

The Practice of Tonglen by Pema Chodron (The Cultivation of Compassion)

In order to have compassion for others, we have to have compassion for ourselves. In particular, to care about other people who are fearful, angry, and jealous, overpowered by addictions of all kinds, arrogant, proud, miserly, selfish, mean- you name it- to have compassion and to care for these people, means not to run from the pain of finding these things in ourselves. In fact, one's whole attitude toward pain can change.

Instead of fending it off and hiding from it, one could open one's heart and allow oneself to feel that pain, feel it as something that will soften and purify us and make us far more loving and kind.

The Tonglen practice is a method for connecting with suffering- ours and that which is all around us- everywhere we go. It is a method for overcoming fear of suffering and for dissolving the tightness of our heart. Primarily it is a method for awakening the compassion that is inherent in all of us, no matter how cruel or cold we might seem to be.

We begin the practice by taking on the suffering of a person we know to be hurting and who we wish to help. For instance, if you know of a child who is being hurt, you breathe in the wish to take away all the pain and fear of that child. Then, as you breathe out, you send the child happiness, joy or whatever would relieve their pain. This is the core of the practice: breathing in other's pain so they can be well and have more space to relax and open, and breathing out, sending them relaxation or whatever you feel would bring them relief and happiness.

However, we often cannot do this practice because we come face to face with our own fear, our own resistance, anger, or whatever our personal pain, our personal stuckness happens to be at that moment. At that point you can change the focus and begin to do Tonglen for what you are feeling and for millions of others just like you who at that very moment of time are feeling exactly the same stuckness and misery.

Maybe you are able to name your pain. You recognize it clearly as terror or revulsion or anger or wanting to get revenge. So you breathe in for all the people who are caught with that same emotion and you send out relief or whatever opens up the space for yourself and all those countless others.

Maybe you can't name what you're feeling. But you can feel it-- a tightness in the stomach, a heavy darkness or whatever. Just contact what you are feeling and breathe in, take it in- for all of us and send out relief to all of us.

People often say that this practice goes against the grain of how we usually hold ourselves together. Truthfully, this practice does go against the grain of wanting things on our own terms, of wanting it to work out for ourselves no matter what happens to the others. The practice dissolves the armor of self-protection we've tried so hard to create around ourselves. In Buddhist language one would say that it dissolves the fixation and clinging of ego.

Tonglen reverses the usual logic of avoiding suffering and seeking pleasure and, in the process, we become liberated from a very ancient

prison of selfishness. We begin to feel love both for ourselves and others and also we begin to take care of ourselves and others. It awakens our compassion and it also introduces us to a far larger view of reality. It introduces us to the unlimited spaciousness that Buddhists call shunyata.

By doing the practice, we begin to connect with the open dimension of our being. At first we experience this as things not being such a big deal or so solid as they seemed before. 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. It can be done either as a formal meditation practice or right on the spot at any time.

For example, if you are out walking and you see someone in pain- right on the spot you can begin to breathe in their pain and send some out some relief. Or, more likely, you might see someone in pain and look away because it brings up your fear or anger; it brings up your resistance and confusion. So "on the spot" you can do Tonglen for all the people who are just like you, for everyone who wishes to be compassionate but instead is afraid, for everyone who wishes to be brave but instead is a coward.

Rather than beating yourself up, use your own stuckness as a stepping stone to understanding what people are up against all over the world. Breathe in for all of us and breathe out for all of us. Use what seems like poison as medicine. Use your personal suffering as the path to compassion for all beings.

Tonglen Instructions

When you do Tonglen "on the spot," simply breathe in and breathe out, taking in pain and sending out spaciousness and relief. When you do Tonglen as a formal meditation practice it has four stages.

- First rest your mind briefly, for a second or two, in a state of openness or stillness. This stage is traditionally called "flashing on Absolute bodhicitta" or suddenly opening to basic spaciousness and clarity.
- Second, work with texture. You breathe in a feeling of hot, dark and heavy- a sense of claustrophobia, and you breathe out a feeling of cool, bright and light- a sense of freshness. You breathe in completely through all the pores of your body and you breathe out, radiate out, completely through all the pores of your body. You do this until it feels synchronized with your in and outbreath.
- Third, you work with your personal situation- any painful situation which is real to you. Traditionally you begin by doing Tonglen for someone you care about and wish to help. However, as I described, if you are stuck, do the practice for the pain you are feeling and simultaneously for all those just like you who feel that kind of suffering. For instance if you are feeling inadequate- you breathe that in for yourself and all the others in the same boat- and you send out confidence or relief in any

form you wish.

- Finally make the taking in and ending out larger. If you are doing Tonglen for someone you love, extend it out to everyone who is in the same situation. If you are doing Tonglen for someone you see on television or on the street, do it for all the others who are in the same boat- make it larger than just one person. If you are doing Tonglen for all those who are feeling the anger or fear that you are caught with, maybe that is big enough. But you could go further in all these cases. You could do Tonglen for people you consider to be your enemies- those that hurt you or hurt others. Do Tonglen for them, thinking of them as having the same confusion and stuckness as your friend or yourself. Breathe in their pain and send them relief. This is to say that Tonglen can extend indefinitely.

As you do the practice, gradually over time, your compassion naturally expands and so does your realization that things are not as solid as you thought. As you do this practice, gradually at your own pace, you will be surprised to find yourself more and more able to be there for others even in what used to seem like impossible situations.