

WORKING WITH  
**the Slogans  
of Atisha**

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*A practical guide  
to leading a  
compassionate life*

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This presentation of the 59 *Mind Training Slogans of Atisha* was first published by *Tricycle Magazine*. Each commentary focuses on a slogan of the week. That way, over the course of a year, and at a steady, gentle pace, you can deepen your relationship with these classical guidelines for cultivating a compassionate life.

The source of this Mind Training (Tib.lojong) practice was the great Bengali master, Atisha Dipankara. Later, Geshe Chekawa organized these teachings into this series of 59 *slogans*, which are divided into *seven "points"* or categories. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche published his commentary, *Training the Mind and Cultivating Loving-Kindness* in 1993.

Atisha's slogans provide an earthy, practical way to work with our ego-clinging and to cultivate tenderness and compassion, both through meditation and through the events of everyday life.



# Introduction to Atisha's Slogans

I WOULD LIKE to invite you to join me in an ongoing reflection on the mind training slogans of Atisha.

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

## A Little Historical Background

Atisha was a 10th century Indian Buddhist teacher, who embarked on a dangerous journey by sea in search of the teacher Serlingpa, who lived on the golden isle of Sumatra. Serlingpa was known to be the holder of a body of profound mind training teachings, but to receive these teachings, it was necessary to find Serlingpa and request them. And that is exactly what Atisha did. Having done so, he brought the mind training teachings of Serlingpa back to India and subsequently to Tibet.

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

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

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

## *Today's Practice*

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

Note: Translation of *The Root Text of the Seven Points of Training the Mind* by the Nalanda Translation Committee under the direction of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, revised translation © 1993 by Diana J. Mukpo and the Nālandā Translation Committee. Used with special permission from the Nalanda Translation Committee, 1619 Edward Street, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada B3H 3H9.

A set of 63 4" x 6" cards containing all the slogans, printed in two colors, are available through Samadhi Store at (800) 331-7751. They can be ordered directly at: [http://www.samadhicushions.com/Lojong\\_Slogan\\_Cards\\_p/s-1488.htm](http://www.samadhicushions.com/Lojong_Slogan_Cards_p/s-1488.htm)

# Working with the Mind Training Slogans

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

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

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

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

## *Today's Practice*

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

## POINT ONE

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# The preliminaries, which are a basis for dharma practice

### *1. First, train in the preliminaries.*

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

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

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

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

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

We also need to remind ourselves of what made us think that it was



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

### **Today's Practice**

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

#### **The Four Reminders**

- 1) the preciousness of human life
- 2) the certainty of death
- 3) the entrapment of karma
- 4) the intensity and inevitability of suffering for yourself  
and for all sentient beings

### **A note about absolute and relative bodhichitta**

The mind training slogans are all about loving kindness or bodhichitta. They are about how we can live more sanely and with more effective compassion for others. But they do not immediately launch into the practical application of mind training, or relative bodhichitta. Instead, they begin with absolute bodhichitta and the importance of emptiness as the basis for bodhisattva activity. That is the focus of slogans 2-6. But why start there?

In general, we prefer to just get on with it. If the slogans are about cultivating virtues and helping others, why not just go ahead and do it? Why the emphasis on first establishing a certain view of things? Why start with absolute bodhichitta? How does that change things?

The benevolence cultivated in slogan practice is not simply another form of goody-goodyness. Doing good deeds is fundamental—the path of the bodhisattva warrior is not just about talk, but about action. It is important to cultivate virtue, but it is not sufficient. Our attempts at virtue can become heavy-handed and distorted. We can go so far as to use the activity of kindness as a method of self-aggrandizement in the disguise of helping others. Even when our attempts at kindness are

not distorted, trying to do the right thing can be wearing. It is a struggle.

The point is that although the kind of behavior being cultivated in slogan practice may on the surface be simply another list of ethical injunctions to follow, underlying the entire list of slogans is the ground of absolute bodhichitta, which makes all the difference. For with this ground, or nonground, the basis for distorted kindness is removed, or at least lessened. Instead of struggling to be kind, we find that true acts of kindness are without struggle.

Our attitude as we go about practicing loving kindness or bodhichitta makes a huge difference. It's like the old song that goes, "It's not what you do but the way that you do it." So in working with the remaining slogans, it is important not to lose sight of the ground of ultimate bodhichitta that is established at the very beginning.

### **Today's practice**

Pay close attention to the experience of heavy handedness or light touch in the way you go about your life. In the cultivation of loving kindness, it can be a struggle to try to do the right thing—is it possible to discover a glimpse of spaciousness within that struggle?

## POINT TWO

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### The main practice, which is training in bodhichitta

*Point two is connected with the paramita of **generosity**; it includes nine slogans. (Slogans 2 through 6 pertain to absolute bodhichitta, and slogans 7 through 10 pertain to relative bodhichitta.)*

## ***2. Regard all dharmas as dreams.***

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

It is intriguing that this slogan comes right at the beginning, because it sets a tone that is a little intimidating. If we want to work with the slogans, we need to allow our reality to be bit more shiftier. This slogan challenges our desire to make our world solid and reliable—solid objects, solid self, solid views, solid ideologies, solid opinions, solid relationships, solid everything!

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

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

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

natural rather than heavy handed or moralistic.

### **Today's practice**

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

## ***3. Examine the nature of unborn awareness.***

IN THE PREVIOUS slogan, “Regard all dharmas as dreams,” we looked outward, at our perception of the world. With this slogan we look inward—we look at the looking itself.

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

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

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

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

### **Today's practice**

When you become aware of a thought or an object of perception,

notice how solid and separate the perceiver and what is being perceived seem to be, and the seeming solidity of this and that, here and there. Then look at the nature of the awareness itself, before the arising of “this” and “that.” Keep questioning. What is it exactly and where does it come from?

## ***4. Self-liberate even the antidote.***

THE PROBLEM this slogan addresses is the tendency to cling to the insight uncovered by the previous two slogans. That is, you may have recognized the dreamlike nature of the world and the ungraspable nature of awareness, but you still cling to that recognition itself, and the sense of having figured all this out. The need to find solid ground is so strong that you can even make the groundless nature of inner and outer experience into some kind of ground. You can make emptiness into a catch-all explanation for everything. It is almost instantaneous—as soon as one thing slips away, you have already grasped onto something else. You may have all sorts of realizations, but as soon as you make a realization yours, it is no longer a realization, but another obstacle to overcome.

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

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

### **Today’s practice**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Today's practice**

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

## ***6. In postmeditation, be a child of illusion.***

PRACTICE CAN BE DIVIDED into two: meditation and postmeditation. Meditation refers to time spent in formal practices such as mindfulness-awareness, and postmeditation refers to what we do the rest of the time. The notion of practice, of being a spiritual practitioner, includes both meditation and postmeditation, which means that practice applies both on and of the meditation cushion.”

Once you embark on the meditative path, once you are called a practitioner, everything you do should be seen as practice. The problem is that this could be taken in a very heavy-handed way, which would cloud ordinary activities with a pall of earnestness. It could be taken in an overly precious way, in which everything takes on deep import and a quality of icky religiosity. The trick is to maintain an attitude of practice and at the same time be light and ordinary.

In this slogan, the particular postmeditation practice is to “be a child of illusion.” It is to play within an environment that we recognize to be shifty and illusory. So rather than trying to make our world solid and predictable, and complaining when that is not the case, we could maintain the glimpses of the illusory nature of experience that arise in meditation practice, and touch in with that open illusory quality in the midst of our daily activities. That looser, more open quality is the ground on which the compassionate actions of the bodhisattva can arise.

### **Today’s practice**

Notice what happens when you move from formal meditation practice to postmeditation practice. Where is the continuity and where is the discontinuity? When you see yourself getting more and more solid and fixed, remember this slogan, take a fresh start, and notice how that affects the quality of your actions.

## ***7. Sending and taking should be practiced alternately. These two should ride the breath.***

ACCORDING TO this slogan, in relation to ourselves, it is a good idea to practice breathing out what we want and breathing in what we don't want. How counterintuitive is that? And in relation to others, it is suggested that we practice breathing out to them our love and healing, and breathing in their pain and sickness. That aspect is a little easier to grasp, as the notion of praying for those we care about is more familiar to us, as people who grew up in a Judeo-Christian culture.

There certainly is a need for more loving-kindness in the world. Who doesn't want to develop that aspect of themselves? And that quality of love and heartfulness is what makes this slogan so appealing. It is tender and gives us a way to hold others in our hearts. It gives us a way to connect with those we care about, even when we may not be able to do so physically, and to help others, even though there doesn't seem to be much we can do.

It feels great to pray for others and to be all warm and loving. But that is not all there is to it. The practice of sending and taking, or tonglen in Tibetan, brings to light the boundaries of that love and caring. If you pray for your friends and family, how about other people and other families? If you pray for those you like or admire, how about those who you dislike or reject? What about those you disagree with, or simply find annoying? What about those who do harm? The idea is to go beyond bias, to include more and more, to let the heart grow and expand.

Tonglen also challenges our internal bias—what we like and dislike, grasp or toss out, expose or cover up, fear or covet. The idea is to practice completely reversing the habit of getting rid of what we don't want and holding on to what we do. It seems like such a nice idea to pray for others, but dealing with ourselves is another whole story. It is quite embarrassing when we begin to see the extent of our self-regard, the level of our attachment, and the amount of energy we invest in the ongoing project of looking out for Number One.

### **Today's practice**

When you practice tonglen for others this week, choose someone



a bit out of your comfort zone as the focus. Not your worst enemy, but someone you know personally and that you dislike.

In your tonglen practice in general, at the end of each breath, drop whatever you have breathed in or out. Let it go completely. Keep a light touch.

## ***8. Three objects, three poisons, and three seeds of virtue.***

### **Three Objects: Labeling our World**

One way of looking at this slogan is that it is about the power of labels. It is about the way we categorize our world and what happens as a result. At a crude level and very quickly we are always sizing people up. We put the people we deal with into mental bins such as “friend,” “enemy” or “not worth bothering with.” We do this both individually and collectively.

There are times when this ability to categorize may be crucially important for our survival, which depends on knowing whom we can trust and whom we need to avoid. Simply recognizing that someone is a friend or enemy or neither in that way is not in itself particularly problematic. But what happens is that those labels take on a life of their own. They change from being simple observations of a current situation or interaction to become unchanging definitions of the way things are. They become the world according to us.

### **Three Poisons: Fixed Reactions to Our Own Labels**

When our labels become solid in that way, we can't see past them, we can only react. And the way we do so, according to this slogan, is in three dysfunctional ways: by grasping, by hatred, and by avoidance or indifference. This trio is traditionally referred to as passion, aggression, and ignorance. As we scan our world, we pick out highlights and focus on those people who further or threaten our self-serving agendas, ignoring the rest. We are always struggling to draw in friends and push away enemies.

### **Three Virtuous Seeds: Taking Responsibility for Our Own Reactions**

We first need to see this pattern at work. Then, when a poison such as hatred arises, instead of blaming the “enemy” that triggered such a re-

sponse, we can see that hatred and the other poisons are our own creation. We can take full responsibility for them. Without the excuse of an external object, the poison is left hanging, with no support. When the three poisons arise, we can take them in and hope that, in doing so, others may be freed of such harmful patterns. In that way, we can transform the three poisons into the three virtuous seeds.

### **Today's practice**

Pay attention to labeling and notice how tenacious such labels are. When you react, notice what you are reacting to and where you place the blame. Explore the connection between the poison and the object.

## ***9. In all activities, train with slogans.***

PRETTY MUCH ANYTHING we do can be joined with slogan practice. If you study and memorize the slogans, you will find that slogans appropriate to the occasion will pop up on their own. You can find ways to remind yourself, as well. You could keep a set of slogan cards on your desk, which you could buy or create in your own style. You could read and study the many commentaries on the practice.

Once you understand the underlying point—to increase loving-kindness and concern for others and to decrease self-absorption and ego fixation—you can make up our own slogan. One suited to where you feel most stuck.

