Love and Compassion

As has already been mentioned, since Openness, Clarity and Sensitivity are the essence of true love and compassion, simply to move towards resting in the Awakened Heart in one's Formless Meditation is in itself to be training in spontaneous and equal love and compassion for all beings. However, because of our non-recognition of our true nature, we are trapped in grasping habits of fear, attachment and narrowness of vision. These are the deeply entrenched habits of the ego-mandala with all the strategies it displays to protect and pamper itself. Often these go unnoticed in our formless practice and it is not until situations provoke a reaction that we even notice these habits are there.

There are, therefore, practices in Buddhism that use an element of form or imagination in order to draw these grasping habits to our attention by actually stirring them up. This shows us what we need to let go of. The way to let go is as is described in the Formless meditation. It always comes back to the same thing. For example, there is a practice called the Apramanas (limitless love, compassion, joy and equanimity) which throws into sharp relief our difficulty with wishing well to ourselves or to those we would rather not have anything to do with. By imagining feeling love for ourselves and all beings equally, we notice where our grasping habits are and we can gradually train ourselves to let them go and
rest in the naturalness of limitless and equal love for all beings.

Apramanas
Apramana means measureless and the Apramanas practice refers to a structured way of reflecting and meditating that links us into the measureless love, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity that resides naturally, but hidden’ in our hearts’ In general, I suggest people start thinking about practising the Apramanas after they have been practising Formless meditation for at least one or two years and are starting to settle into a regular practice of about an hour a day’ I think it is important for people to have some experience in practising the Apramanas before taking the Bodhisattva vow’

Tonglen
Tonglen (sending and taking) is a practice that can be introduced and practised on many different levels. It means literally to send out goodness to others and take their suffering on yourself. In general, the foundation for this important practice is laid by several years of formless meditation and Apramanas practice. However, there is a way of practising it even before doing the Formless practice, almost as a means of settling into it. I am starting to teach Tonglen in this way now, because people have found it in books and have told me how helpful they have found it, even when they could not settle to meditation. I thought
about this a lot for several years before deciding to start introducing this preliminary practice of Tonglen as an experiment. It is a very helpful practice when you are feeling very negative, or suffering a lot, or having to work with others who are suffering a lot.

Activities that support our training in love and compassion are:

Reviewing again and again reflections in 'Discovering the Heart of Buddhism' and 'Trusting the Heart of Buddhism' that help us open our hearts to others

Meditation on the Apramanas, Tonglen (Sending out good to others and taking their suffering onto ourselves) and Lojong (training or purifying the heart)
Insight Into Emptiness or Nature of Mind

Ultimately, resting in our own true nature, the Awakened Heart, is to penetrate its depths, to see it in its fullness, clearly, without obstruction. However, this seeing does not come naturally. We are too hide-bound by our assumptions about the nature of the Universe and of our experience. We take it as given, for example, that the mind is inside the head without noticing that the inside of our head is an idea or thought that arises in the mind – this fact is extremely mysterious! Asking ourselves questions such as 'where is the mind?' helps us to focus on the true nature of experience. We have to ask ourselves such seemingly naive questions, in order to start to focus on the assumptions that veil our understanding and let them go. In this way the mysterious Openness of our being can gradually reveal itself.

The sense of understanding opening up, as we let go of grasping, occurs naturally as we engage in the practice of Formless meditation. However, without introducing this process of experiential questioning, this particular way of focusing on our experience, we could go for years or even life times without noticing the hidden assumptions that are distorting our understanding. The questioning makes the difference between the calming practice of shamatha (peaceful abiding, Tib. shinay) and the liberating practice of vipashyana (insight into truth, Tib. hlagtong).
The kind of questioning that I am referring to here is not intellectual analysis in the sense that we are trying to work out a theoretical answer that hangs together logically. It is more a matter of opening out to our experience with a sense of wonder at the strangeness of it. So it's a matter of openness and wonderment, not grasping. It focuses on experience and leaves us simply with the experience as it is, stripping away all our assumptions and the notions that we use to 'explain' it. This requires a special kind of precision, honesty and courage. More than anything, it requires the courage to face and accept what we do not know and that can be quite frightening and disorientating.

