

The Tonglen meditation is a Tibetan Buddhist practice for overcoming the 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.

Quintessential Buddha Dharma --Tonglen

*from The Tibetan Book of Living
and Dying by Sogyal Rinpoche)*

For Ollie on "Quintessential Buddhism"

Tonglen Practice

How to Awaken Love and Compassion

Before you can truly practice Tonglen, you have to be able to evoke compassion in yourself. That is harder than we often imagine, because the sources of our love and compassion are sometimes hidden from us, and we may have no ready access to them. Fortunately there are several techniques that the Buddhist "training of the mind" in compassion has developed to help us evoke our own hidden love. Out of the enormous range of methods available, I have selected the following ones, and have ordered them in a particular way so as to be of the greatest possible use to people in the modern world.

1. Loving Kindness: Unsealing the Spring

When we believe that we don't have enough love in us, there is a method for discovering and invoking it. Go back in your mind and recreate, almost visualize, a love that someone gave you that really moved you, perhaps in your childhood. Traditionally you are taught to think of your mother and her lifelong devotion to you, but if you find that problematic, you could think of your grandmother or grandfather, or anyone who had been deeply kind to you in your life. Remember a particular instance when they really showed you love, and you felt their love vividly.

Now let that feeling arise again in your heart, and infuse you with gratitude. As you do so, your love will go out naturally to that person who evoked it. You will remember then that even though you may not always feel that you have been loved enough, you were loved genuinely once. Knowing that now will make you feel again that you are, as that person made you feel then, worthy of love and really lovable.

Let your heart open now, and let love flow from it; then extend this love to all beings. Begin with those who are closest to you, then extend your love to friends and to acquaintances, then to neighbors, to strangers, then even to those whom you don't like or have difficulties with, even those whom you might consider as your "enemies," and finally to the whole universe. Let this love become more and more boundless. Equanimity is one of the four essential facets, with loving kindness, compassion, and joy, of what the teachings say form the entire aspiration of compassion. The all-inclusive, unbiased view of equanimity is really the starting point and the basis of the path of compassion.

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You will find that this practice unseals a spring of love, and by that unsealing in you of your own loving kindness, you will find that it will inspire the birth of compassion. For as Maitreya said in one of the teachings he gave Asanga: "The water of compassion courses through the canal of loving kindness."

2. Compassion: Considering Yourself the Same as Others

One powerful way to evoke compassion is to think of others as exactly the same as you. "After all," the Dalai Lama explains, "all human beings are the same—made of human flesh, bones, and blood. We all want happiness and want to avoid suffering. Further, we have an equal right to be happy. In other words, it is important to realize our sameness as human beings."

Say, for example, you are having difficulties with a loved one, such as your mother or father, husband or wife, lover or friend. How helpful and revealing it can be to consider the other person not in his or her "role" of mother or father or husband, but simply as another "you," another human being, with the same feelings as you, the same desire for happiness, the same fear of suffering. Thinking of the person as a real person, exactly the same as you, will open your heart to him or her and give you more insight into how to help.

If you consider others just the same as yourself, it will help you to open up your relationships and give them a new and richer meaning. Imagine if societies and nations began to view each other in the same way; at last we would have the beginnings of a solid basis for peace on earth and the happy coexistence of all peoples.

3. Compassion: Exchanging Yourself for Others

When someone is suffering and you find yourself at a loss to know how to help, put yourself unflinchingly in his or her place. Imagine as vividly as possible what you would be going through if you were suffering the same pain. Ask yourself: "How would I feel? How would I want my friends to treat me? What would I most want from them?"

When you exchange yourself for others in this way, you are directly transferring your cherishing from its usual object, yourself, to other beings. So exchanging yourself for others is a very powerful way of loosening the hold on you of the self-cherishing and the self-grasping of ego, and so of releasing the heart of your compassion.

4. Using a Friend to Generate Compassion

Another moving technique for arousing compassion for a person who is suffering is to imagine one of your dearest friends, or someone you really love, in that person's place.

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Imagine your brother or daughter or parent or best friend in the same kind of painful situation. Quite naturally your heart will open, and compassion will awaken in you. What more would you want than to free them from their torment? Now take this compassion released in your heart and transfer it to the person who needs your help: You will find that your help is inspired more naturally, and that you can direct it more easily.

People sometimes ask: "If I do this, will the friend or relative whom I am imagining in pain come to some harm?" On the contrary, thinking about them with such love and compassion can only be of help to them, and will even bring about the healing of whatever suffering and pain they may have gone through in the past, may be going through now, or have yet to go through.

For the fact that they are the instrument of your arousing compassion, even if it is only for an instant, will bring them tremendous merit and benefit. Because they have been responsible, in part, for the opening of your heart, and for allowing you to help the sick or dying person with your compassion, then the merit from that action will naturally return to them.

