

4 Clearing the Mind for Social Engagement

Just as the linguist [gradually] teaches grammar, so the Buddha taught [various] teachings appropriate to the needs of disciples. Some [he taught] to counteract vice; some to cultivate virtue. Some [he taught] based on [the] dualism [of world versus Nirvana]. [And finally, he taught some] the profound, awe-inspiring practice of enlightenment not based on dualism, in essence, the openness that is compassion.

(Nagarjuna, *Jewel Garland*¹)

Roughly two centuries after Shakyamuni's passing, the great Emperor Ashoka convened the third council of the Buddhist community as part of his efforts to weave India's ancient traditions of contemplative living into the fabric of its first universal and non-violent state. Meanwhile, just a few miles from the capitol, in the mango groves of the small farming village of Nalanda, where the Buddha and other great sages loved to teach and retreat, another council gathered around a small shrine called a stupa built by Ashoka to hold some of Shakyamuni's remains. This counter-council was organized by a community of monks and nuns who called themselves Universalists and advocated a more open and socially engaged form of Buddhism, tailored to the needs of lay practitioners who wanted to transform their world rather than simply renounce it.²

Some scholars believe that this community began a movement that would eventually sweep India and spread a non-violent, contemplative version of Indian science and civilization through most of Asia.³ That movement, called the Universal Vehicle, was personified in the colorful figure of Nagarjuna, a physician, linguist, and philosopher who advised King Antivahana II of the Shatavahana dynasty in South India and who came to be revered through much of Asia as "the second Buddha" and "great champion" of this second great wave of Buddhist teaching.

Homage to Great Compassion: The Universal Vehicle of Nagarjuna

I've opened this chapter with a passage from Nagarjuna's classic *Jewel Garland of Advice to the King*.⁴ In it, the second-century monk lays out his vision of a gradual path of teachings suited to the various stages of contemplative healing and human development. The gist of his advice was that the king could find the freedom and peace of contemplative life without abdicating his role in the world, as long as he learned to complement his personal self-healing with the Buddha's profound teachings of compassionate openness and social engagement. Though the Buddha himself had renounced princely life, his contemplative path eventually lead him back from the wilderness into the world. Thanks in part to the success of his teaching and grass-roots community, the contemplative arts and sciences of ancient India had become more and more widely accessible to mainstream Indians over the centuries that followed.

In the wake of the great Emperor Ashoka's reform of Indian civil society, Buddhist institutions had begun to open their doors more and more and to reach out to lay people in all walks of life.⁵ By the time of Nagarjuna, several of India's most progressive dynasties had begun to fund colleges and universities that would become refuges for the unfortunate and uneducated as well as the think-tanks of a contemplative science and civilization that would eventually transform India and most of Asia.⁶ At the turning point in this transformation, Nagarjuna was the architect of the socially engaged teaching tradition that would soon take root at Nalanda University, the international beacon of India's new contemplative science and civilization.

This Essential Nectar of Precepts: The Compassionate Art of Happiness

As for the shift in outlook Nagarjuna personified, it is surprisingly congruent with a profound shift made only

recently in the West. That is the shift from a scientific worldview which sees people and things as independent atoms living and working in isolation, to one which sees people and things as interdependent waves living and working through mutual cooperation. Together with the new interpersonal neuropsychology and the pressing challenges of global interdependence, this shift has fostered a growing popular consciousness of the need for a way of life that is less competitive and more cooperative. Now that modern science has revealed the causal basis of human social behavior in evolution, neurobiology and early development, we know that love and compassion are not just religious beliefs but powerful, natural forces for good. Yet we lack reproducible methods for tapping and harnessing these healing forces, like those developed, refined, and preserved through the centuries by our ancient contemplative traditions. Among traditional methods, the socially engaged curriculum refined by Nagarjuna, Asanga and their heirs at Nalanda is of great relevance for us today because it was designed and tailored specifically to meet the needs of a lay audience living an everyday life in the world.

This Art Refined Over Centuries *Was Transmitted through Suvarnadvīpa*

Though Nagarjuna's *Jeweled Garland* was addressed to a king, the gradual path of teachings he spelled out there sparked a centuries-long dialogue between Buddhist and non-Buddhist scholar-practitioners over how a socially engaged contemplative life could be made accessible to the widest possible audience.⁷ A century or two later, the brothers Asanga and Vasubandhu proposed that Nagarjuna's profound teaching of openness (literally "emptiness") would best be taught to a broad audience by emphasizing the views on the power of mind he shared in another of his three main works, *Reason Sixty*.⁸ They believed that his insight that all persons and things are empty of self-sufficiency would be less likely to frighten or confuse if it was presented in terms of openness of mind; and that presenting it like this would also make it more compatible with the work of opening the heart by extending our social emotions of love and compassion. Called Constructivism, their view of emptiness as open-mindedness was eventually reconciled with the views of Nagarjuna's direct heirs, called Centrists.



Figure 4.1 Asanga, Master of the Engaged Path of Altruism

Two or three centuries later, Nalanda Centrist masters Chandrakirti and Shantideva stressed that even mind must be seen as empty of self-sufficiency, lest people cling to habitual points of view and have greater trouble developing the radical openness and compassion Nagarjuna prescribed. Instead, they believed that the best way to teach openness widely is to present it in terms of the openness of empty conventions of speech, since these help us exchange points of view and so free our minds from self-centered bias that limits our cultivation of compassion and cooperation. By presenting Nagarjuna's insight in terms of openness of speech not just mind, this dialogue-based approach helped make his radical openness more widely accessible without indulging subjectivity; and it did so in a way that fostered the heart-opening cultivation of empathy and compassion as well or better than Buddhist Constructivism.⁹

Called Dialogical Centrism, Chandrakirti and Shantideva's approach eventually became the method of choice for presenting Nagarjuna's socially engaged form of Buddhism. So three centuries later, when Nalanda masters Suvarnadropa and Atisha sought to bring the teachings of Nagarjuna's gradual path to the fiercely independent, non-Buddhist peoples of Sumatra and Tibet, they chose to do so by simplifying and refining the dialogical method of Shantideva. Thankfully, a record of their unique style of teaching is preserved for us in the form of a practice known to Tibetans as mind-training, or as I like to call it, mind-clearing.¹⁰ Since part 1

of this book covered the first three legs of Nagarjuna’s gradual path—correcting vices, building virtues, and committing to eliminate suffering and build peace of mind—in part 2 we’ll devote our attention to exploring the socially engaged part of his path.

Specifically, we’ll explore the engaged path based on the teaching and practice of clearing the mind Atisha refined and brought to Tibet. In fact, I’ve framed all three chapters of part 2 on the speech wheel around the best known version of this popular practice, based on a text recorded by Atisha’s grandstudent Chekawa Yeshe Dorje called *Clearing the Mind in Seven Points*.¹¹ In this chapter, we’ll cover the main practice of compassion based on the first one-and-a-half points; in chapter 5, we’ll cover the way this practice distils the insight meditation on openness or emptiness, based on the next two-and-a-half-points; and in chapter 6, we’ll explore the socially engaged lifestyle prescribed in this text, based on the final three points.

It Resembles the Sun, a Diamond and a Medicinal Tree

In this and previous chapter sub-headings, I’ve italicized the opening lines of Chekawa’s introduction to *Clearing the Mind in Seven Points*. Likewise, through the remainder of part 2, you’ll find the pointers or precepts that make up his pithy and memorable root text, italicized in some of the chapter subheadings. Although some or all of the lines are thought to be direct quotes from Atisha handed down orally, I refer to them here as Chekawa’s, since at the very least, they may never have been preserved in consistent form without the Tibetan scholar’s efforts to organize and commit them to writing. With that said, I invite you to enter the world of his text with me, by reviewing the lines of introduction I’ve mentioned thus far:

Homage to Great Compassion!
This essential nectar of precepts
Was transmitted through Suvarnavipa.
It resembles the sun, a diamond and a medicinal tree!

Meant to highlight the benefits of studying and practicing the teaching encoded in Chekawa’s text, his similes sound intricate enough to our modern ears that we might dismiss them as mere poetry. That’s how I heard them when I first encountered this teaching. Yet as the years flew by and I found myself grappling with the complex challenges of my professional and personal life, these seemingly clichéd similes began to ring truer than all the science, psychology, and expert advice I’d gathered from seemingly more current and reliable sources. How could that be?

Normally, we tackle the mysteries of nature, intractable human challenges and the ills of humanity as complex problems that live somewhere “out there” in the external world. But the one element that slips through the grid of our modern science and technology, even modern psychology, is the single most pervasive source of error and suffering in all our lives. Of course, I mean the internal element of our humanity; what Freud’s predecessor Friedrich Nietzsche called our all-too-human nature.¹² If we could find a source, a method, some way to shine the light of awareness on our human failings, cut through instinctive habits that limit our full capacity and heal the wounds we inflict on ourselves, that would be a great boon indeed.

From the perspective of Buddhist contemplative science, this is exactly what Shakyamuni found in the realization of inner peace he called Nirvana. It is no accident that the word Atisha and Chekawa use to describe the essence of their teaching—whether we translate it as nectar, ambrosia or elixir of immortality—is the same word the Buddha was said to have used to describe his realization. In fact, the essential nectar this socially engaged practice offers has the Buddha’s Nirvana as its first active ingredient. It presupposes the ability to let go of the root causes of suffering and to cultivate the causes of lasting happiness. Yet while its medicine is the same as he prescribed in the eightfold path, this teaching formulates it in a new way that makes it as effective for lay people in a stress-driven world as for monks and nuns living apart from the world in monastic retreat.

While a literal reading of the noble truths maps the path in dualistic terms—as a kind of escape route leading away from the world of compulsive life to the transcendent, otherworldly realm of Nirvana—the socially engaged form of his teaching maps the journey of contemplative life more as an odyssey that eventually leads to re-engagement with the world, only this time from a place of radical openness and compassion. Instead of conceiving Nirvana as a realm apart, and contemplative life as a one-way ticket to renunciation, this new teaching sees it as a non-local way of being, every bit as much at home in the everyday world as in the monastery, hermitage or retreat. The seven-point framework and specific precepts of the practice of clearing the mind offer the essential nectar of Buddha’s Nirvana in a formula especially made for those who choose to stay in the world, and so need a contemplative path which helps them transform their

way of being in the everyday world without ever leaving it.¹³

Given the vital importance of transforming our way of being in the world, we can begin to unpack the reasons why Chekawa compares the benefits of clearing the mind to the life-giving boons of three wonders of nature: the sun, a diamond and a medicinal tree. Like the sun which shines on us all, clearing the mind of social stress can bring warmth equally and impartially into each of our lives, regardless of our surface differences. Clearing the mind of the distortions of trauma can help dispel the ghosts of painful memories, and the shadows of fear, anger, and shame clouding our perception of people, places, and things. Like a diamond blade that can cut anything, clearing the mind through surgical self-analysis can cut through the most calcified mental and emotional blocks and cut out the cancer of self-protective instincts gone wild. And, like a tree every part of which can be used as medicine, the multi-faceted practice of clearing the mind can help heal the whole range of compulsions that poison our lives; or, for those who can't master it all, each part of it can help relieve or heal some of the compulsions that ail us.

