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## Training in the compassion practices of Tonglen

By Christine Longaker

The Loving Kindness Meditation helps to reawaken our inherent capacity to give and receive love, and the compassion practices take us one step further. They are designed to completely eliminate the source of suffering: our belief in and identification with our selfish ego.

By reflecting on the immense suffering that all beings, everywhere, experience, our compassion becomes deeper and more limitless. We wish to free all beings from their suffering and even its causes; we desire, more than anything, to bring them happiness and peace. The more we meditate on suffering, the deeper our compassion becomes, until one day we finally realize that to be of the greatest help to beings, we ourselves must attain enlightenment for the benefit of all others. As Sogyal Rinpoche writes,

This compassionate wish is called Bodhicitta in Sanskrit; bodhi means our enlightened essence, and citta means heart. So we could translate it as "the heart of our enlightened mind." To awaken and develop the heart of the enlightened mind is to ripen steadily the seed of our buddha nature, that seed that in the end, when our practice of compassion has become perfect and all-embracing, will flower majestically into buddhahood. Bodhicitta, then, is the spring and source and root of the entire spiritual path. (The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying, page 201)

The compassion practices described in this section:

- \* Tonglen for an Uncomfortable Atmosphere
- \* Self-Tonglen
- \* Tonglen for Others

are intended to uncover and awaken our bodhicitta, our enlightened courage, and thus bring us close to realizing our wisdom nature.

## Giving and receiving

Tonglen means "giving and receiving." In the Tonglen visualization, we receive, with a strong compassionate motivation, the suffering and pain of others; and we give them, with a tender and confident heart, all of our love, joy, well-being and peace. Normally, we don't want to give away our happiness, nor do we want to take on another person's suffering, but this not-wanting is the voice of our selfish ego. We cherish "I" more than we do "others" and thus everything we think or do has a self-centered motivation. Following our ego's commands all the time keeps us trapped in cycles of hope and frustration, fear and disappointment.

The voice of your ego may warn you that Tonglen could "harm" you, but this is not true. The compassion practices are designed to unravel the selfish patterning of the ego and gradually reinforce your confidence in the radiant wisdom and compassion of your true nature, which is indestructible. Tonglen is a skillful training in a completely new way of being, in which you begin to develop a limitless, fearless and unbiased compassion toward all creation. One key to attaining enlightenment is to develop your compassion so profoundly that you come to love and cherish all other beings more than yourself.

Thus although at first the Tonglen practice appears to be a courageous response to the suffering of others, you will find that training in compassion is actually benefiting you and bringing you further along the path to liberation.

The Tonglen practices may also enable you to:

- \* Bring difficulties and illness onto your spiritual path
- \* Heal your past and present suffering
- \* Prevent or relieve burnout
- \* Transform your relationship with others

## Three Tonglen practices

Before beginning any of the following Tonglen practices, spend some time in meditation, settling your mind and energies, and arousing your compassionate motivation for doing the practice. To nurture the confidence and fearless love that will enable you to take on others' suffering, it is important, before you begin practicing, to shift your perspective and connect with your true nature.

In practicing Tonglen, then, "ordinary you" should never be doing it! The preliminary meditation practice is intended to help you release your identification with your limited and fearful "self grasping" with all its conditionings and barriers, and shift your perception 180 degrees.

As you sit in meditation, then, playfully "pretend to be a Buddha," an enlightened being. Imagine now that you are viewing things from the perspective of your true nature--the aspect of your mind and heart that is clear, infinitely spacious, and naturally radiant with unbiased compassion and love. And from this perspective, begin the Tonglen practice.

### Tonglen for an Uncomfortable Atmosphere

If either your physical environment or the atmosphere inside your mind is uncomfortable or tense, transform it with a simple form of Tonglen. Begin by centering yourself, meditating quietly and invoking your compassionate motivation. Now, shift your perspective and consider that radiating from your innermost wisdom essence is a clear, unbiased compassion and love.

With each in-breath, take in the negativity from your external or internal atmosphere, in the form of a dark cloud, and consider that this dark cloud of negativity is transformed at your heart center, the way hot air is cooled by an air conditioner. With every exhalation, send out and fill the atmosphere with calm, clarity, and joy in the form of light.

## Self-Tonglen

Sit in meditation and consider that the pure aspect of your being-- yourself as the embodiment of enlightened compassion--is the aspect of you sitting on your meditation cushion or chair. Directly in front of you is the "ordinary" aspect of you that is suffering; perhaps feeling lonely, fearful, misunderstood, angry, or troubled by a physical illness or grief.

As you gaze toward your ordinary self and become aware of the suffering you've been carrying, you feel a deep warmth and tenderness, a sense of friendship and unconditional love. You accept the suffering of this other part of yourself, you understand it. Your awareness of this pain or difficulty opens your heart and generates a fearless wish to release and transform the suffering of the "ordinary" you.

