

Excerpts from the Introduction to Training in Compassion by Norman Fisher

Times are tough. We live fast-paced lives, with considerable political, economic, and ecological upheaval, and the resultant dread, fear, and stress make life difficult for almost everyone—except, possibly, those who opt for self-defensive denial, which only defers the pain and probably makes it worse. But times have always been tough. Living a human life, in a human world, on a limited planet, has always been a daunting proposition. Circling the wagons, assuming a self-centered defensive stance, has never been a successful coping mechanism, natural though the impulse may be. We are programmed by evolution in the opposite way: we are cooperating animals, deeply conditioned to be concerned for one another. Our hearts are made for loving. Compassion and connection not only feel good and right (as all of our religious traditions teach us), they also turn difficulties into opportunities—as we have seen so often when, in the course of the seemingly more frequent natural disasters of recent years, neighbors go out of their way to help one another. When they do, tragedy becomes inspirational. Paradoxically, life can seem more, rather than less, meaningful when our world is suddenly shattered. When we are witness to genuine compassion in the face of great suffering, we seem to transcend our difficulties. When we feel like helping, do help, and are helped, we become stronger, happier, more resilient people. Compassion and resilience are not, as we might imagine, rarified human qualities available only to the saintly. Nor are they adventitious experiences that arise in us only in extraordinary circumstances. In fact, these essential and universally prized human qualities can be solidly cultivated by anyone willing to take the time to do it. They can become the way we are and live on a daily basis. We can train our minds. We are not stuck with our fearful, habitual, self-centered ways of seeing and feeling.

A Word about Slogans

Like bumper stickers or advertising taglines, slogans are short, punchy phrases that make an immediate impression. Like a catchy tune, they are easy to remember, think about, and stay with. The best way to develop a mind-training slogan is to work with it initially on your meditation cushion (see basic meditation instructions in appendix 2). The technique is simple enough: sitting calmly with breath and body awareness, simply repeat the slogan silently to yourself again and again, reflect lightly on it, breathe it in with the inhale, out with the exhale. The point is not to sit and think about the slogan as much as to develop it as an almost physical object, a feeling in your belly or heart. Doing this repeatedly will fix it in your mind at a level deeper than is possible with ordinary distracted thinking. After this initial fixing of the slogan in the mind, you can

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

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

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

NOTE: These are all explained further in Appendix 1