The Tree and the Couch: Mind-Clearing and Psychotherapy

To our ears, such broad general claims may sound outsized. But if we subtract the poetry and compare the benefits promised from mind clearing with those we expect from psychotherapy, the claims start to seem more plausible. While psychotherapy is not for everyone, most individuals stand to benefit significantly from greater awareness and understanding of the confused impressions and conflicting emotions that can be traced back to early relationships. Whether or not the distortions and emotions of childhood are severe enough to be diagnosable as childhood trauma, adult neurosis or some other disorder, and whether they still intrude into consciousness or have been long since repressed, they notoriously enhance misperceptions and emotional reactivity in adult relationships.¹⁴

In more serious cases, childhood stress and trauma can lead to disorders that all but block our capacities to sustain healthy relationships, at home and at work.¹⁵ Here, newer therapeutic approaches like object-relational psychoanalysis, self-psychology, interpersonal therapy, and family systems theory can help people cut through deeper layers of traumatic conditioning that block corrective learning and experience, leading to deep character change that frees and enables natural social capacities.¹⁶ Finally, psychotherapy is also a many-faceted remedy, which over time can impact many aspects of health, mental and physical, individual and collective.¹⁷ On the other hand, even small doses or narrowly focused forms of psychotherapy can be invaluable, as we can see from short-term therapies, cognitive therapies, and couples and family therapies.¹⁸

Of the many different kinds of contemporary psychotherapy, those which emphasize the role of personal relationships and social interactions in human development and health offer the closest match with the socially engaged teaching tradition and the practice of mind-clearing. Just as some modern theorists compare the shift from classical analysis to the interpersonal approach of object-relations theory with the shift in modern physics from classical mechanics to wave mechanics, so the shift from classical Buddhist psychology to the social psychology of the Universal Vehicle is typically aligned with the shift from the analytic science of Buddhist Realism to the relativistic science of Nagarjuna's Centrism.¹⁹

In both these distinct cultural contexts, there is a shared sense that the analytic approach which sees and treats people and things as truly separate reflects a preliminary analysis of mind and matter, while the relativistic approach which sees them as interdependent systems reflects a more profound analysis. So while the newer, relativistic approaches of object-relations theory and socially engaged Buddhism assume the preliminary insights and methods of classical analysis and early Buddhism, they also involve a more profound understanding of mind and matter that permits a more radical and far-reaching transformation. This is possible because practices like relational or couples therapy and mind-clearing help people harness the strong forces of love and compassion, the culture medium and catalyst for positive human development.

The Aim is to Turn the Evolution of the Toxic Body/Mind into a Path to Enlightenment!

In these last lines of his introduction, Chekawa identifies the intent behind the mind-clearing practice with the radical aim of Nagarjuna's non-dual "practice of enlightenment." That radical aim is not just to renounce the world but to transform it. This statement of purpose assumes the basic Buddhist science of the human condition and adds to it the new understanding of the relativity and interdependence of self and world,

microcosm and macrocosm. According to classical Buddhist science, the “world” is reducible to the microcosm of an individual mind/body process in its baseline condition or natural state, that is, contaminated by the compulsions that drive the cycle of stress and trauma, especially the root poisons of anger, clinging and delusion.²⁰ This is because the compulsive life world as a whole is made up of the aggregate of compulsive individuals, as molecules are aggregates of atoms.

But while a classical, dualistic reading of the noble truths aims at purifying our toxic way of being by disengaging from the world, a non-dualistic reading has the more ambitious aim of developing a new way of being that allows us to cultivate and spread enlightenment in the world. This new aim is conceivable thanks to the new Buddhist science which found that mind, body, and environment are not intrinsically toxic, but can be purified and transformed by a catalytic process like the chemical reactions described in alchemy. And, thanks to the interrelatedness of all people and things, the transformation of one life in turn can catalyze the transformation of others, eventually altering a whole society.²¹ These lines from Chekawa help orient us to the practice of clearing the mind by locating our own personal path of self-healing and change within the broad, utopian vision assumed by Nagarjuna’s socially engaged form of Buddhism. In this vision, mind-clearing is not just a path of self-healing but a contemplative form of non-violent social activism as well, a non-dual path combining enlightened altruism with enlightened self-interest.

First Learn the Preliminaries: The Foundations of Mind-Clearing Practice

The first point of this seven-point practice underscores the cumulative nature of the gradual path mapped out by Nagarjuna. It reminds us that the engaged art of clearing the mind presupposes a firm foundation in the practice of mindfulness; the insights of the noble truths, and the lifestyle of renunciation covered in part 1. Psychologically, it points to the fact that the work of sustaining healthy relationships requires that we’ve reached the basic milestones of personal self-healing: accurate, healing insight into the self-inflicted nature of our suffering; mastery over our compulsive mindset and habits; as well as some degree of serenity, benevolence, and a sustainable way of life. In practical terms, this first point typically involves continually reviewing and refining the methods, insights and ethics of the vehicle of personal self-healing I call the body-wheel.

Of course, we see something similar to this gradual path when we reflect on the gradual nature of healing and human development in psychotherapy. A successful couples’ treatment requires both parties to have a reasonably secure foundation of mental health and well-being.²² Before they are ready for couples’ therapy, individuals will likely need treatment for their addiction, trauma and/or compulsive lifestyle. If we’re going to master the art of turning social stress into an opportunity for social healing, we need to be able, as they say in airline safety, “to put our own oxygen mask first”; to disarm our own knee-jerk reactions to social stress. This basic degree of self-mastery is indispensable to what I call the social-emotional *Kung-fu* of mind-clearing practice.

Drive All Blame into One: Clearing the Mind of the Traumatized Self

Given this review of the history and logic of proactive social engagement, we turn now to the second point in Chekawa’s sevenfold practice framework.²³ Why introduce the actual practice of clearing the mind with the most edgy and provocative of Chekawa’s precepts: *Drive all blame into one*? What does “driving blame” have to do with compassion? In the simplest sense, blame is the opposite of empathy, and the main obstacle to the operation of compassion.²⁴ In terms of current stress-research and social psychology, blame is a traumatic reflex and a sensitive indicator of social stress.²⁵ As a rough subjective gauge of how threatened we feel by another human, it stands as the psychological equivalent of an elevated pulse in the realm of stress-physiology.²⁶ The instruction to drive all blame into one meets us where we spend all too much time: caught up in the experience of social stress and in traumatic reactivity to those we see as strangers, competitors, enemies, or even perpetrators.

Once it draws our attention to blame, as the projection of our own sense of fear and threat onto others, it directs us to restrain that projection and reverse its externalizing thrust by drawing it back into ourselves. Yet while it begins with a unilateral disarming and redirection of blame, this precept does not direct us to simply suppress that destructive energy or to redirect it at ourselves. It does not ask us to blame ourselves indiscriminately for everything, committing the sort of psychological suicide that is a common complication of

social stress and abuse.²⁷ Instead it asks us to pinpoint self-defeating habits to be changed, within a general spirit of unconditional self-acceptance and proactive self-mastery.²⁸

Confronting Knee-Jerk Self-Enclosure: The Root of All Social Stress

Just what does Chekawa mean by the word “one.” The correct understanding and healing efficacy of the entire practice to follow hinges on the clear and precise pinpointing of this term, which is counterintuitive enough that it has become a source of widespread misunderstanding among Tibetans as well as Westerners. All too often, the word is taken to refer to “me, myself, and I” in a general or imprecise way, as if I and my ego or self-interest are somehow to blame for all the bad interactions I have with others in the world. In the West, much of the misunderstanding is caused by translation. Though the offending habit to be “blamed” as the first step in clearing the mind is usually referred to in English as “self-cherishing,”²⁹ I find the term “self-indulgence” more accurate and less misleading.

There is nothing wrong with wisely loving or cherishing any living being, including oneself. The problem comes when we mistake unthinking, unhealthy attachment for healthy love and cherishing, and indulge, reinforce, or defend habits which are really not beneficial at all, but just plain bad for us. The reason for starting the actual practice of clearing the mind with this precept is that clinging to anything and everything we see as “I,” “me,” or “mine,” especially when we feel somehow threatened, is a very dicey, knee-jerk habit that is more likely to hurt than help. Even if it helps in the short run, this reflex invariably hijacks the higher faculties of empathy and communication we most need to meet the social challenges of civilized life.³⁰ Sadly, this reflex is standard equipment we all share as a matter of nature and nurture.

Survival or Abundance? The Origin and Limits of Self-Indulgence

You may recall the analogy I drew in part 1 between Shakyamuni’s insight into the multi-life origins of the human condition and the modern discovery of the stress-response. Evolved through natural selection because it helped our ancestral life forms respond automatically to a life-threatening physical assault, this response—with its array of fight, flight, and freeze reflexes—is a very specific biological tool that prepares us to meet a very circumscribed challenge. Alongside this self-protective response-set and the survival mode it supports, our ancestral forms of life evolved and preserved another response-set and mode of engagement to meet a very different range of conditions. What some call the relaxation response—with its array of healing, growth and love reflexes—is an equally specific biological tool which prepares us to capitalize on circumstances of relative safety and abundance. As I see it, this is the part of our nature Shakyamuni realized in his Nirvana experience.

As more complex life forms evolved, especially the increasingly social forms of our mammalian forbears and our primate next-of-kin, both of these primal modes and ways of being in the world were extended.³¹ To support our increasing dependence on others for survival, the primitive stress-response was extended into what we now call attachment behavior, including an array of social capacities, emotions, and gestures like facial expressions and cries which secure the help of others in adversity. To support our increasing collaboration with others in sharing abundance, the primitive relaxation-response was extended into the realm of bonding behavior, including an array of social capacities, emotions and gestures like facial expressions and cooing which engage others in mutual grooming, learning, courtship and play. Mammals of different eras and species maintained a delicate balance between these two modes of social engagement to meet the range of different challenges and conditions posed by a changing environment.