Slogan practice is practical. It applies to everything that we do. There is guidance for meditation practice as well as for all the hassles of daily life. Slogan practice applies to the times when we drop our guard, and we see where we are really coming from. It applies to how we are, as opposed to how we think we should be. The point of mind training is not to smooth everything out, but to work with what is not smooth. It is to work with what is challenging, embarrassing, intense, and confusing. Slogan practice is an uncovering process. It includes everything! In whatever we do, it is possible to flip our perspective from self to other.

## Today's practice

Where do you place the boundaries of your practice? Where do you shut it down? Choose one situation outside that boundary to include in your slogan practice.

# *10. Begin the sequence of sending and taking with yourself.*

YOU MAY WANT to develop greater compassion and the ability to take on the suffering of others, but what about yourself? What about your own suffering? According to this slogan, that is where you start. You begin by recognizing your own suffering.

It is not always easy to look into our own discontent. But if we are to work with others we should try to understand our own suffering as deeply as possible. We need to look into our many layers of suffering, including everything from physical pain, emotional confusion, regrets, anxieties, fears, the whole deal. We cannot hide out. We may prefer to think that we are beyond that, and our situation may be very fortunate, but we need to bring out whatever is there.

Whatever suffering we dig up, from our surface to our depths, we take in as fully as possible. We breathe it in wholeheartedly. It is a part of us, it is real. Why does it fester? What keeps it going?

It is our avoidance and our fear. We don't have to be heroic. We could start by taking just a little bit of our suffering and breathing it in. We could accept it little by little.

Each move we make in this direction, which sounds so difficult, in fact, is a tremendous relief. It is like the story of the return of the prodigal son, where the family is once again whole and there is rejoicing.

The idea of this slogan is to take in your own suffering first, and then expand that to take in the suffering of others. It is to be compassionate to yourself as well as other beings. Seeing clearly the nature of your own suffering is a way to understand more clearly the suffering of others.

## Today's practice

In your sending and taking practice, this week place attention on your own situation, breathing in various forms of suffering and breathing out to yourself loving-kindness, openness, and strength. To conclude, reflect on other beings who suffer in similar ways and extend your loving-kindness to them as well.

## POINT THREE

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### Transformation of bad circumstances into the path of enlightenment

*Point three is connected with the paramita  
of **patience**; it includes six slogans.*

### ***11. When the world is filled with evil, transform all mishaps into the path of bodhi.***

WHEN THINGS go wrong, when we encounter obstacles, the last thing on our minds is the dharma. Instead, what is the first thing on our minds? Ourselves! It is all about how we are being inconvenienced, burdened, put upon, attacked, misunderstood, rejected—you name it. Not only do we lose track of the path, but our concern for others goes into hibernation as we focus front and center on our own particular problem.

Is it possible to use the very obstacles that block us and cause us to close down as a means of awakening? If so, it would be great, as there is certain to be no shortage of mishaps, and who can think of a time when the world was not filled with evil? When all was harmonious and at peace?

According to this slogan, you do not have to pretend that everything is okay. And you do not have to wait for things to get better in order to practice. Instead of viewing mishaps as personal attacks, you can include them in your practice. You might even welcome them, for it is when you face difficulties, not when things are going smoothly, that you learn the most. That is what tests the strength of your practice.

Transformation does not mean that all our problems go away or that we overcome all our difficulties. It does not mean that the world is suddenly all rosy. It means that the path of dharma is big enough to accommodate whatever arises, good or bad. When you work with mishaps

using the tools of mindfulness and loving-kindness, your relationship to such mishaps is transformed—and in the process, so are you.

### Today's practice

As obstacles arise throughout the day, pay particular attention to your immediate response and the assumptions embedded in that response. Where is the awakening and where do you get stuck?

## *12. Drive all blames into one.*

WE LIVE IN A SOCIETY and world filled with blames and complaints of all kinds. When something goes wrong—and there is always something going wrong—we look for someone to blame. If we can't find who is responsible, and our urge to blame is still lingering around, we choose someone willy-nilly. It could be anyone. Fill in the blanks, "It's the \_\_\_\_\_! (Jews! Women drivers! Husbands! Kids! Corporations! ...)

It is true that if we are trying to solve a problem, we need to uncover its source, to discover who or what is responsible. That is pragmatic, and gives us a way to correct the problem. But our attempt to find someone to blame is often not all that straightforward and not very helpful, either. Think of all the intractable seemingly never-ending conflicts in the world, with no solution in sight, and each side convinced they are right. "You are to blame!" "No, it's all your fault!" And it goes on and on. This same pattern occurs in the small conflicts of daily life, from the playground to the family, to the workplace. The blaming game is continuous. It has a life of its own and leads nowhere.

Conveniently, blaming others allows us to avoid looking into our own role in the problems and conflicts we encounter. We look outward, but we do not look within. And even in looking outward, once we have assigned the blame, we go no further. So we do not get to the root of the problem. We stop short, satisfied that we are off the hook and someone else is at fault.

This slogan is quite radical. Instead of blaming others, you blame yourself. Even if it is not your fault, you take the blame. It is important to distinguish this practice from neurotic self-blaming or the regretful fixation on your own mistakes and how much you at fault. It also does not imply that you should not point out wrongdoing or blow the whistle

on corruption. Instead, as you go about your life, you simply notice the urge to blame others and you reverse it.

### **Today's practice**

Pay attention to how blaming arises and what patterns it takes. See what happens when you take on the blame yourself. Notice what changes in your own experience and in what you observe around you.

## ***13. Be grateful to everyone.***

THIS SLOGAN is about gratitude. Gratitude does not seem to be that front and central nowadays. Instead of appreciating what we have, we keep focusing on what we do not have. We are filled with grudges and resentments and have strong opinions about what we deserve and what is our due. We may be taught to say “please” and “thank you,” but what have we been taught about appreciation?

In our commodified world, we see things as material for our consumption. We don't ask, we just take. And in the blindness of our wealth and privilege, we don't see how much we have to be grateful for. We take all that we have for granted and we live in a very ungrateful world.

This slogan assumes that we at least have basic gratitude for the good things that befall us. It then challenges us to extend that feeling of gratitude to include not just gratitude for what is positive, but gratitude for the negative also. Personally, I think we need to work on our basic gratitude, first. Simply adding this dimension to the way we view things would be a great improvement.

Conventional gratitude is based on distinguishing what we like from what we do not, good fortune from bad fortune, success from failure, opportunities from obstacles. By practicing conventional gratitude, we may begin to better appreciate times of good fortune and opportunity. But what about all the obstacles, unpleasant people, and difficulties in our life?

According to this slogan, we should be especially grateful for having to deal with annoying people and difficult situations, because without them we would have nothing to work with. Without them, how could we practice patience, exertion, mindfulness, loving-kindness or compassion? It is by dealing with such challenges that we grow and develop. So

we should be very grateful to have them.

### Today's practice

To begin with, reflect on the things in your life for which you are grateful. Notice what happens when you acknowledge all that you have to be grateful for. Now reflect on something difficult, the kind of situation or person that would not inspire conventional gratitude. Can you extend your gratitude to include that as well? What happens when you do so?

## ***14. Seeing confusion as the four kayas is unsurpassable shunyata protection.***

WITH THIS SLOGAN, once again we are joining what we usually consider as undesirable with practice. In this case it is confusion. At first glimpse, this slogan seems rather obscure and even esoteric. What kind of confusion? What are the four kayas? What is shunyata, anyway, and what form of protection can it provide? Protection from what?

In everyday experience, it is often hard to pin down what exactly is happening and why. Whenever we begin to figure things out, there is always some kind of slippage. Things begin to make sense, but just almost and not quite. We keep trying to chip away at our confusion, to straighten it out, to get rid of it, imagining ourselves somehow coming out on the other side, into a nonconfused state where everything is workable. But according to this slogan, rather than getting rid of our confusion, what we really need to do is to examine it and in doing so transform our view of it. We need to look below the surface to how we perceive reality altogether.

Basically, the point here is that if we really look closely at the way our mind works, even in the midst of confusion, we always find the same process: one of continual awakening. This process is described in terms of what are called the four kayas or "bodies." Through careful attention and meditative practice we begin to see how every perception begins with uncertainty and openness (dharmakaya); then starts to come into focus (nirmanakaya); then develops energy and begins to come together (sambhogakaya), and finally clicks, synthesized as immediate present-moment experience (svabhavikakaya). It is as though confusion is awakening in disguise.



This pattern of continual awakening (seeing confusion as the four kayas) is paired with one of continual letting go (supreme shunyata protection). So in this slogan, not only do we transform how we view confusion, but we also see that although it may seem solid and intractable, fundamentally it is empty. Combining all this, when we see everything as empty and awake, we have no ground to defend and nothing to protect—which is the most excellent protection of all.

### Today's practice

In your sitting practice, pay attention to the arising and dissolving of perceptions. Notice how your sense of self seems to arise simultaneously with each perception, ready to respond to any threat; notice the subtle undertone of fear. What are you actually protecting?

## *15. Four practices are the best of methods.*

THIS SLOGAN is very straightforward and action oriented. It lays out four specific practices to incorporate in our everyday life.

1. The first practice is **to accumulate merit**. This is pretty tricky. It sounds as if you should try to pile up good deeds as credentials, like scouts collecting merit badges. But here the idea of merit has a twist. It is not just that if you are good you will be rewarded. Conventional acts of merit such as practicing good deeds, revering sacred images and texts, and supporting the sangha, are encouraged here as a way to disrupt egotism, not to build a holy persona that is even worse than normal egomania.

2. The second practice is **to lay down evil deeds**. You do not need to be heavy-handed or guilt ridden about it. You just need to reach the point of getting tired of your neurosis, embarrassed and fed up enough to do something about it. Then you can refrain from what you have been doing, and let go not just of the evil but the evil doer as well.

3. The third practice is **to offer to the dōns**. Dōns are sudden attacks of neurosis that seem to come from nowhere in a sudden burst. When you are taken aback by such a dōn, the idea is to take that as a gift. It shakes you out of your complacency so you should be grateful.

4. The fourth practice is **to make offering to the *dharmapalas*, or “*dharma protectors*.”** Dharmapalas are said to protect the integrity of the teachings and keep an eye on practitioners who lose their way. They are guardians of awareness. When we are caught in self-deception or unmindfulness, the world strikes back. The idea is that we should not only appreciate that, but invite it.

### Today’s practice

When you do something good, try to remove any add-on of self-congratulation or righteousness. When you make a mistake, try to remove any add-on of self-punishment or guilt. Instead, simply commit yourself to refraining from such actions in the future. Tune in to whatever arises as a way to reconnect with kindness and awareness.

## ***16. Whatever you meet unexpectedly, join with meditation.***

WHEN OUR LIVES are going relatively smoothly and predictably it is easier to maintain our mindfulness. But when things are happening fast, it is hard to remember to join what we encounter with meditation. It is also easier to think of others if we ourselves are not currently either in the midst of some crisis or caught up in some amazing opportunity. But it seems that no matter how hard we try to stay on an even keel, we keep being blindsided by unexpected events.

According to this slogan, taking an attitude of compassion and awareness does not need to be some formal or long drawn out process. It can be done in an instant, in the tiny gap that occurs at the very moment we are surprised by something unexpected, whether positive or negative. Of course, that is the same point where we are most apt to lose it.

When we are at that point of just about to lose it, before we have gone into reaction mode or dragged out our usual arsenal of habits, we can pause. We can interrupt that momentum. Instead of joining whatever we meet with our bundle of preconceptions, self-absorptions, fixed views, and programmed responses, we can immediately join it with meditation. We can insert awareness and compassion.

Throughout the slogan teachings, we keep being reminded that each and every situation is an opportunity for growth and awakening. To take

advantage of such opportunities, we need to keep expanding the boundaries of our meditation to include more and more aspects of our life. By cultivating an attitude of ongoing mindfulness, by becoming genuine practitioners, it is as if we create a well of loving-kindness and awareness that we can tap even in the midst of sudden changes and challenges.

