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TRAINING IN COMPASSION

ZEN TEACHINGS ON THE PRACTICE OF LOJONG

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Introduction

Times are tough. We live fast-paced lives, with considerable political, economic, and ecological upheaval, and the resultant dread, fear, and stress make life difficult for almost everyone—except, possibly, those who opt for self-defensive denial, which only defers the pain and probably makes it worse.

But times have always been tough. Living a human life, in a human world, on a limited planet, has always been a daunting proposition. Circling the wagons, assuming a self-centered defensive stance, has never been a successful coping mechanism, natural though the impulse may be. We are programmed by evolution in the opposite way: we are cooperating animals, deeply conditioned to be concerned for one another. Our hearts are made for loving.

Compassion and connection not only feel good and right (as all of our religious traditions teach us), they also turn difficulties into opportunities—as we have seen so often when, in the course of the seemingly more frequent natural disasters of recent years, neighbors go out of their way to help one another. When they do, tragedy becomes inspirational. Paradoxically, life can seem

more, rather than less, meaningful when our world is suddenly shattered. When we are witness to genuine compassion in the face of great suffering, we seem to transcend our difficulties. When we feel like helping, do help, and are helped, we become stronger, happier, more resilient people.

Compassion and resilience are not, as we might imagine, rarified human qualities available only to the saintly. Nor are they adventitious experiences that arise in us only in extraordinary circumstances. In fact, these essential and universally prized human qualities can be solidly cultivated by anyone willing to take the time to do it. They can become the way we are and live on a daily basis. We can train our minds. We are not stuck with our fearful, habitual, self-centered ways of seeing and feeling.

How Can We Train the Mind?

Mind, as I mean it in this book, is more than intellect. It also includes sensations, emotions, subtle senses of subjectivity, desires, aspirations, attitudes, images, concepts, perceptions, and so on. In a word, mind is consciousness, the sum total of our human experience. In this sense, mind also includes body—we are conscious of our bodily sensations, and our emotions, maybe our thoughts too, affect us bodily and vice versa.

Most of us think of our minds, "the way we are," our basic attitudes and reactions, as being fixed by our genetic inheritance and life experience. We assume that our basic feelings and reactions are simply a given, indelibly fixed in us. We can learn information and specific skills, which is why we go to school or invest in training programs. Yet our basic character remains the same. If we're genetically or environmentally programmed to be angry, sad, depressed, or cheerful people, we will continue to be that way more or less throughout our lives. We are who we are.

But contemporary cognitive science is proving this assumption false. In fact, our minds, our character, our patterns of thought and emotion, are much more fluid than we thought they were. Our brains are renewed through activity and reflection; they are, as scientists say, plastic. So our minds are trainable. Our basic patterns of thought and feeling can be different. This is news we are only now in the process of fully digesting.

For most of us, our default untrained mind isn't very inspired. We are easily discouraged, distracted, offended, or hurt. When things don't go well, when life presents us with great or grave challenges, we are more likely to wilt or whine than to rise to the occasion. Our horizons are severely limited. We want to be successful and accomplished, but the smallness of our self-confidence stops us in our tracks. Or maybe we *are* accomplished, but it's not enough to satisfy our inner need. We want to love and be loved, but because of our bruised egos and checkered pasts, love doesn't come easily or naturally. Even lives that seem outwardly to be happy and full can feel lonely and unfulfilled on the inside. And when, on the other hand, we report that we are content with our lives, it may well be because we have sets our sights too low. We haven't touched the great possibilities, haven't even considered that we could love widely and absolutely, that we could be compassionate, wise, deep, appreciative, and resilient people. Most of us in these cynical and embattled times don't consider such things as even remotely within our grasp. We feel lucky simply not to be struggling.

But much more than this is possible. We know that if we want to develop stamina and strength in the body, we have to work at it steadily and repeatedly over time. It won't do to simply decide we are going to do weight training, read a book about it, and intend to do it. The reading, the thinking, the intention, would only be a beginning. We'd need to go to the gym and do our reps,

and keep that up over time. This is true for the mind as well—training the mind takes not only know-how and intention, it also takes repetitive training over time.