As a result of the way attachment behavior extends the self-protective mode of the stress-response, the limits of empathy and failures of cooperation in social animals naturally tend to trigger the same primitive fight-flight-freeze reactions as physical stressors like encountering predators. While the insensitivity or inattention of parents is a far cry from the kind of physical life threat the stress-response prepares us to meet, it tends to elicit similar reactions when misperceived as life-threatening by helpless young.³²

As the most exquisitely social of all social animals and the most helpless at birth, we humans have an unusually intense dependency on others and may be especially prone to confusing social stressors with physical life-threats. So it is that most of the events we humans experience as life-threatening traumas—the lion’s share of experiences which elicit, condition and reinforce our self-protective instincts in the course of development—are neither life-threatening challenges nor physical threats of any kind. Bound up with our self-protective instincts and woven together with the biology of the stress-response, we humans tend to develop what I call a traumatized sense of self, based on our memory of childhood traumas and fleshed out by

our identification with stress-reactive habits and defenses.

Indulging the Cornered Animal and Traumatized Child Within

Unfortunately, given the conservative bias in human development, this traumatized sense of self tends to be the position we default to when facing challenging social interactions. This means engaging with others who may themselves be overwhelmed as if they were parents on whom our survival depends, and meeting them from the rut of an outmoded self that locks us in a straightjacket of stress-reactivity and learned helplessness. In effect, the learned reactive mode I call the traumatized sense of self acts as a psychological hair-trigger which feels every stressful social interaction as a life-threatening event, tripping the innate survival mode which adds insult to injury by unleashing its chain reaction of fight-flight-freeze biochemistry. Caught in the grip of these two mutually reinforcing reactive habits—one innate and one learned—our bodies are stuck in an evolutionary hangover of stress and our minds in the recurrent nightmare of childhood trauma, even while the average expected conditions of our daily lives have never been better and our mastery over the forces of nature has never been greater.

This context also helps flesh out the second analogy we need to understand Shakyamuni's elucidation of the human condition, the analogy of trauma. The origins of human suffering lie not just in our evolutionary past but in our development within single lifetimes as well. From the moment our minds engage our parents under the influence of the poisons of self-reifying confusion, fear-based attachment and shame-based aggression, we weave for ourselves a recurrent nightmare of trauma. By identifying this nightmare as "I" and "mine," and building on this perverse foundation an obsessive mentality, addictive emotional life, and a compulsive way of being in the world, we effectively lock ourselves in a post-traumatic state that perpetuates the evolutionary hangover of stress-driven survival. The psychology of trauma is crucial to this pathology because it turns our safe and comfortable social environment into a seeming mine-field of triggers. In this post-traumatic mine-field, each and every interaction with others becomes a set up for us to implode into shame, rage or panic, the moment we experience them as negligent or abusive parents rather than equally insecure fellow-travelers.

We've Met the Enemy: Our Own Wild, Confused Minds

You can think of the gist of Buddha's insight into our civilized discontent as an inversion of Jean-Paul Sartre's provocative existentialist credo, "Hell is other people." For the Buddha's heirs, especially in the tradition of socially engaged practice, the truth is the opposite: hell is a place within my own mind. Specifically, it is the traumatized sense of self that insinuates itself into our minds like a parasite or poisonous snake, sapping us of the capacities we need to thrive with others, and poisoning our minds and bodies so that nothing and no one feels safe enough, fair enough or good enough. Psychoanalyst Margaret Mahler refers to this all-too-human stance as "the paranoid-schizoid position." I often illustrate this psychological rut with the singsong mantra of childhood self-pity, "Nobody loves me, everybody hates me, I'll just eat worms!" What Chekawa means by the precept, "Drive all blame into one," is that indulging our self-protective impulse to seek safety under the cover of this regressed stance is the prime obstacle to healthy social emotional self-care and proactive social development. Shantideva compares the way stopping this reflex protects our minds from social stress to the way sandals protect our feet:

Where is there enough leather
To cover the surface of the Earth?
But just having sandals on one's feet
Is the same as covering the whole Earth.³³

The Inner *Kung-Fu*: Clearing the Mind

The essence of the discipline of clearing the mind is this tactical inversion from the primitive reflex of externalizing blame to a reflexive awareness that sees our own part in the problem, alongside the contributions of others. This shift in attention is the gateway to mind-clearing because it opens an avenue to focusing on what we can realistically master, maximizing our leverage over our interactions by changing what is within our control: our own outlook, attitude and behavior. The strategy is comparable to one we are well aware of from the globalization of the Asian popular culture of martial arts. By building the discipline to master innate

violent impulses and self-protective reflexes, the martial artist can keep cool enough to maintain an objective clarity and empathic awareness of an opponent's moment-to-moment mindset, intentions and habits. As a result, s/he can stay well ahead of the actions of an untrained and undisciplined mind, mastering even the most hostile opponent by putting higher awareness over primitive impulse, light over heat.³⁴ In effect, the practice of mind-clearing targets the terrorist within us all, and unmasks him not as pure evil, but as the traumatized child and cornered animal that threatens all of our peace and survival, individually and collectively.

By impersonally, empathically, and proactively engaging that wild child with a no-fault, zero tolerance discipline, the mind-clearing offers a path to disarming and taming our own minds that also prepares us to help others disarm and tame themselves. Far from the self-sacrificing martyrdom that leaves us open to playing the doormat for less civil others, this practice equips the meek child within with the self-knowledge and inner strength to really inherit the earth.³⁵ If we want inner peace to be sustainable in the everyday world, we need to engage with that world in a proactive way that protects and extends our peace of mind in the face of expectable social stresses. Instead of indulging our inner child by demanding others be better than they are, we must take adult responsibility for parenting ourselves through our social lives, dedicating whatever energy we save to deal maturely with others still in the grips of their wild child.

Contemplate the Kindness of All Living Beings: Building a Proactive Social Self

With this self-critical shift, we open the door to a whole new way of life based on proactive engagement with others in the day-to-day world. Once we break the death-grip the traumatized self maintains on our minds, we clear the way for our positive social self to emerge from the shadows and take the lead in our interactions with others. As we've learned from today's trauma therapies, we must first disarm the survival mode of trauma before we can feel safe enough to learn a new way of being with others based on positive social emotions and healthy interactions.³⁶ In effect, the complementary modes of abundance and survival are also mutually incompatible.³⁷

In illustrating this fact, I like to borrow an analogy frequently used by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Fascinated with cars since his boyhood, His Holiness likes to compare the shift from a negative mindset to a positive one to shifting gears with a manual transmission. If we're stuck in the overdrive of high stress and trauma, we must first downshift to neutral before we can reengage in the low-stress mode of peace and compassion. The first precept—*drive all blame into one*—serves as a reminder to down-shift out of the overdrive of trauma into the neutral mode of self-reflection and self-care, before the second precept—*contemplate the kindness of all*—directs us to re-engage with others in the low-stress mode of proactive confidence, empathy, and compassion.

Taken together, the remaining precepts we'll explore in this chapter unpack the art of cultivating and harnessing our natural capacity for the positive social emotions we need to motivate and sustain positive social interactions. This includes four main topics: two main methods of building healthy empathy and compassion; putting empathy and compassion into practice with the help of an art called giving and taking; monitoring our practice with breath-mindfulness in the course of everyday interactions; and training the mind for long-term practice through cognitive-behavioral learning. First, though, a big-picture look at compassion.

From Sentimentality to Spontaneity: The Four Modes of Compassion

The first thing we can expect to come up when most of us hear the precept to *contemplate the kindness of all living beings* is our innate fear and learned experience that *not all* living beings are kind; in fact, some have a knack for being threatening, attacking, and even lethal. Are we supposed to deny or whitewash the ways in which our everyday world seems anything but kind? Are we being asked to live in a spiritual fantasy world rather than in hard reality? A general look at compassion in the socially engaged tradition helps resolve these questions and clarify the real intention behind this precept and practice. In terms of its positive social psychology, compassion is not viewed simply in light of its emotional tone but also in light of its cognitive accuracy and behavioral efficacy. This is clear from a quick look at a traditional typology of modes or levels of compassion.³⁸

Generally defined as the wish that another or others be freed from suffering and its causes, compassion is categorized into four modes or levels. Most closely aligned with what we think of as compassion in Western psychology or ethics is the first mode. Called sentimental compassion, this type of compassion is seen more as

a subjective state of pity or sympathy, which may be more colored by the compassionate subject's good intentions than by any realistic understanding of the nature of others' suffering or a practical ability to help. One answer to the question of whether this tradition wants us to live in a rosy but unrealistic fantasy world lies in the teaching that this common sentiment is not true compassion because it is neither realistic nor efficacious. The full answer lies in unpacking the three modes or depths of compassion that *are* considered genuine.

The first of these modes I call narrative compassion because it combines the wish to help with a realistic understanding of the evolutionary causes and developmental conditions driving others' suffering, as well as the empathic art it takes to help others break out of their myopic life-story to see their predicament realistically and make healthy change. This mode bears a clear resemblance to the analytic insight that allows a therapist to build an accurate therapeutic construction of a client's history in psychotherapy. As in mind-clearing, in therapy we would see this insight as ideally combined with the empathic sensitivity and interpretive art it takes to help a client revise their familiar narrative to support healing and change.

The second mode I call analytic compassion because it marries a profound wish to help with a realistic analysis of the moment-to-moment mind/body conditions that maintain suffering, as well as expertise in prescribing changes in mindset, motivation, and habit that would counteract those conditions and foster healing. This mode bears an obvious resemblance to the depth-psychological insight that allows a clinician to discern cognitive, affective, somatic and/or behavioral factors that reinforce suffering, as well as the clinical expertise to prescribe changes in thinking, emotional regulation and/or lifestyle that would counteract suffering and promote healthy development.

The final mode I call unconditional compassion because it integrates the most profound instinct to help with a direct intuition of another's predicament and a spontaneous response that reflects the level of empathic attunement and responsiveness an experienced mother has towards the needs of her child. This level of compassion may be a bit more controversial for us, in that it assumes an intuitive openness and empathic spontaneity that challenges our notions of objectivity and distance. Nonetheless, I believe it's very much in line with the highest levels of empathic maturity and therapeutic mastery.

As I see it, these modes of effective compassion are the key, active ingredients needed to catalyze and sustain the healing experience and dialogue of a therapeutic relationship. In addition, what Chekawa has in mind when he directs us to *contemplate the kindness of all living beings* is quite in keeping with current views of how our higher cognitive faculties evolved, develop and function in synergy with our primal, mammalian social emotions.³⁹ The gist of this view is that genuine, mature, or effective compassion, more than a simple affect, sentiment, or belief, is a highly evolved form of social-emotional intelligence that is vital to the success of human interaction, communication and cooperation. Of course, despite the need to integrate the two faces of social engagement, the tradition suggests that we cultivate them separately at first, and then eventually work to integrate them into one seamless practice. So we turn now to the traditional methods used to develop the emotional face of compassion.

