



LION'S ROAR

Deep Dive
—into Tonglen



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CONTENTS

How to Practice Tonglen

Pema Chödrön

Tonglen: A Prayer That Rides the Breath

Judy Lief

In With the Bad Air, Out With the Good

Gelek Rimpoche

Tonglen: A Lesson in Giving and Taking

Emily Strasser

Helping Others – and Yourself – through Tonglen Meditation

Pema Chödrön

Tonglen in 4 Steps

Ethan Nichtern

The No-Escape Button

Alixia Doom

Reversing Ego's Logic

Pema Chödrön

Kindness to Ourselves and Others

Judy Lief



How to Practice Tonglen

Pema Chödrön teaches us “sending and taking,” an ancient Buddhist practice to awaken compassion. With each in-breath, we take in others’ pain. With each out-breath, we send them relief.

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.

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 tonglén 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.

When you do tonglén 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.

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.

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.

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.

Tonglén 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.

With her powerful teachings, bestselling books, and retreats attended by thousands, Pema Chödrön is today's most popular American-born teacher of Buddhism. In *The Wisdom of No Escape*, *The Places that Scare You*, and other important books, she has helped us discover how difficulty and uncertainty can be opportunities for awakening. She serves as resident teacher at Gampo Abbey Monastery in Nova Scotia and is a student of Dzigar Kongtrul, Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, and the late Chögyam Trungpa. For more, visit pemachodronfoundation.org.

Tonglen: A Prayer That Rides the Breath

On the inbreath, says Judy Lief, take in what is bad, freeing others from it. On the outbreath, offer what is good.

The world today is in chaos, full of suffering, confusion, and greed. It's easy to become overwhelmed and shut down, but closing our hearts isn't helpful to anyone. We practice tonglen to touch into and strengthen our inherent capacity for compassion and courage—the inner qualities that sustain us as we meet the challenges of engaging with this suffering world.

Tonglen is like a prayer that rides the breath, similar to how Tibetan prayer flags ride the wind. It enhances our trust in our ability to be kind and, at the same time, it enhances our understanding of the selfish and negative energies that are also a part of us. Tonglen is rooted in our natural tendency to love and connect with one another.

The natural in and out breath is the starting point for tonglen. Our breathing links us with the world around us: inside out, outside in. Without willing it or even noticing it, we're always sending our own energy out into the world and taking in whatever energies are coming at us. We're not separate from one another. We're linked. Tonglen begins with this quality of connection, of linkage: with oneself, with others, with the world.

Although we're engaged in such an exchange all the time, in tonglen we're intentional as to what we send out and what we take in. In tonglen practice we send out things that bring people happiness, such as love, kindness, well wishes, confidence, strength, and support, and we take in things that cause them to suffer, such as fear, doubt, pain, confusion, and sickness. We offer to others what is good and we take in what is bad, so that others may be free of it. This is the ultimate bodhisattva activity.

There are many variations and ways to practice tonglen. Traditionally, tonglen is included as a regular part of one's daily meditation session. In that context, we engage regularly with this practice and deepen our understanding over time. In the midst of life, there are also many opportunities to apply tonglen in action. We can touch into tonglen on the spot in any situation that needs our love and compassion.

Meditation

1. TOUCH SPACIOUSNESS

Sit quietly. Relax and breathe simply and naturally. Let go of restlessness. Let go of the past and the future and of compulsive thinking and planning. Be still. Touch spaciousness. Imagine that you are like a vase. Within you, there is vast space. Around you, there is vast space. Between the two, there's a subtle boundary.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Let the inhalation dissolve within. Let the exhalation dissolve without. Begin the practice with a brief gap. Take a moment to stop and start fresh.

2. RELATE TO ENERGIES

Evoke positive energy as bright, cool, and refreshing, and send it to all beings on the exhalation. Evoke negative energy as tarry, thick, and claustrophobic. Remove it from all beings as you breathe in. Let your breathing flow.