This is where the whole apparatus of spiritual practice with its many techniques comes in.

Spiritual practice, exactly like training in a gym, takes time and effort. Just as there are stationary bicycles, treadmills, weight machines, and other devices, so in spiritual practice there is prayer, meditation, ritual, study, and other techniques. Using these steadily over time, we can change our minds. We can begin to notice our unsuccessful repetitive patterns of thinking and feeling. We can begin to see their consequences. We can stop unconsciously identifying with them, as if they defined us, and go beyond grief and self-blame to a sense of curiosity and hopefulness. We can begin to cultivate new ways of thinking, feeling, speaking, and acting and gradually make them more and more our own. Our basic patterns over time will be different as we train our minds with intentional techniques and practices, and this will influence our relationships and our sense of ourselves and the world.

The traditional text on which this book is based, translated usually as *The Root Text of the Seven Points of Training the Mind* (often called, for short, *Lojong* in Tibetan), is one of the greatest texts for training the mind in all of world religion. Its seven key points are further subdivided into fifty-nine slogans. The original text was composed in Tibet in the twelfth century (for some reason a particularly fruitful period in world religion—the time, more or less, of Aquinas, Maimonides, Averroes, and Dogen, among many others) by Geshe Chekawa Yeshe Dorje. It's based on an earlier fifty-nine-slogan text of the tenth-century Indian master Atisha. Throughout Tibetan Buddhist history, up to the present, masters have lectured on and written commentaries to this text, using it

as the basis for practical hands-on training in the cultivation of compassion and resilience. Its popularity in Asia has transferred to the West, where today the text is studied by many Buddhist teachers, who have begun writing their own commentaries to make mind training readily available to their students. Traditional commentaries in English include Ken McLeod's translation of a seminal commentary by the Tibetan master Jamgon Kongtrul, under the title *The Great Path of Awakening*. The storied Tibetan master Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche's commentary is available as *Enlightened Courage*. There are contemporary Western commentaries by the great and colorful twentieth-century Tibetan Buddhist founder Chögyam Trungpa, and by his disciple the nun Pema Chödrön, whom I have been fortunate enough to know and practice with. There is scholar-practitioner B. Alan Wallace's *Buddhism with an Attitude: The Tibetan Seven-Point Mind-Training*. And many more. (For the wording of the slogans in this book, I have relied mainly on Chögyam Trungpa's lively renderings into English—also used by Pema Chödrön—and, where I felt it necessary for the points I wanted to emphasize, have made my own versions.)

Why Another Commentary?

There are three reasons for this commentary: First, a great and relevant text for spiritual practice deserves as many commentaries by as many voices as possible. Each new commentary inevitably adds some refreshment, showing overlooked angles for practice.

Second, because I am a Zen Buddhist priest who has studied Tibetan and Theravadin Buddhism as well as Western religious traditions, there is a good chance that my Zen perspective on an Indo-Tibetan Buddhist text will be different in some advantageous ways. This is often the case with cross-traditional religious

studies. I have experienced this before. One of my previous books is *Opening to You: Zen-Inspired Translations of the Psalms,* which, judging from the comments of many readers over the years, has had value for Jewish and Christian readers already quite familiar with the psalms. Somehow, my "outsider's view" shed new light for many readers on these beautiful ancient texts.

Another reason a specifically Zen approach to a non-Zen text might be worthwhile has to do with a characteristic of Zen itself: its commonsense simplicity. Religion in general and Buddhism in particular can be pretty complicated. Although Buddhism may now appear in Western culture as a fresh breeze, the truth is Buddhism throughout Asian history has had all the upsides and downsides of any religion. It has been just as tradition-bound and scholastic as any religion gets to be over time. Zen's original formation in China was a reaction to this very tendency. Although in time Zen, too, became elaborated and ritualized, the basic Zen impulse is to avoid piety and cut directly to the chase. Its language and methodology is iconoclastic and plainspoken. Possibly such an attitude will do this old text some good.

