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Meditation: Tonglen or Giving and Receiving: A Practice of Great Mercy

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Cultivating Mercy

The practice of Tonglen or Giving and Receiving is done to develop our compassion and our ability to be present for our own suffering and the suffering of others. It is also a practice of great kindness that opens up our whole being to the overwhelming presence of suffering and our strength and willingness to transform alienation into compassion through the energy of mercy and the cultivation of openness.

Tonglen is one of the richest and bravest practices that we can do. In teaching this practice for more than twenty-five years, I have been told again and again that this one practice has helped many people immeasurably in attending to their own fears around pain, suffering, dying, and loss and has given them a real basis for the joining of compassion and equanimity. This is one of the great meditation jewels that offers a way us to cultivate our natural mercy.

We begin the practice with a heart that is truly committed to helping others and to working openly with our own situation. When we look deeply into how this can actually happen, we see that to help others, we must relate with kindness toward our own suffering, our rage, helplessness, and frustration, our doubt, bitterness, and fear.

The practice of Sending and Receiving helps us to get in touch with the obstacles that prevent us from understanding and caring. Through our own experience with suffering and the development of an atmosphere of openness toward it, we can begin to accept and be with others and ourselves in a more open, kind and understanding way. Our own difficult personal experiences then become the bridge that leads us to compassion and to giving no fear.

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Giving No Fear

In order to give no fear, we must first learn to relate with our own suffering—our rage, helplessness, frustration, doubt, bitterness, and fear—instead of pushing it away. Gentle loving-kindness toward ourselves is what it takes to be present for our own suffering. We need to learn to stay with our own suffering without trying to change it or fix it. Only when we are able to be present for our own suffering are we able to be present for the suffering of others. The practice of mindfulness meditation, in which we watch the ebb and flow of mental activity, is a good way to cultivate this ability. With gentle precision and honesty, we stay with our experience through foul weather and clear skies. Seeing the mental weather go through its changes gives us some sense of the nature and cause of our suffering and also of the possibility that, at the very ground of our being, we are all free from suffering.

The practice of giving and receiving develops our ability to be present for suffering and offers us a way to cultivate natural mercy. It trains us to use the energy of loving-kindness to open our hearts to suffering and transform it into well-being. It asks us to invite suffering into our being and let it break open the armor of our heart. The tender spaciousness that arises awakens selfless warmth and compassion. We cannot help but send our love and kindness to the one who is suffering, be it others or ourselves.

The basis of the practice is the realization that suffering exists and that beings can be free of suffering. These are the two great points of faith that guide us in this practice. We discover them to be true through our own experience. When I sit with a dying person, I must see both of these dimensions. I must look from a place in myself that includes suffering but that is bigger than suffering. I must look from a heart that is so big that it is open to everything, including freedom from suffering. Can I see her suffering and her great heart as well? Can I see his true nature, who he really is, deeper than the story?

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Meditation: Giving and Receiving

To begin the practice, you can sit in meditation posture, relax in a chair, or lie down. Gently close your eyes and let your body and mind settle. You want to feel relaxed and open.

You can say this prayer—or the prayer of your choice—to create a sense of spaciousness in which the giving and receiving can take place:

*Having recognized the futility of my selfishness
And the great benefit of loving others,
may I bring all beings to joy.
May I send all my virtues and happiness to others
through the strength of my practice,
and may I receive the suffering, obstacles, and defilements
of all motherly beings in all realms.*

Begin by breathing in whatever you are feeling—fear, agitation, anger, resistance—and accepting it. On the exhalation breathe out well-being. Clear your mind by bringing awareness to what is agitating you and breathing it in, accepting it with kindness. Then, as you exhale, give yourself some spaciousness. Do this breath practice until you are calm and alert

Working with the Texture of the Breath

When you feel settled, begin the second stage of the practice, which is establishing a rhythm of breathing. On your inbreath imagine that you are inhaling heavy, hot air. On your outbreath visualize exhaling cool, light air. Continue with this pattern—breathing in heaviness and breathing out lightness—until it is familiar to you. The heaviness is suffering; the lightness is well-being.

Now imagine that you are breathing through all the pores of your body. On the inbreath heavy, hot air enters every pore. On the outbreath, cool light flows from every pore.