You can also mentally dedicate the merit of that action to your friend or relative who helped you to open your heart. And you can wish the person well, and pray that in the future he or she will be free of suffering. You will be grateful toward your friend, and your friend might feel inspired and grateful too, if you tell the person that he or she helped you to evoke your compassion.

5. How to Meditate on Compassion

The simplest ways are the best and the most direct. Every day, life gives us innumerable chances to open our hearts, if we can only take them. An old woman passes you with a sad and lonely face, swollen veins on her legs, and two heavy plastic bags full of shopping she can hardly carry; a shabbily dressed old man shuffles in front of you in line at the post office; a boy on crutches looks harried and anxious as he tries to cross the street in the afternoon traffic; a dog lies bleeding to death on the road; a young girl sits alone, sobbing hysterically in the subway. Switch on a television, and there on the news perhaps is a mother in Beirut kneeling above the body of her murdered son; or an old grandmother in Moscow pointing to the soup that is her food for today, not knowing if she'll have even that tomorrow; or one of the AIDS children in Romania staring out at you with eyes drained of any living expression.

Any one of these sights could open the eyes of your heart to the fact of vast suffering in the world. Let it. Don't waste the love and grief it arouses; in the moment you feel compassion welling up in you, don't brush it aside, don't shrug it off and try quickly to return to "normal," don't be afraid of your feeling or embarrassed by it, or allow yourself to be distracted from it or let it run aground in apathy. Be vulnerable; use that quick, bright uprush of compassion; focus on

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it, go deep in your heart and meditate on it, develop it, enhance, and deepen it. By doing this you will realize how blind you have been to suffering, how the pain that you are experiencing or seeing now is only a tiny fraction of the pain of the world.

All beings, everywhere, suffer; let your heart go out to them all in spontaneous and immeasurable compassion, and direct that compassion, along with the blessing of all the Buddhas, to the alleviation of suffering everywhere.

Compassion is a far greater and nobler thing than pity. Pity has its roots in fear, and a sense of arrogance and condescension, sometimes even a smug feeling of "I'm glad it's not me." As Stephen Levine says: "When your fear touches someone's pain it becomes pity; when your love touches someone's pain, it becomes compassion." To train in compassion, then, is to know all beings are the same and suffer in similar ways, to honor all those who suffer, and to know you are neither separate from nor superior to anyone.

So your first response on seeing someone suffer becomes not mere pity, but deep compassion. You feel for that person respect and even gratitude, because you now know that whoever prompts you to develop compassion by their suffering is in fact giving you one of the greatest gifts of all, because they are helping you to develop that very quality you need most in your progress towards enlightenment. That is why we say in Tibet that the beggar who is asking you for money, or the sick old woman wringing your heart, may be the buddhas in disguise, manifesting on your path to help you grow in compassion and so move towards buddhahood.

6. How to Direct Your Compassion

When you meditate deeply enough on compassion, there will arise in you a strong determination to alleviate the suffering of all beings, and an acute sense of responsibility toward that noble aim. There are two ways, then, of mentally directing this compassion and making it active.

The first way is to pray to all the buddhas and enlightened beings, from the depths of your heart, that everything you do, all your thoughts, words, and deeds, should only benefit beings and bring them happiness. In the words of one great prayer: "Bless me into usefulness." Pray that you benefit all who come in contact with you, and help them transform their suffering and their lives.

The second and universal way is to direct whatever compassion you have to all beings, by dedicating all your positive actions and spiritual practice to their welfare and especially toward their enlightenment. For when you meditate deeply on compassion, a realization dawns in you that the only way for you to be of **complete** help to other beings is for you to gain enlightenment. From that

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a strong sense of determination and universal responsibility is born, and the compassionate wish arises in you at that moment to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all others.

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 Preliminary Tonglen Practice

The best way to do this practice, and any practice of Tonglen, is to begin by evoking and resting in the nature of mind. When you rest in the nature of mind and see all things directly as "empty," illusory, and dream-like, you are resting in the state of what is known as "ultimate" or "absolute Bodhicitta," the true heart of the enlightened mind. The teachings compare absolute Bodhicitta to an inexhaustible treasury of generosity; and compassion, when understood in its profoundest sense, is known and seen as the natural radiance of the nature of mind, the skillful means that rises from the heart of wisdom.

Begin by sitting and bringing the mind home. Allow all your thoughts to settle, neither inviting them nor following them. Close your eyes if you wish. When you feel really calm and centered, alert yourself slightly, and begin the practice.

1. Environmental Tonglen

We all know how the moods and atmospheres of our mind have a great hold on us. Sit with your mind and feel its mood and atmosphere. If you feel your mood is uneasy, or the atmosphere is dark, then as you breathe in, mentally absorb whatever is unwholesome; and as you breathe out, mentally give out calm, clarity, and joy, so purifying and healing the atmosphere and environment of your mind. This is why I call this first stage of the practice "environmental Tonglen."

