letting go of the story  
line is what it takes, which is not that easy. That light  
touch of acknowledging what we're thinking and let-  
ting it go is the key to connecting with this wealth  
that we have. With all the messy stuff, no matter how  
messy it is, just start where you are—not tomorrow,  
not later, not yesterday when you were feeling bet-  
ter—but now. Start now, just as you are.  
  
Milarepa is one of the lineage holders of the Kagyii  
lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. Milarepa is one of the  
heroes, one of the brave ones, a very crazy, unusual  
fellow. He was a loner who lived in caves by himself  
and meditated wholeheartedly for years. He was  
extremely stubborn and determined. If he couldn't  
find anything to eat for a couple of years, he just ate  
nettles and turned green, but he would never stop  
practicing.  
  
One evening Milarepa returned to his cave after  
gathering firewood, only to find it filled with demons.  
They were cooking his food, reading his books, sleep-  
ing in his bed. They had taken over the joint. He knew  
  
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about nonduality of self and other, but he still didn't  
quite know how to get these guys out of his cave.  
Even though he had the sense that they were just a  
  
projection of his own mind—all the unwanted parts  
of himself—he didn’t know how to get rid of them.  
  
So first he taught them the dharma. He sat on this  
seat that was higher than they were and said things to  
them about how we are all one. He talked about com-  
passion and shunyata and how poison is medicine.  
Nothing happened. The demons were still there.  
Then he lost his patience and got angry and ran at  
them. They just laughed at him. Finally, he gave up  
and just sat down on the floor, saying, “I’m not going  
away and it looks like you're not either, so let’s just  
live here together.”  
  
At that point, all of them left except one. Mila-  
repa said, “Oh, this one is particularly vicious.” (We  
all know that one. Sometimes we have lots of them  
like that. Sometimes we feel that’s all we've got.) He  
didn’t know what to do, so he surrendered himself  
even further. He walked over and put himself right  
into the mouth of the demon and said, “Just eat me  
up if you want to.” Then that demon left too. The  
moral of the story is, when the resistance is gone, so  
are the demons.  
  
That's the underlying logic of tonglen practice and  
also of lojong altogether. When the resistance is  
gone, so are the demons. It’s like a koan that we can  
  
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work with by learning how to be more gentle, how to  
relax, and how to surrender to the situations and peo-  
ple in our lives.  
  
Having said all that, now I'll talk about tonglen. I’ve  
noticed that people generally eat up the teachings,  
but when it comes to having to do tonglen, they say,  
“Oh, it sounded good, but I didn’t realize you actually  
meant it.” In its essence, this practice of tonglen is,  
when anything is painful or undesirable, to breathe it  
in. That's another way of saying you don’t resist it. You  
surrender to yourself, you acknowledge who you are,  
you honor yourself. As unwanted feelings and emo-  
tions arise, you actually breathe them in and connect  
with what all humans feel. We all know what it is to  
feel pain in its many guises.  
  
This breathing in is done for yourself, in the sense  
that it’s a personal and real experience, but simulta-  
neously there’s no doubt that you're at the same time  
developing your kinship with all beings. If you can  
know it in yourself, you can know it in everyone. If  
you're in a jealous rage and it occurs to you to actually  
breathe it in rather than blame it on someone else—  
if you get in touch with the arrow in your heart— it’s  
quite accessible to you at that very moment that  
there are people all over the world feeling exactly  
what you're feeling. This practice cuts through cul-  
ture, economic status, intelligence, race, religion.  
  
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People everywhere feel pain—jealousy, anger, being  
left out, feeling lonely. Everybody feels that exactly  
the way you feel it. The story lines vary, but the un-  
derlying feeling is the same for us all.  
  
By the same token, if you feel some sense of de-  
light—if you connect with what for you is inspiring,  
opening, relieving, relaxing:  
  
you breathe it out, you  
give it away, you send it out to everyone else. Again,  
it’s very personal. It starts with your feeling of delight,  
your feeling of connecting with a bigger perspective,  
your feeling of relief or relaxation. If you’re willing to  
drop the story line, you feel exactly what all other  
human beings feel. It’s shared by all of us. In this way  
if we do the practice personally and genuinely, it  
awakens our sense of kinship with all beings.  
  
The other thing that’s very important is absolute  
bodhichitta. In order to do tonglen, we've first estab-  
lished the ground of absolute bodhichitta because it’s  
important that when you breathe in and connect  
with the vividness and reality of pain there’s also  
some sense of space. There's that vast, tender, empty  
heart of bodhichitta, your awakened heart. Right in  
the pain there’s a lot of room, a lot of openness. You  
begin to touch in on that space when you relate di-  
rectly to the messy stuff, because by relating directly  
with the messy stuff you are completely undoing the  
way ego holds itself together.  
  
We shield our heart with an armor woven out of  
very old habits of pushing away pain and grasping at  
  
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pleasure. When we begin to breathe in the pain in-  
stead of pushing it away, we begin to open our hearts  
to what’s unwanted. When we relate directly in this  
way to the unwanted areas of our lives, the airless  
room of ego begins to be ventilated. In the same way,  
when we open up our clenched hearts and let the  
good things go—radiate them out and share them  
with others—that’s also completely reversing the  
logic of ego, which is to say, reversing the logic of suf-  
fering. Lojong logic is the logic that transcends the  
messy and unmessy, transcends pain and pleasure.  
Lojong logic begins to open up the space and it be-  
gins to ventilate this whole cocoon that we find our-  
selves in. Whether you are breathing in or breathing  
out, you are opening the heart, which is awakening  
  
bodhichitta.  
  
So now the technique. Tonglen practice has four  
stages. The first stage is flashing openness, or flashing  
absolute bodhichitta. The slogan “Rest in the nature  
of alaya, the essence” goes along with this flash of  
openness, which is done very quickly. There is some  
sort of natural flash of silence and space. It’s a very  
simple thing.  
  
The second stage is working with the texture. You  
visualize breathing in dark, heavy, and hot and  
breathing out white, light, and cool. The idea is that  
you are always breathing in the same thing: you are  
essentially breathing in the cause of suffering, the  
  
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origin of suffering, which is fixation, the tendency to  
hold on to ego with a vengeance.  
  
You may have noticed, when you become angry or  
poverty-stricken or jealous, that you experience that  
fixation as black, hot, solid, and heavy. That is actu-  
ally the texture of poison, the texture of neurosis and  
fixation. You may have also noticed times when you  
are all caught up in yourself, and then some sort of  
contrast or gap occurs. It’s very spacious. That's the  
experience of mind that is not fixated on phenomena;  
it’s the experience of openness. The texture of that  
openness is generally experienced as light, white,  
fresh, clear, and cool.  
  
So in the second stage of tonglen you work with  
those textures. You breathe in black, heavy, and hot  
through all the pores of your body, and you radiate  
out white, light, and cool, also through all the pores  
of your body, 360 degrees. You work with the texture  
until you feel that it’s synchronized: black is coming  
in and white is going out on the medium of the  
breath—in and out, in and out.  
  
The third stage is working with a specific heartfelt  
object of suffering. You breathe in the pain of a spe-  
cific person or animal that you wish to help. You  
breathe out to that person spaciousness or kindness  
  
or a good meal or a cup of coffee—whatever you feel  
would lighten their load. You can do this for anyone:  
the homeless mother that you pass on the street, your  
  
suicidal uncle, or yourself and the pain you are feel-  
  
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ing at that very moment. The main point is that the  
suffering is real, totally untheoretical. It should be  
heartfelt, tangible, honest, and vivid.  
  
The fourth stage extends this wish to relieve suffer-  
ing much further. You start with the homeless person  
and then extend out to all those who are suffering  
just as she is, or to all those who are suicidal like your  
uncle or to all those who are feeling the jealousy or  
addiction or contempt that you are feeling. You use  
specific instances of misery and pain as a stepping  
stone for understanding the universal suffering of  
people and animals everywhere. Simultaneously, you  
breathe in the pain of your uncle and of all the  
zillions of other desperate, lonely people like him.  
Simultaneously, you send out spaciousness or cheer-  
fulness or a bunch of flowers, whatever would be  
healing, to your uncle and all the others. What you  
feel for one person, you can extend to all people.  
  