The third reason for this commentary has to do with what I consider a serious weakness in Zen: its deficiency in explicit teachings on compassion.

Zen is a school of Mahayana Buddhism, and like all Mahayana schools, compassion is its foundation. Yet most Zen literature and lore appears to be rough, theoretical (in an antitheoretical way), and austere (if often humorous). Since Zen is so fixated on cutting through complications and focusing on a few simple, profound points, it assumes rather than encourages compassion and has very little to say about it. This is why I have taken to presenting the Indo-Tibetan teachings on compassion and altruism in my Zen retreats and seminars and have made them a part of

my personal Zen curriculum. They fill in the gaps, for Western students, that Zen leaves. And since no other text that I know of, in any tradition, is as thoroughgoing and as systematic as the Seven Points in speaking of the practical cultivation of compassion and resilience, it seems to me worthwhile not only for Zen practitioners but for all students of religion and spirituality to have a commentary to it that opens it out a bit from the context of its original traditional setting.

Another thing: it is particularly important to me, after a lifetime devoted to religious practice, to remember that religion is supposed to be a path for full human development, not, as it too often seems to be, a restrictive and narrow-minded ideology that makes you feel as if you have an exclusive purchase on the truth. Interreligious sharing has been a part of my practice for many years, and through it I have learned that if we human beings want to survive with any graciousness on this planet, we need to affirm and share each other's religious practice rather than continue to use religion as a way to further divide us (and I include values-based atheism and secularism as forms of religion for those who find conventional religious symbolism and practice meaningless, offensive, or wounding). It is an odd and disturbing fact that although all religions teach love and compassion, religion throughout history has probably generated at least as much exclusivity and violence as love. Probably more. So I am sympathetic to those who feel that religion should be abandoned altogether or somehow denatured into a diffuse spirituality, without being "organized." And yet there is tremendous know-how and wisdom in our great religious traditions. It would be a shame to give that up, even if we could. I am sure that giving ourselves permission to study and practice with each others' sacred texts and teachings will help to soften and release religion's exclusivity and narrowness. Since it is very likely that

religion is not going to go away any time soon, it is better to work with it than to ignore it.

A Word about Slogans

Like bumper stickers or advertising taglines, slogans are short, punchy phrases that make an immediate impression. Like a catchy tune, they are easy to remember, think about, and stay with.

The best way to develop a mind-training slogan is to work with it initially on your meditation cushion (see basic meditation instructions in appendix 2). The technique is simple enough: sitting calmly with breath and body awareness, simply repeat the slogan silently to yourself again and again, reflect lightly on it, breathe it in with the inhale, out with the exhale. The point is not to sit and think about the slogan as much as to develop it as an almost physical object, a feeling in your belly or heart. Doing this repeatedly will fix it in your mind at a level deeper than is possible with ordinary distracted thinking.

After this initial fixing of the slogan in the mind, you can think about it more, journal about it, talk about it with friends, write it down, repeat it to yourself—maybe when you are walking or driving, or any time you remember to do it—committing yourself to holding it in your mind during the day as often as you can. You can post it on your refrigerator, float it across your computer screen. When you suddenly notice you have forgotten it and your mind is muffled with anxiety or worried rumination, use the very moment of forgetting as a cue to remembering rather than as a chance for self-judgment. This is, after all, mind training. Of course you are going to forget! But noticing that you forgot is already remembering. Mind training requires commitment, repetition, and lots of patience.

If you practice with a slogan in this way, soon it will pop into

your mind unbidden at various times during the day. Hundreds of times a day instances will arise that seem germane to the slogan you are working with. In this way, you can practice a slogan until it becomes part of your mind—your own thought, a theme for daily living.