Dissolving the Metal Sheath around the Heart

Now visualize a metal sheath around your heart. This metal sheath is everything about you that is difficult for you to accept: your self-importance, selfishness, self-cherishing, self-pity. It is the band of fear that hardens your heart. The practice invites you to dissolve this metal sheath and open your heart to its natural nonjudgmental state of warmth, kindness, and spaciousness. You can do this by visualizing the metal sheath breaking apart when the inbreath of suffering touches it. When the heart opens, the hot, heavy air vanishes into its vast space. What arises is natural mercy. It is this quality of unarmored heart that allows you to be with suffering and at the same time to see beneath the suffering.

Awakening the Heart

The reason you are doing this practice is that you are suffering, others are suffering, and you wish with all your heart that all beings could be free from suffering. This wish needs to be specific, personal, and sincere. It helps to touch in with a being or an event that evokes this wish. The Tibetan teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche would remember having seen a puppy being stoned to death when he was a child. He would have done anything to relieve the dog of its suffering. He used the memory of this helpless puppy to open his heart at the beginning of the practice.

Bring to your mind some being, dead or alive, with whom you feel a deep connection: a parent, child, pet, your grandmother, your dearest friend, your beloved teacher—someone who is suffering. You would do anything to help this one. Be with this one and feel what she is experiencing. Let your whole being turn toward her suffering and your wish that it might be relieved. See how vulnerable she is. Like a mother who will do anything to help her child, you will do anything to help your friend.

Visualize the suffering of your beloved as polluted, hot smoke and breathe it in through your whole body. The instant that the inbreath of suffering touches the metal sheath of self-centeredness around your heart, the sheath breaks apart, and

your heart opens to the suffering. The hot smoke instantly vanishes into the great space of your heart, and from this space spontaneously arises an outbreath of mercy and healing. Send a deep, cool, light, and spacious healing breath to your friend. Let the outbreath flow through every pore of your body.

Let this one's suffering remind you of the many others who find themselves suffering in the same way. This friend is your connection to them. Breathe in their suffering. Let your heart break open. Send them healing with your outbreath. Continue with this practice.

Practicing with Your Own Situation

Bring the practice to your own life. Remember a time when you were in a difficult situation. You may still hold energy around this difficulty. You may have been hurt, angry, depressed, outraged, or afraid. Remembering the feeling as vividly as possible, breathe it in as hot, heavy, polluted smoke. Let go of any sense of blame, any object of blame. Breathe in the raw feeling directly as the hot smoke of suffering. Take it in completely through every pore of your body. Own the heat and rawness of it completely.

This practice takes a lot of courage. You might find yourself resisting breathing in the suffering. If so, you can breathe in your resistance as hot, heavy smoke. You can breathe in alienation, piety, boredom, arrogance, confusion, grief, or clinging—whatever flavor your suffering of the moment takes. Let the ego sheath dissolve to reveal your vast and spacious heart. Breathe out the sense of spaciousness, openness, kindness, and surrender that arises. Shower these qualities on yourself in a rain of cool, healing light. Aerating your suffering in this way is threatening to the ego—that small, tight self that habitually clings to anger, blame, or shame as a way of fortifying its illusion of solidity and separateness. It breaks your heart open to your bigger self.

Don't analyze what you are doing. Don't try to figure it out. Don't justify it. Simply do the practice. Breathe in the heavy, hot smoke of your suffering and

breathe out sympathetic space. As you breathe in your hot, heavy, tar-like suffering, own it completely. Then breathe out clarity and surrender, relief and kindness.

Connecting with Those Suffering as You Are

Now consider that at this very moment many others are experiencing the same kind of misery as you—anger, for example. The details of their distress are not important. The point is to connect with the truth that others are suffering just as you are. Feeling your distress and their distress, breathe it in for others as well as for yourself.

This won't increase your suffering; rather, it will open your heart to the truth that others are suffering as you are. It will give you the opportunity to connect with them. Let this connectedness open your sympathy toward yourself and them. And as you breathe out clarity and kindness, let the breath go to all those who are suffering as you are.

Now dissolve the visualization and continue with the practice, breathing in universal suffering—your suffering and that of all beings—as heavy, hot smoke. The hardness around your heart dissolves, and your great heart appears as the smoke of suffering vanishes into its vast space. Through every pore of your body, breathe out goodness and healing as a cool, light breath.

Practicing with a Parent

Bring into your awareness the parent or parent figure—whether dead or alive—with whom you have had the greatest difficulty. Maintaining the rhythm of the hot, smoky inbreath and cool, light outbreath, consider how this one and you have suffered. For a moment imagine gazing into the eyes of this parent. Looking at him in a mental photograph might help. Notice if this is difficult for you. See the wear on his face. Maybe her life has been full of disappointment and frustration. Maybe she was afraid. Maybe he was numb. See if you can allow yourself to be in touch with the difficulties that this one has had. Imagine how things might have

been different for him. Imagine how he could have given you love in a form that nourished you.