Generally speaking, the process of dismantling our assumptions does not happen all at once. We need to keep approaching our experience from new angles, asking different questions as we recognize different kinds of belief structure that we unconsciously grasp or hold in the background of our awareness and which obstruct our understanding. These are not necessarily beliefs that we can or do justify intellectually, or are even aware of. For example, we put so much energy into securing and protecting the self, although intellectually we are very uncertain as to what it is. Our emotions and actions bear witness to our passionate belief in it and in its existing in a particular way. By examining closely what we mean by 'self' and noticing the inconsistencies and confusion surrounding it, we can start to recognise our grasping at what is false and therefore needs to
be let go of. This requires openness and clarity in the form of a powerful kind of honesty that takes a keen interest in what is real and true, just because it is true.

Having recognized our grasping at false beliefs and habits of thinking, effort and discipline is required in noticing them and letting them go. Sometimes grasping at a whole series of false beliefs and habits of thinking can collapse temporarily in one go and we can see right through to the essence or heart of Reality. Nevertheless, the old habits still need to be worn out like old boots. So practices that involve constantly questioning our assumptions and habitual ways of thinking are essential. The quality of interest and honesty required here is called prajna, which is sometimes translated as intelligence (or wisdom). It is not intelligence in the sense of being clever with words and concepts. It is intelligence in the sense of being honest and accurate in our appreciation of our own experience.

It is important to have a deep and strong sense of the adhistana (supportive influence or blessing) of Awakening to support us in this kind of practice. This is both because it is through the adhistana of Awakening that realization is possible and because sudden strong experiences (nyams) of emptiness or Reality can be frightening. They loom like death itself to the grasping ego mandala. This links to the sixth area of the training explored in this booklet, but needs to be mentioned here to alert the practitioner to its importance. The sense of adhistana that is needed
provides us with a sense of letting go into something more real and alive than the delusions we are letting go of. This is what gives us the confidence to let go - it overcomes our fear.

Sometimes, when questioning, we can find ourselves pushing too hard to find intellectual answers. The remedy for this is to relax and have confidence that the answer will come through on its own, not through our intellectual grasping, but from the adhistana of Awakening itself. We may start to feel that we are not clever enough intellectually to understand such deep things, but this is not the point. We only need to be honest. Honesty is already extremely intelligent and the only intelligence we need. We don't need to be particularly clever or articulate. So whether we are very gifted academically or not, we all need the same kind of openness and honesty to be able to ask our questions in a naïve and simple way. We also need to be able to open to the adhistana of Awakening coming to us from beyond intellectual grasping.

What makes this kind of questioning a special area of training over and above the simple Formless meditation is that it requires, at least at first, a certain amount of form. By 'form' I mean something to focus on. Whereas in the formless practice proper there is nothing to focus on, there is simply resting in the nature of awareness itself, in this kind of questioning we use a question to focus our attention. We use the form of the question to draw our attention to hidden assumptions. The form that is introduced to start with
may be quite gross, such as repeating the question again and again to ourselves, but it draws our attention to aspects of our experience we might otherwise have missed. Having had our attention drawn to our experience in this way, the habitual patterns of thought that were obstructing our vision drop away, maybe just for a fraction of a second. We are then able to experience our experience very simply, as it is, for a moment, before the old habits kick in again. It's as if, having had such an experience, we can return to it almost like revisiting a place. By returning to that place again and again, our old way of thinking gradually starts to wear thin, allowing us to rest more easily and naturally in greater clarity. As this happens, the question becomes less and less necessary. What is happening is that we are moving closer to resting in the Awakened Heart, the whole purpose of the formless practice. Eventually we can drop the focus provided by the questioning entirely, because the intelligence that is the true nature of the questioning is none other than the Openness, Clarity and Sensitivity of our Awakened Heart.