Which slogan to practice with and how long to stay with any one slogan? Be serious, attentive, and flexible. It is most important to keep the practice lively—disciplined but lively. Approaching the slogans systematically and in the order given in the book may not always serve. Read the book sequentially, but rather than dutifully beginning to practice with the slogans in order, it may be best to pick a slogan that jumps out at you for some reason, one that seems particularly relevant for the conditions of your life right now, even if you don't know exactly why. And once you find a slogan you want to work with, stay with it for a while—weeks, months, even years. You will find staying with one slogan over time surprising: the meaning and flavor of the slogan will change as events of your life develop, as time advances and the seasons change. It may yield a surprising variety of insights. So it is sometimes good to stay with a slogan even when you feel restless and want to move on. On the other hand, staying with one slogan too long, and too doggedly, will be counterproductive and discouraging. Especially when another slogan calls out to you. A few weeks may in most cases be enough, unless you are inspired to go on longer. And, of course, it is perfectly okay, and recommended, to come back to a slogan you've already worked on. It will certainly yield new insights the second, third, or fourth time around.

Working with phrases is an ancient technique for mind training in almost all literate cultures. In serious Jewish, Muslim, and Christian practice, as well as many versions of Buddhism, texts are chanted daily. They are also studied, memorized, and used as

sacred instruction to shape and illuminate conduct and thought. Understood as the word of God (or Buddha), such texts are not to be taken lightly or at face value. There is always more meaning than meets the eye. With this spirit, a line from a prayer or psalm can become a slogan either intentionally or spontaneously, a living treasure for the practitioner, as if the words were a gift for you alone. In early Buddhism the many lists of positive and negative qualities to be developed or abandoned were memorized and used for repetitive practice, and in Zen there is the technique of meditating on a koan, a brief Zen story, that is often, for practice purposes, reduced to a phrase or two. Although the Indo-Tibetan practice of slogans is perhaps more psychological and intentional than these and other practices, it is in its essentials quite similar.

The slogans offered in this book are somewhat unusual in one particular. The reader might notice rather quickly that there is something counterintuitive about their fundamental stance. Ordinarily when confronted with the unpleasant, the troublesome, or the difficult, whether in a situation, a person, or a feeling, the natural impulse is avoidance. We either deny the difficulty (often quite sincerely) or, if we can't deny it, try to ignore it, get rid of it, or escape from it somehow. This seems natural enough. Most people don't thrive on trouble or enjoy unpleasantness. So naturally we approach the slogans in the hope that training in them will help us eliminate difficulties.

But the slogans take exactly the opposite approach. When difficulty arises, the slogans say over and over again, turn toward it rather than away. Although this is not what we want to do, the truth is it's the best way. Turning toward the difficulty will not only make it easier on us in the end, it will also effect the rather astonishing feat of turning the difficulty into a benefit. When we train our mind to embrace what's hard instead of trying to get rid

of it, we have begun to walk a path of growth, happiness, and true resilience. Our very difficulties and sufferings, if we hold them the right way, can be wedges to pry open our smallness. This is what the slogans propose. Changing the habit of avoiding difficulty to the habit of engaging it creatively may be the single most important factor for training the mind.

Compassion literally means embracing the suffering of others. To embrace the suffering of others is to be liberated and opened by that suffering, to the point of finding love. But compassion is impossible if we can't learn to bear our own sufferings and difficulties, if our old habit of denying and running away continues to have its way with us. So the practice of mind training begins with the effort to turn toward difficulty rather than away from it. When we are no longer daunted by difficulties but are willing to engage and make use of them, we become truly resilient individuals.

I can imagine many possible way to make use of this book. As with any book, you could read it, enjoy it (at least I hope so), and be influenced by it in whatever way you spontaneously are or are not. No author could expect more than this from a reader. But it is also possible, since this book is essentially a training manual, a course of study, to read it more slowly and more intentionally than you read most books. You could do as I have suggested above—practice with the fifty-nine slogans, reflect on them, meditate on them, read the relevant sections of the book repeatedly and test out what's said against your own experience. You could convene a group to work on the practices with you—or suggest to a group you already belong to that training in the fifty-nine slogans might be a fruitful way to spend some time, possibly even years. I have contemplated the slogans with enjoyment and much personal transformation ever since I first encountered them and have shared them with many people over the years in

seminars and retreats in many places, where they have always been well received. It was because of these many warm receptions, and students' desire to see my oral presentations in written form, that I decided to take the time to write this book. However you decide to make use of it, my hope is that the experience will be of benefit not only to you but to your friends and family and, ultimately, to everyone.