Imagine your parent as a three- or four-year-old child. Perhaps you remember a photograph of this face. See her face free from weariness. Imagine this one without suffering. If it is difficult for you to see your parent in this way, please notice the resistance that might be there. This is all right. Breathe in the resistance; breathe out acceptance and spaciousness.

In practicing this way, perhaps you experience anger, disappointment, or heartbreak. Let yourself feel whatever arises. Breathe deep into your belly and resolve to transform your alienation in order to help others and to help yourself be free from suffering. Breathe in your own suffering as heavy, polluted, hot smoke. The instant that the inbreath of suffering touches the metal sheath of self-centeredness around your heart, the sheath dissolves, and your heart can open to your own suffering. The hot smoke of suffering instantly vanishes into your heart, and from this space an outbreath of mercy arises spontaneously. Send a deep, cool, and healing breath to yourself. Let this outbreath flow through every pore in your body.

Reconsider the parent whom you have visualized. You have seen this one as a child. Now see him as you last remember him. Breathing in the hot, heavy smoke of his suffering, let it dissolve the hardness around your heart so that your great heart can absorb and transform suffering. On your outbreath send all your strength, understanding, caring, and love to your parent.

Now allow yourself to let go of the visualization of your parent and keep the rhythm of the breathing steady, breathing in hot, heavy smoke, smoke that dissolves completely into the vastness of your heart. Breathe out through every pore of your body coolness and healing. Send it to the whole world.

Practicing with a Dying Person

Imagine that you are sitting with someone who is dying. See her as clearly as you can. You are sitting quietly and peacefully next to her, following her breath. You see that she is in pain. You can almost feel her pain. Visualize the sheath of fear around your heart, that tough membrane that you use to protect yourself from the world. Breathe in her pain as hot, heavy, grimy smoke. Breathe in through every pore in your body. Let your heart break open to her pain. Now release the pain completely as you breathe out a breath of kindness, giving her all the good that you have known in your life.

Practicing with Your Own Experience of Dying

Now imagine that this one who is dying is you. See yourself in a hospital bed. Your body feels tired and heavy. You might be fearful. Breathe in that fear as heavy smoke. Let it dissolve the tightness around your heart. Feel your heart open to its natural greatness. Then let go of your breath completely as you send all the good in your heart to the world.

Imagine that this is the moment of your death. Let your heart completely relax and open like a flower as you let go of your last breath, giving the great merit of your life to beings everywhere.

Now dissolve the visualization and rest your body and mind in openness. Then send whatever good you might have derived from the practice to suffering beings everywhere.

Meditation: Practicing Tonglen with Another

After practicing Tonglen with yourself, turn silently toward someone close to you. Stay with the practice, letting yourself breathe in universal suffering. The sheath around the heart breaks open, and the smoke of suffering dissolves into the spaciousness of your heart. Through every pore in your body, exhale all of your goodness and healing for the world.

Gaze at the chest area of this one sitting across from you. If you wish, you may gently synchronize your breathing with each other. Practicing non-dual presence and continuing the practice with your inhalation, breathe in hot, heavy smoke, letting that smoke dissolve the sheath around your heart, and breathing out a cool light breath. Be a breathing presence for all beings, as you sit across from this your friend.

If fear or resistance comes up, notice it. Remember the depth of your commitment. Rekindle your determination if fear makes it difficult for you to practice directly with another. Breathe in the fear and breathe out ease. When you are ready, let your eyes rise and gaze into the throat area of this person across from you. Continue sending and receiving. Let the specific identity of this one sitting across from you become a little more revealed to you. Stay in the truth of your practice.

When you are ready, let your eyes rise to meet the eyes of the friend sitting across from you. Not grasping but being present, gaze into the eyes of your friend. Let your good heart connect with this one sitting across from you. This one, like you, has suffered. This one's life, like all lives, has had its share of pain and sorrow. This one, like you, will die one day.

See the lines of weariness, concern, disappointment or sadness in this one's face. It is not necessary to give what you see a story. In a general way, just be with the life that this one has lived. Keep it very simple. If you feel as though you are

beginning to fixate, close your eyes and return to your breath practice and open your eyes when you are steady.

Now imagine this one as a three-year old child. See him or her as this one might have been when he was very young and free of any pain. Imagine that this young, fresh and hopeful being is still alive in your friend.

