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THE PRACTICE OF TONGLLEN

City Retreat | Berkeley Shambhala Center

Fall 1999

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, 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.

TONGLLEN 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.

THE THREE STAGES OF TONGLLEN

OK, so now, here are the three stages of tonglenn.

The first stage is, I'm going to hit the gong [gong sounds], and just listen to the gong and let your mind rest [sounds resonates out]. It's called a moment of openness, traditionally called a flash of absolute bodhichitta— that sense of openness. Just listen to this sound of the gong, and sometimes that really evokes a sense space. [gong sounds, sound resonates out]

Do you see what I mean? It's just a beginning with a feeling of opening or stillness or not being caught up. And in the next class, when we have time for questions and answers, and in your discussion group you can talk about this a little bit. But, beginning with a sense of not caught up as the background. So, listening to the gong. So, that's the first stage, openness. Just a moment, beginning with openness, or stillness, or gap. Just a flash. Just a moment.

Then, second stage. Breath in the texture of claustrophobia. The texture of all caught up. Breath out the texture of relaxation, or spaciousness, or letting go. So, usually how this is taught (with the eyes open or closed): Breath in, a sense of heavy, hot, dark. Breath out, a sense of fresh, cool, light. Breath in the heavy, hot, dark. Breath out, light, cool, refreshing. You can breath into your heart, with the idea of making the heart very big. Welcoming it in. Allowing a lot of room for it to come in.

And then you breath out, radiating it out. Sending it out. Or you can breath in to your whole being, like breathing in to a big sky. The point is to open, when you breath in. To welcome it in. To allow room for what usually we push against. To open. Training the heart muscle, the chitta, to open. That which is so scared, so frozen, training it to open, when we breath in —and using our breath to help us.

And breath out. But the point is, whether you're breathing into the heart, getting bigger and bigger and bigger, or breathing in to your whole being, there's no place for it to get stuck. You're just opening. You're not capturing it. You're not making yourself sick with it. You're making yourself healthy and loving and compassionate by opening the heart in the very situation where you usually close down. Or, if you already feel the open heart, because this is someone on your list, then you nurture that open heart by breathing in and sending out.

Nurturing. Like cultivating that which is already here. You water the seed that is already here. Do you see? And, if you feel there is no seed here, all you feel is panic, then there is a seed here.

If you open around the panic, you'll find the tenderness, you'll find the soft spot. Hidden behind that armor of: I don't want this, this isn't safe, go away, it's your fault, it's my fault. You see? The hardness behind there is the tenderness.

If you breathe in, you're finding the tenderness, finding the soft spot, experiencing it. You may not feel you do experience it, but you're training. You're training in the process that will allow you to experience your own heart, your own tenderness. And to let what is frozen, fixated, and caught... to let it flow again. Let it flow again. Maybe like when you were a little child. Love and compassion, flowing. So, breathing in the quality of the claustrophobia, or the I don't want—the pain. The pain. Dark, heavy, hot... in. Clear, cool, and light... out. And you visualize this however you wish to. In and out. And we'll do that for a little bit.

Then will move on to the third section, which is doing tonglen for a particular situation, and expanding that out. Which is to say, do it for someone on your list, breathe in for them, breathe out for them. Breathing in for them is breathing in the pain that they feel; the pain that you feel for them. Breathing in the pain. Knowing the pain as best you can. You may not know exactly what they're feeling, but you know that you feel their suffering in you. And you breathe in, and you feel that. For them.

And for yourself, too. You breathe in, and you send out— something specific if you wish to, but otherwise, just relaxing out. And you also think, There's other people like this one in the world. The world is filled with people who are terrified... Or a little child that is terrified or hurt, or an animal that is being beaten, or whatever it is. Someone who is sitting and lonely. You think, It's not just them, there are many people like this.

So, always, tonglen stays very specific, but you have a sense of how universal the situation is.

Or, you find the compassion is blocked, either because you go completely numb, or because resentment comes in, something seems to interfere with your flow of compassion. But, not really. Because, you just shift the emphasis, and that becomes the subject of your tonglen. In which case, you breathe in — say the resentment, or whatever it is, you may not know what to call it— but you breathe in the feeling of No or the feeling of [pushes away with her hands], or the feeling of [pulls toward with her hands]. You breathe that in. Opening to it. You see? That's the point. Opening to it. You are dissolving the barriers. And the method is, opening your heart, opening your being.

You breathe in for yourself and all the other people in your situation, so the realness of your immediate, personal situation, you never leave that, you respect it, it's self-compassion, but it's also empathy for everyone else in the same boat.

That's the third stage: something very personal and real, and the universalness of that very real pain that you feel, for yourself in yourself, or for another being. So, those are the three stages: The flash of openness or stillness, like a pause of not being caught up.