Cultivating Compassion: The Art of Civilized Happiness

Before we turn to consider the two main methods of building empathy and compassion, a few general comments about the way in which that cultivation is traditionally viewed in Buddhist and Western culture may help set the stage. In stark contrast to the view of love promoted traditional religious culture of the West, our modern scientific view of human nature saw our potential for social emotions like empathy, love, and compassion as mainly self-interested and narrowly circumscribed. Instead of our religious view of humanity as loving, until recently modern science saw our nature as primarily competitive and aggressive.⁴⁰ This modern consensus has been forcefully challenged by the rise of new fields like sociobiology, positive psychology and interpersonal neurobiology.⁴¹ In this emerging new science, positive social emotions and social-emotional intelligence are seen less as conflicting with individual self-interest than as essential and basic to healthy human development and adaptation. There is also increasing openness now to a view of our nature as having a relatively unlimited potential to extend and expand our social capacities through use-dependent plasticity.⁴²

This new science prepares us well to understand the social psychology of Buddhism, in which our natural capacities for empathy, love, compassion, and altruism are seen as potentially unlimited and indispensable to our optimal well-being and happiness in the unnatural condition of civilized life. While Buddhist psychology can hardly be accused of underestimating the deep roots of our instinctive narcissism and destructive emotions, it clearly anticipates the optimism of the emerging science on our potential for social change. In fact, in its socially engaged teaching tradition, it may be even more committed than the new science to the

idea that social capacities like empathy and altruism must be cultivated by all individuals and groups as a basic necessity of our health, education and welfare. The two methods of cultivating compassion developed in the Nalanda tradition and taught widely in Tibet exemplify this radical optimism and ambition. In effect, they map a course of athletic exercise and training that is and should be open to anyone who wants to move their everyday life towards optimal wellness and sustainable happiness.

The Fourfold Method of Exchanging Self and Other

The most concise and integrated of the two methods of building compassion in this tradition is the more recent technique developed by Shantideva.⁴³ Known as the method of exchanging self and other, this fourfold practice is an ideal place for us to start because it integrates cognitive and behavioral changes along with the core shift in emotional stance from reactive self-indulgence to proactive social engagement. It revolves around four successive steps: equalizing self and other; recognizing the costs of self-indulgence; realizing the benefits of love and compassion; exchanging self-indulgence for altruism. I like to describe these four steps as grounding, clearing, rebuilding, and reorienting.

The First Step: Grounding Compassion in Equanimity

The first step lays the foundation for a mature, objective approach to others and our interactions. Yet it begins where our traumatized approach to life does: myopically focused on our own narrow self-interest and those of the people we hold dear. As we saw in part 1, our basic relationship with ourselves and our loved ones revolves less around healthy love than around the fear-based clinging Buddhist psychology calls attachment. This clinging, expressed in stress-reactive and post-traumatic self-involvement, is compounded by our bland indifference, mistrust and denial of the humanity of vast majority of people we interact with. Further compounding our predicament is the shame-based envy and resentment for the special group we see as competitors or threats. In effect, this complex of threefold bias not only insures that all our interactions are driven or tainted by various forms of stress and trauma, but effectively locks us in a fortress-like prison of compulsive isolation, clinging and antipathy.

The art of equalizing self and other is designed to help us break down this prison one brick at a time, by bringing an unbiased mindfulness and awareness to our perception and responses to all living beings, close and far, human and non-human. The exercise proceeds much like basic science, by bringing our attention to the deep family resemblance and common history linking each one of us to one another and to all other life. The first move is to see all humans and all living beings as siblings under the skin, equal in being made of the same basic elements and in being subject to the same facts of life, including impermanence, illness, aging, and death. The second is to recognize the psychological bottom line that cuts across surface distinctions between us: that all animate life is sensitive to pleasure and pain; and that all sensitive beings equally seek the former while avoiding the latter. A scientific version of our Jeffersonian values, this reflection is meant to spark an enlightened spirit of humanity that counteracts our baser instincts towards self-indulgence and to build a universal tolerance, acceptance, and empathic inclusiveness. As Shantideva says,

First, I should apply myself to meditation
On the equality of self and others.
Since we're all equal in wanting happiness and rejecting suffering,
I should cherish all living beings as I do myself.⁴⁴

Therefore I should dispel others' suffering
Simply because it is suffering, just like mine;
And I should bring others' happiness
Simply because they are living beings, just like me.⁴⁵

Correcting our Biases For and Against Other Lives

Next, we bring this more objective awareness to bear in examining and correcting the biases that distort our perceptions and interactions with others. This self-corrective analysis works differently in each case, depending on the three main kinds of bias we project onto others.

Since our positive bias towards family and friends is based on attachment, we work first to see through the

idealization or denial we have towards people we wish would love and help us, by facing their real limitations and trying to accept them more objectively as they are. Likewise we must reflect on the costs of clinging to these people in a self-indulgent way that denies their limits and the limits of our relationship, forging a symbiotic, codependent bond that leads us to reinforce each others' problems rather than honestly facing and solving them.

Second, we turn to our bias of indifference towards those we consider strangers or neutral acquaintances, a bias mainly supported by our compulsive confusion or delusion. Whether we simply fail to notice or acknowledge the individuality and importance of this silent majority of beings, this bias myopically narrows our world to a precious few friends and enemies, blanking out most of those our lives and world depend on. Our work here is to remove these blinders so that we can stop dismissing or neglecting most living beings and begin to see and treat all life with the sensitivity and seriousness we normally restrict to dear ones.

Finally, we take on the most difficult bias, the primal self-protective aversion and antipathy we have for those who seem to question, challenge or threaten our self-interest or well-being. Here, our work is to expose the distorted view we have of these individuals based on our traumatic reaction to the challenge they pose to our self-image and our way of life. Only when we're able to see them realistically as complex individuals with their own rights, needs, and problems, can we wake up to the challenge they pose for our relationship with reality and the future. While we all might prefer for this stressful part of our lives to just disappear, there is simply no realistic way for us to move through life without conflicts or differences with some individuals and groups. For that reason and because such difficult interactions trigger our worst traumatic stress-reactivity, there is enormous hidden benefit in learning to approach these interactions mindfully and skillfully.

Contemplating the Kindness Apparent or Hidden in all Living Beings

Instead of focusing on the equal make-up and frailty of living beings, Chekawa takes equality a step further and suggests we focus on the fact that, whether we notice it or not, they all possess some degree or form of kindness. While we do tend to focus sentimentally on the kindness of those we hold dear, we have a double or triple standard when it comes to strangers and rivals. Do we stop to reflect that each and every one of the strangers who surround us in our city, country and on the planet have loved ones themselves—people they see and treat with the same sort of kindness we feel for our loved ones? Of course, we are even less likely to reflect on the fact that those who challenge, threaten or hurt us or our loved ones inevitably have someone in their lives they hold dear and treat with some form of kindness. Chekawa's precept urges us to recognize and reflect on the kindness in all living beings as the best equalizer, because contemplating that quality most forcefully disarms the defensiveness we feel for strangers and rivals and naturally kindles the human-kindness we normally reserve for family and friends.

Equanimity: The Ground of Equality and Justice for All

Of course, the spirit of this work is somewhat familiar to us, as it resonates with our democratic sense of justice as well as our scientific ideal of objectivity.⁴⁶ Yet it addresses the need for fairness in our perceptions and actions on a much more personal level than we are used to, and it does so more radically and systematically than even the most rigorous modern disciplines. In practice, the closest most of us come to this exercise is in psychotherapy, where we must correct our childhood distortions of parents and stop projecting these as transference onto significant others at home and work. Yet at least for the average lay client, the way psychotherapy corrects such bias is not as complete or systematic as this practice, and leaves most of the interactions we have with others prey to persistent distortions and bias.⁴⁷

Another key difference between this exercise of equanimity and what passes for objectivity in the modern context is that it is not the disembodied, disengaged, or disinterested state we normally think of as scientific objectivity or neutrality. It does involve disentangling the tentacles of clinging we tend to confuse with love and healthy attachment. But the expectation is that once those tentacles are released, love will flow more fully and freely, unrestrained by the death-grip of traumatic hyper-vigilance, compulsive controlling, and fear.⁴⁸ I often compare the distinction to the difference in narrative voices between a remote third person narrator who is objective in an indifferent or distant way and a close omniscient narrator who enters inside the mind of each character with caring intimacy. This distinction applies equally to our modern therapeutic ideas of the analyst's "neutrality," which is less like our modern scientific ideal of unfeeling reason than an extension of the wise yet caring engagement of a mature parent.⁴⁹

A Middle Way Between Self-Indulgence and Self-Sacrifice

Unlike Indian and Western views of a supreme being who is literally omniscient and omnipotent, altruists like Shakyamuni are seen as more nurturing and effective than other humans but not without limits and needs. So while their love and compassion may be unconditional and universal, they are in fact refined and expanded versions of the natural social capacities innate in us all. This is why such altruists include themselves in their own love and compassion, as one being whose needs and interests are equal in merit and importance to any other's. If they seem to act selflessly, it is simply a function of the emotional calculus of their compassion, since the category "self" only includes one living being, while the category "others" includes infinite beings, each one of whom ideally is held as dear as oneself or one's only child.

Since the impartial and universal empathy aimed at in Shantideva's first step lays the foundation for a mature and balanced social engagement with self and all others, I refer to this step as "grounding" the practice of proactive compassion. You may also recognize it from the practice we in the West now call "loving kindness."⁵⁰ In the context of the gradual path, this first exercise dovetails with the work of the body-wheel: the horizon of personal self-healing reviewed in the first of Chekawa's seven points: *first learn the preliminaries*.

Meditative Experiment 4.1: Practicing Equanimity

In a secure, quiet space, find a comfortable posture, and clear your energy by exhaling a long, complete sigh. Let your next breath fill your lungs naturally, with as little effort as possible, and take that gentle, fresh breath as a tether for your restless mind. A breath at a time, let yourself shift into a kinder and gentler rhythm of breathing, and take that rhythm as a focal point to settle and center your energy and awareness. As you breathe in, try to gather your dissipated energy and distracted awareness and let them come to rest on your gentler breath-rhythm, centered at your heart. As you breathe out, exhale whatever restlessness and fatigue is inside you, imagining you can see it leaving your nostrils, fingers, and toes as puffs of white smoke. By alternately settling your distracted mind and uplifting your drowsy mind, you'll naturally find yourself moving towards a more centered space of clarity and calm, riding on the relaxed in and out of your breath.

