



## KALAPA GOVERNANCE

### COMPASSIONATE ABIDING

*True spirituality is not a battle; it is the ultimate practice of non-violence. We are not regarding any part of us as being a villain, an enemy, but we are trying to use everything as a part of the natural process of life.*

-- Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche,  
*The Myth of Freedom*

This is a short note on the practice of Compassionate Abiding. This practice was introduced in recent years by Acharya Ani Pema Chödrön and Acharya Dale Asrael. They have described the practice in slightly different ways, but the fundamental view and technique is the same. I have found it a powerful support in my own life and work and have tried to share it with others.

In her book *No Time to Lose*, which is a commentary on the *Bodhicharyavata* (The Way of the Bodhisattva) by Mahasiddha Shantideva, Ani Pema writes:

*Bodhisattvas practice "in the middle of the fire." This means that they enter into the suffering of the world; it also means they stay steady with the fire of their own painful emotions. They neither act them out nor repress them. They are willing to stay "on the dot" and explore an emotion's ungraspable qualities and fluid energies – and to let that experience link them to the pain and courage of others.*

Compassionate Abiding practice is a method that can help us learn to do this. It is straightforward in its technique, profound in its effects. It can be practiced at any time, under any circumstances. We can learn to apply it in situations where we are experiencing intense emotion of any sort, not as a way of suppressing our feelings, but as a way of relating to them directly and with sanity.

In his book *The Myth of Freedom*, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, states:

*You are not quite certain what your relationship to your emotions is. There is a tremendous conflict, a feeling that you are being overpowered by your emotions, that you are losing your basic identity, your center of command ...When there is*

*no panic involved in dealing with the emotions, they you can deal with them completely, properly. Then you are someone who is completely skilled in their profession, who does not panic, but just does their work completely, thoroughly.*

-- Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche,  
*The Myth of Freedom*

The practice of Compassionate Abiding is a carefully constructed technique that enables us to relate to intense experience and bring that into the living reality of trying to do our work “completely, thoroughly.”

The foundation of the practice is described by Ani Pema in her book, *Practising Peace in Times of War*. She begins with a description of the inner experience we all have when we start to get “carried away” or “hooked”:

*In Tibetan, there is a word that points to the root cause of aggression, the root cause also of suffering. It points to a familiar experience that is at the root of all conflict, all cruelty, all oppression and greed. This word is shenpa ... I think of shenpa as “getting hooked”.*

*Another definition – used by Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche – is the “charge” – the charge behind our thoughts and words and actions, the charge behind “like” and “don’t like”... The charge behind the tightening, behind the urge, behind the story line or action is shenpa.*

*You can actually feel shenpa happening... It’s like experiencing the yearning to scratch an itch, and generally we find it irresistible. Nevertheless, we can practice patience with the fidgety feeling and hold our seat.*

*In these moments, we can contact the underlying insecurity of the human experience, the insecurity that is inherent in a changing, shifting world. As long as we are habituated to needing something to hold on to, we will always feel this background rumble of slight unease or restlessness. We want some relief from the unease, so when shenpa arises we go on automatic pilot: without a pause, we follow the urge and get swept away...*

*We could think of this process in terms of the four Rs: recognizing the shenpa, refraining from scratching, relaxing with the underlying urge to scratch, and then resolving to interrupt the momentum like this for the rest of our lives. What happens when you don’t follow the habitual response? You’re left with the underlying energy. Gradually you learn to relax into that shaky, impermanent moment. Then you resolve to do your best to keep practicing this way.*

## ***The practice of Compassionate Abiding***

There are several ways of practicing Compassionate Abiding, as taught by Ani Pema and Acharya Asrael. In my attempt to share this with others, I have condensed their instructions into four steps which can be remembered with the acronym LESR (pronounced "laser", as in "laser beam"). LESR stands for:

**Locate**  
**Embrace**  
**Stop**  
**Remain**

### **LOCATE**

Locate what? Locate the feeling.

A strong emotion -- like anger, frustration, sadness -- has arisen within us. Often it is so strong that we don't even notice what is happening to us. The intensity sweeps us away like a small boat on a strong current. But in the practice of Compassionate Abiding, we try to notice that this has happened as soon as the emotion arises. As we get better at noticing, we can say to ourselves: "Oh, I feel strong emotion arising. Now is the time to practice Compassionate Abiding."

