

# Book Review

## *Training in Compassion: Zen Teachings on the Practice of Lojong*

By Norman Fischer

Shambhala Publications, 2013

Review by Barry Briggs JDPSN

Zen Master Seung Sahn had a unique talent for encapsulating essential Buddhist teachings in just a few words, and these slogans continue to inspire and motivate practitioners around the world:

*Put it all down.*

*Only go straight!*

*Don't make anything.*

*Just do it!*

Of course, Zen Master Seung Sahn wasn't the first Buddhist teacher to use slogans; for example, Atisa, a 10th-century master from Bengal, developed a set of 59 practice slogans with a specific function: the development of compassion.

Over time, Atisa's slogans were integrated into Vajrayana Buddhism and became the *lojong* mind training practice. In Tibetan Buddhism, *lojong* training develops *bodhicitta* (literally, "enlightenment mind"), the aspiration to save all beings from suffering.

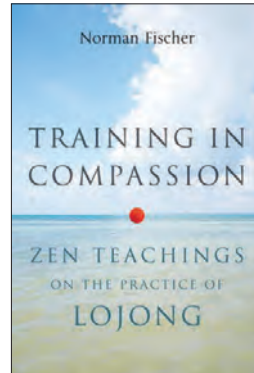
The *lojong* slogans range from intuitively obvious (*Be grateful to everyone.*) to others that seem more opaque (*This time, get it right!*). When employed in sequence and over time, the *lojong* slogans promise to reveal our deep connection to all beings.

At first glance, the *lojong* methodology may seem quite foreign to Zen practitioners. After all, Zen is sometimes described as "wall-gazing" practice—sitting quietly with mind and keeping a clear direction. Zen usually does not employ a structured framework, and certainly doesn't project an outcome.

So, when Norman Fischer, a widely respected Zen teacher, writes a commentary on the 59 *lojong* slogans, we might take note.

Fischer received dharma transmission in the Shunryu Suzuki lineage of Japanese Soto Zen in 1988 and serves as the guiding teacher of the Everyday Zen Foundation. He has published more than a dozen books of essays and poetry. Notably, he has served as a vigorous advocate for interreligious dialogue, saying:

*I feel that in our period it is the challenge of religious traditions to do something more than simply reassert and reinterpret their faiths, hoping for loyal adherents to what they perceive to be the true doctrine.*



In this spirit, Fischer turned to the *lojong* slogans in his most recent book, *Training in Compassion*. In explaining his motivation for writing about a practice associated with Tibetan Buddhism, Fischer notes:

*[This] has to do with what I consider a serious weakness in Zen: its deficiency in explicit teachings on compassion . . . Since Zen is so fixated on cutting through complications and focusing on a few simple, profound points, it assumes rather than encourages compassion.*

While Fischer's commentary follows the linear method of the slogans, he encourages readers to approach *lojong* training in any way that make sense; for those already engaged in dharma practice, this method might trigger a profound insight into an unexpected aspect of training.

As sometimes happens with dharma teachings, each of the *lojong* slogans can contain the entirety of the buddhadharma.

For example, Fischer's commentary on the slogan "Abandon hope" exposes how hope (an aspect of desire-mind) can shape our approach to practice. We begin practice with hopes and expectations, of course—otherwise we'd never enter a meditation hall. But Fischer notes that expectations can change over time—and even disappear:

*Practice disappears as a vehicle for self-improvement, and the only thing important for you to know is to live your life, which means to continue with your mind-training. Shunryu Suzuki called this "practice without a gaining idea."*

*So this slogan is telling you: when you are excited about your progress or discouraged about your lack of progress, let go of that silly thought. Abandon all hope and go happily on.*

Abandon ideas, fears, hopes and all the rest, and go happily on! And, as the last of the slogans says, "Don't expect applause!"

Many of the *lojong* slogans bring us face to face with the arrogance of certainty, a needed medicine for those who think they're getting somewhere with practice. For example, consider the injunction to "Do good, avoid evil, appreciate your lunacy, and pray for help."