You need to work with both the third and fourth  
stages—with both the immediate suffering of one  
person and the universal suffering of all. If you were  
only to extend out to all sentient beings, the practice  
would be very theoretical. It would never actually  
touch your heart. On the other hand, if you were to  
work only with your own or someone else’s fixation, it  
would lack vision. It would be too narrow. Working  
with both situations together makes the practice real  
and heartfelt; at the same time, it provides vision and  
a way for you to work with everyone else in the world.  
  
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You can bring all of your unfinished karmic busi-  
ness right into the practice. In fact, you should invite  
it in. Suppose that you are involved in a horrific rela-  
tionship: every time you think of a particular person  
you get furious. That is very useful for tonglen! Or  
perhaps you feel depressed. It was all you could do to  
get out of bed today. You're so depressed that you  
want to stay in bed for the rest of your life; you have  
considered hiding under your bed. That is very useful  
for tonglen practice. The specific fixation should be  
real, just like that.  
  
Let’s use another example. You may be formally  
doing tonglen or just sitting having your coffee, and  
here comes Mortimer, the object of your passion, ag-  
gression, or ignorance. You want to hit him or hug  
him, or maybe you wish that he weren't there at all.  
  
But let’s say you're angry. The object is Mortimer  
and here comes the poison: fury. You breathe that in.  
The idea is to develop sympathy for your own confu-  
sion. The technique is that you do not blame Mor-  
timer; you also do not blame yourself. Instead, there  
is just liberated fury—hot, black, and heavy. Experi-  
ence it as fully as you can.  
  
You breathe the anger in; you remove the object;  
you stop thinking about him. In fact, he was just a  
useful catalyst. Now you own the anger completely.  
You drive all blames into yourself. It takes a lot of  
bravery, and it’s extremely insulting to ego. In fact,  
  
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it destroys the whole mechanism of ego. So you  
breathe in.  
  
Then, you breathe out sympathy, relaxation, and  
spaciousness. Instead of just a small, dark situation,  
you allow a lot of space for these feelings. Breathing  
out is like ventilating the whole thing, airing it out.  
Breathing out is like opening up your arms and just  
letting go. It’s fresh air. Then you breathe the rage in  
again—the black, heavy hotness of it. Then you  
breathe out, ventilating the whole thing, allowing a  
lot of space.  
  
What you are actually doing is cultivating kindness  
toward yourself. It is very simple in that way. You  
don’t think about it; you don’t philosophize; you sim-  
ply breathe in a very real klesha. You own it com-  
pletely and then aerate it, allowing a lot of space  
when you breathe out. This, in itself, is an amazing  
practice—even if it didn’t go any further—because at  
this level you are still working on yourself. But the  
real beauty of the practice is that you then extend  
that out.  
  
Without pretending, you can acknowledge that  
about two billion other sentient beings are feeling the  
exact same rage that you are at that moment. They  
are experiencing it exactly the way you are experienc-  
ing it. They may have a different object, but the ob-  
ject isn’t the point. The point is the rage itself. You  
breathe it in from all of them, so they no longer have  
  
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to have it. It doesn’t make your own rage any greater;  
it is just rage, just fixation on rage, which causes so  
much suffering.  
  
Sometimes, at that moment, you get a glimpse of  
why there is murder and rape, why there is war, why  
people burn down buildings, why there is so much  
misery in the world. It all comes from feeling that  
rage and acting it out instead of taking it in and airing  
it. It all turns into hatred and misery, which pollutes  
the world and obviously perpetuates the vicious cycle  
of suffering and frustration. Because you feel rage,  
therefore you have the kindling, the connection, for  
understanding the rage of all sentient beings. First  
you work with your own klesha; then you quickly ex-  
tend that and breathe it all in.  
  
At that point, simultaneously, it is no longer your  
own particular burden; it is just the rage of sentient  
beings, which includes you. You breathe that in, and  
you breathe out a sense of ventilation, so that all sen-  
tient beings could experience that. This goes for any-  
thing that bothers you. The more it bothers you, the  
more awake you're going to be when you do tonglen.  
  
The things that really drive us nuts have enormous  
energy in them. That is why we fear them. It could  
even be your own timidity: you are so timid that you  
are afraid to walk up and say hello to someone, afraid  
to look someone in the eye. It takes a lot of energy to  
maintain that. It’s the way you keep yourself together.  
  
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In tonglen practice, you have the chance to own that  
completely, not blaming anybody, and to ventilate it  
with the outbreath. Then you might better under-  
stand why some other people in the room look so  
grim: it isn’t because they hate you but because they  
feel the same kind of timidity and don’t want to look  
anyone in the face. In this way, the tonglen practice  
is both a practice of making friends with yourself and  
a practice of compassion.  
  
By practicing in this way, you definitely develop  
your sympathy for others, and you begin to under-  
stand them a lot better. In that way your own pain is  
like a stepping stone. Your heart develops more and  
more, and even if someone comes up and insults you,  
you could genuinely understand the whole situation  
because you understand so well where everybody's  
coming from. You also realize that you can help by  
simply breathing in the pain of others and breathing  
out that ventilation. So tonglen starts with relating  
  
directly to specific suffering—yours or someone  
else’s—which you then use to understand that this  
suffering is universal, shared by us all.  
  
Almost everybody can begin to do tonglen by  
thinking of someone he or she loves very dearly. It’s  
sometimes easier to think of your children than your  
husband or wife or mother or father, because those  
relationships may be more complicated. There are  
some people in your life whom you love very straight-  
  
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forwardly without complication: old people or people  
who are ill or little children, or people who have been  
kind to you.  
  
When he was eight years old, Trungpa Rinpoche  
saw a whimpering puppy being stoned to death by a  
laughing, jeering crowd. He said that after that, doing  
tonglen practice was straightforward for him: all he  
had to do was think of that dog and his heart would  
start to open instantly. There was nothing compli-  
cated about it. He would have done anything to  
breathe in the suffering of that animal and to breathe  
out relief. So the idea is to start with something like  
that, something that activates your heart.  
  
So you think of a puppy being stoned and dying in  
pain, and you breathe that in. Then, it is no longer  
just a puppy. It is your connection with the realization  
that there are puppies and people suffering unjustly  
like that all over the world. You immediately extend  
the practice and breathe in the suffering of all the  
people who are suffering like that animal.  
  
It is also possible to start with the puppy or your  
uncle or yourself and then gradually extend out fur-  
ther and further. Having started with the wish to  
relieve your sister's depression, you could extend  
further and breathe in the depression of people who  
are somewhat “neutral”—the ones to whom you are  
not that close but who also don’t cause you fear or  
anger. You breathe in the depression and send out re-  
lief to all those “neutral” people. Then, gradually, the  
  
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practice moves to people you actually hate, people  
you consider to be your enemies or to have actually  
harmed you. This expansion evolves by doing the  
practice. You cannot fake these things; therefore you  
start with the things that are close to your heart.  
  
It’s useful to think of tonglen practice in four  
stages:  
  
1. Flashing openness  
  
2. Working with the texture, breathing in dark,  
heavy, and hot and breathing out white, light,  
and cool  
  
3. Working with relieving a specific, heartfelt in-  
stance of suffering  
  
4. Extending that wish to help everyone  
  
The main thing is to really get in touch with fixa-  
tion and the power of klesha activity in yourself. This  
makes other people's situations completely accessi-  
ble and real to you. Then, when it becomes real and  
vivid, always remember to extend it out. Let your own  
experience be a stepping stone for working with the  
world.  
  
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7  
Bringing All That We Meet  
to the Path  
  
Teewss SLOGAN ts “When the world is filled  
with evil, / Transform all mishaps into the path  
of bodhi.” The word bodhi means “enlightenment.”  
This is the basic statement of lojong altogether: how  
to use the unwanted, unfavorable circumstances of  
your life as the actual material of awakening. This is  
the precious gift of the lojong teachings, that what-  
ever occurs isn’t considered an interruption or an ob-  
stacle but a way to wake up. This slogan is very well  
suited to our busy lives and difficult times. In fact,  
it’s designed for that: if there were no difficulties,  
there would be no need for lojong or tonglen.  
Bodhisattva is another word for the awakening war-  
rior, the one who cultivates bravery and compassion.  
One point this slogan is making is that on the path of  
the warrior, or bodhisattva, there is no interruption.  
The path includes all experience, both serene and  
chaotic. When things are going well, we feel good.  
We delight in the beauty of the snow falling outside  
the windows or the light reflecting off the floor.  
There’s some sense of appreciation. But when the  
  
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fire alarm rings and confusion erupts, we feel irri-  
tated and upset.  
  