As your mind eases into a more centered space of clarity and calm, imagine dissolving it into the subtle breath, the pulse of gasses that travels throughout your whole body, filling each tissue and cell with fresh oxygen and gathering up CO₂ to breathe out again. Try to feel you're breathing with your whole body, and that, with each breath, your body is becoming lighter and clearer, like a person-shaped bubble of life and breath. In your breath-body, open the scope of your mindfulness to the raw feel of your sensation, taking care to let go of feelings of pleasure and accept distress rather than fight or avoid it. Next, open your mindfulness to include your primal mind, immersing yourself in its natural clarity and awareness by letting go of any clinging or struggling with good or bad thoughts and images. Then finally expand your mindfulness to include all of you—your breathing body, raw feel, primal mind and experience—trying to maintain the centered balance you've been bringing to each layer of your life.

Now that you've found a greater balance and equanimity within your own body-mind, it's time to expand your awareness outwards and try to extend that balance to your interchange with others and the world we share. First, try to shed the tough skin of defensiveness and open your breath-body to feeling part of the world around you. Imagine yourself as a person-shaped bubble, a wave of life-energy and awareness within a sea of life-energy and awareness. Feel yourself filling and emptying with waves of life-breath and awareness, giving and taking with others and the world around you, like a cove filling and emptying with surf.

Now turn your awareness to your social environment. First, call up the image of a person near and dear to you for whom you feel a strong, uncomplicated warmth and affection. Invite the personality of your loved one to enter and inhabit the image, so you feel their presence as if you could reach out and touch them. Now focus on taking in their presence on the in-breath, and feel yourself filled with a sense of warmth and connectedness. As you savor that warmth, try to let go of any fearful attachment or clinging that normally preys on you and blocks your ability to feel deep, heart-opening love. Now breathe that stronger, purer love out to your dear one and see him or her take it in and feel warmed and connected in turn. As you exchange loving energy and awareness, feel your bond with your loved one deepening and intensifying, until it begins to fill you both with life-giving warmth.

Then invite into the space around your loved one all those you hold near and dear including your friends and role-models, allowing the outpouring of pure love to spread to them all, as if you were at a

gathering where all were filled with an expansive sense of human kindness, belonging and gratitude. Here again, practice exchanging feelings of warmth and affection with your whole community of close others, trying to stretch your heart open and expand your capacity to savor, share and spread true care and love.

Next, invite your close community to move behind you, where they can back you up and buoy you with a sense of all-encompassing, unwavering, unconditional love. Now call up before you the image of a remote acquaintance for whom you feel very little except a vague sense of indifference. Best here is someone you routinely see but have little or no real knowledge or sense of, someone like a shopkeeper, bus driver or mailman. Invite the individual's personality to enter and inhabit your image. Now breathe in a sense of his or her presence as deeply and intimately as you can, as if you'd suddenly become neighbors for life or been thrown together by a disaster. As you breathe in his or her presence, try to see through the cloud of denial, prejudice, and myopic exclusiveness that keeps us locked in a self-enclosed trap of isolation and mistrust.

With your mind and heart clearing, tune into your common humanity by getting a feel for your acquaintance's familiar make-up and vulnerability, as well as distinctive blend of strengths and weaknesses. As you mix this sense of common humanity with the abiding sense of warmth you feel with your dear ones, try to breathe out a welcoming air of tolerance, acceptance and benevolence that adopts and embraces this unique individual as a new member of your extended family and heart-community. Now imagine him/her breathing in your inviting energy, feeling warmed and welcomed into your presence and life; and practice savoring and deepening this sense of connection one breath at a time. Finally, as the sense of human family feeling begins to fill you both with an inclusive sense of belonging, invite all the other remote acquaintances or complete strangers in your locality, your nation, your continent, and on our planet to gather behind your acquaintance, and join in the outpouring of real empathy, interconnectedness, and human kindness.

Lastly, invite you newfound friends and extended human foster family to come to your sides, men to your right and women to your left, and continue to embrace them in a sense of radical acceptance and rainbow solidarity. With these new members flanking you together with the community of dear ones backing you up, turn now to face the hardest challenge: coming to accept the people you find overly challenging or even threatening.

Begin by calling up someone you know all too well who's not your worst enemy but who simply rubs you the wrong way, like an edgy relative or sour neighbor. Next, respectfully invite the personality of that difficult other to enter and inhabit your image. Now gradually try to restrain any angry, resentful, or aversive reactions you feel towards him or her, and instead apply the clarity and peace of mind you've mustered thus far to engaging this person with a fresh open-mindedness and proactive tolerance, as if for the very first time. Here too, trying to breathe in an awareness of his/her common human make-up and frailties, reflecting on the fact that his/her edge or sour mood is no doubt caused by the same negative instincts and habits that plague us all. At the same time, take care not to overlook or discount any signs of human decency or kindness, as well as any distinctive qualities or suffering that may help you put his/her rough edges in context.

Now as you take in the humanity and uniqueness of this difficult other, try to neutralize any guardedness or resistance that might block your own empathy or human kindness by staying tuned to the deep and abiding positive feelings you feel with the community backing you up and the human family at your side.

Patiently yet persistently try to accept the presence of this challenging being in your life, and welcome him or her as the salt and pepper in the mix of your larger community and social life. It may help to reflect that if not for this other, there will always be someone who rubs you the wrong way, and that alongside any negative qualities s/he has there is likely to be a vital kernel of truth in the dissenting perspective s/he represents. As you open the fabric of your sense of community to include him or her as a member in good standing, try to appreciate the relief it brings to let go of aversion as well as the final expansion of your sense of belonging and interconnectedness with your social world as it really is. And as you breathe out this sense of radical tolerance, see your opponent soften and respond to your effort, until a genuine air of mutual respect and acceptance begins to flow between you. Into this air, finally invite the whole spectrum of difficult others—including the most threatening—to gather around the difficult other, and try to imagine stretching your sense of inclusiveness, one challenge at a time, until it can embrace the whole scope of your interconnection with others in the world.

At last, with your loved ones behind you, your acquaintances at your side, and your challengers right in front of you where you can watch them, try to breathe in the presence of your whole social environment just as it is, only joined in a spirit of radical acceptance and proactive engagement. As you take in your full

interconnectedness with all humanity, try to savor a deep, heart-opening sense of belonging, and breathe out any positive feelings of relief, warmth, inclusiveness and connectedness to open and warm the hearts of all those we share this shrinking planet with.

You may finally choose to include all the other forms of life, from your most favorite to your least favorite, until you can taste a sense of breathing together with all other life on the planet, as if you and the earth were breathing as one. When you've had your fill, invite your guests to return to their own lives and places in the world, but just breathe a duplicate of your dearest into your heart, to keep the sense of warmth and openness always there with you to draw on every day.

The Second Step: Clearing the Mind of Post-Traumatic Self-Indulgence

If the first exercise in Shantideva's fourfold method of building compassion dovetails with Chekawa's first point, the second exercise—recognizing the costs of self-indulgence—overlaps with the first precept of his second point, *drive all blame into one*. Drawing on the basic analytic psychology of Buddhism, this exercise has us trace the causal sequence driving our misperception of friends and enemies back to the root compulsions of attachment and aversion. These opposing biases are then traced in turn to the same root poison that causes us to overlook or distort the humanity of strangers: the compulsive confusion and delusion underlying our all-too-familiar traumatized state of mind. In this exercise, we practice clearing away that confusion to expose the taproot of our whole biased subjectivity.

As you may recall, the most accessible part of this taproot is the delusion or fixed misperception of self we developed in the course of early childhood trauma: that we are all alone, helpless, and powerless in the face of the threatening challenges of our lives. If we trace this misperception deeper into our subconscious minds, we eventually hit upon the protective instinct of self-reification innate in us all, known to Western psychology as primal narcissism. It is this instinct that mistakes our sense of ourselves as helpless, threatened and alone for the fixed, objective reality of who and what we are, while simultaneously mistaking other humans who cannot read our needs or meet them for predatory rivals in a dog-eat-dog struggle for survival. Based on this, we build a mistaken, worst-case view of ourselves and our social world biased by the traumatic perceptions and stress-reactive emotions of early childhood.⁵¹ The more we indulge our traumatized sense of self and others, the more we lock ourselves into a recurrent nightmare of survival which triggers and is reinforced by the toxic neurochemistry of the stress-response.⁵²

The Traumatized Self: A Weather Vane in the Storm of the World

While the main intent of this practice would seem to be to help others, the fact is that the biased subjectivity of self-indulgence is unfair not just to others but even more so to ourselves. Once we fix our frame of reference in life on a traumatic attachment to ourselves and a few family and friends, we expose our minds to the toxic influence of compulsive confusion, clinging and aversion. Given that myopic fixation, our minds are caught in the powerful cross-currents of conflicting preoccupations called the worldly winds: attachment to ourselves and our circle enjoying pleasure, fame, praise, and gain; aversion to ourselves and our circle suffering pain, disrepute, blame, and loss. These winds are matched by countercurrents of attachment to our rivals and their circle suffering pain, disrepute, blame, and loss; and aversion to our rivals and their circle enjoying pleasure, fame, praise, and gain. With our higher faculties blinded by self-indulgence, we are pushed around our daily lives by the unseen force of primal drives, thrown here and there by the winds of disturbing confusion, insatiable acquisitiveness, and unbridled competitiveness.