### Today's practice

In order to join experience and meditation, it is helpful to begin by noticing when that does not happen. So today's practice is to pay attention to "losing it." Strangely, simply seeing such moments more clearly, without too much judgment or commentary, is a way to extend an attitude of practice more consistently and deeply into our ongoing activities.

## POINT FOUR

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### Showing the utilization of practice in one's whole life

*Point four is connected with the paramita of  
**exertion**; it includes two slogans.*

## ***17. Practice the five strengths, the condensed heart instructions.***

THE TWO SLOGANS of Point Four are a blanket approach: you are blanketing your entire life with exertion. It takes exertion to live properly and it also takes exertion to die properly. No matter how much we have studied or how many ideas we may have, without exertion, our understanding will be superficial, not transformative.

The first of the two (Slogan 17) describes exertion in terms of five components: determination, familiarization, virtue, reproach, and aspiration.

1. Determination. First, instead of drifting through each day in

a haze, you should consciously choose a course for your activities. You should set a direction and try to stick with it, whether it is for an hour, a day, or a longer period of time.

2. Familiarization. By engaging with exertion over and over again, the practice of mindfulness and loving-kindness becomes familiar territory for you, and is no longer a big deal. It is a part of you and not a project, but a way of life.

3. Virtue. In terms of loving-kindness, you keep setting your sights higher, and are not content with a half-hearted or partial approach to practice.

4. Reproach. With reproach you are willing to call a spade a spade. You recognize that it is your fascination with yourself, or your ego fixation, that causes you so much suffering and keeps you from developing loving-kindness and compassion. You don't try to pretend otherwise. You are willing to reproach the ego and are determined to tame it and undermine its power.

5. Aspiration. Every time you practice, you should end by recommitting yourself to the service of others. You should aspire to attain enlightenment and cultivate mindfulness and loving-kindness so that you are capable to saving yourself and others, not matter what obstacles may arise.

### **Today's practice**

Pay attention to how you decide to spend your time. How much of your activity each day is intentional? Choose a day and try deliberately setting an intention to place whatever you are doing that day within the context of mindfulness and loving-kindness practice.

## ***18. The mahayana instruction for ejection of consciousness at death is the five strengths: how you conduct yourself is important.***

THE PREVIOUS SLOGAN was about how to live, and this slogan is about how to die. It may seem that living and dying are two very different

things, but they are completely interconnected. We learn how to live by learning how to die and we learn how to die by learning how to live. Each informs the other.

According to this slogan “how you conduct yourself is important.” This is actually quite provocative. We usually divide our experience, viewing some things we do as a big deal and very important and viewing other things as trivial or insignificant. It is easy to think of dying as an end to our ability to do anything of significance and living as what really matters and where we get things done. But the idea here is that how we conduct ourselves in every single action matters and is important in and of itself.

As in the previous slogan, the point is that acting properly takes strength and exertion. To start with, you have to set your mind in the right direction. If you are just drifting along in a haze, you will easily be thrown off course. It takes real determination to maintain a sane and compassionate approach even in the face of death. When we are threatened, it is so easy to lose both our sanity and our compassion.

Determination goes a long way, and it gains even more strength to the degree that you develop an ongoing habit of mindfulness. By practice, by repetition, mindfulness becomes familiar territory for you. It is like the old joke: How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice, practice, practice. Through practice you begin to uncover obstacles that may arise in facing death, such as fear and attachment, so you have a way of dealing with them. And when you really look into such obstacles, you see that they can all be traced back to the fixed belief in a solid separate ego, which seems to be being threatened. Examining even further, you realize that there is no such thing as a solid separate ego—it has no true existence, so nothing, in fact, dies.

### **Today’s practice**

Spend some time contemplating the things that make you afraid, and how you react. Contemplate times you are in pain, and how you deal with it. Notice whatever causes you to lose your mindfulness. Determine to hold the perspective of mindfulness and compassion even in the midst of fear, pain, or dying.

## POINT FIVE

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### Evaluation of mind training

*Point five is connected with the paramita of **meditation**; it includes four slogans.*

#### ***19. All dharma agrees at one point.***

THIS SLOGAN raises the question of how we evaluate ourselves and others. How do we tell if someone is the genuine article or a charlatan? How do we know if we ourselves are going off the rails in our spiritual practice?

There are a lot of trappings in the realm of spirituality. Some teachers have many followers and others only a few. There are all sorts of costumes, titles, and robes. Teachers compete for students, and students evaluate teachers and sanghas by all kinds of criteria. Sometimes one style of Buddhism becomes trendy for a while and then fades out of fashion. Cultural and gender biases abound. People speculate on how enlightened this teacher or that may be, and look for signs of official recognition, status, and power. So what should we look for in a teacher or a sangha?

Looking inward, it sometimes seems that we are making progress, and at other times it seems that the whole endeavor has been a waste of time. It all depends on our mood. Sometimes all we notice is that years go by and we seem to be no different than when we began—or even worse. At other times, we notice that we have become a bit more calm, maybe, or a bit more aware, or even a bit more kind. We are discouraged one day and inspired the next. So how do we know how we are doing? What should we be looking for?

According to this slogan, in looking outward, it is important not to be misled by trappings of popularity or spiritual power, and in looking inward it is important not to be caught up with our shifting moods or superficial changes. Instead, we must never forget the essential point of the dharma altogether, which is to give up ego clinging. The purpose of all dharma is simply to overcome ego. That is the one and only true measure of a teacher or a practitioner.

## Today's practice

As you go about your day, try to pay attention to the points when your solid sense of separateness is provoked. Notice the thoughts and sensations that arise with reactions such as defensiveness and territoriality. Pay attention to the thoughts and sensations arise when something has drawn you out, beyond your self-absorption.

## *20. Of the two witnesses, hold the principal one.*

THIS SLOGAN is about aloneness and confidence. It gets to a core issue on the path of practice, which is the fact that each of us must travel it alone and by ourselves. Of course we may be in a community or a sangha, but within a sangha of one-hundred members, there are a hundred different paths. We may be in one tradition, but the way we each go about it is unique. Life altogether has that same quality. We come in alone, we go out alone, and in between no matter how many friends and acquaintances we may have, we are still alone at a fundamental level.

It is hard to accept this kind of existential aloneness in ourselves or in others. We want people to really know us, and we want to have some way of truly understanding others. But no matter how much we bare our hearts, we can never convey the fullness of our experiential reality. And no matter how much we probe, we can never fully penetrate another person's experience.

According to this slogan, if we want feedback as to how we are doing, we must rely on our own judgment. But it is unsettling to realize that no one else really knows what is going on with us. So we look around for confirmation. We look to others for feedback and to find clues as to how we are doing from others. Instead of looking directly at our own experience, we try to find it in what is reflected back to us from outside. But that reflection is not all that trustworthy. People are easily fooled by appearances and judge what is going on according to their own biases and preconceptions.

It is easy to become so used to looking for the approval of others that we lose confidence in our own self-knowledge. But according to this slogan, we must learn to trust what we know and not rely so heavily on

others. Only we really know when we are being phony or genuine, aware or unaware, compassionate or uncompassionate. No matter what may be going on at the surface, and how confused we may feel, deep down we know exactly what is going on and what we are up to. That is the witness we must hold.

### **Today's practice**

Pay attention to the loneliness of experience. Notice the difference between seeking for confirmation and direct witnessing. What makes you trust or distrust your own experience?

## ***21. Always maintain only a joyful mind.***

JOY DOESN'T have that good a reputation in our culture. We tend to associate it with idiocy or with people who are spaced out or stupid, people who are blithely ignorant of the state of the world or simply too self-absorbed to bother. How can you be joyful when there are so many problems? What about the truth of suffering, the problem of greed and craving? What about warfare, oppression, prejudice, and on and on? Furthermore, joy seems boring. There is no drama in it. For excitement, we need conflict, anger, and intensity.

Clearly this slogan is not referring to an ignorance-is-bliss type of joy. And it does not imply that everything is okay. Buddhism is known for telling it like it is and for not being afraid to face hard truths—and the truth is that everything is not okay. Yet we are still advised to be joyful.

We have so many assumptions as to what it means to be mindful and what it means to be compassionate. We take things so seriously—we take ourselves so seriously! This slogan challenges that approach. It is a direct challenge to our usual earnest and heavy-handed approach to the path, to the world, and to ourselves. It is a challenge to the assumption that the way to fight heavy-handed problems is with heavy-handed solutions. And it is a challenge to our desire to make everything a big deal and of utmost importance and seriousness.

According to this slogan, we should not practice the dharma with gritted teeth, but with delight. We should appreciate our good fortune



in having found a teaching that not only talks about uprooting suffering and its cause, but also shows us how to do so. We should have a little humor.

This does not just apply to when things are going well, and it does not mean that we should be disengaged. Instead, we could touch in to a sense of lightness and joy repeatedly, in whatever we do, no matter what is going on.

### **Today's practice**

For today's practice, I would simply like to pass on a practice I received from Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche which is simplicity itself, but oddly effective: No matter what you are feeling or what is going on, smile at least once a day.

## ***22. If you can practice even when distracted, you are well trained.***

WHEN YOU BEGIN to do mindfulness or bodhichitta practice, one of the first things you notice is how distracted you are. It can seem as if a veritable avalanche of thoughts, fleeting moods, memories, plans, judgments, and all sorts of mental folderol is pouring through your mind continually. People say such things as "I was fine before I started meditating, but now my mind is just a jumble." However, none of that is really new, it was just never noticed before.

Mindfulness practice uncovers how flighty the mind can be and how easily it is captivated willy-nilly by whatever arises: a thought, a sensation, a sound, any old thing. As we continue to observe the workings of our mind, its bobbing and weaving become familiar territory. But then what? What do we do with all those distractions?

The goal of mindfulness is to overcome distractedness and learn how to focus the mind. The idea is to hold the mind to an object of our choosing, rather than be at the mercy of a mind that is hip-hopping all over the place. It is not easy to steady the mind, to not be distracted. To tame or settle the mind takes effort, it takes practice. So what could it possibly mean to practice even while distracted? Isn't the idea not to be distracted?

Here is where the interesting twist of this slogan comes in. According to this slogan, instead of waging a kind of battle with distractions you can co-opt them as supports for your practice. It is like setting a default tendency toward mindfulness and bodhichitta, so that the moment a distraction arises, it brings us right back. The instant we notice we have lost our attention, we have regained it. So for a well-trained mind, when sudden distractions arise, they do not interrupt your practice, but reinforce it.

### Today's practice

In your practice and during your daily activities, pay particular attention to the points at which you lose your mindfulness. In terms of bodhichitta practice, pay particular attention to the points at which you lose your openness or kindness. Notice the process of losing it and coming back.

## POINT SIX

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### Disciplines of mind training

*Point six is connected with the  
**prajña paramita**; it includes sixteen slogans.*

## ***23. Always abide by the three basic principles.***

ON THE SPIRITUAL PATH, over and over again it is a good idea to keep coming back to a few basic principles. By doing so, you can bound your actions with discipline. You can keep your practice on track. It is a bit like setting up bumpers on the side of a bowling alley, so your ball stays in its lane and does not fall into the gutter. This slogan suggests you work with three basic principles: honoring your commitments, refraining from outrageous actions, and developing patience.

**Honoring your commitments.** In general, this means that when you make a commitment to train your mind, you do not back down but

you stick with it. More formally, it means that you keep the two basic vows of mind training: the refuge vow and the bodhisattva vow. In the first, you vow to work with yourself and to develop mindfulness and awareness. In the second, you vow to work with others and to develop wisdom and compassion. When you first take such vows, they are highly inspiring and a bit intimidating, but it is easy to drift away and forget what you have vowed to do. So it is important to refresh those commitments daily.

**Refraining from outrageous actions.** The advice here is to be steady and modest. It is not necessary to be all that dramatic, and you do not need to draw attention to yourself. You should recognize the desire to be seen as special, to be noticed as “advanced” or “spiritual” as a stumbling block, and not give in to its seduction.