It’s all opportunity for practice. There is no inter-  
ruption. We would like to believe that when things  
are still and calm, that’s the real stuff, and when  
things are messy, confused, and chaotic, we’ve done  
something wrong, or more usually someone else has  
done something to ruin our beautiful meditation. As  
someone once said about a loud, bossy woman,  
“What is that woman doing in my sacred world?”  
  
Another point about this slogan is that part of  
awakening is to cultivate honesty and clear seeing.  
Sometimes people take the lojong teachings to mean  
that if you’re not to blame others but instead to con-  
nect with the feelings beneath your own story line, it  
would be wrong to say that someone has harmed you.  
However, part of honesty, clear seeing, and straight-  
forwardness is being able to acknowledge that harm  
has been done. The first noble truth—the very first  
teaching of the Buddha  
  
is that there is suffering.  
Suffering does exist as part of the human experience.  
  
we harm others and others  
  
People harm each other  
harm us. To know that is clear seeing.  
  
This is tricky business. What's the difference be-  
tween seeing that harm has been done and blaming?  
Perhaps it is that rather than point the finger of  
blame, we raise questions: “How can I communi-  
cate? How can I help the harm that has been done  
unravel itself? How can I help others find their own  
  
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wisdom, kindness, and sense of humor?” That's a  
much greater challenge than blaming and hating and  
acting out.  
  
How can we help? The way that we can help is by  
making friends with our own feelings of hatred, be-  
wilderment, and so forth. Then we can accept them  
in others. With this practice you begin to realize that  
you're capable of playing all the parts. It’s not just  
“them”: it’s “us” and “them.”  
  
I used to feel outrage when I read about parents  
abusing their children, particularly physically. | used  
to get righteously indignant—until I became a  
mother. | remember very clearly one day, when my  
six-month-old son was screaming and crying and  
covered in oatmeal and my two-and-a-half-year-old  
daughter was pulling on me and knocking things  
off the table, thinking, “I understand why all those  
mothers hurt their children. | understand perfectly.  
It’s only that I've been brought up in a culture that  
doesn’t encourage me that way, so I’m not going  
to do it. But at this moment, everything in me  
wants to eradicate completely these two sweet little  
children.”  
  
So lest you find yourself condescendingly doing  
tonglen for the other one who's so confused, you  
could remember that this is a practice where com-  
passion begins to arise in you because you yourself  
have been there. You've been angry, jealous, and  
lonely. You know what it’s like and you know how  
  
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sometimes you do strange things. Because you're  
lonely, you say cruel words; because you want some-  
one to love you, you insult them. Exchanging yourself  
for others begins to occur when you can see where  
someone is because you've been there. It doesn’t  
happen because you're better than they are but be-  
cause human beings share the same stuff. The more  
you know your own, the more you're going to under-  
stand others.  
  
When the world is filled with evil, how do we  
transform unwanted situations into the path of awak-  
ening? One way is to flash absolute bodhichitta. But  
most of the techniques have to do with relative bod-  
hichitta, which is to say, awakening our connection  
with the soft spot, reconnecting with the soft spot,  
not only through the stuff we like but also through  
the messy stuff.  
  
People have plenty of reasons to be angry. We have  
to acknowledge this. We are angry. But blaming the  
other doesn't solve anything.  
  
Ishi had plenty of reasons to be angry. His whole  
tribe had been killed, methodically, one by one.  
There was no one left but him. But he wasn’t angry.  
We could learn a lesson from him. No matter what's  
happening, if we can relate to the soft spot that’s  
underneath our rage and can connect with what's  
there, then we can relate to the enemy in a way  
in which we can start to be able to exchange ourself  
for other. Some sense of being able to communicate  
  
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with the enemy—heart to heart—is the only way  
that things can change. As long as we hate the  
enemy, then we suffer and the enemy suffers and  
the world suffers.  
  
The only way to effect real reform is without ha-  
tred. This is the message of Martin Luther King, of  
Cesar Chavez, of Mother Teresa. Gerald Red Elk—a  
close friend and teacher who was a Sioux elder—told  
me that as a young man he had been filled with ha-  
tred for how his people had been, and continue to be,  
treated. Because of his hatred, he was alcoholic and  
miserable. But during the Second World War, when  
he was in Europe, something in him shifted; he saw  
that he was being poisoned by his hatred. He came  
back from the war, and for the rest of his life he tried  
to bring back the sense of spirit and confidence and  
dignity of the young people in his tribe. His main  
message was not to hate but to learn to communicate  
with all beings. He had a very big mind.  
  
Another slogan says, “All dharma agrees at one  
point.” No matter what the teachings are—sha-  
matha-vipashyana instruction, lojong instruction,  
any instruction of sanity and health from any tradi-  
tion of wisdom—the point at which they all agree is  
to let go of holding on to yourself. That’s the way of  
becoming at home in your world. This is not to say  
that ego is sin. Ego is not sin. Ego is not something  
that you get rid of. Ego is something that you come to  
  
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know—something that you befriend by not acting  
out or repressing all the feelings that you feel.  
  
Whether we're talking about the painful interna-  
tional situation or our painful domestic situation, the  
pain is a result of what's called ego clinging, of want-  
ing things to work out on our own terms, of wanting  
“me-victorious.”  
  
Ego is like a room of your own, a room with a view,  
with the temperature and the smells and the music  
that you like. You want it your own way. You'd just like  
to have a little peace; you'd like to have a little happi-  
ness, you know, just “gimme a break!”  
  
But the more you think that way, the more you try  
to get life to come out so that it will always suit you,  
the more your fear of other people and what's outside  
your room grows. Rather than becoming more re-  
laxed, you start pulling down the shades and locking  
the door. When you do go out, you find the experi-  
ence more and more unsettling and disagreeable. You  
become touchier, more fearful, more irritable than  
ever. The more you just try to get it your way, the less  
you feel at home.  
  
‘To begin to develop compassion for yourself and  
others, you have to unlock the door. You don’t open it  
yet, because you have to work with your fear that  
somebody you don’t like might come in. Then as you  
begin to relax and befriend those feelings, you begin  
to open it. Sure enough, in come the music and the  
smells that you don't like. Sure enough, someone  
  
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puts a foot in and tells you you should be a different  
religion or vote for someone you don't like or give  
money that you don't want to give.  
  
Now you begin to relate with those feelings. You  
develop some compassion, connecting with the soft  
spot. You relate with what begins to happen when  
you're not protecting yourself so much. Then gradu-  
ally, like Ishi, you become more curious than afraid.  
To be fearless isn't really to overcome fear, it’s to  
come to know its nature. Just open the door more and  
more and at some point you'll feel capable of inviting  
all sentient beings as your guests.  
  
It helps to realize that the Nelson Mandelas and  
Mother Teresas of the world also know how it feels to  
be in a small room with the windows and doors  
closed. They also know anger and jealousy and lone-  
liness. They're people who made friends with them-  
selves and therefore made friends with the world.  
They're people who developed the bravery to be able  
to relate to the shaky, tender, fearful feelings in their  
own hearts and therefore are no longer afraid of those  
feelings when they are triggered by the outside world.  
  
When you begin to practice this way, you’re so  
honest about what you're feeling that it begins to cre-  
ate a sense of understanding other people as well. A  
young man told this story in a discussion group dur-  
ing a lojong training weekend. He had gone into a bar  
in Los Angeles to play pool. Before starting to play, he  
put his brand-new leather jacket down on a chair.  
  
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When he finished playing, it wasn’t there. The four  
other people in the bar were just sitting there looking  
at him with big smug smiles on their faces. They were  
really big guys. He felt extremely small and power-  
less. He knew that they had taken his jacket and that  
it wouldn’t be wise to confront them because he was  
small and outnumbered. He felt humiliated and  
helpless.  
  