While the whirlwind of confusion and the cross-winds of clinging and antipathy twist and push our inner lives aimlessly about, they also throw us off course in our relationships with others, near and far. Fear-based attachment and clinging constricts our relations with loved ones, tainting these ties with pointless tension and conflict. Delusion, denial, and confusion lead us to sleep-walk through our interactions with strangers or neutral acquaintances, enclosing us in a myopic bubble of isolation. Envy, aversion, and enmity force us to carry an unsupportable burden of antipathy and resentment, weighing down our ability to resolve disagreements and differences. So the biased mindset of our traumatized self not only twists our minds into knots of conflicted confusion but also wreaks havoc on our social life, blighting the whole web of relationships that make up the fabric of our human world. Nagarjuna compared our habit of reifying traumatic distortions and emotions as "I" and "mine" to a bad seed from which all our ills grow:

(Mind/body) systems develop from the construction of "I,"
(Yet) that construction of "I" in reality is false;

How could what has grown
From such a false seed be true? ⁵³

Overcoming Our Instinctive Resistance to Self-Analysis

Exposing the habit of self-indulgence and recognizing its costs is only the first step in the healing self-analysis and self-change we need to transform our social way of being in the world. The analysis this practice assumes is so radical and profound that we will return to it in chapter 5, as well as in the other two chapters on insight in parts 3 and 4. Progress in exposing and correcting this habit must necessarily be gradual, because it hides in our psychic blind spot as the most constant fixture in our minds and because it is thoroughly intertwined with the self-protective instincts that are a such powerful force in our lives. Typically, our inner dialogue and frame of reference are so intimately involved with this habit that it is a prodigious feat to get any perspective on it at all. Since exposing and disarming the grip of self-indulgence dispels the ghostly self-protective instincts and memories possessing our minds, I refer to this step in Shantideva's method as "clearing." This step effectively frees our powers of insight, empathy and altruism from the constraints of traumatic stress-reactivity, allowing these key muscle groups to be strengthened and toned in the remaining two steps of this method. Shantideva describes this key step in his *Guide*:

Since all the traumas of this world,
All our mental anguish and physical distress,
Arise from (this habit of) self-indulgence,
Of what use is this terrified ghost to us?
Without extinguishing a fire,
We cannot stop it from burning us.
Likewise, without eliminating self-indulgence,
We cannot stop our experience of suffering.⁵⁴

Step Three: Rebuilding Our Whole Way of Being in the World

This brings us to the third exercise of Shantideva's fourfold method: realizing the benefits of love and compassion. In the context of Chekawa's mind-clearing practice, this is the exercise most closely aligned with the second precept of point two: *contemplate the kindness of all living beings*. In the Nalanda tradition, the basis for this step is the understanding that, despite their seeming independence, the diversity of living and non-living things arises entirely from the process of interdependence and mutual interaction. The scientific basis for the Buddhist psychology of selflessness, this understanding explains why social emotions like love and compassion are beneficial not simply on a "higher" moral level, but on the most basic, pragmatic level of life in the world as well.⁵⁵

The Ground of Compassion: The Old, New Science of Interdependence

We are more likely to get the gist of this exercise if we briefly review the new science that has lent current validation to the optimistic worldview of socially engaged Buddhism. For today's evolutionary biology and psychology, the basis for the benefits of love and compassion lies in the fact that, despite eons of life-death struggle our ancestors had to survive, the rise of highly social animals in the mammalian era has tipped the balance of life towards cooperation rather than competition.⁵⁶ The gradual transition culminating in the evolution of hominids has finally been punctuated by the emergence of cultural evolution and human civilization.⁵⁷ This gradual sea-change has made the primitive, asocial reflex of stress-reactivity seem like vestigial organs compared with the social responses like empathy on which our lives increasingly depend.

Cooperative traits based on social emotions are not sentimental weaknesses, as modern science once taught us, but the right evolutionary tools for the job of civilized life. In hindsight, the rise of social evolution is a natural extension of the primal forces of sexual reproduction supporting primitive social behaviors like courtship and nurturance.⁵⁸ More basic still, sexual evolution in turn can be traced to the forces of interdependence supporting the development of our physical environment and the advent of life.⁵⁹ The same forces that sustained the evolution of more cooperative life also account for why our minds and brains are

naturally prepared to communicate and cooperate, motivated by social emotions like love and compassion, as we see in the groundbreaking synthesis of my colleague, Dan Siegel.⁶⁰

In a very practical sense, exercising such social emotions and the capacities they support may be the best way to adapt ourselves more fully to our delicate natural environment, as well to tune into the progressive spirit of evolution and human development. Building our capacity for social engagement shifts our development into a progressive mode in which we grow more able to parent our inner child while having as much mature humanity as possible to share with others who are more challenged. This allows us to build a more effective, cohesive and meaningful social life and world *unilaterally*, by doing what we can to raise the level of our everyday interactions rather than passively waiting for others to mature themselves.⁶¹ Shantideva speaks eloquently about this third step in the process:

Since one who knows the equality of self and others
Derives great joy from relieving others' suffering,
For their sake, s/he would gladly enter the deepest hell,
Like a wild goose diving into a fresh lotus pool.
The ocean of joy that will arise
When all living beings are freed
Is all I could wish for—
So why wish for my freedom alone?⁶²

Hence just as I protect myself
From anything unpleasant, however small,
So I should act towards others
With a compassionate and caring mind.⁶³

Step Four: Exchanging Childhood Self-Indulgence for Mature Altruism

Shantideva's fourth and final exercise—exchanging self-indulgence for altruism—effectively completes the profound inner shift begun by building an engaged, proactive self. Since much if not most of our inner lives have been spent in the myopic mode of self-indulgence, identified with our traumatized childhood self, completing the shift to a synoptic self and mature way of life requires a decisive change in our sense of identity.

As we dismantle our childhood self-indulgence and build a mature, engaged social self, we must finally make the decisive step of shifting our frame of reference and sense of identity from the familiar habits we've built up around our childhood self to the new outlook and values we've been building. And since, according to Buddhist psychology, our self is constructed under the guidance of language, it is essential at this final step that we re-center our sense of "I" and "mine" around the new stance of openness and skills of compassion which are the building blocks for our proactive, engaged social self. As in the natural process of parenthood, this shift happens organically and eventually arrives at a more expansive and objective agency which embraces others as much as the self.⁶⁴

While the expansion of selfhood in the course of parenting is a natural developmental process fueled by the exercise of empathic openness and loving, compassionate care, the shift in this step is a conscious, cultural extension of that process to our social lives as a whole. It amounts to adopting the whole of humanity and all life as an extended family, and choosing to relate to that family, to the best of our ability, as a volunteer foster parent to any and all in need. Of course, in order for this shift to be authentic, we must exchange our myopic sense of our life as centered around our narrow self-interest for an expanded sense of it as intimately involving the well-being of each and every individual in the web of life that is our world.⁶⁵

Reorienting Our Lives Around our Social Fitness

Because of the enormous sea-change this shift involves, I like to call this fourth exercise "reorienting." It is not that we eliminate our familiar self, even our childhood self or "inner child" from our view of the world, but that we now choose to view that small self, as if from the outside in, rather than see our selves and our world from within it, looking out. But this shift means that we commit to doing so not from the self-indulgent stance which denies the needs and perspectives of others, but from an objective, adult stance which sees our

subjective self as one of many confused and myopic selves. So, while the world, our world, remains exactly as it was before, our orientation on that world has come full circle and shifted 360 degrees.

It's not that we now stand outside ourselves and see ourselves with the same indifference as we used to see others. Rather, we stand in another part of ourselves, which has the ability to see our old self and the selves of infinite others with equal clarity and equal compassion.⁶⁶ Our shift towards this objective, magnanimous part of ourselves is described as altruistic simply because its equal attention and care for all life naturally brings the center of gravity in our awareness outside our narrow selves and into the larger world where we share the causes and conditions of health, freedom and happiness with unlimited others.⁶⁷ By cultivating the heroic resolve to climb out of our childhood fears and grow wise and caring enough to parent ourselves and all beings, we've radically changed the course of our lives and opened up a whole new future for ourselves and our world.⁶⁸

This reorientation, however revolutionary, is not an end in itself but in fact only a new beginning. Once we commit to this new vision and reorient our minds and lives around it, we've actually taken the first step on the practical journey of a thousand steps that gradually leads to a whole new way of being in the world. In traditional terms, the spirit of enlightened altruism starts out as a virtual solution to the predicament of our self-enclosed lives and only gradually becomes an actual one. It is said that that enlightenment can come in a flash, like a bolt of lightning on a dark night, while the actualizing or embodying that flash of vision in a fully compassionate way of life takes three incalculable eons! Consider these verses from Shantideva's *Guide*:

Though there is no "I" there,
Through the force of familiarity
I cling to an "I" within a body
Which arose from the egg and sperm of others.

In the same way, why can I not
Identify "I" with the bodies of others?
Equally I should not find it hard
To identify my own body as "other."⁶⁹

Just as I regard the hands and so on
As limbs of my body,
So I should regard all living beings
As limbs of a living whole.⁷⁰

So, whoever wants to immediately care for
Both themselves and others,
Should practice this noble secret
Of exchanging self and other.⁷¹

Asanga's Sevenfold Causal Method of Building Compassion

For a look at the deeper emotional and behavioral levels of this transformation, I know of no better window than the sevenfold method of building compassion attributed to Asanga. For the sake of brevity, I'll simply describe that method by listing the causal sequence of seven affective states. These work like a positive social-emotional workout to exercise and build from our own personal experience of receiving nurturing to the development of universal compassion and enlightened altruism.

The sequence of affects which allow us to athletically exercise and develop the spirit of altruism is: (1) recognizing the whole family of life as our mother, and adopting all beings as kin;⁷² (2) recalling our visceral memories of the loving kindness shown us by mother and/or other caregivers;⁷³ (3) in response to the nurturing love we've been shown, cultivating strong feelings of gratitude and indebtedness; (4) channeling those feelings into a strong urge to return that love by actively extending it to others;⁷⁴ (5) deepening and expanding that love into compassion that spontaneously acts to help all living beings;⁷⁵ (6) channeling that universal compassion into the heroic resolve to take responsibility to relieve the suffering and promote the happiness of all living beings;⁷⁶ (7) conceiving and building the will to become an enlightened altruist able to

guide all living beings to real freedom and lasting happiness.⁷⁷

Though ancient, the contemplative methods of Shantideva and Asanga resonate deeply with current trends in modern evolutionary biology. The emerging consensus on the evolution of social behaviors like altruism is based on the rise of mathematical models that predict the selective advantage conferred by kin-directed altruism.⁷⁸ Although these models reduce such behaviors to the natural selection of traits that tend to preserve genetic material by the protection of related kin, many biologists now believe that social animals have evolved other forms of altruism—like reciprocal and direct altruism—which have expanded the scope of social behavior far beyond the confines of genetic kinship.⁷⁹

In effect, both contemplative methods of building compassion exploit the openness and plasticity of these natural traits by stretching them to adopt ever-larger circles of life and building them to exceptional degrees. This is part of a conscious strategy to culturally enhance our natural fitness for social life in order to better adapt us to the unnatural conditions of civilized living.⁸⁰ From the standpoint of modern models, Shantideva's method works more on what biologists call reciprocal and direct altruism, the natural tendency supported by prefrontal mirror neurons to feel empathy for others and show them the kindness we would like in return. In contrast, Asanga's method works more on what they call kin-directed altruism, the natural tendency to recognize kin as self, and to show them the whole range of primal social behaviors including protection, soothing, grooming, caretaking and teaching.

Traditionally, it is said that Shantideva's method works from the head down, while Asanga's works from the heart up. They may appeal to people with different inclinations and learning styles; or, as in the Gelukpa tradition of the Dalai Lamas, they may be combined in a super-method that works on both heart and mind together.⁸¹ In any case, their job is to meet us where we begin—at the natural level of childhood myopia and self-indulgence—and to bring us in a gradual yet rigorous way to higher levels of maturity, objectivity and social-emotional intelligence. Once we take these as pathways towards a new life in the world, they bring us to the threshold of the next great method of clearing the mind: the art of giving and taking.