3. GET PERSONAL

Begin with a situation that evokes real feelings for you. It could involve the person you care about the most. It could involve someone who is sick or suffering, someone you're worried about. Touch into your feeling of love for that person and your concerns about them. As you breathe out, send out love and sincere wishes for their well-being. As you breathe in, take in their pain or confusion in order to free them from such obstacles.

4. EXTEND

Think of the many others—past, present, and future—who suffer in similar ways. Extend your tonglen to these many beings.

5. DAILY LIFE

Return to the simplicity of just resting and breathing. Let the tonglen session dissolve. Then carry a tonglen attitude, a light touch of tenderness, into your life.

Judy Lief is a Buddhist teacher and the editor of many books of teachings by the late Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. She is the author of *Making Friends with Death*. Her teachings and new podcast, “Dharma Glimpses,” are available at judylief.com.

In With the Bad Air, Out With the Good

Gelek Rimpoche on the practice of tonglen, the way to awaken bodhi mind by doing exactly the opposite of what your ego wants.

“Give and Take” mounted on the breath

is the magic device

Bringing love, compassion, and the special mind.

To save all beings from this world’s great ocean,

Please bless me to awaken true bodhimind.

From “An Offering Ceremony to the Spiritual Masters” by the First Panchen Lama

As the First Panchen Lama suggests, the practice of tonglen—give and take—is a major way of subduing our self-cherishing, ego-pleasing thoughts. Ego is our biggest obstacle to developing bodhi mind. When we try to destroy ego, we are training our mind—the mind that ignores all other people, the one that thinks we are the most important person of all. Once we have been able to destroy our selfish, egoistic thoughts, we begin to act as our true selves and we have a real ability to benefit ourselves and others.

Right now, the ego blocks our capacity to help not only others but also ourselves. We have to understand that we cannot really help anyone until we have learned how to help ourselves. But the ego prevents us from helping ourselves by presenting a false notion of what it really means to help ourselves. What does our ego want? Ego wants us to be superior to everybody else; ego wants me to be the best of all. If you are a meditator, your ego would like you to be the best meditator, and if you are an artist, your ego would like you to be recognized as a creative genius. If you're a businessman, you want to be the most prosperous, wealthy and efficient, and to that end you will do whatever it takes to destroy your competition. Your ego always demands supreme superiority. In Tibetan, we call this attitude *dag zin*, holding tight to the self.

The more successful you become, the more the demands of your ego will increase. In the beginning, you simply want to succeed, but your ego will not be satisfied. When you become a little more successful, your ego wants to kill your competition. And when you become even more successful, it wants to make you the universal king. There is no telling what ego wants because our desire doesn't have any limit; therefore, its demands continually increase.

Our ego is so interesting. Just watch your mind when you say, "What do I want? What do I want to take? All the best! Whatever anyone has, I want it!" And what do you want to give? "All the

problems and the misery.” That’s ego talking. But it’s not the real you. You are a good and wonderful person. You are kind. You have a compassionate nature.

To free ourselves, we need to turn the tables on ego’s demands. So whatever ego wants, you should turn around and do the opposite. If ego tells you, “Go up,” make sure you go down. If ego tells you, “Go down,” go up. That’s how you have to treat your ego. If ego tells you, “Get all the best!” it means it is time for you to take all the worst. And if ego tells you, “Give all the miserable things,” then take all the miserable things. That is the premise of the practice called tonglen, or “give and take.”

Tonglen practice is united with the flow of the breath. The breathing system we have is to inhale and exhale air. That is basic human nature. We breathe in and out, and if we stop doing either of them, we’re gone. Tonglen uses this basic human function to develop compassion and love. As we breathe in and out, we try to develop love and compassion: compassion-oriented breathing in and love-oriented breathing out.

One important difficulty you might encounter is thinking, “It doesn’t make any difference to me that all these people are suffering. Why should I care?” That is worse than thinking, “I need to help but I can’t.”

