



## Reaching Underneath Our Protective Shell, by Pema Chodron

There's a slogan in the Mahayana teachings that says, "Drive all blames onto oneself." The essence of this slogan is, "When it hurts so bad, it's because I am hanging on so tight." It's not saying that you should beat yourself up. It's not advocating martyrdom. What it implies is that pain comes from holding so tightly to having it our own way, and that one of the main exits we take when we find ourselves uncomfortable, when we find ourselves in an unwanted situation or an unwanted place, is to blame.

We habitually erect a barrier called blame that keeps us from communicating genuinely with others, and we fortify it with our concepts of who's right and who's wrong. We do that with the people who are closest to us and we do it with political systems, with all kinds of things that we don't like about our associates or our society. It is a very common, ancient, well-perfected device for trying to feel better. Blame others. Blaming is a way to protect your heart, trying to protect what is soft and open and tender in yourself. Rather than own that pain, we scramble to find some comfortable ground.

The slogan is a helpful and interesting suggestion that you could begin to shift that deep-seated ancient habitual tendency to hang on to having it on our own terms. The way to start would be first, when you feel the tendency to blame, to try to get in touch with what it feels like to be holding on to yourself so tightly. What does it feel like to blame? What does it feel to reject? What does it feel like to hate? What does it feel like to be righteously indignant?

In each of us, there's a lot of softness, a lot of heart. Touching that soft spot has to be the starting place. This is what compassion is all about. When we stop blaming long enough to give ourselves an open space in which to feel our soft spot, it's as if we're reaching down to touch a large wound that lies right underneath all that protective shell that blaming builds (...)

Compassionate action starts with seeing yourself when you start to make yourself right and when you start to make yourself wrong. At that point you could just contemplate the fact that there is a larger alternative to either of those, a more tender, shaky kind of place where you could live.

This place, if you can touch it, will help you train yourself throughout your life to open further to whatever you felt, to open further rather than shut down more. You'll find that as you begin to commit yourself to this practice, as you begin to have a sense of

celebrating the parts of yourself that you found so impossible before, something will shift in you. Something will shift permanently in you. Your ancient habitual patterns will begin to soften and you'll begin to see the faces and hear the words of people who are talking to you.

If you begin to get in touch with whatever you feel with some kind of kindness, your protective shield will melt and you'll find that more areas of your life are workable. As we learn to have compassion for yourself, the circle of compassion for others - what and who you work with, and how - widens.

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