

## Compassionate Presence to Feelings and Thoughts

### *“Handshake Practice”*

by Lama John Makransky, drawing on the teachings of Tsoknyi Rinpoche

***Compassionate Presence to the Body:*** Sit with comfortably straight back, eyes open gazing downward, chin down, hands comfortably on lap. Take a long, deep, cleansing breath. Now come down from the thinking mind into the body, and feel the grounding pressure of the body wherever you feel it most: e.g. the pressure of your feet on the floor, or the pressure of your legs or bottom on the chair. Settle in to the felt sense of that pressure. When the mind wanders, gently bring it back to that grounded feeling of gentle pressure.... After a little while, bring awareness to any part of the body—such as a foot or hand, a leg, or part of the torso, and sense the physical feeling in that part of the body, whether unpleasant, pleasant or neutral. Without trying to change that feeling in any way, just be aware of it in a gentle, friendly way, with a sense of acceptance and kindness toward it; a sense of deep allowing.... You might notice a reaction to the feeling, like a wish for it to go away. If so, just be aware of that reaction in the same gentle, accepting way, without trying to change or solve it. If the physical feeling changes of itself, just let it, and be present to whatever feeling replaces it in the same way (take just a few minutes).

***Compassionate Presence to Emotional Feelings:*** Now bring to mind a slightly unpleasant emotional feeling that you’ve been feeling or struggling with recently. To help bring it to mind, think of the situation that evokes the feeling: e.g. something you’ve been worrying or anxious about; a feeling of urgency about something you have to do; feeling a bit overwhelmed by something in your life; feeling frustrated or irritated by someone or something; feeling sad about something. Notice how this feeling feels, not just in your thinking mind but within your being: e.g. the feeling of tightening up from worry or urgency, a twinge of anxiety or fear, a burning feeling of frustration, a heavy feeling of sadness .... Bring awareness to the emotion as you feel it within, with a sense of deep acceptance and kindness, like a friend being quietly present to a friend, without being enmeshed in the feeling, without rejecting it, without trying to solve or

change anything in it, without ruminating about why you have it. If there is a reaction of not wanting this feeling, of pushing it away, just be with this reaction in the same way, with a sense of deep acceptance and kindness toward it. Be with any troubled feeling that arises like being with a troubled friend: without imposing any agenda on your friend, without trying to get him to change or go away; you are just quietly present to him, with warmth and kindness. Similarly here, don't impose any agenda on the feeling, whether to make it go away or change it or figure it out. Just be aware of what it feels like within, with a sense of acceptance and warmth.

By being with feelings in this safe, friendly way, feelings may trust, open, and reveal underlying feelings. Just accept whatever feelings further arise in a gentle welcoming way, without trying to solve or change anything in them. As this practice deepens, you may find your mind resting right in the marrow of a feeling, which may settle into a place of deep warmth, calm and peace from within. If that happens, just let it happen, without seeking to get such a thing to happen.

***Releasing:*** Let your mind and heart release their frameworks, relax and fall open. Let all patterns of thought and feeling that arise just unclench and unwind within this relaxing openness of mind, letting all be. Take a moment to enjoy being at ease and complete.

***Compassionate Presence to Thoughts:*** After you have become familiar with the meditation above focusing on physical and emotional feelings, you can begin similarly to bring awareness to thoughts that occur in association with such feelings, bringing the same sense of acceptance and kindness toward the thoughts as for the feelings. When present to thought in that way, just as for feelings, we are neither enmeshed in them nor seeking to suppress or avoid them—but we are compassionately present to the thoughts. The aim is to notice thoughts as thoughts, rather than to focus on their contents. For example, if a thought arises of something you need to do later today, rather than ruminating about what you need to do, recognize it as just a thought, and be aware of it as such with a sense of deep acceptance and kindness, as for feelings. As practice deepens, you may find your mind resting right in the essence of thoughts, which spontaneously arise and dissolve with a deeply pleasant feeling. If that happens, just let it happen, without seeking to get such a thing to happen. Then, after some time, finish the meditation with the “Releasing” phase.

### ***Tips for Learning this Practice:***

(1) This practice is done both in sitting meditation and throughout the day. We began the practice with emotional feelings above by bringing to mind a troubled feeling. That was done to help us initially connect to the practice. But we should learn to do this meditation at any time with any feelings: physical or emotional, unpleasant, pleasant, neutral, strong feelings, subtle feelings. If there is no strong feeling at the moment, you can do the practice with the felt sense of your body and mind.

(2) Don't impose an exaggerated friendliness agenda—just be with each feeling like a trustworthy friend listening quietly, with kindness, to a friend.

(3) It's OK to verbalize a feeling to yourself just a little ("*Oh, this is sadness,*" "*fear,*" "*anger*" ...), just enough to help the mind stay in touch with the feeling, sensing how it feels within. Don't verbalize a lot more than that; don't ruminate on it or on how to solve it. Just be gently aware of it, and notice the next feeling that opens up, and so on.

(4) Explore this practice during the day with any feelings that arise, including feelings you don't like. To be with unpleasant feelings in this simple way, without trying to distract oneself from them, is a gradual learning. So it's important to be patient with the practice and with yourself.

### ***Reported Benefits of This Practice Over Time:***

(1) This practice helps the mind and its emotional energy deeply settle and calm, making a firm basis for all other meditation practices (of love, compassion, equanimity, wisdom).

(2) There can be a healing effect from this practice. We are often at odds with our emotional feelings—seeking distraction from troubled feelings or suppressing them. To be with feelings here in such an unconditional way helps them to relax deeply and unclench, experienced as healing within. The power to be with our own feelings with kindness and compassion becomes the power to be with others and their feelings with kindness and compassion.

(3) Ultimately feelings can thereby open into a ground of warmth, deep calm, and unconditioned well-being in the core of our awareness (Tsoknyi Rinpoche calls this “*essence love*,” a quality of the mind’s deep nature).

(4) When we experience suffering feelings, we tend to experience them as if they were the only reality here, which can lead to empathic distress when we are with others who are suffering, and to burnout. This practice reveals that suffering feelings are never the only reality here—an inner power of warmth and kindness is always also here, a larger reality of compassionate awareness that can embrace all feelings. To experience this helps prevent empathic distress and burnout.