In the traditional text, the fifty-nine slogans are organized into seven points that form the structure of the chapters that follow:

1. **Resolve to begin**
2. **Train in empathy and compassion (absolute and relative compassion)**
3. **Transform bad circumstances into the path**
4. **Make practice your whole life**
5. **Assess and extend**
6. **The discipline of relationship**
7. **Living with ease in a crazy world**

1

Resolve to Begin

THE FIRST POINT OF ZEN mind training includes only one slogan:

1. Train in the preliminaries.

You can understand and practice this slogan three ways.

First, *the preliminaries* includes everything difficult that has happened in your life up until the moment you begin the training. The divorce you are going through or have gone through but never digested, the inexplicable breakup from out of the blue, the unexpected death of someone close to you that has shaken you to the core, a terrible childhood you might have thought you'd gotten over but now realize you haven't, an illness, a job loss, or some other present or past disaster may be the preliminaries for you. The difference between just suffering these things and trying to cope and "training" has to do with how you view them, with your sense of resolve and personal responsibility. Even if what happened to you was not your fault, taking responsibility for it now that it has happened, owning it as the stuff of your present life—rather than seeing it as a tragedy that shouldn't have happened and that therefore there's someone to blame

(even if there *is* someone to blame) or bemoaning your sad fate and life's terrible injustice—is **Training in the preliminaries**. In other words, to **Train in the preliminaries** is to stop moaning and feeling sorry for yourself and to recognize instead that regardless of what has happened or why, this is your life and you are the only one equipped to deal with it.

And then, based on that sense of personal responsibility, **Training in the preliminaries** involves reflecting on your life so that you can develop the resolve and courage to begin a new life path. **Training in the preliminaries** is the process of looking honestly at your life and making a firm decision to embark on a disciplined spiritual path.

There are many ways to go about this. In Alcoholics Anonymous and other recovery programs, it's done by coming together in community and telling and listening to one another's stories. It can be done with psychotherapy, with journaling or other forms of writing or art, or with any other form of reflective exercise designed intentionally as a format for such training. The point is that you begin by marking a pause in your life, a time when you say to yourself, "The old path is no good anymore. I have come to the end of it. I need to take the time now to review my life so that I can find the motivation to go ahead differently."

Once you take that time and find that motivation, you have trained in the preliminaries.

A friend of mine, a lawyer, had to **Train in the preliminaries** the hard way. After years of toughing out a life full of anger and aggression (he was a plaintiff's trial attorney, suing on behalf of people who had been in terrible accidents, so he had plenty to be angry about), he was depleted, lonely, and lost. At just that moment he experienced a sudden death in his family and then severe marital problems. It was too much for him. He fell into a deep depression and had to be hospitalized—not once but twice.

In the hospital his work in psychotherapy gave him a way to look at his life from another angle. He began to be able to share his story, first with his therapist and then with other people, rather than keeping his inner situation hidden—from himself as well as everyone else, as he had always done: indeed, as he had been trained to do in his family and in law school. He began to see that he could understand his life as a difficult journey rather than as a shameful failure. Yes, he'd gone down, very far down. But down is part of the journey. From that point on, little by little, he began to recover and to make a life path out of helping other lawyers in his situation.

A second way to understand **Train in the preliminaries,** and the way that a Zen student would be most likely to see it, is "practice *zazen* (Zen meditation)." Start a meditation practice, a daily practice if possible, and trust that sitting regularly on your cushion with your breathing and the feeling of your body (as described in appendix 2) will provide the spiritual inspiration and force necessary to set a new process in motion in your life.

A third way is to follow the set of traditional reflections given in Tibetan and Mahayana Buddhism, specifically as a way of **Training in the preliminaries.** There are four key points to think about. If you really take these points seriously, if you think about them long enough and hard enough to see how true they really are, it will change your outlook on life, and you will have found the motivation to begin again. The practice of reflecting on the four points might involve, first, reading about them; second, reading about them again and again; third, writing them down and thinking about them; fourth, journaling about them; and fifth, continuing to bring them up in your meditation practice or other times set aside for personal reflection.