Then, as a result of having worked with this prac-  
tice, it occurred to him that he could feel empathy  
for people in the world who had been laughed at,  
scorned, and spat upon because of their religion or  
the color of their skin or their gender or their sexual  
orientation or their nationality, or for whatever rea-  
son. He found himself empathizing with all the peo-  
ple throughout time who had found themselves in  
humiliating situations. It was a profound experience  
for him. It didn’t get him his jacket back; it didn’t  
solve anything. But it opened his heart to a lot of peo-  
ple with whom he had not before had any sense of  
shared experience.  
  
This is where the heart comes from in this prac-  
tice, where the sense of gratitude and appreciation  
for our life comes from. We become part of a lineage  
of people who have cultivated their bravery through-  
out history, people who, against enormous odds, have  
stayed open to great difficulties and painful situa-  
tions and transformed them into the path of awaken-  
ing. We will fall flat on our faces again and again, we  
  
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will continue to feel inadequate, and we can use  
these experiences to wake up, just as they did. The  
lojong teachings give us the means to connect with  
the power of our lineage, the lineage of gentle war-  
riorship.  
  
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8  
Drive All Blames into One  
  
‘D LIKE TO TALK A BIT about another slogan,  
  
“Drive all blames into one.” When we say, as ina  
previous slogan, “When the world is filled with evil,”  
we mean, “When the world is filled with the results  
of ego clinging.” When the world is filled with ego  
clinging or with attachment to a particular outcome,  
there is a lot of pain. But these painful situations  
can be transformed into the path of bodhi. One of  
the ways to do that is to drive all blames into one. ‘To  
see how this works, let’s look at the result of blam-  
ing others.  
  
I had someone buy me the New York Times on  
Sunday so I could look at the result of people blam-  
ing others. In Yugoslavia, there’s a very painful situa-  
tion. The Croats and the Serbs are murdering each  
other, raping each other, killing children and old  
people. If you asked someone on either side what  
they wanted, they would say they just want to be  
happy. The Serbs just want to be happy. They see the  
others as enemies and they think the only way to be  
happy is to eradicate the source of their misery. We  
all think this way. And then if you talked to the other  
side, they would say that they want the same thing.  
  
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This is true in Israel with the Arabs and the Jews.  
This is true in Northern Ireland with the Protestants  
and the Catholics. The same is true everywhere, and  
it’s getting worse. In every corner of the world, the  
same is true.  
  
When we look at the world in this way we see that  
it all comes down to the fact that no one is ever en-  
couraged to feel the underlying anxiety, the underly-  
ing edginess, the underlying soft spot, and therefore  
we think that blaming others is the only way. Reading  
just one newspaper, we can see that blaming others  
doesn't work.  
  
We have to look at our own lives as well: How are  
we doing with our Juans and Juanitas? Often they're  
the people with whom we have the most intimate re-  
lationships. They really get to us because we can’t  
just shake them off by moving across town or chang-  
ing seats on the bus, or whatever we have the luxury  
of doing with mere acquaintances, whom we also  
loathe.  
  
The point is that if we think there is any difference  
between how we relate with the people who irritate  
us and the situation in Northern Ireland, Yugoslavia,  
the Middle East, or Somalia, we're wrong. If we think  
there is any difference between that and the way that  
native people feel about white people or white people  
feel about black people or any of these situations on  
earth, we're wrong. We have to start with ourselves. If  
all people on the planet would start with themselves,  
  
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we might see quite a shift in the aggressive energy  
that’s causing such a widespread holocaust.  
  
“Drive all blames into one’—or “Take the blame  
yourself,” if you prefer—sounds like a masochistic  
slogan. It sounds like, “Just beat me up, just bury me  
under piles of manure, just let me have it and kick me  
in the teeth.” However, that isn’t what it really means,  
you ll be happy to know.  
  
One way of beginning to practice “Drive all blames  
into one” is to begin to notice what it feels like when  
you blame someone else. What's actually under all  
that talking and conversation about how wrong  
somebody or something is? What does blame feel  
like in your stomach? When we do this noticing we  
see that we are somehow beginning to cultivate brav-  
ery as well as compassion and honesty. When these  
really unresolved issues of our lives come up, we are  
no longer trying to escape but are beginning to be cu-  
rious and open toward these parts of ourselves.  
  
“Drive all blames into one” is a healthy and com-  
passionate instruction that short-circuits the over-  
whelming tendency we have to blame everybody  
else; it doesn’t mean, instead of blaming the other  
people, blame yourself. It means to touch in with  
what blame feels like altogether. Instead of guarding  
yourself, instead of pushing things away, begin to get  
in touch with the fact that there’s a very soft spot  
under all that armor, and blame is probably one of the  
most well-perfected armors that we have.  
  
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Drive All Blames into One  
  
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You can take this slogan beyond what we think of  
as “blame” and practice applying it simply to the gen-  
eral sense that something is wrong. When you feel  
that something is wrong, let the story line go and  
touch in on what’s underneath. You may notice that  
when you let the words go, when you stop talking to  
yourself, there’s something left, and that something  
tends to be very soft. At first it may seem intense and  
vivid, but if you don’t recoil from that and you keep  
opening your heart, you find that underneath all of  
the fear is what has been called shaky tenderness.  
  
The truth of the matter is that even though there  
are teachings and practice techniques, still we each  
have to find our own way. What does it really mean to  
open? What does it mean not to resist? What does it  
mean? It’s a lifetime journey to find the answers to  
these questions for yourself. But there’s a lot of sup-  
port in these teachings and this practice.  
  
Try dropping the object of the blame or the object  
of what you think is wrong. Instead of throwing the  
snowballs out there, just put the snowball down and  
relate in a nonconceptual way to your anger, relate to  
your righteous indignation, relate to your sense of  
being fed up or pissed off or whatever it is. If Mor-  
timer or Juan or Juanita walks by, instead of talking to  
yourself for the next four days about them, you would  
stop talking to yourself. Simply follow the instruction  
that you're given, notice that you are talking to your-  
self, and let it go. This is basic shamatha-vipashyana  
  
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instruction—that’s what it means by dropping the  
object. Then you can do tonglen.  
  
If you aren't feeding the fire of anger or the fire of  
craving by talking to yourself, then the fire doesn't  
have anything to feed on. It peaks and passes on. It’s  
said that everything has a beginning, middle, and  
end, but when we start blaming and talking to our-  
selves, things seem to have a beginning, a middle,  
and no end.  
  
Strangely enough, we blame others and put so  
much energy into the object of anger or whatever it is  
because we're afraid that this anger or sorrow or lone-  
liness is going to last forever. Therefore, instead of re-  
lating directly with the sorrow or the loneliness or the  
anger, we think that the way to end it is to blame it on  
somebody else. We might just talk to ourselves about  
them, or we might actually hit them or fire them or  
yell. Whether we're using our body, speech, mind—  
or all three—whatever we might do, we think, curi-  
ously enough, that this will make the pain go away.  
Instead, acting it out is what makes it last.  
  
“Drive all blames into one” is saying, instead of al-  
ways blaming the other, own the feeling of blame,  
own the anger, own the loneliness, and make friends  
with it. Use the tonglen practice to see how you can  
place the anger or the fear or the loneliness in a cra-  
dle of loving-kindness; use tonglen to learn how to be  
gentle to all that stuff. In order to be gentle and cre-  
ate an atmosphere of compassion for yourself, it’s  
  
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necessary to stop talking to yourself about how wrong  
everything is—or how right everything is, for that  
matter.  
  
I challenge you to experiment with dropping the  
object of your emotion, doing tonglen, and seeing if  
in fact the intensity of the so-called poison lessens. I  
have experimented with this, because I didn’t believe  
that it would work. I thought it couldn’t possibly be  
true, and because my doubt was so strong, for a while  
it seemed to me that it didn’t work. But as my trust  
grew, I found that that’s what happens—the intensity  
of the klesha lessens, and so does the duration. This  
happens because the ego begins to be ventilated.  
This big solid me—’"I have a problem. I am lonely. |  
am angry. I am addicted’—begins somehow to be  
aerated when you just go against the grain and own  
the feelings yourself instead of blaming the other.  
  