Activities that support our investigation into our experience are:

Questions about our experience introduced in 'Discovering the Heart of Buddhism' and 'Trusting the Heart of Buddhism', especially in regard to spaciousness of awareness and not-self

'Analytical' meditations like those in Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness
Specific preliminary meditations from the Dzogchen and Mahamudra traditions

Study, reflection and meditation on the instructions contained in texts such as *Clarifying the Natural State* by Dagpo Tashi Namgyal, and the *Mahamudra Pranidhana* of Karmapa Rangjung Dorje.
Daily Life Awareness and Mindfulness Practice

Resting in the Awakened Heart, our own true nature, the nature of the Universe, leads naturally to being able to act spontaneously and appropriately for the benefit of others. When we can rest in this way, there is no need to keep to special rules or codes of behaviour. This is the special yogin's conduct beyond giving up negative acts and adopting positive ones. Although this is a very advanced level of practice, we begin to notice this happening to some extent almost as soon as we start out on the path to Awakening. As we open towards our experience in meditation and daily life awareness practice with courage and honesty, we already find we respond to situations more sensitively, with more kindness and more appropriately. Since Openness, Clarity and Sensitivity are our nature, the more we let go of our distorted habits of thinking and behaving, the more our behaviour is in line with our natural responsiveness and sense of wellbeing. We naturally become more gentle, communicative and clear in our dealings with others and with the world in general.

However, it would be mistaken to think that this means that we should concentrate exclusively on our Formless meditation and not worry about our conduct; sloppily disregarding the effects of our actions, smugly secure in our idea of ourselves as Dharma people whose conduct will naturally be all
right. Just as with all the other areas of the training, examining our relationship with the world can reveal to us negative attitudes that we might not notice when sitting in Formless meditation. Yet such attitudes will be blocking the process of opening into the Openness, Clarity and Sensitivity of our true nature. Although, in theory, appropriate action arises spontaneously from resting in our true nature - in practice, our inappropriate attitudes, reflected in our speech and actions, prevent us resting in this way. So noticing and letting go of negative actions, speech and reactions (in our general behaviour in relation to the world) is integral to our daily life awareness practice and fundamental in terms of making progress with the Formless meditation. As we let go of negative attitudes, speech and actions, they are naturally replaced by their positive counterparts. As we notice this, we need to cultivate those positive tendencies and actions, since they are in harmony with the Openness, Clarity and Sensitivity of our true nature and are conducive to the awakening of these qualities in our Formless practice.

Inappropriate attitudes often express themselves in the way we relate to our own body, as well as to others and the world in general. So applying awareness practice to our own body can provide vital triggers of awareness, enabling us to let go of inappropriate attitudes and making it more obvious to us how to let go of the negative speech and actions that flow from them.
Our Physical Presence in the World

There is a feedback process between our awareness, how we act in the world, and how we experience our presence in the world. It is not by accident that a person who leads a good life is called 'upright', an untrustworthy person is called 'shifty' and a trustworthy person is called 'solid' and 'grounded'.

Becoming aware of our physical body links directly to the Formless practice. The Awakened Heart that we are learning to rest in includes our physical presence in the world. The physical body is experienced as the very awareness that we are learning to rest in. Since awareness of the body is an intrinsic aspect of awareness in general, the more we rest in the nature of awareness, the more relaxed, confident, open, clear and sensitive we will feel physically. It can be very helpful to deliberately focus on body awareness and perhaps use simple, gentle exercises as a means of linking into this awareness of the body. Furthermore, through feeling more alive and relaxed physically, our actions of body, speech and mind become more open, clear and sensitive to ourselves and others.

For example, if we feel tense and do not know how to relax physically, it is very difficult to be open, clear and sensitive in the way we communicate with others. Simply by becoming aware of the tension, acknowledging it and doing something physical to release it, we can be more open, clear and sensitive. This is a very simple and obvious example, but it
reflects the deep and subtle nature of body awareness.