Here are the four points:

First, *The rarity and preciousness of human life.*

Something desirable is even more desirable if it is rare. Its rarity makes it all the more precious and valuable. There are more than seven billion human beings on planet Earth, and this seems like a lot. But maybe not. The earth may contain seven billion or so humans, but it also contains many other living creatures. For instance, every human body is host to trillions of living beings—various kinds of bacteria, mites, and other microscopic creatures that are, in their time and space scale, just as alive and just as vivid as we are in ours. Beyond these trillions (multiplied by seven billion) who live in and on our bodies, there are of course many other larger creatures, creatures we can see and relate to. The number of ants alone, in their various species, is incomparably larger than seven billion, not to mention all the other sorts of insects and other animals that exist in the air and water and on land. If you consider, then, the total number of nonhuman living beings on the earth and could somehow relate that number (though no doubt it is far too large to compute in any meaningful way) to the number of human beings, you would certainly see that human life on earth is a very rare thing. You would have to pick over trillions upon trillions of living creatures before you would find one that was human. And this calculation only involves the planet Earth, this tiny water- and soil-laced planet spinning around a small star within a vast universe. Who knows how many other planets out there have life-forms. Or no life-forms. Therefore, it is no exaggeration to say that human life is not only, as we would all agree anyway, precious and sacred and not to be taken lightly; it is also, in the grand scheme of things, unbelievably rare.

Therefore, your living body is a fortunate, rare, and precious gift, and your human mind—consciousness risen to the point where there can be identity and value and thought and beauty and autonomous choice—is dear beyond compare. Having received this rare and precious gift, how is it that up to now you haven't thought about the best and highest way of fulfilling your human purpose, you haven't resolved to go beyond your self-centeredness and self-concern so that you can begin to manifest wisdom and compassion—or whatever you consider to be the highest of human purposes? Considering deeply the preciousness of human life, you feel inspired to begin to do something more with your life.

This is the first point to think about, and it is a pleasant, an awesome thing to think about.

The next three points are also awesome but less pleasant.

Second: *The absolute inevitability of death.*

Most of us somehow believe that we are the sole exception to the otherwise universal rule that all living creatures die. We have seen others die, so we know that others die, and if asked we will answer that yes, we do understand that we will die, but somehow, despite this, in our heart of hearts, in our thoughts and feelings, we don't really believe it. Check yourself sometime during the day and ask yourself honestly whether right now, in this moment, you truly believe that you are going to die someday. The likelihood is that you would have to answer no, at that moment you do not really believe it, you feel as if you are here and are always going to be here.

Yet the reality of death is the most important factor of every moment of our lives, because it's thanks to death that we can cross over from one moment to the next. If this moment doesn't die, totally disappearing, we can't have the next moment. So loss and death are facts of life every moment. But one day a moment will come like all others but different in one respect: it will not be succeeded by another moment. "Oh, he died," people will say then.

One of the disturbing things about this moment is that you never know when it will come. Most of us believe we don't have to worry about this moment because death comes in old age,

and since we are not now so old, it's not a problem for us. But death doesn't come only in old age, it comes at any age, and nobody knows when. And even if it were to come in old age, old age comes much more quickly than you thought it would: you were young, you blinked your eyes, thirty or forty years flew by, and now you are no longer young. How did that happen all of a sudden?

Lived time is not uniform and fixed. It is not a substance measured evenly by clocks. In fact, time is subjective. As you grow older, time speeds up. To an infant, a day or a week is an eternity—so much experiencing and learning is going on that time crawls by, almost as if there were no time. To a child beginning summer vacation, the two or three months ahead seem endless, the start of school in the fall a century away. But the older you get, the shorter a month gets. To a middle-aged person, five years goes by rather quickly. Time actually speeds up with age and the accumulation of lived experience. This means that if you are thirty, your life is much more than a third gone: it is maybe 80 percent gone. If you are fifty, is it 95 percent gone. There's not nearly as much time left as you thought there was.