Consider that the suffering of the "ordinary" you takes the form of a dark cloud, and with each in-breath, visualize that you breathe it in. As the dark cloud of suffering enters your being, it disintegrates any final traces of egoistic clinging or fear in your heart, and reveals your bodhicitta--the radiant source of wisdom and compassion at the core of your being--which shines out even more powerfully, like a brilliantly shining sun.

As you exhale, freely give out understanding, joy, unconditional love and peace, in the form of light, to the suffering aspect of you. Continue this giving and receiving with each breath for as long as you like.

As you continue the practice, visualize the "ordinary" aspect of you is gradually relieved of suffering and filled with well-being and joy. Each time you conclude, consider that the practice has been completely effective: the "ordinary" aspect of you is released of all pain and distress and is now radiantly happy and at peace. And, since there is no difference now between these two aspects, dissolve the visualization and remain in meditation.

## Tonglen for Others

Begin the Tonglen by sitting quietly and bringing your mind home through the practice of meditation. To inspire your practice, meditate deeply on the suffering that all beings experience, and allow their suffering to open your heart and awaken your compassion.

To help you develop confidence, you can do the following meditation as a preliminary to your practice of Tonglen. In the sky in front of you, invoke the presence of a Divine Being for whom you feel devotion, or the presence of many saints or enlightened beings. Pray that through their inspiration and blessings the seed of your compassionate essence, your bodhicitta, may be awakened in your heart. Visualize that these enlightened beings respond to your prayer, sending tremendous rays of compassion and wisdom into you, dissolving the ego's clouds of selfishness and fear, and revealing your bodhicitta. At the end, visualize that all of these enlightened beings dissolve into you, becoming one with your wisdom mind--which shines out even more brilliantly with compassion. From this perspective, begin the Tonglen.

Visualize that sitting in front of you is someone in your life whom you know to be suffering. Open yourself to this person's suffering, allowing yourself to feel connected with him or her and aware of all of their difficulties. Feel rising in you a strong compassionate intention to release the person from their suffering and even its causes.

Breathe in the other person's suffering, in the form of a dark cloud, and visualize it coming into your heart center, where it dissolves any final traces of self-grasping, thus fully revealing the heart of your enlightened mind, your bodhicitta. As you breathe out, consider that you are sending to the other person, in the form of brilliant light, all your healing love, warmth, energy, confidence and joy.

Continue this "giving and receiving" with each breath for as long as you wish. If you like, you can even imagine your bodhicitta has transformed your heart or your whole body into a brilliant wish-fulfilling jewel that is able to fulfill any special needs or desires of the person for whom you are practicing. At the end of the practice,

consider that your compassion has completely dissolved all the person's suffering and even its causes, filling him or her with well-being, peace, happiness and love.

As your Tonglen practice becomes stronger and more confident, you can gradually imagine others who are suffering in front of you--co-workers, patients, relatives or even strangers--and practice taking in and transforming their suffering, extending to them all of your happiness, clarity, understanding, forgiveness and love. While doing the Tonglen, as the light of your bodhicitta touches and fills those for whom you are practicing, feel a firm conviction that all of their suffering and traces of negativity have been purified. Knowing this practice can bring such benefit, you feel a sense of joy that you have been able to successfully free others from their suffering or pain.

As you conclude each session of Tonglen, dedicate its positive and healing power to those you had visualized and pray that the merit of your practice of compassion may benefit all other beings, who are as limitless as space.

### Adapting the Tonglen for daily life

Sometimes when you bring the Tonglen practice to your daily encounters with suffering, you may find you still have a subtle hope or fear: a hope that the person will be grateful, or change, as a result of the practice, or a fear that you will experience his or her suffering. If this happens, then use one of the following methods to adjust yourself or adapt your practice:

- \* Do the Tonglen mentally, as an aspiration: "May I be able to relieve the suffering of all beings; may I give my happiness to all beings."

- \* Do the Tonglen for your own aversion to the other person's suffering

- \* Focus on the Loving Kindness or the Self-Tonglen meditation.

The Tonglen practices should be approached as a training, so that as you gain familiarity with each part of the practice, you are able to engage in the next stage with greater ease and confidence. I have found that before applying Tonglen in everyday situations it is important to first spend some time doing the preliminary Tonglen practices in your daily meditation--Tonglen for an Uncomfortable Atmosphere and Self-Tonglen--so that you learn to extend a genuine acceptance and compassion toward your own suffering and even your fears.

Then train in doing Tonglen for Others as a meditation. With the increased confidence and familiarity this brings, you'll find that when you encounter suffering in your daily life, you are able to naturally do the "giving and receiving" practice of Tonglen with genuine love and fearlessness.

If you find you have difficulty extending compassion toward yourself, you can consider that, with each in-breath, you are taking in and transforming the suffering of all others who presently experience the same kind of illness, loss, pain or emotional distress as you. This may help you begin to accept your own painful circumstances with more awareness and compassion.

Finally, doing the Tonglen practice while we are ill or disabled is an extraordinary way of bringing meaning to our suffering, and it enables us to begin using each life experience as a preparation for our death. The Tonglen practice enables us to transcend our suffering by dedicating it to others, thus literally "forgetting ourselves" in the process.