Why would anyone wish to appreciate his or her own

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lunacy? And to whom would we pray for help? Fischer investigates this unlikely slogan by writing:

*Bow to your own weakness, your own craziness, your own resistance. Congratulate yourself for them, appreciate them. Truly, it is a marvel, the extent to which we are selfish, confused, lazy, resentful, and so on. We come by these things honestly. We have been well trained to manifest them at every turn.*

An ancient sutra says, “It [enlightenment-nature] and dust interpenetrate.” This means that the mind, in all its wonder and lunacy, and inspiration and confusion, is already complete.

“Pray for help” simply means: we are not alone. If we truly perceive this, we can let go of self-centered ideas and turn to others for help—not (only) for oneself, but for all beings. In Korea, Buddhist practitioners sometimes greet one another with “Seong Bul hapshida,” which means “Let’s become Buddhas together!” That’s the spirit of “pray for help.”

A few of the *lojong* slogans, such as “Don’t be a phony,” can hit like a blunt instrument. Let’s face it, when we first begin practice many of us are phonies. We mimic our teacher’s pet phrases and sometimes even their intonations. We model the behavior of older practitioners. In my experience this is a natural process, the process of “praying for help.” But, at some point, we must find our own expression of the buddhadharma. Then, compassion

comes fully alive.

For a Zen practitioner, *lojong* training can seem overly methodical and analytical, and it can present a seductive risk to those who want something from practice. Fischer understands the risks and investigates the *lojong* with humility, insight and wit; these qualities help us understand the profound wisdom behind each slogan.

Taken together, Fischer’s commentaries present a remarkably complete view into *bodhicitta*, the spacious mind of profound compassion. And just as Fischer never forgets the great vow implicit in each slogan, he also never loses sight of his own great vow:

*If we are now facing hard times, much better to face them with patient, compassionate hearts than with fear and panic. We have always needed one another. Our love for one another is both natural to us and something we need to strengthen through cultivation. We need sermons we can understand and use. We need many reminders and encouragements.*

Life asks so much and we so often fall short. The developers of the *lojong* mind-training system surely knew this. Yet they also knew that compassion is a profoundly human quality, fully attainable by each person.

Fischer’s book explores how to bring just a little more compassion into everyday life. A little more would matter a lot. ♦

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#### *A Wedding Talk (Continued from page 24)*

Carolyn and Matt don’t have a formal Buddhist practice, both have been involved in what I would call meditative activities: Carolyn in yoga and Matt in martial arts. There is more work there for them to do. Remember, there is nothing specifically Buddhist about mindfulness—there are many different paths to the same reservoir of wisdom and love. It doesn’t always involve going to a zendo or a church or an ashram. Sometimes it means stopping and listening to the rain.

#### **Wisdom**

When Carolyn was about seven, she and I were sitting at the kitchen table in our apartment on Dover Road in West Hartford. I was reading a magazine and she was coloring with crayons. At one point, she stopped and looked up and said, “When you think about it, Dad, hope and fear are the same thing.” I looked up, thought about what she had just said and I responded, “Aren’t you seven? How do you come up with this stuff?” And this is one of many such examples. I had to become a Buddhist just to keep up. So, I think between them, there are many seeds of wisdom to cultivate.

#### **Patience**

Finally, there is patience. Well, it took them seven years to get here, so I guess they have plenty of patience!

#### **Marriage Vows**

*We vow in our married life together to continually break through our preconceived views of each other and see clearly.*

*We vow to let go of feelings that arise from selfish desires, attachments, and fears, so that we can open our hearts to one another.*

*We vow to be compassionate with one another and with all beings.*

*We vow to practice peaceful and ethical occupations and to support each other in our work.*

*We vow to support one another in creating a compassionate and loving home.*

*We vow to always be mindful of each other and to let go of our ideas and beliefs so that we can see each other clearly.*

*We vow to encourage each other to walk the bodhisattva path together. ♦*