**Developing patience.** Mind training is not something you zoom through and then move on to something else. It is a lifelong occupation. You need to be patient and without bias as you go about it, both with yourself and with others. You should know yourself and not think more or less of yourself, but be straightforward, steady and realistic.

### Today's practice

What does it mean to make a commitment? What helps you to maintain the commitments you have made, and what throws you off track?

## *24. Change your attitude, but remain natural.*

WHAT ATTITUDE is this slogan talking about, and why should we change it? What is an attitude anyway? It seems to me that an attitude is our customary way of thinking about things, which is usually reflected in our actions. An attitude is a kind of mental container that shapes and colors whatever is put into it. Your attitude not only colors what comes into the mind, but leads you to attend to some things and be completely oblivious of others. It affects what comes into your head as well as what happens thereafter.

This slogan targets one attitude in particular: the attitude that you yourself are more important than others. The attitude that you come first and others come second. It is rather embarrassing, but crude as it may

sound, most of us carry this attitude or assumption with us all the time. It is definitely our default position, and deeply ingrained.

Mind training is all about changing that fundamental stance. The practice is to make an effort to care for others as much as you care for yourself. Even more radically, it is to shift your attitude so that your concern for the welfare of others actually pops up first, rather than a distant second.

This kind of attitude adjustment seems like a pretty big deal, heroic even. But according to the slogan, it is important not to get caught up in the big-dealness. The slogans altogether have an odd way of combining radical challenges with the suggestion just to relax. There is absolutely no room for exhibitionism or spiritual posturing. Slogan practice is not focused on grand gestures. Instead, the idea is to make small but consistent moves in the direction of awareness and loving kindness. And then...get over yourself and just relax!

### **Today's practice**

When you notice your attitude turning inward, fixating on yourself, give it a gentle nudge and turn it outward to include other beings. Don't punish yourself for your selfishness or give yourself a gold star for your altruism. Simply apply the slogan and move on.

## ***25. Don't talk about injured limbs.***

IN THE ORDINARY sense, this slogan simply means not to make fun of others or draw attention to their defects and problems. Rather than dwelling on what is wrong with people, which only exaggerates and perpetuates their weaknesses, we should remember that they are doing the best they can. We should accept them as they are.

It seems to be endlessly entertaining to dwell on other people's faults. There are so many to choose from. We can take pride in how astute we are and how wittily critical. Each little jab makes us feel just a tad more superior. For some reason it seems so much easier to pick out what is wrong with someone than what is right, and far juicier. But that approach not only exaggerates the other person's problem but also heightens our own smugness and arrogance.

This slogan does not imply that you should not notice the problems

or deformities people have, or that you should pretend everything is okay. It does not mean you should simply vague out or not be interested in what is going on around you. The point is to examine how you react to such things.

It may seem a kindergarten level of advice to be told not to poke fun of people. Of course, most of us don't outright do that. But at a subtler level, we are both fascinated and repulsed by other people's deformities and weak points. This leads us to dwell on those defects, and in turn, our focus on their defects turns the people themselves into kinds of defect-appendages. So although we may not be talking behind their backs or poking fun at them, we are still distancing ourselves from them. We are engaging in a technique of subtle rejection.

This slogan is based on combining awareness with acceptance. It points to a way of viewing the world that takes people, no matter what condition they are in, at face value pure and simple. You don't look away, you don't stare, you don't poke fun or make awkward jokes or small talk. When you see people in this straightforward way, you are not embarrassed by their ugliness, weakness, or infirmity. Instead, you simply meet them where they are.

### **Today's practice**

This slogan is great because most of us have people on our lives with such big defects that we can't see past them. Think of a person you are embarrassed to be around, whose flaws are obvious. See if you can expand your attention, so that you can see past that person's defects, and past your reactions and ideas about those defects, to the person themselves.

## ***26. Don't ponder others.***

THIS SLOGAN is very similar to the last, in that it points to how easy, entertaining, and totally distracting it can be to muse about what is wrong with everybody else. The habit of faultfinding is part of a larger pattern of insecurity in which we always feel the need to compare ourselves to other people. It is as though we need to convince ourselves that we are okay, which we can only do indirectly, in comparison to people who are less okay.

There is an old blues song with the line, "Before you 'cuse me, take a

look at yourself.” In mind training that is the focus: taking a good look at yourself. However, the point is not to dwell on your own faults—or your own virtues, for that matter. It is to see yourself and others in a clear and unbiased way. It is to see, but not to dwell on the seeing, as though you were a cow chewing its cud.

The point of this slogan is that you should trust your own experience, and not always have to compare it to that of other people. It is to loosen the tendency to be so fascinated with what is wrong with everybody else that you are unable to see what is right and good about them. Instead of covering up your own faults and highlighting the faults of others, you should do the exact opposite.

Strangely, when you are not afraid to uncover your own flaws, and you are not constantly comparing yourself to others, it is a great relief. When you look at yourself, you no longer have to convince yourself of anything and you have nothing to hide. And when you look at other people, you are not doing so with the ulterior motive of using what you see to prop up your own feeling of superiority and virtue.

### **Today’s practice**

As you go about your day, with the people you encounter, pay attention to what comes up in your mind. Pay particular attention to the qualities of comparison mind and faultfinding mind. What is the difference between simply seeing a flaw and dwelling on it or using it to prop yourself up?

## ***27. Work with the greatest defilements first.***

THIS IS A GREAT slogan for procrastinators. It is all about looking into those things we avoid, that we put off, that we somehow never end up dealing with. In particular it is about defilements. But what are defilements? According to this slogan, defilements refer to patterns of thought, habits, and emotions that sap our energy and keep us from thriving. Defilements prevent us from awakening our wisdom or compassion. They pollute what is by nature pure, and block our instinct to grow and develop. They are powerful inner obstacles. Of course we may

have outer obstacles, as well, but the idea is to start with what is close at hand, something we could actually have some influence over.

On a mundane level, you may notice that some things always seem to end up at the bottom of your to do list, and just stay there. Sometimes they migrate to a new improved to-do list, but once again they end up on the bottom. This slogan is a reminder to shake this pattern up and to go straight to the most difficult task. Although we may have a variety of things to do, it is pretty easy to figure out what that particular task might be. We can feel the quality of avoidance in our bodies.

At a deeper level, this slogan challenges us to analyze what really sets us back. We need to do so persistently enough to expose our core obstacles, to try to get to the root of what holds us down. It challenges to dig deeply enough to uncover our greatest defilements. And having done so, we need to stick with that defilement and keep working on it until we are free of it.

This slogan also points to an on-the-spot way of working with our situation in which we do not put anything off, but we deal with whatever defilement arises simply and directly. That is, in cooking up compassion, nothing is moved to the back burner.

### **Today's practice**

What patterns of thought or habit do you have that block your development of wisdom and insight? What is your most consistent and frequent roadblock? Take some time to reflect on this and on how you might begin to work with it.

## ***28. Abandon any hope of fruition.***

THIS SLOGAN undercuts our attachment to either success or failure. It is a kind of positive giving up. Abandoning any hope of fruition does not mean abandoning our projects and ambitions. Instead it points to a way of going about things that is present focused rather than fixated on results.

When we do anything, we usually do it for a purpose. We have some aim in mind and we hope to accomplish that aim. We hope to succeed rather than fail. That is fine. But what then happens is that our thoughts of success or failure begin to overpower the task at hand. The fear of fail-

ure can make us timid and unwilling to take risk our clinging to a successful outcome can make us more and more tight. We become impatient and grit our teeth trying to force our desired outcome. The hope of fruition and the fear of failure go hand-in-hand.

So much education and so much of the conventional thinking about how to motivate people is based on that model of hope and fear. We learn to expect some kind of reward or confirmation any time we succeed and to expect some form of punishment when we do not. But according to this slogan, it is better to abandon that whole approach. In that way, when we act, there are no hidden agendas or ulterior motives.

Even the practice of developing loving kindness through slogan practice could be tainted by this desire to be recognized and confirmed. Our attempts to develop loving kindness may begin to be more about cultivating an image of being wise and compassionate than actually helping other people. Because of our need to confirm ourselves, to prove to ourselves that our efforts have been successful, we may try to force a reaction of appreciation or gratitude on those we are supposedly selflessly helping. According to this slogan, there is more room for real kindness and compassion to arise if we let go of our attachment to results, or at least loosen it a little.

### **Today's practice**

How is it possible to maintain your focus, to “keep your eyes on the prize,” without getting fixated on results? As you go about your activities, pay attention to the difference between having a goal and being taken over by your hopes, fears, and speculations.

## ***29. Abandon poisonous food.***

THE IMAGE of poisonous food suggests an experience that is seemingly nourishing, but in fact can kill you. In terms of slogan practice, this image refers in particular to the poison of ego-fixation and its power to transform the nutritious food of loving-kindness practice into poison.

In Buddhism there is a great respect for the power of self-centeredness to co-opt even the most magnanimous or sublime experience for its own self-aggrandizement. The idea of ego is not so much a thing as a habit of using whatever experience arises to solidify and prop up our



feeling of a solid and separate identity. It is literally a form of ingesting experience to fatten our own self-absorption.

The realm of spirituality is an especially seductive form of poisonous food. In the great spiritual traditions, there are yummy practices, exotic rituals, beautiful liturgies, profound texts. We can attend workshops galore, hang out with brilliant teachers, even become teachers ourselves. We can gather students and get V.I. P. treatment and at the same time still feel totally virtuous and not caught, like others, in trivial concerns. With each helping of this meal, we build up our feeling of being special, important, popular, compassionate, and profound. We can even become wealthy.

As we build up our spiritual institutions, we can feed an even larger ego, a collective ego. We can turn the pure and nourishing food of genuine spirituality and practice into the poisonous food of power mongering, sectarianism, unthinking allegiance to dogma, and groupthink. We can create cozy cocoons and wallow in our smugness and superiority.

Eating poisonous food feeds the ego and poisons our spiritual freshness and innocence. Instead of dissolving our estrangement from ourselves, each other, and the environment in which we live, eating such poisonous food hardens our differences and heightens our confusion. By eating poisonous food, instead of lessening our self-deception, we are fattening it up.

### **Today's practice**

Whether you follow a spiritual tradition, or you are affiliated with no tradition, reflect on the how you approach the spiritual path and the cultivation of loving kindness. Notice how easy it is to slip into approaching spirituality as just another commodity, bought and sold in the marketplace. Pay special attention to how nutritious food turns into poison.

## ***30. Don't be so predictable.***

WHEN WE WORK with mind training and the development of bodhichitta, we are interrupting our usual way of going about business. We find that many of our actions are programmed and extremely predictable and we notice that in other people as well. This is why it is so easy to push each other's buttons. It is why it is so easy to manipulate and to be manipulated.

If we do not make an effort to do otherwise, if we do not pay attention, then much of what we do will be in the form of automatic reactions. We can see this whole process as it is happening, although often we do not. We might recognize it in the sinking feeling of “Here I go again.” We might see it coming, but our reaction is so fast that we can’t stop ourselves.

This kind of predictability is fueled by the self-centered undercurrent of fascination with our own concerns and disinterest in others except to the extent that they either threaten or feed our own desires. When someone does us harm, we hang onto our grudge about that for a very long time. But when someone helps us, we take it for granted, and soon forget it.

We do not have to be so programmed and predictable. If we cultivate awareness enough to step back a bit from simply reacting, we can insert a gap or a pause before being carried away. In that little gap there is the freedom to respond in a fresh way, less predetermined. When we respond from a more dispassionate perspective, and are not just caught in the game of defending or promoting our ego, it is as though a different world opens up. We begin to see how our limited focus has prevented us from developing a bigger vision of what is going on and how best to respond to it.

### **Today’s practice**

When you feel threatened, don’t get defensive, pause, and then react. When you are praised, don’t just lap it up, pause, and then react. What do you notice? Explore the contrast between using experience to further your own agenda and seeing it from a broader perspective.

