



All-Embracing Compassion: The Heart-Practice of Tonglen



As human beings, we have a very interesting habit of resisting what is unpleasant and seeking what is pleasurable. We resist, avoid, and deny suffering and we continually grasp at pleasure. If we observe our behavior, it is easy to see that we habitually resist and avoid people, situations, and feelings we consider to be painful, unpleasant, or uncomfortable, and we are naturally attracted to people, situations, and feelings we consider pleasant, comfortable, and gratifying. According to Buddhist teachings, this behavior is a symptom of fundamental ignorance and is influenced by the defilements of greed (attachment), hatred (aversion), and delusion (misperception of reality). To break the spell of this dualistic perception, to dissolve the barriers in our hearts that keep us feeling separate from others, and to cultivate a deep compassion for all living beings, including ourselves, we need to meet and embrace reality in a radically new way. To accomplish this, we can use the precious heart-practice of Tonglen.

Tonglen is a Tibetan word which means *sending and taking*. This practice originated in India and came to Tibet in the eleventh century. With the practice of Tonglen, we work directly with our habitual tendency to avoid suffering and attach ourselves to pleasure. Using this powerful and highly effective practice, we learn to embrace our life experiences with more openness, compassion, inclusiveness, and understanding, rather than denial, aversion, and resistance. When we encounter fear, pain, hurt, anger, jealousy, loneliness, or suffering, be it our own or others, we breathe in with the desire to completely embrace this experience; to feel it, accept it, and own it, free of any resistance.

In this way of practice, in this way of being, we transform our tendency to close down and shut out life's unpleasant experiences. In accordance with Buddha's First Noble Truth, we acknowledge, touch, and embrace our personal and collective suffering. We do not run away. We do not turn the other way. Touching and understanding suffering is the first step toward true transformation. Rather than avoiding suffering, we develop a more tolerant and compassionate relationship with it. We learn to meet and embrace reality—naked, open, and fearless.

Although the idea of developing a relationship with suffering may sound somewhat morbid, we must remember the teachings of the Second and Third Noble Truths as well: when we touch and embrace suffering, we can finally understand what causes it. When we understand the cause of suffering, we can eliminate it and be liberated. There is an end to suffering, however, we must learn how to meet it in a new way. Tonglen practice can help us accomplish this shift of awareness, this training of the mind.

A New Way to Embrace Our Life Experience

It is obvious that Tonglen practice is completely contrary to the ways in which we usually hold our personality (ego) together. Each of us have our defensive ego strategies for coping with the pain, hurt, disappointment, and suffering we encounter in life. We armor, protect, and separate ourselves from our inner and outer experiences in numerous ways that we are not even conscious of. In truth, Tonglen practice does indeed go against our habitual tendency of always wanting things to be pleasant, of wanting life on our own terms, of wanting everything to work out for ourselves no matter what happens to others. This practice dissolves and transforms the armor of our self-protection; the psychological strategies and defenses we create to keep ourselves separate from our own suffering and the suffering we encounter in the world. Tonglen practice gradually wears away our habitual grasping at a false sense of self (self-grasping/ego fixation/identification with the personality).

Tonglen effectively reverses our usual pattern of avoiding suffering and seeking pleasure. In this process, we finally liberate ourselves from a very ancient prison of selfishness. With this radical shift of awareness, this new way of embracing our life experience, our heart becomes more tender, open, sensitive, and aware. We naturally feel more alive; more loving and caring, both for ourselves and others. By practicing Tonglen, we connect with a less defended and more open, spacious dimension of our being. The all-embracing compassion of our true nature begins to shine through and we are introduced to a far more intimate and grander view of reality. With this sublime heart of love, liberated from attachment, aversion, and

indifference, we gradually recognize and feel the absolute interdependence and preciousness of all living beings. This is true intimacy with life. This is the cultivation of bodhicitta—the awakened heart of compassion and wisdom.

Hearing and Feeling the Cries of the World

Breathing in, we allow ourselves to feel the inevitable suffering that occurs in this life. Our heart's natural response to this suffering, while breathing out, is compassion. We breathe in the pain and suffering of this world like a dark cloud, letting it pass through our hearts. Rather than bracing ourselves against this pain and suffering, we can let it strengthen our sense of belonging and interdependence within the larger web of being. Avalokiteshvara (Chenrezig) is the Bodhisattva of Universal Compassion. His name means "One Who Hears the Cries of the World." Long ago he vowed not to return to nirvana until all living beings had been liberated from suffering. Avalokiteshvara listens to and feels the pain and suffering of the world. He breathes in, receiving the cries and anguish of the world and responds with the greatest care and compassion. In Buddhism, the traditional vow made by the Bodhisattva is to alleviate the suffering of all sentient beings.

