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SHAMBHALA SUN

BUDDHISM CULTURE MEDITATION LIFE

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Your Guide to

Buddhist Meditation

Learn a wealth of meditation techniques to
develop calm, awareness, wisdom & love

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Loving-Kindness

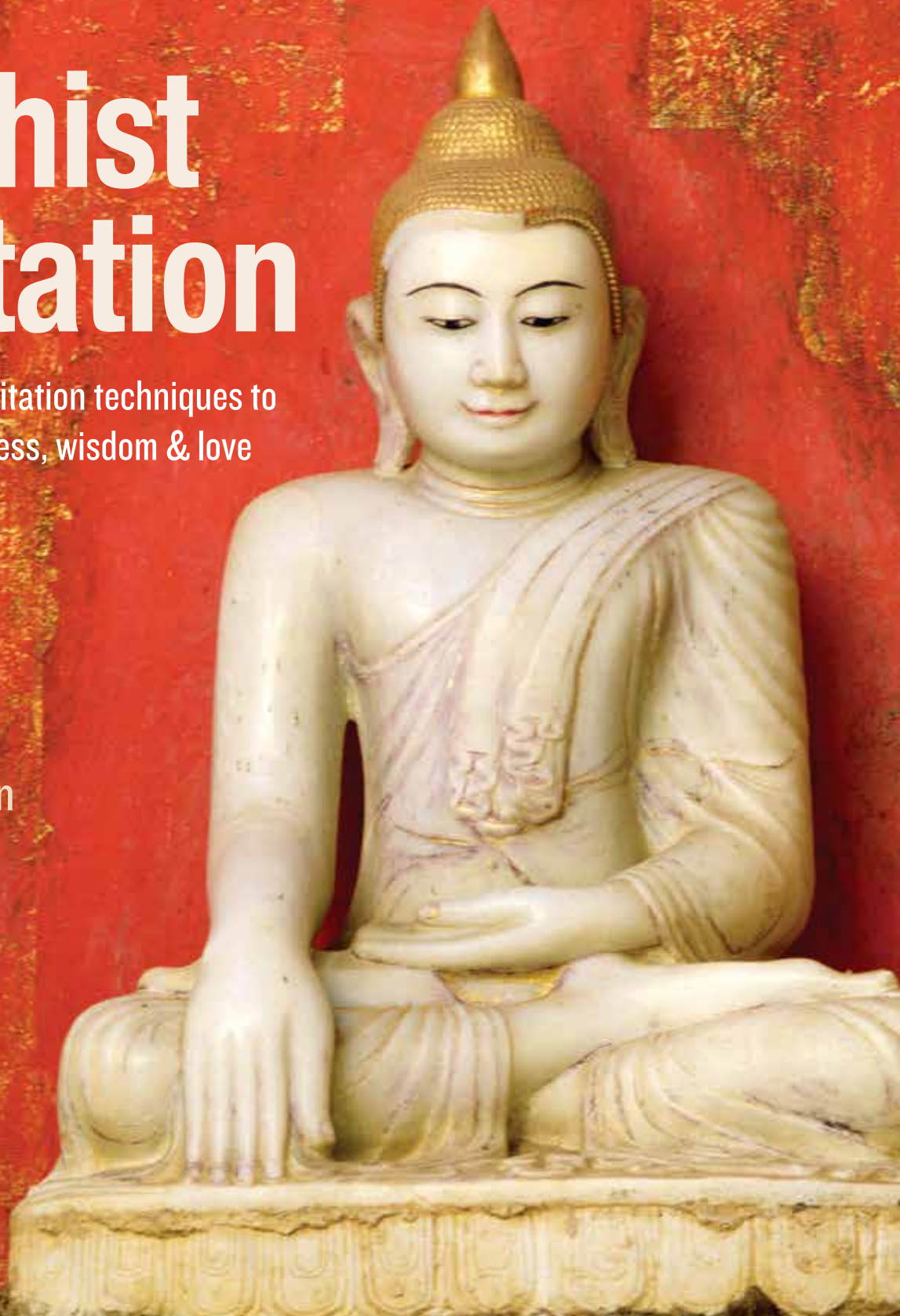
Zen Meditation

Visualization

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and more...



Tonglen

In with the Bad, Out with the Good

“Accepting and sending out” is a powerful meditation to develop compassion—for ourselves and others. ETHAN NICHTERN teaches us how to do it in formal practice and on the spot whenever suffering arises.



TONGLEN, WHICH IN TIBETAN MEANS “accepting and sending out,” is one of the most powerful and intense compassion meditations in the Buddhist tradition.