Practice Combining Both Giving and Taking: The Art of Social Self-Transformation

As the phrase suggests, giving and taking is a practice applied to the constant flow of social transactions and exchanges which is the currency of our daily lives. Yet the familiar connotation of “give and take” is sure to be misleading when it comes to the work of radical self-transformation this art involves. In fact, I often describe this practice as one of *reversing* the flow of give and take. Here's why. From early childhood, we human beings must take far more than we can possibly give back to others. In developed societies, this dynamic all too often persists into adolescence and even adult life, reinforced by the self-indulgent creed of our age. On the street, the secular, materialist strain in our culture tells us that the only smart thing is “Look out for number one.” And this amounts to a view of our social lives in which things are going well when we take as much as we possibly can and give back as little as we absolutely must.

Of course, given the survival of the fittest ethos and bottom-line economics of the modern secular world, this self-indulgent outlook may seem like fair-minded, hard-nosed pragmatism. But from the vantage of our emerging new science of mind and life, we're beginning to see this bottom line way of being as ultimately self-defeating and dangerously short-sighted. Still, we often persist in this view, caught in the modern double-bind which offers us no alternative but the rigid anorexia of a self-sacrificing religious ethos. The art of giving and taking opens up a middle way that offers us an eminently realistic yet meaningful alternative.

Growing Pains: The Gradual Path of Giving and Taking

In practice, reversing the flow of give and take is a gradual process that inches forward through several phases. First, we learn to stop expecting the unique circumstances of childhood to continue into our later years. Then, we must gradually accustom ourselves to the real circumstances of our adulthood, in which we've grown to a place of parity with those who once seemed like gods. Next, we start looking to better our lives in a truly effective, mature way, by a combination of learning to skillfully parent ourselves and building virtues and strengths we can share with the world. Finally, we strive to make the greatest difference we can for ourselves and our world by working to tap our full potential and rise above self-limiting notions of our ability to aid those around us. This process builds on natural shifts in human development: from child to adolescent; adolescent to adult; parent to grandparent; and family elder to community leader.⁸² Yet it does not leave this

vital process of maturation to the lucky few or genetic chance, but rigorously and systematically cultivates our natural altruistic potential as the optimal solution for all individuals and groups facing the challenges of our increasingly complex social world.

As for the first phases in giving and taking, we must come to recognize the conditions of “good enough” human childhood from an adult point of view: not as a magical state of grace ordained to gratify our primal narcissism, but as the hard-won product of the collective altruism of parents, grandparents, friends, and neighbors. Naturally, we all see this in theory, but it’s something else entirely to adjust to this adult reality on a gut level. Our attachment to primal narcissism is clear in our clinging to the childish fantasy that our relations with others should be an endless series of pleasures, with no cost in disappointment, pain or work. Renouncing this attachment and reversing our childish expectations means coming to recognize the real causes and conditions of human flourishing and setting about reproducing them for ourselves and others, not waiting for the good life to fall into our lap or be handed to us on a silver platter.

Coordinated Giving and Taking: Navigating the Worldly Winds

As for Chekawa’s precept to *practice combining both giving and taking*, it’s important to see how these two exercises work hand in hand to build a whole new way of being in the world. The exercise of taking care counters the self-indulgent winds of aversion with genuine compassion that takes suffering head on, regardless of whether it’s our own or others’. And the complementary exercise of giving love counters the self-indulgent winds of acquisitiveness with nurturing love that shares whatever abundance we have equally with all life, near and far. Working together, these two powerful limbs put us on a road not taken, leading us out of the regressive rut of self-protective reactions towards a proactive self-confidence and engagement with our complex social world. The practice of combining these two in our everyday interactions serves to integrate all our exercise of social emotions—equanimity, tolerance, acceptance, gratitude, love, and compassion—into a highly effective way of being in the world that increasingly galvanizes our altruistic resolve and embodies the spirit of enlightened altruism.

Start Gradually with Taking on Your Own (Suffering)

All too often glossed over, this essential precept makes crystal clear that the art of giving and taking is not some pie-in-the-sky selflessness, but a real, pragmatic alternative to our self-defeating self-indulgence. As we learned from the first of Chekawa’s seven points—*first learn the preliminaries*—there is no possible way to build a proactive social self without a firm foundation in personal self-healing and effective self-care. The precept to *start gradually* also underscores the point that enlightened altruism in this tradition begins at home: as a mature and effective way of realizing one’s true self-interest.

Anything but a zero sum game, this practice assumes a radical vision of interdependence in which we all benefit equally by lining up together *with* our mature social selves and *against* no one else but our own primitive self-protectiveness and self-indulgence. Of course, the traumatized child and cornered animal within are trying their best to take good care of us by clinging to worst-case memories and stress-reactivity. It’s just that the distortions and instincts they are acting on are in fact no match for the real challenges of our complex social lives. Their tendency to fight, fly, or freeze in the face of the pressing demands of our social lives may give some illusory safety or fleeting comfort, but does so at the expense of building the clear-headed awareness and people skills which will ultimately help us adapt to our daily lives.⁸³

Starting with our own suffering here means decisively clearing our minds of our alarmist childhood reactions to our own problems and distress, and making a concerted effort to approach them maturely with the wise self-care of a good parent. Naturally, this effort involves a radical reorientation of consciousness in which we approach our childhood self as an other: the troubled child within us all. And since this requires so dramatic a re-centering of experience, we must inevitably begin by choosing this road-not-taken on a moment-to-moment basis: one problem, one distress at a time. Traditionally, this is conveyed in the precept to start by taking responsibility for our own suffering as it occurs in the present moment. As in psychotherapy, this begins with coming to see through our sense of helplessness and trauma in real time, so that we can begin to apply our adult capacity for empathic insight here and now.

As we gain confidence and mastery in this practice and can face our present challenges with a mature state of mind, we then move on to take responsibility for our past suffering, one day, one generation, one evolutionary era at a time. In terms of therapy, this process involves changing the narrative of suffering, alienation and trauma that stretches back through our life experience to our early development, and even further to our intergenerational heritage and evolutionary past. Finally, we begin to take on our own future

suffering, that is, to anticipate the trajectory of suffering that would be caused by the continuation of our self-indulgent, self-limiting habits, and to change that course by taking the steps that act as causes and conditions of future health, freedom and happiness. This is analogous to the work of lasting self-change and life-change which occupies the final phases of a long-term insight therapy or positive therapy.

Gradually Giving and Taking with Others, Near and Far

Once we've successfully built the self-knowledge and self-care we need to take on our own suffering, the next step is to apply ourselves to the proactive work of taking responsibility for the quality of our interactions with others. While this may seem like a shift away from self-interest, traditionally it's seen as the natural expansion of the horizon of our self-interest to include our experience with others in the world we share. It's vital to see this expansion in context as the natural outpouring that comes of an overabundance of capacity, resources and well-being. This outpouring is natural since building a firm foundation of optimal self-care leaves us free from the distress that used to burden us and still burdens others, in touch with a whole spectrum of positive insights, energies and skills we developed in the course of learning to care for ourselves.

Of course, while it may come naturally for us to proactively engage with the suffering of others, the expansion of the range and scope of our engagement is incremental and gradual. Traditionally, we're advised to begin working to raise the quality of our interactions in our most intimate relationships first. As we know from the challenges of building truly positive relationships with significant others and children, this is a whole new training ground that requires patient and persistent application. Nonetheless, these relationships are seen as a prime training ground for the capacity to care effectively, so the practice of giving and taking with others should begin here.

From our inner circle, the scope of our capacity to effectively take care and give love expands next to include all the less intimate family, friends, neighbors, colleagues and acquaintances that make up the larger circle of those near and dear. Some of these relationships will pose more challenges than others, but each is an opportunity to grow more objective, more confident and more artful. Once we're essentially done with this circle, it's time to move on to the majority of humans who are effectively neutral: strangers we encounter in our daily lives.

Dispelling Irrational Fears of Contagion and Burn-Out

This step brings us to the most difficult challenge to the art: learning to take in the humanity of those who frighten, challenge or threaten us and to extend to them the same humanity we normally reserve for our loved ones. Here especially it helps to dispel some popular misconceptions about what "taking on others' suffering" and "giving others love" actually means. Influenced by irrational fantasies and fears of contagion, many who hear about giving and taking—even in Western Buddhist communities—have the false view that taking on others' suffering means suffering for others, as we were told Christ did for our sins.

Despite some traditional imagery and language which suggests just this, taking on the suffering of others in fact means actively taking their suffering into our awareness, and allowing ourselves to respond with whatever remembered or current experience of suffering in our own life most closely corresponds to it. This in no way entails feeling the same suffering others feel, especially when we have already learned to understand and heal the analogous ailments within our own mind. Instead, it gives us a basis for realistic empathy, that is, not mere sympathy or feeling just what others feel, but an empathic insight that sees the hurt for what it is and an empathic art that skillfully resolves it.

This view of "taking care" has obvious resonance with Freud's classical view the analyst's empathy, which involves using his own unconscious memories and associations as a receptive organ that helps him build an intuitive understanding of the client's suffering. Of course, here too, to the extent that the analyst has resolved the conflicts which resemble the client's, his empathy embraces the client's suffering with the wise compassion a parent brings to her child's myopic confusions and emotions. As a result of this higher level understanding and mastery born of self-care, the practicing altruist or therapist feels a relative sense of relief and gratitude in the face of what others find overwhelming and intolerable. And it is this spontaneous gratitude and satisfaction that provides the positive energy and emotion which flows out towards the other in the act of giving acceptance, encouragement, guidance, and love.

When we understand the emotional micro-economics of the exchange of giving and taking in this way, we can also begin to see through the misconception that giving love inevitably leads to caretaker stress and burn out. The degree of stress entailed by caregiving is proportional to the degree of unresolved conflicts and confusions in the caregiver, and has little or nothing to do with the level of distress and suffering experienced

by the other. In fact, when one has effectively resolved at least the gross level of internal stress and trauma that burden and taint our natural care and love, the art of giving and taking becomes a source of deep satisfaction and ongoing learning, making it a profoundly rewarding and generative experience.

The last major misconception about giving and taking pertains specifically to the challenge of practicing it with people who threaten us in some way. The misconception is one we have run into before, namely that taking care and giving love is all about sweetness and light, and hence is impractical or masochistic in the face of threatening others. The fact is that a realistic understanding of others' suffering is as likely to require an act of tough love or fierce compassion as it is to involve being soft or nice. As when a child's intense upset, reckless exploration, or destructive impulses poses a risk of real harm, the natural and skillful response of a watchful parent will tend to be correspondingly fierce.