At that point, we do our best to relate very directly to the feeling of the emotion. We try to **locate** the feeling. What do we mean by the feeling of the emotion? Often there is a physical sensation in our bodies. Sometimes it is vivid, like a knot in our stomach or tightening in the chest. Sometimes it is more vague, like a cloud around us. At this point in the practice, we just try to locate those sensations -- in our chest, our belly, our heart, our head. What does that sensation feel like - it is hot, is it cold, is it like a stabbing pain? Do I feel numb?

Often we may be in an argument, on a phone call, or caught up in powerful thoughts. At that point, trying to locate the feeling in our bodies, can seem like we are "avoiding the issue", but in fact we are going deeply into the powerful energy that has arisen in our being. This first step is a way of opening ourselves up right at the very moment when our habitual tendency might be to close down.

### **EMBRACE**

What do we embrace? We embrace that feeling.

We rest our mind on the feeling we have located. We do more than notice it. We **embrace** it. We can imagine that feeling (for example, the coldness of fear) as if it were a little child. (It could be our child. Or little us.) We imagine that we are embracing this little person and holding them to us, as if protecting them with our

warmth. One way of sustaining this embrace is to breathe in and feel we are drawing the feeling even more deeply into ourselves. As we breathe in, we imagine we are getting closer to the feeling itself. At the end of the in-breath, we breathe out. When we breathe out we do our best to relax. We are not breathing out the feeling or sending it away. We are still embracing the feeling as we breathe.

It doesn't matter what the feeling is. It could be deeply unpleasant and painful. The point is to locate the sensation and do our best to rest with it. What makes that difficult is that usually we are completely pre-occupied with a tremendous internal dialogue. That brings us to the third step.

## **STOP**

What do we stop? We do our best to stop thinking.

During this experience of relating directly to the feeling, embracing it as fully as possible, we notice that all kinds of mental and internal verbal activity are going on. Our habit is to talk to ourselves inwardly when we have strong emotions. If we are experiencing anger or despair, we feed the anger or despair with all the things we say to ourselves. We intensify our anger and despair with this internal talk. Often we experience this internal talk as all the things we imagine we are saying to the person or people who hurt us, who we are blaming or who we imagine we are shouting at! Similarly if we are addicted to something or someone, we feel that addiction with our internal broadcast or serenade!

In this practice, we try something different. The instruction is to consciously gently **stop** talking to ourselves and simply rest with the intense feeling, without words. This is like the famous Tibetan meditation instruction of hitting the pig on the nose. This is different to noticing our thinking and labelling it in shamatha practice. This is literally putting a stop to our inner dialogue. The moment we start adding words to our experience, we tell ourselves to stop. We return to the intense feeling of the pain we are having and rest our minds fully on that.

Often this is possible only for short periods. That's fine. We simply continue to notice the thoughts whenever we can, and come back to the feeling of the emotions beneath the words. This is done with great gentleness and kindness to ourselves.

The moment we notice that we are adding words to our experience, we gently let the words go and return to the feeling and rest our minds fully in it. This is a "felt" experience rather than a mental experience.

In my experience, it takes energy to do this. We come back and again and again to the feeling, letting go of the inner chatter. In the moments we are able to do this, even for a second or two, we feel the energy of the intense emotion more

directly. Sometimes it feels like an amazing chemical reaction is going on inside us. We might feel like running away from it, which brings us to the next step.

## **REMAIN**

What do we remain with? We remain with the direct experience of the feeling.

We return to the intense feeling and remain with it as fully as possible. Again and again we remind ourselves not to start talking to ourselves, but simply to rest with the feeling. We may use the breathing technique to help us do that: when we breathe in, we imagine we are embracing the feeling; when we breathe out we stay with the feeling, but relax a little.

It feels very reminiscent of the famous verses in the Bodhicharyavatara where Shantideva says:

*When the urge arises in the mind  
To feelings of desire or wrathful hate  
Do not act! Be silent, do not speak!  
And like a log of wood remain.*

It would be a mistake to think that Shantideva is somehow advising us to behave like dead wood, lifeless and insensitive. My experience of Compassionate Abiding practice has helped me understand these words in a very different way. This practice enables us to go much more deeply into the energetics of our experience, to a much deeper place of connection with others.