## ***31. Don’t malign others.***

WHEN WE MALIGN someone, our intention is to cause harm. Our words are spiteful and ill-spirited. There is a saying that “sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” But in fact words do have power and they certainly can hurt.

In working with the slogans, we are working not only with our actions, but with what is behind them. For instance, when we say something, we should ask ourselves why we are saying it, and for what pur-

pose. Will what we say help the situation or not? Are we trying to connect with someone or get rid of them? Are we trying to help them or to destroy them? Or maybe we are talking just to talk, to fill the space because we are uneasy with the silence.

If we need to malign others to make us feel good about ourselves by comparison, we will never feel all that great. And at the other extreme, when we encounter people who are exceptional, that approach will make us feel pathetic in comparison. According to this slogan we should stop that whole destructive approach.

Not maligning does not mean that we do not notice differences in people. It does not mean that we should not recognize people's hateful or destructive attitudes and weaknesses when we encounter them or that we should not speak up. Everything does not just become a mush. But when we see other people's problems without encumbering our perception by the need to prop up our own insecure ego, we can respond more directly and appropriately. By stopping the habit of maligning, not only will we do less harm to others, but we will also begin to free ourselves from the need for such props.

### **Today's practice**

Pay attention to your speech and to how you talk about and to other people. What is the difference between speaking critically and using speech to harm or to destroy?

## ***32. Don't wait in ambush.***

THIS SLOGAN is about scheming mind, the mind that never forgets a slight or an insult. Instead it keeps eating away at us, sometimes for years, and even decades. This unforgiving attitude can cause us to cut ourselves off from long-term friends or relatives. It can become so rigid and fixed, that even on our deathbed we refuse to let it go. Many people carry such grudges for life. Beyond simply carrying a grudge, we begin to plot our revenge. We wait patiently for just the right moment, a time when that person has let down their guard, or when they are in a weakened position, and then we let them have it.

That is what waiting in ambush is all about. We think, "Just wait, I'll get you back!" You can see this pattern on the individual level and on a

larger scale, within organizations or between nations. First one side is insulted, then the tables are turned, and the other side gets insulted back. First you are the underdog, and you scheme about all the things you will do to those who disrespect you once you are in power. And once you are in power, you mistreat them just like they mistreated you.

It is easy to get caught up in a cycle where we dwell on the many insults we have endured. We stew about them and how unfair and undeserved they are. We dwell on that and let it fester, and slowly we build our case for ambush. We lay out our plans and wait, ready to pounce. But we have let the insult take us over, and by doing so we have become a slave to the actions of others. Those remembered insults we hold onto so tightly have taken over our mind. By working with this slogan, we can free ourselves from that unhealthy pattern.

### **Today's practice**

In the present, notice your response when somebody insults you. What is the physical sensation and what thoughts arise in your mind? Looking back, do a grudge survey. How many grudges have you been carrying with you, and for how long? How does it feel to carry a grudge, and how does it feel when the grudge softens or dissolves or you consciously let it go?

## ***33. Don't bring things to a painful point.***

WE ALL HAVE lots of faults, and it is easy to get caught up in dwelling on them. It is easy to see all the things that are wrong about everyone and everything else as well. We may feel that we are doing somebody a favor by pointing out to them where they fall short, convincing ourselves that we are only doing so for their own benefit. But focusing on people's most vulnerable areas, their most painful points, can undermine their confidence and their ability to go forward. Likewise, focusing on our own faults can be equally discouraging.

What happens with this focus on the negative is that our critical attitude becomes so entrenched that we can only see what is wrong, and we become blind to what is right. By critiquing other people, we may feel good about ourselves in comparison. But in order to keep feeling

good, we need to keep finding new targets for our faultfinding, in order to shore ourselves up. Deep down we do not trust ourselves, so we need to keep convincing ourselves in this way.

According to this slogan, instead of pouncing on people's weaknesses and vulnerabilities, we should be providing encouragement and support for their strengths. That is what we should notice and point out, not just what is wrong. The idea is that it is more skillful to encourage positive qualities than to criticize what is negative. With this approach, we are not using others to heighten our own confidence nor are we undermining other people's confidence by reminding them of their inadequacies.

### **Today's practice**

Notice the quality of faultfinding, which can take place on a light level or on a more going-for-the-jugular scale. When you find yourself caught in this pattern, notice your motivation. When you have difficulty with a person, can you see beyond their faults? Can you find a positive potential to build on, even if it seems small?

## ***34. Don't transfer the ox's load to the cow.***

THIS SLOGAN is about weaseling out of our own duties and responsibilities. It is about passing the buck. In the first place, we avoid committing ourselves, and when we do make a commitment, instead of following through, we prefer to hand it off. We are so concerned with our rights and what we feel we are owed, and we think very little about what we owe to others and to the society at large. When we are asked to do something we may feign modesty, but not because we are really modest. We just want a way out of taking on a load we know we could carry if we wanted to.

The imagery of this slogan has further implications in that an ox is stronger than a cow, so the idea is not to put the heaviest burden on the one who has the least strength to deal with it. It may feel unfair or that you are carrying more than your weight, but realistically, not everyone has the same capabilities.

Sometimes we are in situations when there is a need for someone to take on a leadership position. After the question, "Is anybody willing

to step up?” everyone plays the disappearing act and there is nothing but silence. In those occasions, if what is being asked for is worthwhile and you have the background or ability to take it on, you should just do so.

This slogan is also about developing skill in working with others. It is an art to know how much responsibility to take on yourself and how much to direct to each of the people you are working with so that each person feels challenged but not overwhelmed.

### **Today's practice**

Pay attention to the temptation to shift your burdens to those who are weaker than you. When you find yourself hiding your own strengths and abilities, look into what is behind that. In what ways do you avoid taking on your fair share of responsibilities?

## ***35. Don't try to be the fastest.***

SO MUCH OF our life is based on speed. We want to be the first to do this and the first to get that. We are always in a big rush. We want to beat everyone else, to get to the front of the line. Being fast and busy makes us feel important. We have lots to do and not much time to do it. Fast is smart, slow is stupid. Fast is youth, slow is old age. We race along faster and faster, but where are we going?

That quicker, faster, better approach creates enormous pressure. There is no relief, and it is hard to enjoy ourselves. We have no time to step back and reflect on what we are doing or what life is all about. Superficially this approach seems to make sense for a while, we have lots to do after all. But we become addicted to speed, and we are afraid to stop or even to slow down.

When we bring this approach into our spiritual journey and into mind training practice, it simply does not work. We may try to force feed knowledge into ourselves, but wisdom and compassion cannot be forced. Nor can creativity. Imagine if you judged something like a symphony in this way. One conductor could brag that their orchestra played Beethoven's 9th in half the time!

Some people approach spiritual practice like gymnastics and think the more practices they do, and the quicker they progress through the various programs, levels, or what have you, the better. But the very term

practice implies going at a steady speed. You keep doing the same thing repeatedly, over and over, no matter how advanced you may be. If you are a singer you do scales, if you are a meditator you sit, if you are a hatha yogin, you do downward dogs.

Slogan practice is about cultivating both awareness and compassion, both in formal practice and in daily life. Ideally this is one complete package. You don't try to get somewhere, but you just keep going. The less striving mind you have, the more inherent wakefulness shines through. The less you force it, the more the heart can relax and open. Instead of beating yourself up with the slogans, you use them as sharp but gentle reminders that awakening is immediate and available. Basically, you lighten up and give yourself a break from the relentless speed and pressure of modern life.

### **Today's practice**

Notice how the quality of speediness affects your practice and your daily life. Do you feel superior or special because you are faster than others and have passed them by? On the contrary, do you feel inadequate that others are passing you by and leaving you in the dust? What would it be like to drop that success-failure paradigm altogether?

## ***36. Don't act with a twist.***

THIS SLOGAN has to do with being honest about our ulterior motives. It is based on an appreciation for how tricky our mind can be. We say one thing and mean another, or we act out of seeming benevolence, while in our heart we are only really care about ourselves.

Acting with a twist is a way of using others to advance our own interests. Everything revolves around me, myself, and I, and that attitude colors everything we do. It literally distorts everything we say and all our actions into servants of our ego and our self-important schemes.

With this tricky approach, when we hear about mind training and the need to develop bodhichitta or loving kindness, although we may work with that, we are only doing so as a tool for our own development. We keep track of our acts of kindness and our moments of awareness as demonstrations of how we ourselves are progressing. Instead of genuinely opening our heart, we go through the motions. Then we look around to

make sure that our benevolence is properly noticed and admired. In reality, under the guise of helping, we are just using people. They are props for our self-development project.

When we do not act with a twist, our words and actions are not sticky. They are straightforward, with no hidden schemes attached. When we practice meditation or work with the slogans in daily life, we do not keep obsessing about what we are going to get out of it. Instead, moment by moment, as each new situation arises, we work with it as best we can and then we let it go.

### **Today's practice**

A good practice today, and any other day, is to notice how often what you do is based on "What's in it for me?" Rather than try to hide that, you can bring it into the open. Ironically, to move from selfishness to concern for others, you could start by being honestly selfish. When such selfishness is hidden, that underground force colors everything you do, and you can't help but act with a twist. But each time you expose it, you are diminishing its power.

## ***37. Don't make gods into demons.***

IT IS POSSIBLE to take the very best and turn it into the very worst. When we first encounter the dharma and the mind training teachings, we are so open and excited. It is so refreshing to encounter practical guidelines for developing wisdom and compassion and to find teachings we can actually apply in our everyday activities. But the more we practice and the more we become familiar with the teachings, the more tempted we are to close down and check out. Instead of appreciating the power of the practice, we begin to insert the heavy hand of ego.

At first meditation and compassion practices seem so beautiful and gentle. We feel enriched and nurtured. But as we continue, we begin to encounter a more threatening and provocative side to mind training practice. It makes us feel unmasked and exposed, embarrassed by our own mindlessness and the puny nature of our compassion for others.

As the practice begins to bite or to be more challenging, when it is no longer simply an add-on to our regular way of going about things, but a call for personal transformation, we feel threatened.



We reach a crossroads where we can either continue to open or we begin to shut down. At this point, we may simply stop practicing or we may co-opt the practice so that, rather than challenging our ego, it nourishes it. We keep the feel-good part and reject the rest. In doing so we are beginning to turn dharma into anti-dharma.

It is quite simple. In one approach, we are trying to consume the dharma. We are trying to fit the dharma into our small-mindedness, and in the other, we are dissolving our small self into the vastness of the dharma. When we try to feed on the dharma, instead of becoming more open and gentle, we become more closed-minded and arrogant. We have succeeded in turning the dharma, a path that is designed to make us more humble, flexible, compassionate, and awake into a kind of demon, feeding our worst qualities. Making the teachings into a credential for our ego is a perversion of the dharma. We are using our attachment to our superficial version of the dharma to destroy what true dharma is all about. It is turning a god into a demon.

### **Today's practice**

In your encounter with the teachings, how have you changed? In what ways have you become more appreciative and open and in what ways have you become more opinionated and closed? How can you identify with the dharma without making them into just another credential?

## ***38. Don't seek others' pain as the limbs of your own happiness.***

IT IS EMBARRASSING to realize how much of our own happiness seems to be based on the suffering of other beings. Even worse, we find that at times we go so far as to hope that someone else suffers, because we know that we will benefit from their pain. We hope that someone else will lose, so that we can win. We develop a kind of dog-eat-dog, or your-pain-my-gain mentality.

This slogan is about exploitation. It is about taking advantage of others in order to maintain our wealth and privilege. It could also be applied to our attitude to our mother earth. It is about the habit of take take take, with no gratitude, and with blindness as to the consequences.

When we recognize the extent to which we base our own happiness

on the pain of other beings, our so-called happiness is threatened. It begins to ring hollow. So we cover up this reality in a cloud of vague ignorance. We act as though our good fortune is simply our due and has nothing to do with any one else's problems or suffering. But often, in fact, the two are inextricably interconnected.