The path of the Bodhisattva is to remember our belonging and connection with all of life. When we know in our hearts that we are connected to the insects, animals, trees, the earth, and every living being, we do not cause harm or suffering to any of these parts of ourselves. Rather, we become sensitive and attuned to the cries of the world, and we learn to respond with wisdom and deep compassion. We develop the wish to free all beings from their suffering and its causes; we desire, more than anything, to bring them happiness and peace. Indeed, the practice of Tonglen is an excellent way for us to train our heart and mind so we too can develop universal compassion and help alleviate the suffering of all living beings.

Suggestions for the Practice of Tonglen

Use what seems like poison as medicine. Use your personal suffering as the path to compassion for all beings.

In Tonglen practice, through our compassion, we take on (embrace without resistance) the various sufferings of all beings: their fear, hurt, frustration, pain, anger, guilt, bitterness, loneliness, doubt, rage, and so forth. In return, we give them our loving-kindness, happiness, peace of mind, well-being, healing, and fulfillment.

1) Sit quietly, calm the mind, and center yourself. Reflect on the immense suffering that all beings everywhere experience. Allow their suffering to open your heart and awaken your compassion. You may also choose to invoke the presence of all the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and enlightened beings, so that through their inspiration and blessing, compassion may be born in your heart. In this way, you are resting in bodhicitta—the enlightened nature of the mind. Bodhicitta, is an inexhaustible source of purity, generosity, and compassion.

2) Imagine in front of you, as clearly as possible, someone you care for who is suffering. Although this may be more challenging, you may also imagine someone you feel indifferent toward, someone you consider to be an enemy, or those who have hurt you or others. Open yourself to this person's suffering. Allow yourself to feel connected with him or her, aware of their difficulties, pain, and distress. Then, as you feel your heart opening in compassion toward the person, imagine that all of his or her suffering comes out and gathers itself into a mass of hot, black, grimy smoke.

3) Now, visualize breathing in this mass of black smoke, seeing it dissolve into the very core of your self-grasping (ego) at your heart center. There in your heart, it completely destroys all traces of fear and selfishness (self-cherishing) and purifies all of your negative karma.

4) Imagine, now that your fear, self-centeredness and negative karma has been completely destroyed, your enlightened heart (bodhicitta) is fully revealed. As you breathe out, imagine you are sending out the radiance of loving-kindness, compassion, peace, happiness, and well-being to this person. See this brilliant radiance purifying all of their negative karma. Send out any feelings that encourage healing, relaxation, and openness.

5) Continue this “giving and receiving” with each breath for as long as you wish. At the end of your practice, generate a firm inner conviction that this person has been freed of suffering and negative karma and is filled with peace, happiness and well-being. You may also wish to dedicate the merit and virtue of your practice to the benefit of all sentient beings.

Another Excellent Form of Tonglen

Clearly imagine a situation where you have acted badly, one about which you feel shameful or guilty, and which may be difficult to even think about. Then, as you breathe in, opening your heart, accept total responsibility for your actions in that particular situation. Do not judge or try to justify your behavior. Simply acknowledge exactly what you have done wrong and wholeheartedly ask for forgiveness. Now, as you breathe out, send the compassionate radiance of reconciliation, forgiveness, harmony, healing, and understanding. Breathe in the pain and the blame, and breathe out the undoing of harm. Breathe in taking full responsibility, breathe out the compassionate radiance of healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation. This exercise is especially powerful. It may give you the courage to go see the person(s) whom you have wronged and the strength and willingness to talk to them directly and actually ask for forgiveness from the depths of your heart.

Tonglen is a Practice and a Way of Life

Traditionally, we begin by doing Tonglen for someone we care about. However, we can use this practice at any time, either for ourselves or others. Tonglen can be done for those who are ill, those who are dying or have just died, or for those that are in pain of any kind. Tonglen can be done either as a formal meditation practice or right on the spot at any time. For example, if we encounter someone in pain, right on the spot we can begin to breathe in their pain and send out some relief. At any time, when we encounter our own emotional discomfort or suffering, or that of others, we open our heart and fully embrace what we are encountering on our in-breath. Breathing out, we offer the heartfelt radiance of acceptance, loving-kindness, and compassion. This is a practice and a way of life.

Practicing Tonglen on one friend in pain helps us begin the process of gradually widening the circle of our compassion. From there, we can learn to take on the suffering and purify the karma of all beings; giving others our happiness, well-being, joy, and peace of mind. Tonglen practice can extend indefinitely, and gradually, over time, our compassion will expand. We will find that we have a greater ability to be loving and present for ourselves and for others in even the most difficult situations. This is the wonderful goal of Tonglen practice, the path of the compassionate Bodhisattva.