

The Four Tenets of Compassion

A founder's working reference to the Brahmaviharas

A 5 Spheres of Empathy resource · Version 1

This is a first version. It comes from the patterns I've seen in the biggest emotional hurdles facing founders and business leaders around the world, distilled into something you can actually use. It will grow.

Why this matters

At the early stage, you are the product. This is the second sphere of empathy all over again, the conscious self.

Most advice stops at your decisions.

It says the quality of your life and business depends on the quality of the decisions you make. True, as far as it goes.

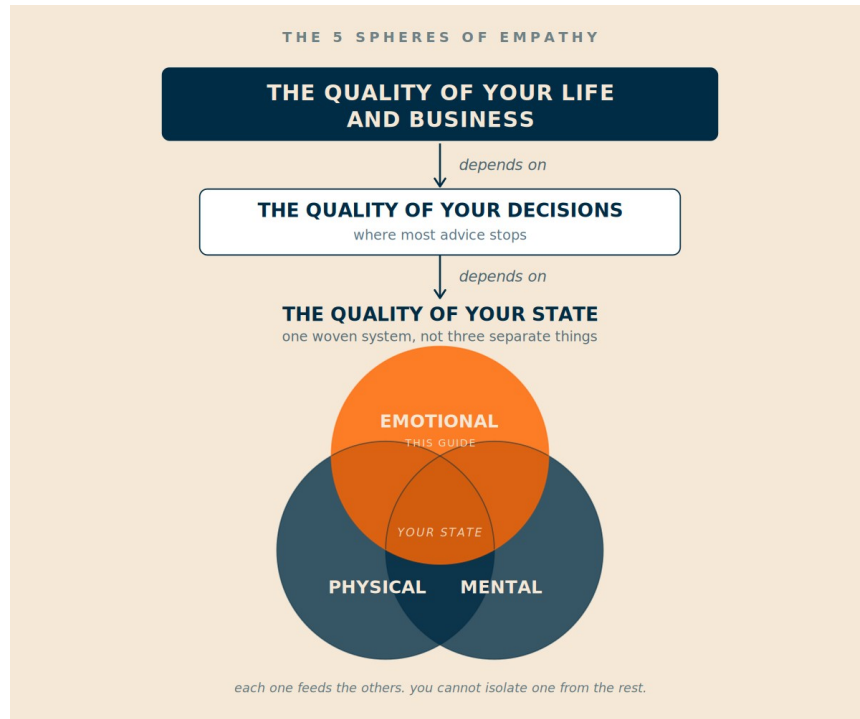
We go one step further.

The quality of your decisions depends on the quality of your state. And your state is not three separate things. Your emotional, physical and mental states are woven together, each one feeding the others.

Poor sleep frays your patience. Unprocessed emotion wrecks your focus. A tired body makes a fearful mind.

So the real question is this.

In what state are you making your most important decisions? Your build. Your story. Your message. Your actions. Your presence.



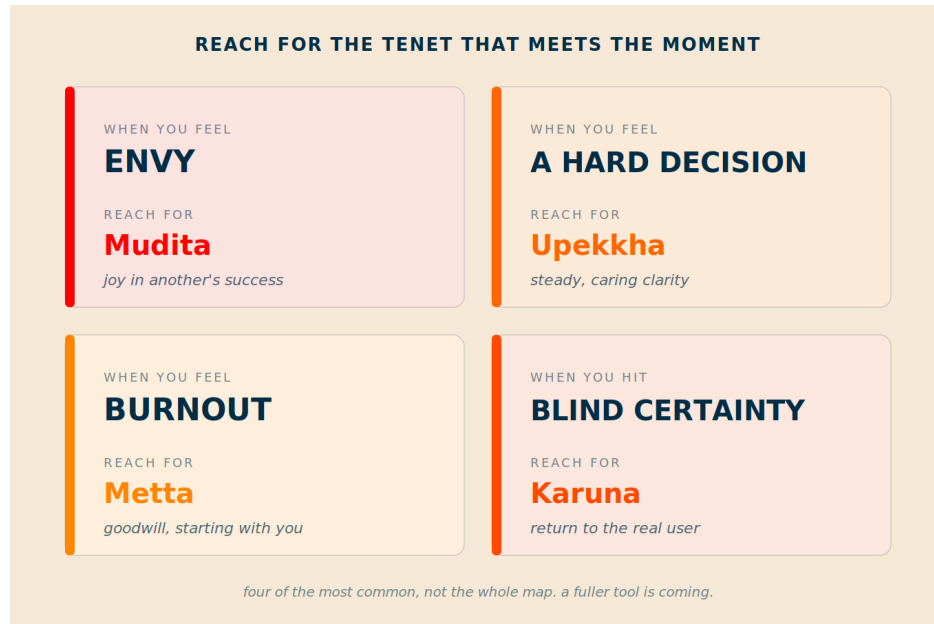
This guide covers one part of that whole, the emotional, through the four tenets. For the physical and mental, and for how it all connects, the Field Guide goes deep. Follow the site and the newsletter for more as it comes.