Ego’s trick is to make us lose sight of our interdependence. That kind of ego-thought gives us a perfect justification to look out only for ourselves. But that is far from the truth. In reality we all depend on each other and we have to help each other. The

husband has to help his wife, the wife has to help the husband, the mother has to help her children, and the children are supposed to help their parents, too, whether they want to or not. You may say, “My mother and my father were supposed to nurture me. It’s okay to help them because they were supposed to help me.” Or you may say, “I don’t really like this difficulty, but it involves my mother, so I can’t look away.” It is very similar to the feelings some people have when they are divorced. A woman might say about her ex-husband, “He’s my daughter’s father”—she dislikes him, she’s angry, upset, yet he is still “my daughter’s father.” She can’t cut that part out. Even when she’s dying to cut it out and tear it into pieces, he’s still her daughter’s father.

This is reality. The connections between people are so serious, so strong and so long-lasting, that we cannot remove them. Our changing lives have made it so that we don’t recognize each other, but we do have a tremendous amount of connection. We have dealt with each other so many times in our previous lives. We put trust in each other, we consult each other, we try to gain some wisdom from each other and we try to solve personal problems for each other. We also try to help the future generations. All these things we do together, and as a result we have a tremendous amount of connection. We are karmically connected. Even though we may feel we cannot connect to “all sentient beings” right at this moment, we are still very much connected to them.



Interdependence is reality, but we human beings have taken an “I couldn’t care less” attitude. Environmentalists have been telling us about the idea of interdependence, so we have begun to understand it on that level. The environment isn’t the only connection, though. The major connection is among the people. If there are no people, the environment doesn’t mean much. What makes the difference is the interpersonal connections. Buddha has presented the idea of interpersonal connection and how important it is, how relevant it is to our lives and how much our lives depend on it. Great compassion, responsibility and caring are based on the interpersonal relationship. The most important interpersonal relationship is bodhimind—caring and committing to others. That’s not a perfect definition of bodhimind, but that’s what it boils down to.

We are connected in a way that is similar to the connections between the parts of your body. If you get a thorn in your foot, your hand will go and take it out. If your foot is suffering from the thorn and your hands say, “I don’t care. I don’t have suffering. It’s the foot that has suffering,” or if the left hand gets a thorn and the right hand says, “I don’t care. It’s you who is suffering, not me,” in the end, the foot will suffer and the hands will suffer. That is how we function. Likewise, whether it is a personal problem, group problem or international problem, we should address it, talk about it and try to solve it together. If you don’t care about other people, it is a spiritual problem. If you don’t care about them, they won’t care about you, and we’ll all suffer and the problems will continue.

Tonglen practice is based on this connectedness, but when we practice tonglen—giving and taking on the breath—are we really helping others? In the long run, the answer is “yes,” we are helping others. No, it is not an immediate help for them, but it is helping us. At this moment we are not even taking their suffering; we are taking our own future suffering. So, we are also giving our positive karma to ourselves first. We try to materialize it, so that we don’t have to suffer. Then we do the same with the people that we care about. Then with the people they care about. Then with their family, children, spouses and so forth. That’s how we extend our practice when we involve ourselves with it seriously.

The practice of tonglen: general instruction

If you are a reasonable person, you want to make those nearest and dearest to you happy. What makes them unhappy? Their mental, physical and emotional suffering. Normally that’s what our lives are all about. When we have physical pain, we say, “Ouch!” When we have mental or emotional pain, we have a long face. When we hear and see pain in those we love, we try to make them happy by removing their suffering. To make use of that urge, we do a mental exercise. The tool we use is our breath. The power of inhalation lifts their suffering. The power of exhalation gives them our joy, and the cause of that joy, our virtue.

You breathe in from the left nostril. While breathing in, you take their suffering. You take it completely, without any fear, without any hesitation, and you don't leave anything out.