The “one” in “Drive all blames into one” is the ten-  
dency we have to want to protect ourselves: ego  
clinging. When we drive all blames into this ten-  
dency by owning our feelings and feeling fully, the  
ongoing monolithic ME begins to lighten up, be-  
cause it is fabricated with our opinions, our moods,  
and a lot of ephemeral, but at the same time vivid and  
convincing, stuff.  
  
I know a fifteen-year-old Hispanic guy from Los  
Angeles. He grew up in a violent neighborhood and  
was in gangs from the age of thirteen. He was really  
smart, and curiously enough, his name was Juan. He  
  
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came on really mean. He was tough and he snarled  
and he walked around with a big chip on his shoul-  
der. You had the feeling that that was all he had going  
for him: his world was so rough that acting like the  
baddest and the meanest was the only way he saw to  
survive in it.  
  
He was one of those people who definitely drive all  
blames into others. If you asked him a simple ques-  
tion, he would tell you to fuck off. If he could get any-  
body in trouble, he definitely would do so. From one  
point of view, he was a total pain in the neck, but on  
the other hand, he had a flair and brilliance about  
him. It was always mixed; you hated him and you  
loved him. He was outrageous and also sparky and  
funny, but he was mean—he would slap people and  
push them around. You knew that that was pretty  
lightweight compared with what he was used to  
doing at home, where they killed each other on a reg-  
ular basis.  
  
He was sent to Boulder, Colorado, for the summer  
to give him a break, to give him a nice summer in the  
Rocky Mountains. His mother and others were trying  
to help him get a good education and somehow step  
out of the nightmare world into which he had been  
born. The people he was staying with were loosely af-  
filiated with the Buddhist community, and that’s how  
I came to know him. One day he came to an event  
where Trungpa Rinpoche was, and at the end of this  
event, Trungpa Rinpoche sang the Shambhala  
  
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anthem. This was an awful experience for the rest  
of us because for some reason he loved to sing the  
Shambhala anthem in a high-pitched, squeaky, and  
cracked voice.  
  
This particular event was outside. As Rinpoche  
sang into a microphone and the sound traveled for  
miles across the plains, Juan broke down and started  
to cry. Everyone else was feeling awkward or embar-  
rassed, but Juan just started to cry. Later he said he  
cried because he had never seen anyone that brave.  
He said, “That guy, he’s not afraid to be a fool.” That  
turned out to be a major turning point in his life be-  
cause he realized that he didn’t have to be afraid to be  
a fool either. All that persona and chip on the shoul-  
der were guarding his soft spot, and he could let them  
go. Because he was so sharp and bright, he got the  
message. His life turned around. Now he’s got his ed-  
ucation and he’s back in L.A. helping kids.  
  
So that’s the point, that we tend to drive all blames  
into Juan because Juan is so obnoxious. We aren't en-  
couraged to get in touch with what’s underneath all  
our words of hatred, craving, and jealousy. We just act  
them out again and again. But if we practice this slo-  
gan and drive all blames into one, the armor of our  
ego clinging will weaken and the soft spot in our  
hearts will appear. We may feel foolish, but we don’t  
have to be afraid of that. We can make friends with  
ourselves.  
  
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9  
Be Grateful to Everyone  
  
HE SLOGAN “Be grateful to everyone” is about  
making peace with the aspects of ourselves that  
we have rejected. Through doing that, we also make  
peace with the people we dislike. More to the point,  
being around people we dislike is often a catalyst for  
making friends with ourselves. Thus, “Be grateful to  
everyone.”  
If we were to make a list of people we don't like  
  
people we find obnoxious, threatening, or worthy of  
contempt—we would find out a lot about those as-  
pects of ourselves that we can’t face. If we were to  
come up with one word about each of the trouble-  
makers in our lives, we would find ourselves with a  
list of descriptions of our own rejected qualities,  
which we project onto the outside world. The people  
who repel us unwittingly show us the aspects of our-  
selves that we find unacceptable, which otherwise  
we can't see. In traditional teachings on lojong it is  
put another way: other people trigger the karma that  
we haven't worked out. They mirror us and give us the  
chance to befriend all of that ancient stuff that we  
carry around like a backpack full of granite boulders.  
  
“Be grateful to everyone” is a way of saying that we  
  
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can learn from any situation, especially if we practice  
this slogan with awareness. The people and situa-  
tions in our lives can remind us to catch neurosis as  
neurosis, to see when we're in our room under the  
covers, to see when we've pulled the shades, locked  
the door, and are determined to stay there.  
  
There’s a reason that you can learn from every-  
thing: you have basic wisdom, basic intelligence, and  
basic goodness. Therefore, if the environment is sup-  
portive and encourages you to be brave and to open  
your heart and mind, you'll find yourself opening to  
the wisdom and compassion that’s inherently there.  
It’s like tapping into your source, tapping into what  
you already have. It’s the willingness to open your  
eyes, your heart, and your mind, to allow situations in  
your life to become your teacher. With awareness,  
you are able to find out for yourself what causes mis-  
ery and what causes happiness.  
  
“Be grateful to everyone” is getting at a complete  
change of attitude. This slogan is not wishy-washy  
and naive. It does not mean that if you’re mugged on  
the street you should smile knowingly and say, “Oh, I  
should be grateful for this,” before losing conscious-  
ness. This slogan actually gets at the guts of how we  
perfect ignorance through avoidance, not knowing  
that we're eating poison, not knowing that we're put-  
ting another layer of protection over our heart, not  
seeing through the whole thing.  
  
“Be grateful to everyone” means that all situations  
  
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teach you, and often it’s the tough ones that teach  
you best. There may be a Juan or Juanita in your life,  
and Juan or Juanita is the one who gets you going.  
They're the ones who don't go away: your mother,  
your husband, your wife, your lover, your child, the  
person that you have to work with every single day,  
part of the situation you can't escape.  
  
These situations really teach you because there’s  
no pat solution to the problem. You’re continually  
meeting your match. You’re always coming into a  
challenge, coming up against your edge. There’s no  
way that someone else can tell you exactly what to  
do, because you're the only one who knows where it’s  
torturing you, where your relationship with Juan or  
Juanita is getting into your guts. Others don’t know.  
They don’t know when you need to be more gentle,  
when you need to be more clear, when you need to be  
quiet, and when you need to speak.  
  
No one else knows what it takes for another person  
to open the door. For some people, speaking out is  
opening the door a little wider; for other people,  
being still is opening the door a little wider. It all has  
to do with what your ancient habitual reaction is to  
being in a tight spot and what is going to soften the  
whole thing and cause you to have a change of atti-  
tude. It’s the Juans and Juanitas who present us with  
these dilemmas, these challenges.  
  
Basically the only way you can communicate with  
the Juans and Juanitas in your life is by taking the  
  
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teachings and the practice very personally, not trust-  
ing anybody else’s interpretations, because you your-  
self have the wisdom within, and you yourself will  
find out how to open that door. As much as we would  
like Juan or Juanita to get out of our life and give us a  
break, somehow they stick around, and even if we do  
manage to get rid of them, they seem to reappear  
with another name and another face very soon. They  
are addressing the point at which we are most stuck.  
  
It’s important, in terms of being grateful to every-  
one, to realize that no slogan, no meditation practice,  
nothing that you can hear in the teachings is a solu-  
tion. We're evolving. We will always be learning more  
and more, continually opening further and further.  
  
It is good to open your mind so that each situation  
is completely fresh. It’s as if you’ve never been there  
before, a completely new take. But even with this ap-  
proach, you can get trapped. Let's say you're a medi-  
tation instructor. Your student arrives for a meeting,  
and because you're very open and in tune, something  
magical happens. There’s some real communication  
between the two of you, and you can see that some-  
thing has helped, something has gotten through and  
connected with her own heart. She leaves and you  
feel great—" Wow! I did that wonderful thing. I could  
feel it.” The next person comes in and you forget  
about the freshness because you're feeling so good  
about what you just did. He sits down and talks to  
you and you come out with the same answers that  
  
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you just gave the last person. But that just leaves this  
new person cold; he couldn't care less. You have the  
humbling experience of realizing that there’s never  
just one solution to a problem. Helping yourself or  
someone else has to do with opening and just being  
there; that’s how something happens between peo-  
ple. But it’s a continuous process. That’s how you  
learn. You can’t open just once.  
  