2. Self Esteem

For the purposes of this exercise, divide yourself into two aspects, **A** and **B**. **A** is the aspect of you that is whole, compassionate, warm, and loving, like a true friend, really willing to be there for you, responsive and open to you, without ever judging you, whatever your faults or shortcomings.

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B is the aspect of you that has been hurt, that feels misunderstood and frustrated, bitter or angry, who might have been, for example, unjustly treated or abused as a child, or has suffered in relationships or been wronged by society.

Now as you breathe in, imagine that **A** opens his or her heart completely, and warmly and compassionately accepts and embraces all of **B**'s suffering and negativity and pain and hurt. Moved by this, **B** opens his or her heart and all pain and suffering melt away in this compassionate embrace.

As you breathe out, imagine **A** sending out to **B** all his or her healing love, warmth, trust, comfort, confidence, happiness, and joy.

3. Tonglen in a Living Situation

Imagine vividly a situation where you have acted badly, one about which you feel guilty, and which you wince to even think about.

Then, as you breathe in, accept total responsibility for your actions in that particular situation, without in any way trying to justify your behavior. Acknowledge exactly what you have done wrong, and wholeheartedly ask for forgiveness. Now, as you breathe out, send out reconciliation, forgiveness, healing, and understanding.

So you breathe in blame, and breathe out the undoing of harm; you breathe in responsibility, breathe out healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

This exercise is particularly powerful, and may give you the courage to go to see the person 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.

4. Tonglen for Others

Imagine someone to whom you feel very close, particularly someone who is suffering and in pain. As you breathe in, imagine you take in all their suffering and pain with compassion, and as you breathe out, send your warmth, healing, love, joy, and happiness streaming out to them.

Now, just as in the practice of loving kindness, gradually widen the circle of your compassion to embrace first other people whom you also feel very close to, then those whom you feel indifferent about, then those you dislike or have difficulty with, then even those whom you feel are actively monstrous and cruel. Allow your compassion to become universal, and to fold in its embrace all sentient beings, all beings, in fact, without any exception:

Sentient beings are as limitless as the whole of space.
May they each effortlessly realize the nature of their mind,
And may every single being of all the six realms, who has
each been in one life or another my father or mother,
Attain all together the ground of primordial perfection.

The Main Tonglen Practice

In the Tonglen practice of giving and receiving, we **take on, through compassion** all the various mental and physical sufferings of all beings: their fear, frustration, pain, anger, guilt, bitterness, doubt, and rage, and we **give** them, **through love**, all our happiness, and well-being, peace of mind, healing, and fulfillment.

1. Before you begin with this practice, sit quietly and bring your mind home. Then, making use of any of the exercises or methods I have described, whichever one you find really inspires you and works for you, meditate deeply on compassion. Summon and 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.
2. Imagine in front of you, as vividly and poignantly as possible, someone you care for who is suffering. Try and imagine every aspect of the person's pain and distress. Then, as you feel your heart opening in compassion toward the person, imagine that all of his or her sufferings manifest together and gather into a great mass of hot, black, grimy smoke.
3. Now, as you breathe in, visualize that this mass of black smoke dissolves, with your in-breath, into the very core of your self-grasping at your heart. There it destroys completely all traces of self-cherishing, thereby purifying all your negative karma.
4. Imagine, now that your self-cherishing has been destroyed, that the heart of your enlightened mind, your Bodhicitta, is fully revealed. As you breathe out, then, imagine that you are sending out its brilliance, cooling light of peace, joy, happiness, and ultimate well-being to your friend in pain, and that its rays are purifying all their negative karma.

Here I find it inspiring to imagine, as Shantideva suggests, that your Bodhicitta has transformed your heart, or your whole body and being itself, into a dazzling, wish-fulfilling jewel, a jewel that can grant the desires and wishes of anyone, and provide exactly what he or she longs for and needs. True compassion **is** the wish-fulfilling jewel because it has the inherent power to give

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precisely to each being whatever that being most needs, and so alleviate his or her suffering, and bring about his or her true fulfillment.

5. So at the moment the light of your Buddha streams out to touch your friend in pain, it is essential to feel a firm conviction that all of his or her negative karma **has** been purified, and a deep, lasting joy that he or she has been totally freed of suffering and pain.

Then, as you go on breathing normally, in and out, continue steadily with this practice.

Practicing Tonglen on one friend in pain helps you to begin the process of gradually widening the circle of compassion to take on the suffering and purify the karma of all beings, and to give them all your happiness, well-being, joy, and peace of mind. This is the wonderful goal of Tonglen practice, and in a larger sense, of the whole path of compassion.