Sometimes people visualize something, like the ocean, the sky. But today, I think the gong helps— listening to the gong. Then, second stage. Breathe in... First there's no subject matter, you just breathe in the quality, the heat of pain; the narrowness of it; the heaviness of it. And you breathe out... That can be fun, just visualizing, sending out. Equally, in, dark... Equal breathe, out... (equal length) light and cool and fresh. Just sending it out.

And then you move on (and I'll be guiding this), you move on to the particular situation, someone on your compassion list, or if you're blocked, just do it for what you're feeling. You know, if you want to choose another subject, you can, if one readily comes up.

I'm just trying to help you out here. I don't care what you do the tonglen on, but sometimes a major obstacle is not being able to come up with anything. I'm offering you your very own list that you made.

Q&A:

Student: [mic didn't work -it's a question about difficulty breathing in tonglen practice]

Pema: Well, this is obviously a pretty common question. So, really it's one of the reasons that I stress doing tonglen on the spot. Because, as I say, somehow on the spot, you get more of a feeling about what's really going on. That, really, things are closed down, and breathing in is opening, and sending out is opening. And, it's as if everything is closing in on you, and you just take an attitude that you could be here and you could open to what's happening. So, yes, you can definitely get this feeling of your throat closing down.

I think it would just be acknowledging that, and acknowledging that a lot of people find themselves in that situation. Then you might feel when you breathe out—they say give equal time to the in and out breath— but it doesn't feel so real.

But, if you think of that breathing in as opening, and sending out as opening, then maybe you don't have to get too worried about which is in and which is out. Except, it's important to keep breathing, and it's important to keep breathing in and out! Otherwise, you're dead. Right? And, unlike sitting meditation, you can exaggerate the breaths. Breathing deeply in, and then, equally deeply, sending out.

I think a lot of that is helped by being able to acknowledge the panic and open your heart— make your whole being open enough, as if you became the sky, and just open to it. And as somebody said, There's no place, really, for it to get stuck. Because it's not like a cannon ball that you're breathing in. It's really a tendency to clutch that you're reversing. It's a tendency to close down and tighten your belly and tighten your whole being, that you're almost physically relaxing to it, as you breathe in. And then, you send that out.

In fact, one of the things that's very valuable about Linda Jones' little handbook is she gives many, many different translations of the slogans from a lot of these different books. She gives her personal commentary and also from different people, and she said that there are three or four teachers who actually recommend that you can work for awhile just with in breath, and then work just with out breath, until you get the hang of in and out.

I was taught, always, to synchronize them in and out, but I think, as I always say, you're the only one who knows what's going on, there's no one else judging your practice— it's your practice. So you do what works. As long as eventually you're getting in the habit of how interconnected the in and out are— in terms of... they help each other.

Student: I feel if I were to explain the tonglen practice to somebody, it would just sound masochistic.

Pema: I think the important thing is, What do you say to yourself? Right now. Do you feel it's masochistic?

Student: No, no.

Pema: It's all right if you do.

Student: No, no, it doesn't at all.

Pema: So, why not?

Student: Because I feel like I'm helping.

Pema: And how?

Student: That I'm changing my perspective and realizing I have something to give, I have something positive to give.

Pema: So, that's what you could say to them. All you can say is, Well, listen, I can understand where you're coming from, but here's my experience. It's opening the heart to where you usually shut down. Because we all know, there's this common practice where you breathe in what's pleasant, and send out what's unpleasant. Right? I think that's a common visualization that's done. From the point of view of logic, that's what we want, right?, if you want to be happy, you breathe in what's pleasant, and you get rid of...

Tonglen is actually just a little more sophisticated. A little bit more in touch with what the root of suffering and the root of happiness are. It isn't like the other is "off the wall." It's just that if you want to go deeper into the real root of suffering, it's closing down, and the real root of happiness is opening the heart, or dissolving the armor.

We just go right into that which we usually armor against. And, conversely, when there's attachment or addiction, we train in letting go of those things. It doesn't have to do, really, with morality or ethics, per se, at all. It just has to do with what brings an individual happiness. And what then brings happiness to the bigger picture as well. But, it is good for us to do this, that's the interesting thing.

We're not doing it because we want everyone else to be happy, therefore we're willing to suffer —although sometimes the teachings do sound like that. But, the truth is, it's what will also bring us happiness.

It takes courage, that's why the image of the warrior or the bodhisattva — warrior or bodhisattva are two names for the same thing— it's the one who cultivates courage. Because it does take courage to go to reside with this kind of energy —you want to get away from it. Whether you know what the core fear, core belief, is or not, you know what that energy feel like.

And you know you want to get out of there. And then you begin to acknowledge your thoughts— like all the ways you get out of there: it's her fault, it's his fault, it's because of me, I'm bad... endless.