What you learn from the Juans and Juanitas in  
your life is not something that you can get a patent on  
and then sell as a sure thing that will always work. It  
isn’t like that. This kind of learning is a continual  
journey of wakefulness.  
  
A meditation student I was working with whom I'll  
call Dan had a serious alcohol and drug problem. He  
was really making great strides, and then he went on  
a binge. On the day I found out about it | happened  
to have an opportunity to see Trungpa Rinpoche. |  
blurted out to him how upset I was that Dan had  
gone on a binge. I was so disappointed. Well, Rin-  
poche got really angry; it completely stopped my  
heart and mind. He said that being upset about Dan’s  
binge was my problem. “You should never have ex-  
pectations for other people. Just be kind to them,” he  
told me. In terms of Dan, I should just help him keep  
walking forward inch by inch and be kind to him—  
invite him for dinner, give him little gifts, and do any-  
thing to bring some happiness to his life—instead of  
having these big goals for him. He said that setting  
  
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goals for others can be aggressive—really wanting a  
success story for ourselves. When we do this to oth-  
ers, we are asking them to live up to our ideals. In-  
stead, we should just be kind.  
  
The main point of “Be grateful to everyone’—the  
“dig”—is that you want to get rid of the situations  
that drive you most crazy, the Juans and Juanitas. You  
don't want to be grateful to them. You want to solve  
the problem and not hurt anymore. Juan is making  
you feel embarrassed, or degraded, or abused; there’s  
something about the way he treats you that makes  
you feel so bad that you just want out.  
  
This slogan encourages you to realize that when  
you've met your match you've found a teacher. That  
doesn't necessarily mean that you shut up and don't  
say anything and just stand there breathing in and  
out, although that might be exactly what you do. But  
tonglen is much more profound than that. It has to  
do with how you open in this situation so that the  
basic goodness of Juan or Juanita and your own basic  
goodness begin to communicate.  
  
Something between repressing and acting out is  
what's called for, but it is unique and different each  
time. People have the wisdom to find it. Juan and  
Juanita have the wisdom, you have the wisdom,  
everyone has the wisdom to know how to open. It’s  
inherent in all of us. The path of not being caught in  
ego is a process of surrendering to situations in order  
to communicate rather than win.  
  
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Be Grateful to Everyone 83  
  
Compassionate action, compassionate speech, is  
not a one-shot deal; it’s a lifetime journey. But it  
seems to begin with realizing that when Juan or  
Juanita is getting to you, pushing every button, it’s  
not as simplistic as just eating it, just becoming  
a worm, “Okay, let them attack me.” On the other  
hand, it’s not as easy as just saying, “lll get him.” It’s  
a challenge. This is how the koan appears in every-  
day life: the unanswerable questions of our lives are  
the greatest teachers.  
  
When the great Indian Buddhist teacher Atisha  
went to Tibet, he had been practicing the lojong  
teachings for some time. Like most practitioners, he  
had the feeling of being haunted by the fact that  
there are blind places that you don’t know about. You  
don’t know that you're stuck in certain places. So he  
valued the Juans and Juanitas in his life tremen-  
dously because he felt they were the only ones who  
got through to him enough to show him where his  
blind spots were. Through them his ego got smaller.  
Through them his compassion increased.  
  
The story goes that Atisha was told that the peo-  
ple of Tibet were very good-natured, earthy, flexible,  
and open; he decided they wouldn't be irritating  
enough to push his buttons. So he brought along  
with him a mean-tempered, ornery Bengali tea boy.  
He felt that was the only way he could stay awake.  
The Tibetans like to tell the story that, when he got  
to Tibet, he realized he need not have brought his  
  
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tea boy: the people there were not as pleasant as he  
had been told.  
  
In our own lives, the Bengali tea boys are the peo-  
ple who, when you let them through the front door of  
your house, go right down to the basement where you  
store lots of things you’d rather not deal with, pick  
out one of them, bring it up to you, and say, “Is this  
yours?”  
  
These are the people who, when your habitual  
style is working just fine and everyone's agreeing with  
you, say, “No way am I going to go along with what  
you just asked me to do. I think it’s stupid.” You think,  
“What do I do now?” And usually what you do is to  
get everybody else on your team. You sit around and  
talk about what a creep this person is who confronted  
you. If the disagreement happens to be in the realm  
of politics or “isms” of any kind, you get a banner on  
which you write how right you are and how wrong  
this other person is. By this time the other person has  
got a team, too, and then you have race riots and  
World War III. Righteous indignation becomes a  
creed for you and your whole gang. And it all started  
because somebody blew your trip. It all turns into a  
crusade of who's right and who’s wrong. Wars come  
from that. Nobody ever encourages you to allow  
yourself to feel wounded first and then try to figure  
out what is the right speech and right action that  
might follow.  
  
Gurdjieff—a teacher in the early part of the twen-  
  
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tieth century, kind of a crazy-wisdom character—  
knew the meaning of this slogan. He was living not  
too far from Paris in a big manor house with huge  
lawns. All of his students came there to study with  
him. One of his main teachings was to be awake to  
whatever process you're going through. He liked to  
tighten the screws on his students. In fact, it’s said  
that he would make you take the job that you most  
didn’t want to take; if you thought you should be a  
college professor, he would make you become a used  
car salesman.  
  
There was a man in the community who was really  
bad tempered. He was everybody’s Juan; nobody  
could stand this guy because he was so prickly. Every  
little thing caused him to spin off into a tantrum.  
Everything irritated him. He complained constantly,  
so everyone felt the need to tiptoe around him be-  
cause anything that might be said could cause him to  
explode. People just wished that he would go away.  
  
Gurdjieff liked to make his students do things that  
were completely meaningless. One day there were  
about forty people out cutting up a lawn into little  
pieces and moving it to another place on the grounds.  
This was too much for this fellow; it was the last  
straw. He blew up, stormed out, got in his car, and  
drove off, whereupon there was a spontaneous cele-  
bration. People were thrilled, so happy he had gone.  
But when they told Gurdjieff what had happened, he  
said, “Oh no!” and went after him in his car.  
  
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ou Be Grateful to Everyone  
  
Three days later they both came back. That night  
when Gurdjieff’s attendant was serving him his sup-  
per, he asked, “Sir, why did you bring him back?”  
Gurdjieff answered in a very low voice, “You're not  
going to believe this, and this is just between you and  
me; you must tell no one. | pay him to stay here.”  
  
I told that story at a meditation center, and later  
they wrote me a letter saying, “We used to have two  
people here helping and there was a lot of harmony.  
Now we have four and the trouble is beginning. So  
every day we ask each other, ‘Is somebody paying you  
  
Peay  
  
to be here?  
  
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Io  
  
Cutting the Solidity  
of Thoughts  
  
ONCE HAD AN INTERVIEW with a student who  
  
began by saying, “This is all pretty depressing, isn't  
it? There’s something sort of grim and discouraging  
about what we're doing here. Where’s the joy?  
Where's the cheerfulness in all of this?” We talked for  
a while. Then at the end of the interview, she had her  
own insight, “I guess the joy comes from getting real.”  
  
That really struck me. Whether it’s connecting  
with the genuine heart of sadness and the messy  
areas of our lives, or connecting with vision and ex-  
pansion and openness, what's real is all included in  
well-being; it’s all included in joy. Joy is not about  
pleasure as opposed to pain or cheerfulness as op-  
posed to sadness. Joy includes everything.  
  
There’s a slogan that says, “Don’t wallow in self-  
pity.” That’s a good one to remember if you find that  
tonglen practice has you crying a lot. This whole ap-  
proach could evolve into self-pity easily, and self-pity  
takes a lot of maintenance. You have to talk to your-  
self quite a bit to keep it up. The slogan is saying to  
get to know what self-pity feels like underneath the  
  
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story line. That's how the training develops a gen-  
uine, openhearted, intelligent relationship with the  
whole variety of human experience.  
  
We're so funny: the people who are crying a lot  
think that they shouldn’t be, and the people who  
aren't crying think that they should be. One man said  
to me that since he’s not feeling anything when he  
does tonglen practice, maybe he should leave; he felt  
that he wasn't getting the point. He wasn’t feeling  
mushy or warm; he was just kind of numb. I had to  
encourage him that a genuine experience of numb-  
ness is a genuine experience of what it is to be  
human.  
  