Likewise, the altruist who responds to the misbehavior of others with tough love or fierce compassion may seem every bit as assertive as one who reacts defensively, only the altruist does so based on an underlying sense of identification and fellow feeling, as if underneath the skin the threatening other was not an object of aversion but his own flesh and blood. While it may seem a nuance, there is probably no greater difference, both for the quality of the altruist's own experience and for the impact his response has on others.

Mount These Two on the (Out and In) Breath: Grounding Altruism in Mindfulness

Perhaps the greatest clue to the practical nature of the art of giving and taking is this precept to ground the contemplative work of taking care and giving love in the stress-protective physiology of breath-mindfulness. By conjoining the contemplative act of taking in others' suffering with the physical act of drawing a breath, the practicing altruist builds a discipline of grounding compassion in an altered state that doesn't just reduce the stress of caretaking but also helps balance attention to others with attention to self, offering some degree of insurance and quality-control over the process. In this joint art, breath-mindfulness helps us to stay ahead of our own mind/body response to others' distress and to bring the highest level of awareness and self-care to be sure that we optimize our capacity to see through and disarm primitive self-protective reactions and conditioned responses that might block or taint our mature care and love.

On the other hand, by conjoining the contemplative act of giving help and love with the physical act of exhaling a breath, the practicing altruist builds the discipline of grounding giving in an altered state that doesn't just disarm blocks to mature magnanimity but also helps balance attention to self and other, offering a degree of insurance and quality-control over this phase as well. Here too, breath-mindfulness helps guarantee that we stay in close touch with moment-to-moment fluctuations in our nervous state while sharing our resources, experience and inspiration with others, and quickly disarm any primitive antisocial reactions like compulsive clinging or obsessive mistrust.

Working together, conjoining taking care and giving love with mindfulness of the breath builds a powerful mind/body discipline of proactive engagement with others, no matter what their condition or state of mind. To use an automotive analogy yet again, once we've disengaged the compulsive survival mode of childhood self-indulgence and re-engaged the low-stress gear of positive social emotions like stress and love, mindfulness of the in and out breath serves to lock in a social emotional four wheel drive that empowers us to negotiate the roughest interpersonal terrain with maximal human traction and minimal wear and tear on our own body-mind.⁸⁴

Meditative Experiment 4.2: Giving and Taking on the Breath

Find a quiet space, unplug from the world, and settle into a comfortable posture. Begin to clear your energy and mind by exhaling a long, complete sigh. Then let your next breath enter your lungs with as little effort as possible, and take that fresh breath as the start of a kinder, gentler breath-rhythm. Assure yourself that it's safe right now to focus on nothing but your breathing body-mind, and take the more relaxed rhythm of breath, centered at your heart, as a tether to reign in your wild or tired mind. As you breathe, imagine you're recalling all the energy and awareness you've put out into the world to get what you want or avoid what you fear, and gathering it back into you to rest on the rhythmic breath at your heart. If you start getting drowsy or dull, take some of that freshly gathered energy and awareness and breathe them into your clouding or fatigue to uplift your mind, firmly but gently returning your focus to the rhythmic breath at your heart. By alternately settling and uplifting, a breath at a time, you'll gradually find yourself shifting into a calmer, clearer, more balanced state of mind.

Now let your centered mind diffuse through your whole body with the fresh oxygen from your breath, awakening every tissue and cell until your body feels less dense and more fluid, light and clear, like a big, person-shaped lung or bubble of breath and life. As you continue to balance any restlessness and heaviness you feel in your body, open your mindfulness to the raw feel of sensation, and seek balance by letting go of attachment to comfort and fearlessly embracing any distress. Next, tune into your primal mind, balancing and centering yourself by diving below or between the surface waves of positive and negative thoughts or images, into the primal clarity and spaciousness of your deeper mind. From that space of deep clarity and calm, scan all the layers of your mind/body process, from the bedrock of your physical form and the undercurrents of sensation to the pure stream of consciousness that is your prime mind, finally opening your awareness to include the surface waves and reflections of mental content: positive, neutral and negative. Keep trying to ride the pure flow of deep mindfulness and, from within that flow, try to accept the whole range and scope of your body-mind while staying centered in a balanced space of clarity and calm. Now that you're more centered within your own body-mind, turn your awareness again to your environment, focusing on your relationships with others in the world.

Begin by calling up the image of yourself as a traumatized child or frightened animal, and try to approach yourself from your inner adult: the wise caring place of your centered clarity and calm. Now take in the full scope of your present suffering—whatever physical, emotional, or existential obstacles may overwhelm you now—and breathe in full awareness of them as temporary conditions which can be overcome with wisdom and care. Mixing that awareness of your sense of being overwhelmed with the objective empathy and confidence of your adult mind, take the relief you feel at recognizing your full capacity to help yourself or get reliable help and channel it into mature nurturing love and self-care, giving it to your inner child on the out-breath. See your inner child receive that love and care with a sense of relief, safety and hope, and gradually grow more secure, cheerful and involved.

Now do the same with the suffering that has burdened your inner child through the years, back to childhood, eventually including the burdens you inherited from past generations and humanity as a whole, not to mention the limits of the nature we all inherited from our evolutionary ancestors back to the dawn of life. As you breathe in awareness of the past burdens and limits that have weighed you down and mix them with clear realization of your full potential now, channel your growing confidence, insight, and empathy into intimate, cherishing love and self-care, breathing these out to your inner child and cornered animal.

When you begin to see the child and animal within you grow to feel safer, warmer and more open, finally turn to take on any burdens you can anticipate facing in the future, including the distant future of the next generation. Here again, breathe in awareness of the challenges you expect may come of negative causes and conditions within and around you, apply the full light and power of your clarity and calm to taking these on, and breathe out an optimistic vision for the future based on your growing ability to mobilize your full capacity and reach out to others.

Now that you've begun by taking on your own burdens, invite your secure inner child back into your heart and call up the image of the one other person you find it easiest and most natural to love. Invite the mind of that person to inhabit your image and go through the process of breathing in full awareness of his or her suffering and breathing out love, care and help. Do this gradually as you did with yourself, starting with present suffering, then past suffering and finally future suffering, taking care and giving love one problem, one breath at a time. As you practice, monitor your own personal reactions and any internal resistances to getting more engaged, patiently bringing self-awareness and self-care to each block as it comes so your capacity can grow naturally without your forcing it.

When you're able to go through this exercise with your dearest other, expand the scope of your practice one person at a time, first working through loved ones, then strangers (by locality, background, walk of life), and finally take on the people who challenge you, starting from the least threatening and ending with the most. To complement this systematic exercise of gradual expansion, it helps to focus part or all of some meditation sessions on recent social interactions that have been stressful, confusing, or upsetting. These "special cases" provide the best raw material to deepen practice, since they alert you to your traumatic reactions and blocks to empathy better than any generic exercise can.

(Monitor) the Three Objects, Three Poisons and Three Roots of Virtue

Having touched on the preliminaries and basic methods of clearing the mind, Chekawa's next instruction offers what he calls *the brief precept for the aftermath (in between meditations)*. Once we've gradually educated

and trained ourselves in clearing the mind and mastered the art of giving and taking, we're finally prepared to apply our newfound objectivity and compassion to our everyday interactions in the world. In practice, such application can't wait until our study and training are complete, but follows the general lines Chek-awa spells out, albeit in a case-by-case fashion.

The final practice he describes involves monitoring our daily perceptions and interactions with the three "objects" or types of living beings distinguished by our biased mind—people we tend to view as objects of attachment, indifference and aversion—with an eye to seeing and treating all three with equal insight, empathy and compassionate art. This involves constantly working to expose and correct the three root poisons or primal stress emotions that bias our social perceptions and actions towards post-traumatic stress reactivity. By bringing rigorous honesty and mindful discipline to detoxifying the poisons that bias our perceptions and interactions, we simultaneously cut the roots of our self-indulgent life of reactivity and plant the roots of a new virtuous way of life: the healing intentions and motivations of non-attachment and healthy love; non-confusion, empathic insight and wisdom; and non-aversion, tolerance and effective compassion.

Discursive Contemplation: *Practice in All You Do with (the Help of These) Words*

The last precept in Chekawa's basic introduction to mind-clearing reviews the method of contemplative study and reflection he recommends. In the tradition of socially engaged practice evolved at Nalanda, focused and analytic meditation were seen as two complementary, mutually indispensable tools. Following the logic of the eightfold path, the beginning phase of discursive study and the intermediate phase of analytic reflection precede the final culmination of meditative learning. Of course, traditionally there is a clear recognition that some learn best by developing a meditation practice before cultivating analytic insight; while others learn best by developing analytic insight before cultivating focused, non-conceptual meditation.⁸⁵ Yet on both these paths, it is indispensably necessary to healing and change for all students to eventually complement their initial mode of contemplative learning with whichever mode they postponed.

Although we'll delve into the complementary roles of discursive analysis and non-conceptual focus in chapter 5, it's important to point out here that Chekawa's recommended method is not unique to mind-clearing.⁸⁶ It assumes the Nalanda consensus that mindfulness and concentration only temporarily slow or stop the workings of negative habits of mind, while discursive analysis, reflection and insight are needed to expose and cut out the instinctive roots underlying those habits once and for all.⁸⁷ As the best way to cultivate concentration is through mindfulness practice deepening over time, the best way to cultivate insight is through the natural progression from intellectual learning and analytic reflection to insight meditation that deepens with time. So Chekawa advises that, *To foster mindfulness of this (teaching), one should practice in all you do with (the help of these) words.*

Chekawa's Text and the Mnemonic Method of Contemplative Learning

This pedagogic method clearly accounts for the distinctive features of Chekawa's text. Though it encompasses a full spectrum of diverse contemplative disciplines, insights and methods, it distils them all into the disarming precepts he strung together in this guide to practice. The art of distilling profound and vast fields of learning into pithy, mnemonic lines like these is vital to any tradition that aims not just to reproduce formulaic knowledge but to guide contemplative learning, reflection and change.⁸⁸ The gist of this method is to help guide and illumine the inner journey of contemplation with pointers that are easily remembered in the midst of meditation or in the process of applying meditative learning in-between sessions to everyday life challenges. If Chekawa's text and pedagogy strike us as unusual, it's only because their style is not typically central to lay teaching and practice outside Buddhist monasteries. Yet it is this very method of scaffolding practice with memorable lines that has made and will continue to make his *Seven Point Mind-Clearing* such a powerful tool for mastering Nagarjuna's challenging practice of social engagement in daily life.