Breathing out from the right nostril, you give all your happiness and the causes of your happiness, your compassion, everything. Without any attachment, without any hesitation, without any miserliness. It reaches them in the form of light, and all become happy and joyful.

The visualization that accompanies the breathing is very important. It makes a big impact on our consciousness. When practicing tonglen, it is recommended to imagine people with faces and names—actual living human beings. You may think, “That way we will only care about human beings. What about the others—my cat, my dog?” This is your cat or dog, but in this tradition you visualize them with a human face and body, simply because it is easier to deal with human beings. And it may also contribute to linking up with a certain good karma, so that the cat or dog may become a human being in its next life.

In your visualization, your friend, your companion, and all the people you care for can be the most important ones, right in front of you—face to face if you want to. They are the object of meditation. When I say, “each and every person with a face and name,” this doesn't mean that you have to keep on thinking, “Oh yeah, he's here and she's there and he's there.” Your major focus can be on one or two people, but at the same time, you think that all the space is filled up with people. I very strongly object to visualizing

nameless, faceless dots, but somehow it easily becomes that. If you have to keep on remembering everybody and go through all of their names and think of all their faces, that would be quite difficult. If we do it the simple way, we imagine that everyone is there, and when we are specifically thinking of somebody, they appear with a name and face.

At first, you may not have that much difficulty, but when you begin to think about it seriously, you may become afraid. You may have fear of taking or you may have hesitation in giving. That's the ego-controlled part of our human nature. When you begin to take the suffering of people on yourself, your mind is going to have a tremendous amount of resistance. If you don't think much about it, your attitude may be, "Whatever it may be, so be it." That's occurring on a very superficial level, where there are no problems. When you begin to think seriously about this, then you start to encounter resistance. You'll say, "Why? Why me?"

The practice of tonglen on self

If you are afraid of taking somebody else's pain, start with taking your own suffering. If it's in the morning, you take the suffering you are going to experience in the evening; or you take the suffering you are going to experience tomorrow, next week, next month, next year or next life. If we take in suffering that will come to us in the evening a little earlier, it might not become quite so big. It is much easier to take on your own suffering and problems in advance than taking on someone else's. It is good to keep training your mind in that way.

While breathing in, take your own suffering from yourself. For example, say to yourself, “I’ll take my own suffering of this evening into me now, and tomorrow’s suffering, and next week’s, next month’s, next year’s, next life’s, and the sufferings of my lives thereafter.” Take your own pain into yourself, make it come a little quicker, so you settle for a smaller problem rather than the heaviest difficulties.

Special give and take

Before we take any suffering, either our own future suffering or the suffering of the other person, the question arises, “What do I do with this now? Where am I going to put it within me?” We have to be prepared for that. We need a garbage can, some place to throw it. It so happens that we have an enemy inside: Mister Ego. That becomes our target. This method of making ego our target is called “special give and take.”

Collect your own negativities, which are the deeds of your ego. Collect your negative emotions, which are the thoughts of your ego. Then visualize your ego in the form of whatever you dislike—a big spider or a heap of darkness. Collect all of it. Don’t leave any part of your body or consciousness out. Just collect it all, somewhere at the center of your body, at the heart level.

What we are taking from the others is not only their suffering but also causes of their suffering, such as attachment, hatred and ignorance. All of these things come in through the breath. When these gather, it has an effect like lightning striking a rocky area;

or—as we see on television these days—bombs exploding; or a cyclone picking up everything in its path. In that way it hits our ego, shreds it completely and destroys it. Not even a trace is left. Nothing! We don't have to keep what we took inside us—feeling it and saving it there and suffering. Not only do we not have to do that, we shouldn't do it.

The practice of tonglen on a one-to-one basis

STEP 1. VISUALIZE AND CONNECT.