This is a serious problem, and it's a problem now, not later. We ought to recognize that we are in an urgent situation. We have much less time left than we thought, and we have no idea when our lives will end, so it is important that right now we turn our attention to what really matters, that we don't waste time.

The inevitability of death and the scarcity of time are the second point to think about if we want to develop firm motivation for changing our lives.

Third: *The awesome and indelible power of our actions.*

In Buddhism this is called karma, which is not mystical or fatalistic. Karma simply means that each of our actions produces a result. And this means *every* action, both large and small. All of our thoughts, words, and deeds have consequences, and we may

never know the measure of these consequences though they are extensive and powerful. In other words, every moment of our lives up to this moment, in which you are holding a book in your hands, with whatever degree of seriousness of intention you have been able to muster—every moment so far in our lives, we have been affecting the world in some subtle yet real way; every moment, we have been participating in creating the world that now exists for ourselves and others. Everything in our lives is important. Everything matters. There are no trivial throwaway moments.

Most of us think of ourselves as rather inconsequential people. We don't take our own power very seriously. Maybe we think the president is important or the mayor is important or the Nobel Prize winner is important, the pop star is important, the Buddhist master is important, but we are not important. But this is not so. The actions, thoughts, and words of each of us are important. All of us together are making the world. So we have to ask ourselves: "How am I living? What kind of actions am I taking? Am I a force for good in the world or am I just another person doing nothing to help and therefore making things worse?" And if we ask these questions seriously, we will have to conclude that we can do much, much better and that we have to do better—that there is no excuse not to and that to do better is an urgent necessity.

Fourth: *The inescapability of suffering.*

Although we don't like to think about it, it seems that sorrow and suffering are inevitable in any human life, even a happy one. There's the suffering of loss, of disappointment, of disrespect; the suffering of physical pain, illness, old age; the suffering of broken relationships, of wanting something badly and not being able to have it, or not wanting something and being stuck with it. There's the inevitable suffering of painful, afflictive emotions, like jealousy, grief, anger, hatred, confusion, anguish—all kinds

of emotions that cause suffering. These things are part of life. No one can avoid suffering. Given that this is so, how can we not take our lives in hand and make a serious effort to develop wisdom, compassion, and resilience? How can we not prepare our minds and hearts for the inevitable suffering that we are going to be facing someday? We have insurance for our car or home because we know we need to protect ourselves from the possibility of accident and loss. We go to the doctor because we know our health requires protection. Why then would we not think to guard and strengthen our mind and heart to cope with the suffering that certainly will be coming in some measure at some time? How can we have been so foolish as to have ignored this necessity for so long?

Deep and systematic reflection on these four points constitutes **Training in the preliminaries:**

The rarity and preciousness of human life.
The inevitability of death.
The awesome and indelible power of our actions.
The inescapability of suffering.

With this reflection we'll realize that the only adequate response to the sober realities of our lives is some form of spiritual practice. I am not necessarily speaking of religion or spirituality in the conventional sense but, rather, that these reflections will cause us to appreciate the seriousness of our human condition and to recognize that we have to live as seriously as we possibly can in response to the gift and the problem that is our life.

2

Train in Empathy and Compassion

PART 1: *Absolute Compassion*

ASSUMING THAT WE HAVE now spent some time reflecting on our lives and have realized that the time has come to be serious, and maybe have established a meditation practice or some other form of spiritual cultivation, we are ready to go on to the second point of mind training, **Training in empathy and compassion.**

Before we launch into this deep and moving study, let me offer a word of caution: this material is not easy to appreciate. It amounts to a contemplation of Buddhism's most profound teachings, the teachings on emptiness, which more or less correspond, in Western thought, to theology: reflections on the nature of God, not necessarily everyone's cup of tea. Although in general, mind training is very practical and down-to-earth, this particular part of it (unlike the parts that follow) seems not to offer much specific and useful advice on how to extend compassion in the world. Instead it asks, in effect, "What is the world? What is self? What is other?" It engages metaphysical questions.

In considering how to organize this book, I wondered whether this more philosophical section might not be better at the end