It’s all raw material for waking up. You can use  
numbness, mushiness, and self-pity even—it doesn’t  
matter what it is—as long as you can go deeper, un-  
derneath the story line. That’s where you connect  
with what it is to be human, and that’s where the joy  
and well-being come from—from the sense of being  
real and seeing realness in others.  
  
The slogan says that when the world is filled with  
evil, or when the world is filled with things that you  
just don’t want, that can all be transformed into the  
path of awakening. Then there are various sugges-  
tions, such as “Drive all blames into one” and “Be  
grateful to everyone.” A third suggestion is that you  
can transform seeming obstacles into awakening by  
flashing on the nonsolidity of things—on shunyata or  
absolute bodhichitta.  
  
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\* &  
This slogan is quite a difficult one, and it’s on this  
subject of shunyata: “Seeing confusion as the four  
kayas / Is unsurpassable shunyata protection.” The  
part about seeing confusion is pretty accessible to all  
of us, but the rest of the slogan requires discussion.  
The word kaya means body. The four kayas are  
dharmakaya, sambhogakaya, nirmanakaya, and sva-  
bhavikakaya. You could say that the four kayas are a  
way of describing how emptiness manifests and how  
we could experience it.  
First there’s a sense of the basic space of dhar-  
  
makaya—dharma body. In our morning chants we  
say, “Che essence of thoughts is dharmakaya; nothing  
whatever, but everything arises from it.” Dharmakaya  
is the basic space from which everything arises, and  
everything that arises is essentially spacious—not  
fixed or clunky.  
  
Sambhogakaya—the “enjoyment body”  
the experience that space is not really emptiness as  
  
points to  
  
we know it; there’s energy and color and movement.  
It’s vibrant, like a rainbow or a bubble or the reflec-  
tion of your face in a mirror. It’s vivid, yet nonsub-  
stantial at the same time. Sambhogakaya refers to  
this energetic quality, the fact that emptiness is fluid  
and vivid. Sound is often an image for sambhogakaya;  
you can’t see or capture it, but it has vibration, en-  
ergy, and movement.  
  
the third of the four kayas—  
  
Nirmanakaya  
  
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refers to the experience that emptiness manifests in  
form. Nirmanakaya is the means of communication  
with others. The Heart Sutra says, “Form is empti-  
ness; emptiness is form.” Nirmanakaya refers to the  
fact that phenomena actually manifest. Trees, grass,  
buildings, traffic, each of us, and the whole world  
actually manifest. That’s the only way we can expe-  
rience emptiness: appearance /emptiness, sound /  
emptiness. They're simultaneous. Whatever appears  
is vividly unreal in emptiness. Emptiness isn't really  
empty in the way we might think of it; it’s vibrant  
and it manifests, yet usually all we see is the mani-  
festation. We solidify it, we solidify ourselves, we  
solidify what we see. The whole thing becomes like  
a war or a seduction, and we are totally caught in  
the drama.  
  
The fourth kaya is svabhavikakaya. Svabhavika-  
kaya means that the previous three arise at once;  
they're not really three separate things. The space,  
the energy, and the appearance arise together.  
  
The slogan says, “Seeing confusion [the sense of  
obstacle, the things we don't want, the sense of inter-  
ruption] as the four kayas / Is unsurpassable shuny-  
ata protection.” Shunyata is protection because it  
cuts through the solidity of our thoughts, which are  
how we make everything—including ourselves—  
concrete and separate. It cuts through the way we're  
over here and everything else is over there.  
  
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Cutting the Solidity of Thoughts gI  
  
As we know from some of the other slogans we've  
discussed, when confusion arises, it is part of the  
path. When confusion arises, it is juicy and rich. The  
sense of obstacle is very rich and can teach us. In  
these practices it’s the necessary ingredient for being  
able to do tonglen or work with lojong at all. But this  
slogan is saying that when confusion arises not only  
do you practice tonglen and connect with the heart,  
but also you can flash on the nonsolidity of phenom-  
ena at any time. In other words, you can just drop it.  
We all know spontaneously what it feels like just to  
drop it. Out of the blue, you just drop it.  
  
For instance, on a meditation retreat there are noo-  
dles for breakfast. Maybe in the beginning it seems  
funny, but halfway through breakfast you find your-  
self—instead of being mindful of the food, the chop-  
sticks in your hand, the other people, and the good  
instructions you've received—talking to yourself  
about what a good breakfast would be, how you'd like  
to have a good breakfast like your mother used to  
make you in Brooklyn. It might be matzo ball soup or  
tortillas and beans or ham and eggs, but you want a  
good breakfast: burned bacon, like Mother used to  
make. You resent these noodles.  
  
Then, not through any particular effort, you just  
drop it. To your surprise, there’s a big world there. You  
see all these little lights glimmering in your empty  
lacquered bowl. You notice the sadness on someone's  
  
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face. You realize that the man across from you is also  
thinking about breakfasts because he has a resentful  
look on his face, which makes you laugh because you  
were there just one second ago.  
  
The world opens up and suddenly we're there for  
what's happening. The solidity of our thoughts be-  
comes transparent, and we can connect automati-  
cally with this space—shunyata—in ourselves. We  
have the ability to drop our story line, to rouse our-  
selves.  
  
‘That’s an everyday experience of shunyata. But it’s  
also a very advanced practice if you can do it when  
you don't happen to feel like it. If everything is solid  
and intense and you're wallowing in self-pity or  
something else, if someone says to you at that point,  
“Just drop it,” even in the sweetest, kindest, most  
gentle voice, you want to punch the person in the  
nose. You just want to keep wallowing in resentment  
and self-pity.  
  
The whole point of the practice of lojong is that  
you start where you are. The slogan “Abandon any  
hope of fruition” is also encouragement to just be  
where you are, with your numbness or resentment or  
whatever. Just start where you are. Then as a result of  
doing the practice, to your surprise you find that this  
week you can drop it more easily than last week; or  
this year you can drop it more easily than last year. As  
time goes by, you find that you can spontaneously just  
drop it more and more.  
  
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The same goes for compassion. We all have com-  
passion. When we remember or see certain things,  
we can, without any effort at all, open our hearts.  
Then we're told to have compassion for our enemies,  
for the Juans of our life, for the people that we really  
hate. That’s advanced practice. But as a result of  
doing lojong practice and giving up all hope of  
fruition, of just relating with who we are now and  
with what we're feeling now, we find that the circle of  
our compassion begins to widen, and we are able to  
feel compassion in increasingly difficult situations.  
  
Compassion starts coming to us because we have  
the aspiration to do the practice and to get more in  
touch with our own pain and our own joy. In other  
words, we are willing to get real. We realize that we  
can’t fake it and we can’t force it, but we know we  
have what it takes to work with how we are right now.  
So we start that way, and both the ability to drop it  
and cheer up and the ability to open our hearts begin  
to grow of their own accord.  
  
“Seeing confusion as the four kayas / Is unsurpass-  
able shunyata protection” is really encouragement  
not to make such a big deal of things. We can at least  
entertain the thought that we could drop it and re-  
member what it feels like when we do drop it—how  
the world opens up—and discover the big world out-  
side of our little ego-bound cocoon.  
  
This particular slogan is meant as meditation in-  
struction. It’s said that only on the cushion can you  
  
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really get into this one. In general, however, I'd like to  
encourage you to use the whole lojong and tonglen  
approach as practice even after you finish your formal  
meditation period. That's where it’s most powerful,  
most real, and most heartfelt. As you're going about  
your day and you're seeing things that touch your  
heart, or you're feeling things that scare you or make  
you feel uptight or resentful, you can begin to think  
of doing the exchange, breathing in and breathing out  
on the spot. This is necessary and helpful. After med-  
itation this practice feels quite real, sometimes a lot  
more real than in the meditation room.  
  
This slogan about the four kayas points out that it’s  
in shamatha-vipashyana practice that you begin to  
see the nonsubstantial nature of things. It’s ad-  
dressed to that part of the practice where we say,  
“Thinking.” You're completely caught up. You’ve gone  
to New York City in your mind, and you're having that  
breakfast, and you're reliving resentments and joys,  
and then without any effort, you wake up. That's  
what happens, as you know, but it’s not like you make  
yourself come back. It’s that suddenly you notice and  
wake up, and then you're told to say, “Thinking.”  
  