Life Style

One of the most important things we need to constantly review and reflect on is our life-style in general. Is it conducive to following the path to Awakening? How could it be made more so? It is important that this should come into consideration when making life decisions about career, family commitments, financial commitments and so on. If you really want to follow the path to Awakening whole-heartedly, think about what this means in terms of commitment. How many other things can you take on as well? Of course, if we are already committed to relationships and situations, we are going to have to work within the constraints laid down by them. There is no need to feel discouraged, as if it is not possible to make a whole range of different kinds of life-style a way of following the path to Awakening. However, this is not to underestimate how important it is to make sure the major decisions in our life are motivated first and foremost by our commitment to the path to Awakening. This means being clear about our values and priorities. This takes training. Often, it is because we are not clear at a deep and fundamental level, that we more or less 'let life live us', making us feel less free and more constrained than we are. This is where it is important to recognise harmful and time consuming
attachments that are ultimately simply hindrances on the path to Awakening. We may decide that, for us, having a partner, job and family is the best way forward, but if we think we really need all these things before all else, we are just falling into samsara's trap. This shows up in our general attitude towards life and to others. It is as if we try to juggle a whole lot of different value systems at once and it's just by chance which one happens to land in our hand at the moment of making a life decision. We really need to train in order to be clear about the path to Awakening and what is really conducive to it and to put this first in every decision we take in life.

Attachment is a sign of lack of confidence in the path to Awakening. So simply reflecting on what is truly important in life can protect us at moments when we falter through lack of confidence. It is so easy to suppress our wish for Awakening at key moments, while we let ourselves be driven by our conditioned responses, attachments, hopes and fears. If we have taken care to make our life decisions in harmony with the path to Awakening, then we buy ourselves time, as it were, in which to overcome this lack of confidence. Once we have taken decisions that commit us to a life of attachment and worldly concerns, it is sometimes difficult to reverse it and our opportunity to overcome our lack of confidence in the path to Awakening seems to slip out of reach, sometimes for a very long time indeed.
A Relaxed and Playful Approach to Life

Whatever our life-style, relaxing, resting, simple walking meditation, playing and so on can provide important support to the Formless practice of just letting be, just resting in the Awakened Heart. It is important not to think that we stop practising when we rest. Rest and play are essential aspects of practice.

Whatever our life-style, on the path to Awakening, too much busy-ness is a sign of laziness and distraction. It is a sign that we have become caught up in grasping and attachment to this and that. It is wasting time. To be relaxed and playful, letting things be, not being fussy, not having lots of notions about what is right and wrong, good and bad, being content with whatever happens and so on are all signs of a good practitioner who knows how to act in the world. As long as you are not grasping you are not wasting time.

Setting Boundaries - Precepts

Until we are quite advanced yogins, we will find it very useful to have some boundary markers that act as triggers of awareness. When we cross these, they prompt us to stop and take a hard look at our behaviour, helping us not to stray too far out of line with our heart wish. Boundary markers may take the form of binding commitments such as formally taking precepts from a preceptor and undertaking not to do
certain negative things or to do certain positive things. For retreatants there are various boundary markers in terms of retreat rules. Another form of boundary marker is the various checklists of negative and positive actions in the Buddha's teachings that we can use as reminders of what kind of behaviour we aspire to keep to.

For example, the five most basic precepts for any Buddhist are not to kill, steal, lie and behave irresponsibly sexually or with intoxicants. So when we are tempted to do any of these things, remembering these boundary markers sharpens our awareness and we think carefully about our conduct. With all of these precepts, I encourage people to relate to them as having two separate parts. On the one hand, as referring to extremely negative actions that we undertake not to do (for example, murder another human being), while on the other hand, as referring to negative actions that we need to try to avoid, while cultivating their positive counterparts (for example, to try not to kill any sentient life and to always try to save life).