According to this slogan, if our happiness is based on the suffering of others, if that is the only way to maintain it, it cannot be true happiness. Our so-called happiness is both tainted and flimsy. So once again, as in so many other slogans, the habit of putting ourselves first and looking out for number one is shown to be a completely dysfunctional approach. It is a false hope, a phony and a fraud.

### Today's practice

Whether you think of yourself as privileged or as underprivileged, contemplate the effect of buying into the paradigm that increasing your happiness depends on decreasing the happiness of others.

## POINT SEVEN

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### Guidelines of mind training

*Point seven is connected with **postmeditation**;  
it includes 21 slogans.*

### ***39. All activities should be done with one intention.***

IT SEEMS THAT every day we fall willy-nilly into a never-ending string of activities. They seem to come at us from outside, without our necessarily having anything to do about it. We keep busy with one thing after another from morning until night.

At times we may be really organized and lay out plans day-by-day and week by-week. We have goals and deadlines. At other times, it may be more as if we are responding to requests that come up, without any clear pattern or direction. E-mails, meetings, obligations keep flooding

in, and we find all the little squares in our calendars filling up.

What holds all this activity together? Is there any thread that runs through all this business? Or are we just trying to make it through another day? What do you know about your underlying intention?

Without saying it in so many words, often the thread holding all our thoughts and activities together is: "What's in it for me?" We wonder how we can survive, get ahead, win, succeed, overcome, take over, grab something, be recognized, appreciated, rewarded...you name it, the list is endless.

In lojong practice, the idea is to replace that unspoken intention based on fear and the need to prop up the ego with an intention of benevolence. Rather than making a few heroic or virtuous gestures or taking on some righteous cause, the idea is to have a quality of awareness, gentleness, and benefit to others color everything you do.

Such an intention should color even the way in which you do the simplest things, like picking up your teacup. Your gestures, speech, thoughts, and emotions should all be expressions of one intention: the powerful intention of benefiting sentient beings.

### **Today's practice**

Notice the way in which your underlying intentions color your actions. Notice also the quality of pointlessness or aimlessness and times when whatever you are doing seems to be without any clear intention. Choose an activity, you normally do and see what happens when you link it with the intention of cultivating gentles and service to others.

## ***40. Correct all wrongs with one intention.***

THIS SLOGAN is about the power of establishing the attitude of mind training as a kind of underlying habit of mind. As in the previous slogan, it is about the power of our intention.

On the spiritual path we encounter both external and internal obstacles to practice and to awakening. Sometimes you are inspired and other times you are not. Even when you are inspired to practice, all sorts of external obstacles arise: you suddenly get sick, you need to attend to a family crisis, your job leaves us exhausted, etc.

Other times your obstacles may be more internal. You are doubtful of the path and of your ability to realize anything. Or maybe you are preoccupied, burnt out, or depressed. It could be that your practice has brought you to a point that feels threatening, and you are afraid to let it get any deeper.

External and internal obstacles such as these can leave you feeling stuck and disheartened.

When you encounter obstacles and obstructions to practice, how do you get back on track? How do you correct your course? The approach of just trying to push your way through does not work very well; it is hard to fight with your own state of mind.

Instead of struggling in that way, you could simply instill in your mind the aspiration to practice lojong or mind training. As you repeat this aspiration, it is almost a kind of self-indoctrination. Even though you might immediately forget it, you keep reminding yourself over and over, everyday, that this is your bottom line position.

Having that single underlying focus has a lot of power. When obstacles arise, they are abruptly brought short by the power of your intention. It is as if you have created a kind of gyroscope to guide your course and bring you back to stability when you lose your balance.

### **Today's practice**

When you find yourself struggling with an external or internal obstacle and falling into resentment or discouragement, notice the tendency to simply feel stuck and under attack. Notice how your relationship to such obstacles shifts when you reconnect with your intention to train your mind in loving-kindness.

## ***41. Two activities: one at the beginning, one at the end.***

WHEN YOU START your day, you could actually take a moment to think about what you are doing. Instead of just launching in, you could begin properly, with something in mind beyond just getting through your to-do list. In particular, you could look on each day as an opportunity to practice lojong, or mind training.

At the end of the day, before you fall asleep, instead of just flopping, you could review how you have done. You could begin by appreciating the times you were connected with bodhichitta and joined it with what you were doing. Then you could also reflect on the times when you lost your connection to bodhichitta and acted accordingly.

The idea is not to beat yourself up for losing your sense of bodhichitta and mind training nor is it to give yourself a medal for being good. You do not need to blame yourself or to blame anyone else. The idea is simply to take note so that you can shift your energy gradually in the direction of kindness and awareness.

The practice of lojong is a life-long journey, but that journey takes place one day at a time. You cannot do anything about days gone by, and speculating about the future can be overwhelming and somewhat pointless. But you can look at each day as a practice period, with a beginning and an end. So every morning you take a fresh start, and every evening you have a chance appraise how you have done.

### **Today's practice**

Notice how easy it is to get so caught up with your life that you never have a chance to see it in any larger perspective. What happens if you take even a little time at the beginning or end of the day to step back and look at what you are doing? What makes you remember your commitment to bodhichitta practice and what makes you forget?

## ***42. Whichever of the two occurs, be patient.***

WHAT HAPPENS to your practice when you extremely happy, when things are going especially well? And what happens to your practice when things are going horribly, and you are not doing well at all? That is what this slogan is about, and the advice is to be patient in either case.

It is hard to practice mind training steadily. So we come up with all kinds of excuses to avoid facing our own state of mind and opening to others. Whether we are feeling pain or pleasure, are sad or happy, we get taken over by the intensity and drama of the situation and we lose our bearings.

When our situation is bright, we indulge in it, and milk it for all it is worth. Since things are going well for us, we don't feel any need to practice. We are caught up in our own pleasure and our wish to maintain it, so we focus on ourselves and forget about others. Mind training and the cultivation of loving-kindness are thrown out the window.

When we are suffering and things are not going well, we also turn inward. We think, "Why me?" and get caught up in the mentality of whining and complaint. Although we might think about practice, we are too miserable to relate with it. Our excuse is that we just don't have the right conditions to practice right now, so we need to wait for conditions to improve. So again mind training is ditched, in this case, due to our preoccupation with our own misery.

Instead of waiting for the "right conditions" to come about, the idea of this slogan is to apply mind training steadily and consistently. In fact every condition is a right condition for mind training.

### **Today's practice**

Notice the waxing and waning of your inspiration to practice mind training. What patterns do you see? What would be threatened if your practice were more steady and continuous?

## ***43. Observe these two, even at the risk of your life.***

THE TWO PRIMARY vows or commitments of the Buddhist path are the refuge vow and the bodhisattva vow. More generally, the two primary commitments one makes on the spiritual path are to work on oneself and to help other beings. These two vows provide fundamental guidelines for how to approach your practice and your daily life.

You can take the refuge and bodhisattva vows in a formal setting, but the main commitment takes place in your heart. The ceremony is simply an acknowledgment of the pledge you have already made.

With the refuge vow, you promise to honor and respect the Buddha, to study and to practice the teachings of Buddhism, and to work with the sangha, or community of practitioners. On an inner level, you make a commitment to awakening, to cultivating knowledge, and to connecting

with fellow seekers of wisdom and knowledge.

With the bodhisattva vow, you dedicate your life to the welfare of all beings. You make a commitment to develop the wisdom, compassion, and skillful means to be of real benefit to the world.

We don't take many vows, but when we do, we need to take them seriously. To observe these two vows, it is not enough to go to a ceremony, celebrate, and then forget about it. They need to be woven into the fabric of your life. And you do not just take such vows once, but you do so repeatedly. In that way, you place everything you do in the context of these two simple but profound underpinnings of the dharma: working on oneself and helping others.

### **Today's practice**

What would change if you took seriously the two principles of working on yourself and helping others as the measure of your actions? How committed are you to yourself or to others?

## ***44. Train in the three difficulties.***

MIND TRAINING or lojong is a way to uncover and develop confidence in our own inherent goodness and that of all beings. It is a way to cultivate loving-kindness. You might say that is the good news. But the way to go about that is by going directly to the dark side, to what prevents that awakened quality from manifesting, which is not an easy task. You might say that is the bad news.

This slogan is about facing difficulties. It is nice to bask in little moments of inspiration or calmness, or altruism. It is inspiring and gives us hope. But it is hard to stay with our obstacles, blockages, and neuroses long enough to figure out how to deal with them. It is too embarrassing and disheartening, so we bounce away, pretending it isn't so, or hoping for the best.

The first difficulty is that obstacles arise too quickly for us to catch. It is hard to slow down enough to recognize the first instant when a neurotic thought or emotion arises. There are, of course endless varieties, but the traditional list of such upsetting emotions, or kleshas, includes passion, aggression, ignorance, jealousy, and pride. Usually, by the time we recognize that we have been captured by confused emotionalism, it is

too late: we are already overwhelmed. So the first training is to try to be a little quicker on the draw, and to recognize them as soon as they arise.

The second difficulty is that once these difficulties have moved in on us, it is very hard to know what to do about it. Kleshas are very difficult to overcome. So the second training is to undermine them at their root, which is our fixation on ourselves. It is to learn to overcome them once they appear.

The third difficulty is that the kleshas keep coming back: it is hard to cut through them. So the third training is to stop buying into the kleshas, being attached to them, and inviting them back.

### **Today's practice**

Instead of battling big deal emotional hang-ups, practice paying attention to the tiny little shifts of thought that, like a match to a fuse, cause a big explosion of confusion.

## ***45. Take on the three principal causes.***

IT IS GOOD to be aware of the convergence of circumstances that makes it possible for you to practice the dharma. By attending to the underpinnings that support you on the path, you can create and maintain a strong base for moving forward. You can develop greater appreciation for your good fortune, and not take it for granted.

At the same time, it is also good to remind yourself that many people do not have such good circumstances. Because you recognize that people need support in order to practice the dharma, you can aspire to provide for others the same kind of support system that you yourself have benefited from.

The first principal cause is the teacher. You may have first heard about the dharma through a book, or a magazine, or a video, or from a friend, or even from an ad on TV, but no matter the medium, if you trace it back, these teachings come from real live human beings, beginning with the Buddha himself. Without the hard work and sacrifices of many generations of teachers, you would never have heard about the possibility of mind training.

The second principal cause is to realize the importance of mind training. We all have the ability to work with our own minds; it is our



natural capacity. But although all people have this capacity, few act on it. So recognizing that mind training is both possible and important, and acting on that recognition, is the second strong support for practice.

The third principal cause is to have adequate social and economic support for your practice. You need to be practical. In order to create the time and conditions for furthering your practice and understanding of mind training, you need to take care of business. You need to find a way to cover your basic needs for food, clothing, shelter, etc.

### **Today's practice**

What kinds of supports could you put in place to help strengthen your practice? Do you need more guidance (the first cause), more confidence and conviction (the second cause), or a more stable social or economic base (the third cause)?

## ***46. Pay heed that the three never wane.***

OUR INITIAL INSPIRATION to study with a teacher or to practice the dharma has a tendency to fizzle away over time. It is one thing to enjoy a burst of enthusiasm, but it is quite another to keep going after the initial excitement wears off. But that is exactly the point when you begin to practice for real.

This slogan is about three central aspects of mind training practice: devotion, appreciation, and discipline. The first aspect, devotion, has to do with your appreciation for your teachers. Devotion is not based on hero worship or a fixation on celebrity. It is an opening of the heart. You should be grateful to have encountered genuine teachers, and you not just take it for granted.

The second aspect is appreciation for the practice of mind training. You should be grateful that you have been given a practical and effective way to work with your mind and emotions and to cultivate wisdom and kindness. It is good to know that loving kindness it is not something that you either have or you don't, but something you can cultivate step by step by means of lojong practice.

The third aspect is your discipline. The dharma gives you a way to work with yourself and to benefit others through formal practice and in

the midst of everyday life. By conducting yourself with grace and dignity, you can inspire the people around you and develop greater confidence in your own potential. You should realize how lucky it is that you have a path and a discipline that works.