That label, “thinking,” is the beginning of acknowl-  
edging that the whole drama doesn’t have any sub-  
stance, that it arises out of nowhere, but it seems  
extremely vivid. Even though the story line goes away,  
there’s energy and movement. It definitely seems to  
  
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manifest in terms of tables and chairs and people and  
animals, and it seems so tangible, but the moment  
you say, “Thinking,” you’re acknowledging that the  
whole drama is just a thought in your mind. That’s a  
recognition of shunyata, or emptiness. Maybe each  
of us has had some moments of how liberating that  
can be.  
  
When the thoughts arise it might occur to you to  
wonder where they come from. Where do they come  
from? It seems as if they come from nowhere. You're  
just faithfully following your breath and—Wham!—  
you're in Hawaii surfing. Where did it come from?  
And where does it go? Big drama, big drama’s hap-  
pening, big, big, drama. And it’s 9:30 in the morning.  
“Oooh. Wow! This is extremely heavy.” A car horn  
honks, and suddenly you’re not in that drama any-  
more, you're in another drama.  
  
I was once instructed to meditate on thoughts. I  
investigated the nature of thought for two whole  
months. I can tell you firsthand that you can never  
find a thought. There is nothing there of substance,  
but with our minds we make it Extremely Big Deal.  
  
Another slogan says, “All activities should be done  
with one intention.” Breathing in, breathing out, feel-  
ing resentful, feeling happy, being able to drop it, not  
being able to drop it, eating our food, brushing our  
teeth, walking, sitting—-whatever we're doing could  
  
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be done with one intention, which is that we want to  
wake up, we want to ripen our compassion, and we  
want to ripen our ability to let go. Everything in our  
lives can wake us up or put us to sleep, and basically  
it’s up to us to let it wake us up.  
  
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Il  
  
Overcoming Resistance  
  
HE SLOGAN of the day is “Four practices are the  
  
best of methods.” This slogan is about the four  
things that help us to practice both relative and ab-  
solute bodhichitta: (1) accumulating merit, (2) puri-  
fying our negative actions—usually called confessing  
our negative actions, (3) feeding the ghosts, and (4)  
offering to the protectors, which is sometimes trans-  
lated as asking the protectors to help you in your  
practice.  
  
Each of these four practices jumps right into the  
guts of unwanted feelings, emotions, and situations.  
Earlier we talked about how the best kind of protec-  
tion is to see the empty, dreamlike quality of the con-  
fusion. Whereas seeing confusion as the four kayas  
is something we do on the level of absolute bodhi-  
chitta, the four practices are about actual things that  
you can do at the relative level in terms of ritual and  
ceremony.  
  
However you talk about it, the crux of the matter is  
to overcome resistance. These four practices are four  
methods that Milarepa might have used to try to get  
the demons out of his cave. The punch line of that  
  
story was that when the resistance was gone, so were  
  
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98 Overcoming Resistance  
  
the demons. Resistance to unwanted circumstances  
has the power to keep those circumstances alive and  
well for a very long time.  
  
Accumulating merit. The first of the four practices is  
to accumulate merit. The way to accumulate merit is  
to be willing to give, willing to open, willing not to  
hold back. It is described as letting go of holding on  
to yourself, letting your stronghold of ego go. Instead  
of collecting things for yourself, you open and give  
them away.  
  
As a result of opening yourself, you begin to expe-  
rience your world as more friendly. That is merit. You  
find it easier to practice the dharma, you have fewer  
kleshas, and circumstances seem to be hospitable.  
You might think that the way to encounter circum-  
stances in which you could practice the dharma is to  
use your same old habitual style. But the idea behind  
accumulating this kind of meritorious situation is to  
open, to give, and not to hold back. Instead of encas-  
ing yourself in a cocoon, instead of shielding your  
heart, you can open, let the whole thing dissolve.  
This is how merit is accumulated.  
  
In Buddhist societies such as in Burma and Tibet  
and China, accumulating merit is interpreted as  
performing all kinds of good works, such as making  
donations to build monasteries or retreat centers.  
It’s wonderful to fund-raise in Hong Kong and Tai-  
wan because people feel that it’s meritorious to give  
  
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~ vercoming Resistance 99  
  
money to build a retreat center or a monastery. If you  
give to these worthy causes, and if it’s a gesture of real  
  
generosity—if you're giving without wishing for any-  
thing particular in return—then it works.  
  
When we take the bodhisattva vow, we give a gift.  
The moment we give the gift is the moment we re-  
ceive one of the marks of taking the vow. The in-  
struction is to give something that you find it hard to  
let go of, something that hurts a little. If you give  
money, it should be just a litthe more than you really  
wanted to give.  
  
In all of these traditional ways of accumulating  
merit, the inner meaning is that of opening com-  
pletely to the situation, with some kind of daring.  
There’s an incantation that goes along with this, the  
practice of which is said to be the ultimate expression  
of gaining merit because it has to do with letting go of  
hope and fear: “If it’s better for me to be sick, so be it.  
If it’s better for me to recover, so be it. If it’s better for  
me to die, so be it.” Another way this is said is, “Grant  
your blessings that if I'm meant to be sick, let me be  
sick. Grant your blessings that if 'm meant to re-  
cover, let me recover.” It’s not that you're asking some  
higher power to grant the blessings; basically, you're  
just saying, “Let it happen, let it happen.”  
  
Surrendering, letting go of possessiveness, and  
complete nonattachment—all are synonyms for ac-  
cumulating merit. The idea is to open up rather than  
shut down.  
  
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Confessing evil actions. The second of the four prac-  
tices is to confess evil actions, or lay down neurotic  
actions. In Buddhist monasteries, this is done cere-  
monially on days of the full and new moons. Con-  
fessing your neurotic actions has four parts to it: (1)  
regretting what you've done; (2) refraining from doing  
it again; (3) performing some kind of remedial activ-  
ity such as the Vajrasattva mantra, taking refuge in  
the three jewels, or tonglen; and (4) expressing com-  
plete willingness to continue this fourfold process in  
the future and not to act out neurotically. So the four-  
fold formula of laying down your neurosis consists of  
regret, refraining, remedial action, and the resolve  
not to do it again.  
  
Bad circumstances may have arisen, but we know  
that we can transform them. The advice here is that  
one of the best methods is to confess the whole  
thing. First, you don’t confess to anybody; it’s a per-  
sonal matter. You yourself look at what you do and go  
through this fourfold process with it. Second, no one  
forgives you. You're not confessing sin; it’s not as if  
you've “sinned,” as we were taught in the Judeo-  
Christian culture in which we grew up.  
  
What is meant by neurosis is that in limitless,  
timeless space—with which we could connect at any  
time—we continually have tunnel vision and lock  
ourselves into a room and put bolts on the door.  
When there's so much space, why do we keep put-  
  
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ting on dark glasses, putting in earplugs, and covering  
ourselves with armor?  
  
Confessing our neurotic action is a fourfold pro-  
cess by which we learn to see honestly what we do  
and develop a yearning to take off those dark glasses,  
take out those earplugs, take off that armor and expe-  
rience the world fully. It’s yet again another method  
for letting go of holding back, another method for  
opening rather than closing down.  
  
1. REGRET. So, first, regret. Because of mindful-  
ness and seeing what you do, which is the result of  
your practice, it gets harder and harder to hide from  
yourself. Well, that turns out to be extremely good  
news, and it leads to being able to see neurosis as  
neurosis—not as a condemnation of yourself but as  
something that benefits you. Regret implies that  
you're tired of armoring yourself, tired of eating poi-  
son, tired of yelling at someone each time you feel  
threatened, tired of talking to yourself for hours each  
time you don't like the way someone else does some-  
thing, tired of this constant complaint to yourself.  
Nobody else has to give you a hard time. Nobody has  
to tell you. Through keeping your eyes open, you  
yourself get tired of your neurosis. That's the idea of  
regret.  
  
Once someone who had done something that he  
really regretted went to his teacher and explained the  
whole thing. The teacher said, “It’s good that you feel  
that regret. You have to acknowledge what you do. It’s