The Buddhist tradition lays much store by precepts and has many lists and codes of behaviour. It is important not to miss the wood for the trees though. In general the precepts are a rather rough and ready way of protecting our practice, until we get to the point where spontaneous right conduct flows naturally from resting in the Awakened Heart. I do not find that there is a great need to emphasise very
strongly the five basic precepts for people in our society, as most of us are basically law-abiding anyway. However, for those who come for Buddhist teachings who are murderers, liars, thieves, rapists or drunkards it is important to stress the five basic precepts before all else!

In the Awakened Heart Sangha, we use the precepts as part of our training to bring our behaviour in daily life in line with resting in the Awakened Heart. When we look into our hearts, we find our deepest heart wish and we find a kind of feeling for how we want to be in ourselves and how we want to be in relationship to others. This is what we link into by means of our meditation and daily life awareness practice. When we do this successfully, our thoughts, words and actions naturally emanate from that heart wish and are naturally open, clear and sensitive. However, for a long time, this is not quite what happens in practice. We find we are not often fully aligned to our heart's deepest wish and we often act in closed, unclear and insensitive ways.

That is why generally speaking, it is important to train in, and to adopt, practices that are specifically about how to relate to the world and others. We have to train in living our life in a way that causes the least harm to any being and the greatest benefit for as many as we can, in both the long and the short term.

In practice, it is not easy to totally avoid harming others and to truly benefit them in the short term and it is only the Dharma that helps in the long term. It is
so often the case that in benefiting one person, we deprive or even harm others; or by trying to please everyone, we end up pleasing nobody; or by trying to do what we think is best, we inadvertently create as many problems as we solve, and so on. We have to live with the unsatisfactoriness of this and not lose heart. We can use such experience to deepen and strengthen our faith in the path to Awakening and to help us give up excessive busy-ness and feelings of over-responsibility. Actions with the genuine intention to help others have a self-existent goodness, irrespective of the practical outcome.

However, when we try to act in more positive ways, we often find we come up against all kinds of blocks and distortions. So the training is to notice these and learn to let them go, by means of the awareness practice that we learn in meditation. This alerts us to habitual mistakes and reactions that are hindering us and need to be overcome, such as attachment, meanness, laziness, pride, jealousy, paranoia, anger, hatred, irritation, discouragement and delusion. These scatter our energy and prevent us meditating and deepening our understanding.

Being honest and open, allowing ourselves to feel the unsatisfactoriness and the messiness of situations, not grasping at a false sense of being sure and right about what we do in every situation, are all training in openness. Responding from the heart and giving the situation our best shot is training in clarity and sensitivity. Once we have given it our best shot, we
can let go into a sense of ease and confidence, allowing ourselves peace of mind. Working with our conduct like this is part of our Dharma training and flows from and also reinforces our Formless practice. We can use the precepts to help us; but we have to be careful to keep the right touch about them, using them as helpful triggers of awareness. This means, on the one hand, not being complacent about them, and on the other, not being obsessive or legalistic about them.

As time goes on and we understand the Buddhist world-view more deeply, we may find that we take a different attitude to the likely consequences of our actions. We tend to start off by thinking about the consequences of our actions on this life and on this world. However, the Buddhist world-view takes into account the consequences our actions have on future lives in ways we cannot know from our direct experience. This all comes into consideration in the section on understanding the nature of being.

At the end of 2001 and on into 2002, I wrote quite extensively on 'Buddhism Connect' about Buddhist precepts and rules of conduct. I recommend students to look at these emails and raise any issues arising from them with me. They are meant to give guidance when we are faced with difficult moral dilemmas in relation to the world and others.

Activities that support our training in how to act in and relate to the world and others:
Reviewing sections in 'Discovering the Heart of Buddhism' and 'Trusting the Heart of Buddhism' that relate to right intention and action, especially clarity, mandala principle and change of heart.

Making sure that we carry our meditation and awareness practice into our daily life and noticing how it affects and helps others.

Developing awareness of our body

Reflection on and commitment to traditional Buddhist precepts and right conduct as found, for example, in *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation* by Gampopa, translated by Khenpo Konchog Gyaltsen Rinpoche, chapters.12-17.