How long do we remain? It is best to use our natural intelligence. Sometimes we can only do this for a very short period of time. Sometimes, it is just too painful and it makes no sense to push ourselves. Sometimes we lose track of the experience and become a little sleepy. Other times we really feel we are riding the intense emotional energy. We are not repressing the energy or acting out. We are able to stay with that feeling until it naturally shifts and moves on.

## **Learning and practicing**

We can incorporate Compassionate Abiding practice into our formal meditation practice every day, and we can try it during the day whenever strong, disturbing emotions arise.

For example, in our daily meditation, after practising shamatha, we can undertake Compassionate Abiding and then return to shamatha for a little while. To start the a few minutes of Compassionate Abiding practice, we can think of something that disturbs us. (It is best to start with something that is only a little upsetting; if we start with something that is too powerful we might not be able to keep our mind on the practice that we are trying to learn!). Once we start thinking about the situation that upsets us, we can then apply our mind to noticing the

emotional feeling that rises up. Then we can do our best to LOCATE the feeling, EMBRACE it, STOP thinking and REMAIN with the direct experience. If we find that the feeling changes, we just follow the natural flow of the practice.

A very simple way to get started is to look around for something that we don't like or want to change. It could be a little bit of dirt on the floor, or something that is in the wrong place. It doesn't take much! Then locate the feeling that somehow lies under that, maybe it is a faint feeling of distaste in the mouth or a little tightening of the chest ...

Is the point to get rid of that feeling of distaste or tightness? Not at all. Compassionate Abiding is not a technique for pain-relief. This would be a mistaken view of the practice. We are not trying to run away from our inner experience, but rather enter into it fully.

Chögyam Trungpa was asked about this by a student. Their exchange is recorded in "Death and the Sense of Experience" in *Crazy Wisdom*:

*Student: If I'm angry, instead of either expressing or suppressing my anger, how can I just relate to it? Should I stop the anger and just relate to the thought process?*

*Chogyam Trungpa: You don't stop the anger, you just are the anger. Anger just hangs out as it is. That is relating with the anger. Then the anger becomes vivid and directionless, and it diffuses into energy. The idea of relating with the emotion has nothing to do with expressing yourself to the other person. The Tibetan expression for that is **rang sar shak**, which means "leave it in its own place." Let anger be in its own place.*

Compassionate Abiding practice is a profound introduction to the deep experience of equanimity and patience. Does this mean patience with others? Not really. It is much more about being patient with ourselves. That is the ground for immense equanimity and love in our work with others. We could think of it as a penetrating way of practicing the Lojong slogan:

*Whichever of the two occurs, be patient*  
-- Lojong slogan 42

In his commentary on this slogan in *Training the Mind and Cultivating Loving Kindness*, Trungpa Rinpoche advised:

*Whether a joyful or a painful situation occurs, whatever happens to you, your practice is not swayed by it, but you maintain continual patience and continual practice. Whether you are in the midst of extreme happiness or extreme suffering, you should be patient.*

We might mistake this quality of patience for some kind of stoic forbearance. In that case, we are simply shutting down, often denying what we and others are going through. The practice of Compassionate Abiding is, in my experience, a powerful antidote to that tendency. It is a method for helping us to be fully present, without judgment or conceptualization, definitely beyond liking or not liking.

So how does this help? In my experience it does several things:

It helps reverse our age-old attitude to discomfort and pain. Thus we cultivate inner strength and stamina, but without hardening or losing our sensitivity.

It helps us open up in the midst of difficult experiences, rather than close down. Thus it makes us better and deeper listeners, especially in chaotic and confusing circumstances.

Because this underlying emotional energy can be very turbulent, it can make it hard to think clearly, especially if it is not brought into the field of consciousness. Thus, relating to it directly has the effect of heightening and clarifying our perception.

It definitely helps take us to a different level of understanding of what is helpful and not helpful in any situation. Thus we are less likely to say or do something hurtful, and more likely to respond intuitively from a place of deep connection with ourselves and others.

It burns up the karma of situations. We find we are practicing not only for ourselves but others, and the inner heat we sometimes feel is literally a purifying fire.