The point of this slogan is that you should pay attention to the ups and downs of your inspiration, so that when your devotion, appreciation, and discipline begins to fade, you can bring yourself back. If you want to stick with mind training, not just dabble, your best ally is the ability to pay heed.

### **Today's practice**

Reflect on the balance of the three qualities of devotion, appreciation, and discipline in your practice. Notice the waxing and waning of inspiration on the path, and how easy it is to let your initial inspiration just fade away. When that happens, what brings you back?

## ***47. Keep the three inseparable.***

IT IS EASY to think of lojong practice as just a mental exercise, after all, lojong is translated as “mind training.” But according to this slogan, lojong practice should engage our whole being: our body, our speech, and our mind. The idea is that we should be so thoroughly and completely permeated with mind training that there is no separation whatsoever.

When you practice wholeheartedly, it shows in your body. The way you handle yourself physically and the way you relate to the even the most ordinary objects in your life reflects in a very concrete way the depth of your practice. So working with the body is a very powerful way to practice lojong. The idea is not to force your body into shape as if you were working out or doing yoga or going on a diet. Instead, no matter what condition your body is in, you can still manifest in your physical presence the qualities of gentleness, awareness, and openness.

When you practice wholeheartedly, it shows in the way you relate to your speech and emotions. In the phrase, “body, speech, and mind,” speech refers not only to talking or expression, but to the world of emotions as well. When emotions arise or when you are about to speak, you can apply lojong. Through lojong, instead of speaking impulsively and being driven by emotional habits, you can express yourself simply and directly.

When you practice wholeheartedly, it shows in your thinking patterns. Part of lojong training has to do with simply noticing how your mind works. What do you do with your mind? What do you think about most often? By applying lojong to your mind, you can begin to reverse the habits of preoccupation and self-absorption that take up so much mental energy. As a result, your mind becomes less tight. It begins to relax and turn outward.

This slogan points out that lojong applies to whatever we do, feel, think, or say. It is a way of bringing our whole system into harmony.

### **Today's practice**

When you think about your lojong practice, does it seem balanced and wholehearted or one-sided and limited? What helps you come into harmony in your body, speech, and mind and what tends to make you lose that feeling of harmony?

## ***48. Train without bias in all areas. It is crucial always to do this pervasively and wholeheartedly.***

THE PREVIOUS SLOGAN was about including all aspects of yourself in your lojong practice: your body, your speech, and your mind. This slogan expands upon that to include all aspects of your experience altogether.

Lojong practice has two components: meditation practice, which includes formless practice and tonglen, and postmeditation, which means working with the lojong slogans in everyday life. Meditation is done alone, and slogan practice takes place in our interactions with others.

This slogan is based on seeing every aspect of your life as a practice opportunity. The idea is that instead of dividing your life, considering some parts practice and the rest time off, you should view everything you do with the eyes of lojong.

If you view lojong as only something that happens on the meditation cushion, you are missing the point completely. Formal practice is great, it is important, but it is only a small portion of your life: the rest is postmeditation. In postmeditation, you are working with what happens after you get up from the cushion and you have to deal with the

nitty-gritty of your life and with other people. That is where your practice is put to the test.

If you are biased and have fixed views about what it takes to be able to practice lojong, it is easy to come up with all sorts of excuses as to why it is so difficult to practice. You can complain about all the obstacles you face and how your circumstances are never quite right.

Being without bias means that there are no excuses. You do not declare any areas off limits, but you relate to your life as a single whole, a back and forth rhythm of meditation and postmeditation. When you are without bias, instead of waiting for the right occasion, you apply lojong on the spot, not matter what is going on at the time. In that way your lojong practice becomes more than a hobby or accessory—it is a way of life.

### **Today's practice**

The best way to develop a more wholehearted lojong practice is by 1) spending time practicing mindfulness and tonglen, and 2) memorizing some or all of the slogans. For today's practice, focus on one or two slogans that particularly strikes you. Touch on those slogans from time to time, and notice when they come up on their own.

## ***49. Always meditate on whatever provokes resentment.***

CULTIVATING LOVING-KINDNESS sounds so sweet and wholesome. When you look at the ads in spiritual publications, you see smiling faces and promises about how to achieve happiness and be more loving and kind. But how many times do you see the word resentment?

A great trap of spiritual practice is the avoidance of negativity and the temptation to pretend to be good. But the most fertile ground for lojong is the boundary where our veneer of virtue breaks down. Rather than always trying to be good, it is better to go directly to what sets us off. According to this slogan, we can apply lojong the moment resentment, annoyance, and other negativities arise.

According to the buddhadharma, goodness is natural; it does not need to be cultivated. What we should focus on instead is removing obstacles, so that natural virtue shines through. But how can we remove

resentment if we are unaware of the extent to which it controls us. We need to look into what makes us provokable.

Each time we are offended, misunderstood, ignored, put upon, we have the opportunity to see how solidly we hold to our views, opinions, our whole sense of who we are. We can see how when that solidity is threatened, we shut down or lash out, get defensive or find some target to blame. By simply seeing all this more clearly, we are already less trapped.

The point of this slogan is to stop avoiding the issue of resentment, and instead really try to understand how it arises. By doing so, we could actually experience the constructing of a solid reactive self on the spot, while it is happening. The moment we notice that painful tightening and constriction, that closing down, is the time to interrupt and undermine that whole destructive process. We can catch ourselves in the act, so to speak. What seems so solid is exposed as a sham, and our small-mindedness and defensiveness is seen through, so the resentment has nothing to push up against and it dissolves into thin air.

### **Today's practice**

As an object of contemplation, choose one thing that provokes your resentment and notice the cascade of sensations it triggers. Let your reaction relax and then bring up the same thing once again. What are you clinging to? What are you afraid of losing? What insights arise when the haze of resentment is less thick?

## ***50. Don't be swayed by external circumstances.***

THE GOOD THING about mind training is that it can be practiced in all kinds of situations. You do not have to wait for the right conditions to arrive or make special arrangements in order to work with mind training. The only rearrangement that needs to be made is to your own attitude.

According to this slogan, you should take the view that whatever takes place in your life will have something to teach you. It does not matter if your external conditions are favorable or unfavorable, good or bad, for no matter what the circumstances, you can always practice mind

training. So you should make use of everything you do and every situation you encounter, no matter how small and insignificant, large and overwhelming, as an opportunity to let go of aggression and cultivate loving-kindness.

The idea is not always to wait for your circumstances to line up just so, before you launch into mind training. In fact, the best time to work with your mind may be when conditions are not so good. Furthermore, if you are waiting for just the right moment, you may end up waiting for a very long time. There are so many reasons why it is impossible to relate to mind training right now, and so many fantasies that as soon as the external situation changes you will be able to resume your practice, no problem—and conveniently, that never seems to happen, so you can avoid the whole thing.

It may seem that the slightest little glitch is all it takes to throw you off course. However, lojong practice is completely impartial: if your external situation is not so good, you can breathe that in; and if it is excellent, you can breathe that out. In that way, instead of being a victim of circumstances, blown here and there by whatever arises, you can cultivate mind training no matter what is going on.

### **Today's practice**

Pay attention to what causes you to turn on and turn off your mind training practice. When does it arise more naturally and when does it completely disappear? What external circumstances are most apt to throw you off course, and how can you utilize those same circumstances to return you to the practice?

## ***51. This time, practice the main points.***

THIS TIME...

Every so often, opportunities to practice the dharma come up. How many times have you let those opportunities pass you by? I think of this slogan as the *mañana* slogan. It is the idea that there will always be time to practice later, but right now there are just too many other things going on.

The split between times you can practice and times you cannot goes against the grain of the whole lojong approach, which is that every situation is an opportunity for practice. In lojong, there are no excuses and

there is no right or wrong time. Basically “this time” is the only time we have, so why not infuse it with mind training?

...PRACTICE THE MAIN POINTS

What are the main points to keep in mind? The first is to take the attitude that benefiting others is more important than benefiting yourself. Obviously, this is a pretty major attitude shift! But you could begin simply, by noticing what you think about: how much do your thoughts revolve around you and your concerns, and how often do any thoughts of others arise, let alone thoughts of actually benefiting them?

The second point is that practice is more important than study. Often practice and study are described as being like the two wings of an airplane, since they are both essential and complementary. But this slogan tips the plane a tad, tilting it towards practice. Book learning or theoretical knowledge only goes so far: practice is what brings the dharma to life and gives it power.

The third point is that of all the possible practices you might do, bodhichitta practice is the most important. Loving-kindness is not just a warm fuzzy add-on, but it is the very core of the Buddhist path. Too much focus on self-improvement can make us even more self-centered, while what we really need to cultivate is greater love, compassion, and sympathy for our fellow suffering beings.

### Today's practice

Loving-kindness begins simply, with connection. Notice in your interactions the ways in which you are continually connecting with and disconnecting from others. What draws you out of yourself? What causes you to pull back?

## ***52. Don't misinterpret.***

THIS SLOGAN focuses on six qualities—patience, yearning, excitement, compassion, priorities, and joy—and how they can be misinterpreted. More generally, the point is to see how we can twist things so that our avoidance of the dharma is considered to be a virtue rather than a fault. We are continually tempted to misinterpret teachings designed to soften our ego-fixation in such a way that they instead add more fuel to our self-absorption and distractedness.

An undercurrent that runs through this slogan is the strong pull of samsara. Lojong practice goes against the grain and threatens our cozy samsaric cocoon, so we try to figure out ways to be dharma practitioners without having to give anything up. We long for transformation, but we really don't want to change anything. So we twist the teachings to fit our personal agenda. We pay lip service, but our heart really lies elsewhere.

The first three categories—patience, yearning, and excitement—are quite straightforward. Misinterpreted patience is being patient with the hassles of samsara, but not patient with dharma practice. Misinterpreted yearning is to have constant yearning for more money, more pleasure, and more security, but to have very little yearning to train the mind or cultivate loving-kindness. Misinterpreted excitement is to find mindless entertainment and the endless pursuit of wealth exciting, but not be excited about the study and practice of the dharma.

The fourth category, misinterpreted compassion, is more provocative. Misinterpreted compassion means to feel compassion for the hardships faced by people who are dedicated to the dharma, but not to feel compassion for evildoers. According to this slogan, true compassion is not based on picking and choosing, and it is not based on sorting people into who is worthy of our compassion and who is not.

The fifth category, twisted priorities, could also be called the challenge of scheduling. Somehow, we always manage to find time in our schedules for what entertains us or advances our self-interest, but find it difficult to find time to practice the dharma.

The sixth and last category, twisted joy, means to take more delight in seeing your enemy suffer or your competitor fail than when you see someone succeed in overcoming confusion through dharmic practice.

These six categories are examples of the many ways that we try to disguise as virtues the many ways we feed our neuroses and our fixation on the self.

### **Today's practice**

Start with the misinterpretation of priorities. List out your main activities for a week, and calculate how much time you spend on each category, such as work, sleep, TV, study, practice, socializing etc. What does this tell you about your priorities? What would need to shift to free up a little time for dharma practice?



## ***53. Don't vacillate.***

WHEN YOU FIRST encounter the dharma, you may be intrigued but wary, or quick to be inspired. If you are inspired, you may jump in enthusiastically, and read all sorts of books, take tons of classes, and practice a lot. But such enthusiasm tends to be short-lived, and after a while, your interest and energy begins to peter out. You begin to have second thoughts about the whole thing.

If you are more wary, you may decide to spend more time checking it out before you make a commitment. Before you dip your toe into the dharma, you want to find out about different teachers and communities and read a few more books. Although you are drawn to the dharma, you are afraid to go too far without more understanding of what you are getting into. But whenever you reach the point of being about to make a commitment, you hesitate and step back.

No matter how you enter into the practice of mind training, the idea is to become more steady and confident. Constantly changing your mind about what you are doing drains away your enthusiasm and leaves you depleted of energy. You sink into a kind of undertow of self-doubt. It is important to break this pattern and to develop more self-confidence and certainty in the dharma and in your own insight.

