

Ten Slogans for Training Contemplative Caregivers

This is warrior's work. Any questions?

— Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche

1. Without Armor, Full of Delight

When we enter a new situation or meet someone for the first time, it is important that we present ourselves naturally. We do not need to hide behind some idea of professionalism. We do not need to worry about what this person is thinking of us. We can just relax and our relaxation will invite theirs. When people are new to each other, there is always an atmosphere of uncertainty. If we drop our shyness and defensiveness, that energy can be stimulating. This fresh encounter could be anything. We are challenged by the opportunity and delighted to explore further.

2. All Situations Are Passing Memory

Spending time with someone, engaging in relationship, we do our best to understand and to be helpful. It is like sailing a boat – the wind blows this way and we tack accordingly. The wind shifts direction and we adjust. The person that we are working with gives us feedback. Sometimes they smile. Sometimes they complain. It is a balancing act that is never quite perfect. We cannot be too attached to our victories or too disheartened by our failures. There will be many situations where we can do nothing and some in which we actually do harm. All of these experiences become memories, intangible and haunting. They are neither true nor not true, but remembering can serve to open our hearts.

3. No Escape, No Problem

In any relationship there will be moments of claustrophobia. We may feel bored or restless, trapped by this person, hopeless in the face of their situation. We may have trouble staying awake when we are with them or difficulty listening to their words.

None of this is a problem. We simply note what we are experiencing and return to the sensation of our feet on the floor, our butt on the chair. It might help to glance out a window or follow our breath as it goes out into the room. As we refocus our attention, questions will arise. “Why do I feel this way and what is the other person feeling?” We can lean into our curiosity now that we have come back.

4. Notice Everything, Respect Everything

When we engage with a person, we are together in an environment. It could be the person’s home, their hospital room or an office. Perhaps we are in a coffee shop or driving in a car. The point is that our communication is always influenced by our context. In a person’s home and even in a hospital room, the objects and arrangement of the space tell a story. People react differently in different environments. Someone who has difficulty talking face to face may open up while riding beside you in a car. By observing how someone relates to their surroundings we learn about their preferences and their habits. We can attune ourselves to a person by respectful attention to these details.

5. Let the Situation Speak for Itself

In any encounter and in any environment, we are tempted to try to manage by labeling things as this or that. “This person is depressed,” or “This household is dysfunctional.” Interpretations and opinions come up for us. They may be accurate or inaccurate, but they are just thoughts. We can note them without becoming involved with them. We do not need to interpret reality for the people that we are working with. They have their own intelligence. We can trust them to see and to learn. We can accompany them in that process. We do not have to control the situation. It will speak for itself, further and further, if we let it.

6. Take the Blame Yourself

People are rarely comfortable about needing help. They may feel vulnerable, anxious about what is happening, worried about what will come next. The atmosphere can be fraught. As caregivers, we are like lightning rods, taking in this charge and grounding it with our presence. The people that we work with

are in pain of one kind or another. They are in the grip of something beyond their control. They may push us away or they might blame us. They may be unable to relate at all. Whatever their behavior, we do not need to become defensive or apologetic. It is not about us, but we can let it penetrate us. We can breathe in the intensity of this person's dilemma. We can feel what they cannot bear and in so doing bring them ease.

7. Be Grateful to Everyone

We aspire to be more skilled as helpers and every interaction is a lesson. We learn from the feedback that the world gives us. Our mistakes are often the greatest teachings. Some encounters may be difficult. There will be people who do not appreciate our good intentions, people who do not like us at all. We may be rejected because of our religion or the color of our skin. Even shocking and hurtful moments are full of information. They can awaken us to the diversity of human perspectives, to the fact that not everyone sees the world as we do. We will also have experiences of unexpected kindness and stunning bravery. Other people will surprise us and we will surprise ourselves. All of these moments are gifts, further instruction about the nature of reality.

8. Don't Expect Things to Go Your Way

Expectations are a tricky business. If we fear the worst, it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we think that we know what will happen, we may not notice what is actually taking place. Expectations are assumptions that can obscure our direct perception. They narrow our view. At the same time, we all have hopes and ambitions. Aspiring to help is based on the assumption that such a thing is possible. When expectations come up, we can see them for what they are and not take them too seriously. We can remind ourselves that we really do not know. Remembering this, we can wait and see, thus sparing ourselves frustration and disappointment. It could be that the outcome, while not what we expected, is better than we could have imagined.

9. Be Steady, Don't Go Up and Down

The people that we work with are in transition. Something has happened. Some change has taken place. They are knocked off balance. What we have to offer them is our steadiness. We have seen other people in similar situations. We understand that difficult passages occur in every life. Even dying is a normal process, something to be expected. In these heightened moments, we can fall back on ordinary comforts – a cup of tea, simple conversation. If we are in the person's home, we can tend to the environment, open curtains, tidy. We can use our words and our actions to bring calm. Once things settle somewhat, we can inquire further. There is no rush.

10. Rely on a Cheerful Frame of Mind

We do this work because we love it. It pleases us to try to help. We are interested in the people we encounter and we can be certain that we will learn from each situation. Some days are harder than others. We will attend suffering and we will feel it. We are honored by that intimacy. We can come back to our original inspiration, remembering the great kindness of those who have helped us. We can taste the joy of human goodness, feel it in our own heart. We can trust that problems will come up. They will bring challenge and freshness. We are so fortunate in our life and we bring our contentment with us. We rely on it and we extend it to others.

These slogans were compiled by Victoria Howard, PhD, and Ann Cason, based on teachings by Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche and Vajra Regent Ösel Tendzin.