The Buddhist definition of compassion is inherently intense and expansive: *the willingness to stay open and available to pain and suffering, both in oneself and others.* So Tonglen does more than help us develop compassion for others. It also transforms our own lives. Using our imagination and respiratory system, it helps us stay present with difficult feelings and relationships that usually provoke resistance and distance. Tonglen gives us incredibly effective mental tools for meeting painful encounters throughout the day.

Tonglen in Four Steps

Before the session, contemplate your intention to stay present with suffering, which is traditionally called the bodhisattva intention. Spend a few minutes doing mindfulness of breath practice to help ground you. Then begin the four steps.

Step One: Connecting with Bodhichitta (About 3 Minutes)

First, take the attitude that you are in a safe space. Wherever you are practicing should feel like a good place for working with annoyance, anger, grief, anxiety, and whatever else comes up. Remind yourself that if something arises you can’t handle right now, it’s fine to return to the breath and take a more relaxed approach to practice.

Next, connect with absolute *bodhichitta* (enlightened mind) for a minute or two. Absolute bodhichitta refers to the mind that is always (and already) awake, beyond doubt or fixation. It is the

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aspect of our awareness that is always observing, yet not caught up in thought. Have a moment of feeling completely open, not fixated on any object of mindfulness and simply available to the environment around you.

Now connect with relative bodhichitta for a minute or two. Relative bodhichitta refers to active expression of compassion in the world. The mind experiences vulnerability, trauma, and confusion, and it meets these situations courageously. You might physically feel your heart-center, noting the fragility of a heartbeat, or you could recall a difficult yet psychologically manageable memory that connects you with your “soft spot.” It should be a memory that makes you feel tender in an interconnected and energized sense, not one that provokes personal shame or overwhelming fear.

Step Two: Mindfulness of Breath with Texture (About 3 Minutes)

Begin paying attention to the breath again, with the following simple visualization:

As you inhale, pollution enters your body: smoke, darkness, or just a general feeling of difficulty and obstruction. Because you have connected with absolute bodhichitta, the mind that is always open and observing, this negativity has nowhere to “stick” in your body, so it can be processed and transformed. To aid this, you might imagine that your body is not really solid but made of a kind of holographic, light-based substance.

As you exhale, imagine releasing pure, bright, nourishing air. If your mind wanders, come back to the breath and reestablish this textural rhythm of accepting and sending out. Your body is now like a recycling plant, “accepting” pollution and “sending out” clean energy.

Step Three: Accepting and Sending While Working with People (About 10 Minutes)

This third stage, focusing on recipients of your Tonglen, represents the bulk of the practice session. You can meditate for a few minutes on each recipient of your compassion. There are many ways to choose the people you want to work with, but it’s best to start with yourself.

You might also bring a short list of potential recipients to the cushion, people you know are having a hard time. You can practice more spontaneously: after beginning with yourself and a specific recipient, you could work with whoever simply arises in your mind as you sit.

Without too much analysis, imagine each recipient’s present trauma or struggle. With each inhalation, accept (or just stay present with) the difficulty of that person, and with each exhalation, and without too much judgment, send to them whatever might help their situation. If you think ice cream would help the person, you don’t have to contemplate whether or not it’s good for their diet—just exhale ice cream! If you don’t know what they need, imagine that you are sending them healing light as you exhale.

Step Four: Universalizing the Practice (About 3-5 Minutes)

Maintaining the inhale/exhale cycle, visualize suffering beyond any individual level. You could expand spatially outward from your body, allowing in all the suffering in your building, your block, neighborhood, and so on. Or you could do Tonglen for suffering groups: your family, a struggling community, a war-ravaged country. Either way, let the group size gradually expand until you are taking in suffering directionlessly and breathing out ease and healing light in all directions. You could imagine that you are doing so through every pore in your body.

Finally, return to resting in open awareness for as long as it lasts until you are swept away by thoughts. In this last stage, relative and absolute bodhichitta are unified in practice because they were never truly separate to begin with.

Close by following the breath and letting any tension or pain that arose in the practice dissolve as you exhale. Breathe extra deeply if it feels good, maybe even sighing a few times. Let go into a relaxed and present state of mind.

Tonglen on the Spot

Whenever you bear witness to suffering in your daily life, do Tonglen for one to three breaths. For example, if someone yells at someone else on the street, breathe in the argument and breathe out understanding. You can also do this for yourself if someone hurts your feelings. It can just be as quick as one cycle of breath. You don’t even have to stop what you are doing; just invest enough energy to stay present with the suffering on the spot without overanalyzing it. In my experience, doing Tonglen on the spot even three times within a busy day builds the heart muscle of compassion in a truly transformative way. ♦

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