When we lack confidence, what happens is that we think too much. It is hard to make a decision because there is no end of options, alternatives, contingencies, and what if's. Commitment is scary because it means choosing one direction and abandoning others, but unless we do so, it will be hard to make any progress in any direction. So once you see what you need to do, the point is to go ahead and do it!

The idea of this slogan is that once you make a decision to practice mind training, you should stick with it so that it becomes a steady thread throughout your life. Although your circumstances are always changing, your commitment to mind training should be unwavering.

### **Today's practice**

When your enthusiasm seems to be flickering, try to drop down a layer to a more steady and fundamental stream of inspiration. By placing whatever you experience within that stream, you can gradually gain greater certainty in the view and practice of lojong.

## *54. Train wholeheartedly.*

TRAIN...

It is probably clear by now that lojong is all about training. And since the nature of mind training goes directly against our entrenched and deep-rooted habit of self-fixation, it is easy to come up with all sorts of excuses for not keeping it up.

We are all about being solid, and we are ready to pounce on anything that threatens our fixed view of ourselves. At the same time, we are always scanning, seeking ways to secure ourselves further. Ego plays both a defensive and offensive game.

Ironically, our ego trickery is such that even studying the dharma and the slogans and the philosophy of mind training can be co-opted as further credentials. That is why study alone is not enough. For these teachings to have any effect at all they need to actually be practiced.

Although practice is essential, mind training is not a clenched jaw or heavy-handed battle. However, it does require that you recognize the pain and claustrophobia of continually playing the game of ego, and that pain is hard to face. But as you practice, something radical occurs: you realize that you don't have to play that game! You see that when you opt out, even briefly, there is relief, lightness, and even joy.

...WHOLEHEARTEDLY

Sometimes people think the Buddhist practices are all about mind, nothing else. But the notion of whole-heartedness, is that you really feel what you feel and that you feel it completely. You should bring your heart and your emotions into the practice so that you can feel more and more deeply the contrast between ego-imprisonment and freedom.

### **Today's practice**

Pay attention to the boundary between wholehearted practice and a more vague and lukewarm approach. Notice your thinking process, your bodily sensations, and emotional undercurrents. What happens at those moments in which you click in and are really practicing?

## ***55. Liberate yourself by examining and analyzing.***

THIS SLOGAN focuses on two major obstacles to realization: ego-clinging and disturbing emotions. The idea is that it is important to really look into those two patterns. In fact, it is so important that you may need to actually conjure them up so that you can examine them in detail.

The usual idea of meditation practice is to calm down, relax, and have a little break. But according to lojong training, unless you are willing to scrutinize your deep-rooted emotional undercurrents and long-standing fixation on yourself, your so-called calmness and relaxation will be superficial.

The tendency to pretend everything is okay, while avoiding unpleasant realities, can be seen in external social relationships and internally as well. But to train your heart/mind you need to stop pretending. Lojong is not about putting on a show, or keeping up appearances. Instead you bring all aspects of your experience to the surface, even those that provoke you the most.

In working with this slogan, you deliberately and systematically bring to mind the kinds of situations that make you crazy and that trigger your defensiveness. You push your own buttons, and then see what happens, and what you find is that just thinking about such things is usually enough to create a whoosh of simultaneous emotional upheaval and a re-solidified focus on the self.

Destructive patterns thrive on being hidden. That is what allows them to maintain their power. But if you are brave enough to arouse these powerful forces, to confront them, and to examine them, you can begin to free yourself from their control. Ironically, in order to develop true peace, you need to be willing to rile things up.

### **Today's practice**

Bring to mind something that gets a rise out of you. Notice the heightening of emotionality and the arising of a kind of frozen and solid self-regard. Try to stay with that experience and to examine it in depth, as a mental, bodily, and emotional sensation. In doing so, remember that lojong is gentle, so don't begin with your most challenging and deep-rooted habit patterns, but with something more ordinary.

## ***56. Don't wallow in self-pity.***

WHEN YOUR PRACTICE is not going well, or you feel it is too hard, you may begin to regret undertaking it in the first place. It is easy to start to feel sorry for yourself. The anti-lojong slogan, "Ignorance is bliss," begins to sound pretty appealing. You think, why not just live a "normal life" and forget about all this? Why take on this extra burden of mind training and the cultivation of loving-kindness?

You realize that mindfulness practice is hard, mind training is hard, practicing compassion is hard, even developing kindness is hard. It is challenging and painful to care about any of this. So you begin to speculate about how easy other people have it. You think about how great it would be if you could just go about your life without lojong practice. It would be such a relief to forget about trying to wake up, uncover deception, practice kindness, help others, and all the rest!

The problem is that once you begin to see things through the eyes of lojong, it is very difficult to turn that off. If you have an insight, it is almost impossible to erase it, or to make the insight an un-insight. What you see, you see. And insight is a good thing, so why feel sorry for yourself?

The point of this slogan is not to wallow in self-pity. In fact, in regard to lojong, it makes no sense, for you are the one who is benefiting. More generally, self-pity is simply a distraction and an energy drain. If someone is better off than you, who cares? If you are better off than someone else, who cares? Why make a fuss in either case? Instead of wallowing in your own fascination either with being special or not getting what you deserve, you could practice thinking of others for a while.

### **Today's practice**

We expect so much from the world and from other people, and when those expectations are not met, we feel angry and sorry for ourselves. Notice the kinds of expectations you have and the relationship between those expectations and the arising of disappointment and self-pity.

## ***57. Don't be jealous.***

THIS SLOGAN is not only about jealousy, but also about overall irritability. If your meditation practice or mind training is making you even

more irritable and touchy than before, something is off. You should be less susceptible to jealousy and irritability, not more so.

At times we are thin-skinned and bristle at the slightest provocation, and at other times we hide out under a thick layer of armor. But instead of bouncing between those two extremes, we can develop softness and toughness hand in hand, so that the heightened sensitivity and greater mindfulness that develop through the practice do not simply provide more reasons to be either jealous and upset or closed off and hunkered down.

Working with this slogan does not mean that you should not notice that some people have more than you do—more money, more power, more ability, more friends, more realization, more intelligence, more creativity, more teachings, more all sorts of things. The idea is to keep the clarity of that observation, but not let it tailspin into fits of jealousy and envy.

Jealousy can be a real cop out: it gives you a good excuse not to relate to your situation as it is. It is entertaining: you can muse about how much easier it would all be if you had whatever that other person has. Jealousy can deflate your confidence: in comparison to all those lucky ones, your situation seems to be so poverty-stricken and hopeless. Jealousy feeds self-absorption and makes you feel like a big ball of resentment and petty-mindedness.

There is a beautiful simplicity and stubbornness to slogan practice. Although it takes place in a kind of jungle of lurking resentments and swirling emotional upheavals and distractions, you can see that jungle for what it is, accept it, and even go so far as to appreciate it. What's great is that you do not have to wait for a better alternative, but you can go right ahead. You can relate matter-of-factly to an emotion like jealousy, and stop seeing it as a mistake, threat, or embarrassment. It may come and go, but it no longer captures you.

### **Today's practice**

Think of someone you know who you are jealous or envious of, and take a look at all the characteristics that spark that feeling. Now think of qualities or circumstance you have that might make someone else envious. There is no end to jealousy once it takes hold. Notice how it feels to be captured by jealousy and how it feels when you are able to drop it before it grows.

## ***58. Don't be frivolous.***

TO WORK WITH this slogan, it is necessary to look at how you spend your time, what you think about, and how you invest your energy. It is easy to fritter away your time in frivolous pursuits that do not lead anywhere. But living in this way is like eating junk food: it is ultimately unsatisfying.

Frivolity comes across as light-hearted and innocent, but it is not. It is not real openness, but a form of aggression towards your own buddha nature. Keeping things on the surface level helps you prevent any discovery arising that might rock the boat. It is seemingly more comfortable to float about in the shallows of life than to pursue its depths. But since the power of buddha nature is that it keeps wanting to arise, suppressing that instinct takes work. To maintain your narrow field of comfort, you have to keep pushing it down.

It is tricky to work with frivolity. First, it is easy to confuse it with the kind of openness, light-heartedness and playful childlike mind that is cultivated by meditative practice. Frivolity can seem to be a virtue, but it isn't. Second, it is possible to overcorrect, to counter frivolity with an overblown display of seriousness. But the mind/heart cultivated by mind training is neither stodgy nor frivolous. The idea is to avoid both those extremes.

You could say that the play between seriousness and frivolity is a kind of Buddhist humor. The most solemn occasions have an undercurrent of absurdity; and the silliest interactions have an undertone of profundity.

### **Today's practice**

Do a little census of what you think about and how you spend your time. How do you distinguish between what is frivolous and what is worthwhile?

## ***59. Don't expect applause.***

NOW THAT YOU HAVE studied all these slogans, don't expect anyone to congratulate you! In fact it is a good idea to look at how much we keep

looking for recognition altogether. It can be embarrassing, but often, as soon as we do anything of note, it is as if we were little children at a playground shouting. “Watch me, mama! Look at me! Look what I can do!” And when whatever we have done is not acknowledged or recognized, how quickly we get puffy and upset.

This slogan gives us a chance to examine our whole relationship to approval and recognition, even fame. The idea is not that recognition in itself is a bad thing, or that we should not encourage or recognize others. It can be inspiring to see the kinds of creative works, intellectual insights, ingenious problem solving, and acts of heroism and kindness that people have accomplished: it can inspire us to do similar things. Especially in a world dominated by bad news and focus on the many problems we face, it is good to applaud people who do good. The problem arises when we expect our actions to be rewarded.

It is surprising how quickly our expectations trigger emotions such as anger, jealousy, righteous indignation, and self-pity. Instead of being able to appreciate what comes our way, we fester about how we didn’t get the praise or recognition we rightfully deserved. And if what we are doing is all about being seen, when we are not seen, the wind goes out of our sails and we founder.

Another problem with the hunt for approval is that it to gain approval you must buy in to the dominant values of the society around you. If what gets approval is getting rich, that is what you strive for; if it is beauty, that is what you obsess about; if it is power over others, that is what you focus on. The desperation for outer rewards goes hand-in-hand with an increasing sense of inner poverty. If you are successful in your quest for recognition, you may be able to ignore what you have given up to achieve it. If you are unsuccessful, you may simply blame the system. But in either case, since you have given over our power to others, you are left empty.

### **Today’s practice**

When you notice you are expecting applause, explore what lies behind that expectation. Notice the subtle shift between when you have done something and when you begin to look around you for recognition.

## ***Summary: Working with the slogans***

ALTHOUGH THE word *slogan* is often associated with advertising or with political campaigns, the origin of the word comes from the Scottish for “war cry.” If you imagine that you are in a battle with distraction, confusion, and self-absorption, then like a war cry, the appropriate slogan is designed to abruptly interrupt your discursiveness and call you to attention.

You could also think of the slogans as pointers, pointing you in the direction of awareness, kindness, and on-the-spot with-it-ness. When you are lost and directionless, slogans can point you in the direction of awakening.

I like to think of slogans as zingers that puncture self-absorption and ego-bloat, collapsing one’s pretensions quickly and mercilessly.

Another way to look at them is as exposés of our ridiculous earnestness and solidity of view and habit. That can be embarrassing, but it is also refreshing, a real relief. What a joke!

There are many ways to work with the Atisha slogans. You can apply them specifically to meditation practice or to daily living. You can look at them as literal common-sense advice or as teachings with multiple levels of meaning. There may be one or more slogans that seem to be “your” slogans, ones you know you need to focus on. There may be slogans you find yourself avoiding. You could create a new slogan to work with.

What is essential to remember is that in working with these slogans and with dharma practice altogether, it is important to have a light touch. The basis of this practice is openness and kindness, not aggression or perfectionism. Although slogan practice is sharp, and may sting at times, that sharpness is grounded in loving-kindness and compassion.

### **Today’s practice**

Choose one slogan to work with for the week. What comes up as you apply this slogan to your sitting practice? What comes up in trying to work with it as you go about your daily life?