Now, in your imagination, bring your friend into the present.

In Buddhism, we say that all beings, whether male or female, have been our mother in some other lifetime, have given birth to us, carried us into life, have cared for us, have nurtured us, have protected us. Allow this one to be your mother, and see not only her difficulties but also her compassion. Your gratitude to her is very deep. With all your heart, you want to repay her kindness.

This one has also been your child. See not only the mother in her or him, but also the child, your child. Imagine the love that you might feel for your child. You would do anything to help this one be peaceful and free of distress.

On your next in breath, breathe in the suffering of this one. Breathe in dark, heavy, hot smoke that breaks apart the metal sheath of self-importance around your heart. The smoke of this friend's suffering dissipates into the vastness of your true heart. On your outbreath, breathe out a cool light breath of kindness.

Remember that this one with whom you are practicing will die. We do not know when or how. See how his or her life is hanging by a breath. You hope that this one will be able to come home to her true nature. Your heart of compassion is wide open. Put any negative aspects of your personality into the metal sheath around your heart. On your next in breath, the dark, heavy, hot smoke of this friend's suffering transforms your negativity into mercy.

Now imagine that this one sitting across from you will not be alive tomorrow. There is always that possibility. The thought of impermanence can help deepen the commitment to the practice. Breathe in suffering. Breathe out kindness. When you feel ready, allow your eyes to close. Let go of this friend sitting across from you. Open the focus of your practice to the universe. Breathe in universal

suffering, dissolving your own self-importance. On your outreach, give away all of your goodness to all beings who suffer.

The Instructions from Pema Chödrön

Tonglen practice, also known as “taking and sending,” reverses our usual logic of avoiding suffering and seeking pleasure. In tonglen practice, we visualize taking in the pain of others with every in-breath and sending out whatever will benefit them on the out-breath. In the process, we become liberated from age-old patterns of selfishness. We begin to feel love for both ourselves and others; we begin to take care of ourselves and others.

Tonglen awakens our compassion and introduces us to a far bigger view of reality. It introduces us to the unlimited spaciousness of shunyata (emptiness). By doing the practice, we begin to connect with the open dimension of our being.

Tonglen can be done for those who are ill, those who are dying or have died, or those who are in pain of any kind. It can be done as a formal meditation practice or right on the spot at any time. If we are out walking and we see someone in pain, we can breathe in that person’s pain and send out relief to them.

Breathe in for all of us and breathe out for all of us. Use what seems like poison as medicine.

Usually, we look away when we see someone suffering. Their pain brings up our fear or anger; it brings up our resistance and confusion. So we can also do tonglen for all the people just like ourselves—all those who wish to be compassionate but instead are afraid, who wish to be brave but instead are cowardly. Rather than beating ourselves up, we can use our personal 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. We can use our personal suffering as the path to compassion for all beings.

The Four Stages of Tonglen Meditation

When you do tonglen as a formal meditation practice, it has four stages:

1. Flash on Bodhichitta

Rest your mind for a second or two in a state of openness or stillness. This stage is traditionally called flashing on absolute bodhichitta, awakened heart-mind, or opening to basic spaciousness and clarity.

Tonglen meditation step 1

2. Begin the Visualization

Work with texture. Breathe in feelings of heat, darkness, and heaviness—a sense of claustrophobia—and breathe out feelings of coolness, brightness, and light—a sense of freshness. Breathe in completely, taking in negative energy through all the pores of your body. When you breathe out, radiate positive energy completely, through all the pores of your body. Do this until your visualization is synchronized with your in- and out-breaths.

Tonglen meditation step 2

3. Focus on a Personal Situation

Focus on any painful situation that's real to you. Traditionally you begin by doing tonglen for someone you care about and wish to help. However, if you are stuck, you can do the practice for the pain you are feeling yourself, and simultaneously for all those who feel the same kind of suffering. For instance, if you are feeling inadequate, breathe that in for yourself and all the others in the same boat and send out confidence, adequacy, and relief in any form you wish.

Tonglen meditation step 3

4. Expand Your Compassion

Finally, make the taking in and sending out bigger. If you are doing tonglen for someone you love, extend it out to all those who are 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 in the same boat. Make it bigger than just that one person. You can do tonglen for people you consider to be your enemies—those who 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.

Tonglen can extend infinitely. As you do the practice, your compassion naturally expands over time, and so does your realization that things are not as solid as you thought, which is a glimpse of emptiness. 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.

Pema Chödrön