Which one to reach for

Here's how to use this. When you feel, or catch yourself in, one of these, that's your signal. That's when you reach for the practice beside it.

You won't always catch it in the moment. That's fine. Noticing late is still noticing.

These four are the ones I see most often in founders and leaders. They're not the whole map. A fuller tool to help you find the right one to reach for is on its way.



How to read each one

For every tenet there's the trigger that tells you to use it, the practice itself, and two ways it goes wrong.

The trap is the counterfeit. It feels like the practice but quietly isn't, and it's the one that catches you. The miss is the obvious failure, where you've clearly lost the plot.

Notice the trap. That's where the damage hides.

This adapts the traditional near-enemy and far-enemy teaching into plainer language for the world of building.

Mudita, for envy

Sympathetic joy. Genuine gladness at another's success.

THE TRIGGER

A competitor raises. A peer wins the award. Someone you started alongside pulls ahead. The envy spiral starts before you've decided to feel it.

THE PRACTICE

Choose joy at their win instead of the spiral. When they do well, we all do well. The category grows, the proof point lands for everyone, the tide rises. This isn't pretending. It's training your mind to find the genuine upside until the joy is real and the envy has nothing left to feed on.

THE TRAP

Intoxication. Getting swept up in their success in a way that's secretly about you. It looks like celebration. It's really your ego borrowing their win.

THE MISS

Envy and resentment. Their success making you smaller.

Upekkha, for difficult decisions

Equanimity. Caring deeply while staying steady when the outcome is beyond your control.

THE TRIGGER

The hard call. A layoff, an exit, a boundary, a decision that helps one group and harms another. You freeze because every option costs something, or you go cold and decide without feeling any of it.

THE PRACTICE

Hold the full weight of who this affects, care about all of it, and still decide clearly. Act on what you control. Release what you don't. Caring and steadiness at once, not one or the other.

THE TRAP

Detachment dressed as calm. It looks serene but it has simply stopped caring. True equanimity still feels the weight. The counterfeit has gone numb.

THE MISS

Anxiety. Being thrown around by every swing of the outcome, unable to act.

Metta, for burnout

Loving-kindness. Unconditional goodwill, beginning with yourself and extending outward.

THE TRIGGER

Burnout. The goodwill has run dry, including toward yourself, and you mistake the emptiness for a reason to push harder.

THE PRACTICE

Start with you, not others. Quietly wish yourself well, then extend it outward. To someone you love, someone neutral, someone difficult. The order matters. You can't pour from a dry cup, which is the whole point of the second sphere.

THE TRAP

Selfish affection. Goodwill that's really about how someone makes you feel, rather than a genuine wish for their wellbeing. Warmth that's actually attachment.

THE MISS

Ill will. Resentment toward the people and demands draining you.

Karuna, for blind certainty

Compassion. Returning to the actual person instead of the one you assume you already understand.

THE TRIGGER

You catch yourself sure you already know what your users need. Sure enough that you've stopped checking. It doesn't feel like not caring. It feels like conviction, like speed, like building fast. That blind certainty is the tell.

THE PRACTICE

Lower the shield of "I already know." Go back to the real person and test your model against them. This is the one tenet that reaches outward, into the third sphere, the direct stakeholder, which is why its practice points to a tool rather than an inward shift. The empathy map and the prompt chain in the resources are the structured way to surface your assumption and check it.

THE TRAP

Research theatre. Going through the motions of talking to users while only listening for confirmation of what you already believe. It looks like diligence. It's really collecting evidence for a model you refuse to update.

THE MISS

Building fast and breaking things on people you never actually looked at. Pure unchecked assumption, shipped at speed.

Using them well

Don't try to hold all four at once. Notice the emotion, name it honestly, reach for the one that meets it. Two minutes of the right practice in the right moment beats an hour of general goodwill.

And remember they balance each other. Compassion keeps loving-kindness from going soft. Equanimity keeps compassion from collapsing into despair. Joy keeps equanimity from going cold.

Four faces of one steady heart. That's what lets you make good decisions under pressure.

For the deeper practices, and the more radical systems for changing a belief or habit at the root, reach out.

Galeno Chua · The 5 Spheres of Empathy