Visualize the person right in front of you, and think of their suffering; the disease they have; or the mental, physical and emotional pain they are going through. When you really see your friend suffering with unbearable pain, tears will come to you. That is true caring. It may not be great compassion, but it is a true feeling of compassion.

If you don't feel anything when seeing the person you really love the most—your current companion or whomever—then you need to change the focus and try to recollect the suffering you have gone through yourself. Think about when you experienced similar difficulties, or if that's not possible, any other difficulties: “How unhappy I was, how much pain I went through, how much anxiety I had, and how many times I woke up in the middle of the night with a heavy heart.”

Think of that, and then try to understand that this other person is going through the same kind of pain. Anyone can say, “Poor little thing!” but if we have no feelings, it isn’t very good—it is being out of touch. Being out of touch with compassion doesn’t work. We have to have the feeling. We can only understand and develop that feeling if we think about when we went through that, or something like that. If we think that way, we get a better understanding of what the other person is going through.

This particular feeling is not necessarily just for tonglen. It is important to use it within your family and apply it to all relationships: between husband and wife, between children and parents, among all members of the family. If you don’t understand the other person’s problems, you have to sit down, calm your mind, and think about when you had that pain and how you felt. If you can remember that, then your attitude toward your family members will be different. You will no longer be that short-tempered, snappy person. It will give you a better understanding of what other people’s pain is all about. Otherwise there is a danger for us of falling into saying, “Oh, the poor little things, how they are all suffering!”

Once you have that feeling, once you can really appreciate and understand what the other person is going through, you are giving rise to real caring. You would like to offer some kind of immediate solution. Right now you would like to destroy that pain. “If I can do something about it, let me do it right away, to make that pain go away.” That desire, anxiety and eagerness are what you

need. Normally, when you see your child suffering tremendously, you will anxiously ask yourself, “What can I do?” You need that type of anxiety. You have to train your mind up to that level. When you have that anxiety, you will say, “Let me take the pain. Is there any way I can take it?”

STEP 2. TAKE.

When you come to that level, you can visualize it. Take it and lift it up by your own sincerity, by your own compassion, by the power of the truth, by the blessings of the enlightened beings: “I’m here now to take all the pains of that person.” Take it in the form of an undesirable color and breathe it in. Breathe it in—whatever that pain might be, including cancer. Take in the pain itself and the cause of the pain. In your visualization literally pick it up and bring it in. Like a powerful lightning bolt, it will hit that mountain of ego, that heap of darkness you have at your heart level, and destroy it. That is the taking in.

STEP 3. GIVE.

Then you give. You give love, affection, virtue—everything—without any hesitation. You give your own positive karma, your own body. Whatever the desire or need of the person may be, you give it to them. You are giving three things: your body, your wealth and your virtue. That’s the best we have to offer, so we give that. And

whatever the need of the person might be, the giving comes in that form. The person becomes free of pain and happy, just as you wanted them to be.

The moment you have any hesitation, the moment you attach a condition, it is not good. People appreciate generosity, but when it is attached to a condition, it becomes difficult to accept it. I remember living in India, which is such a poor country. In the seventies and eighties, America gave a lot of aid but it came with strings attached. India didn't appreciate it. India kept on saying, "We'd rather have trade than aid." They even forced the U.S. aid office to close. If aid comes with strings attached, you become a puppet that has to dance on a string. Even India can say no to that. They are very proud of it, actually. And that is a good thing.

The quality of generosity involves not looking for return. There is no attachment, no hope of gaining something back, no looking for gratitude, and certainly no looking for control, influence or power. When you give, give without any hesitation, without any reservation. Just give.

To do tonglen on a one-to-one basis is very helpful. It is a tremendous opportunity, believe me. You can do this between partners. You can do this between healer and patient. You can do this between teacher and student. You can do this between caregiver and patient. For the caregiver it is a great opportunity for practice. For the patient it is an opportunity to thank the caring

people. For the therapist it is a good opportunity to make the therapy work better. For the patient it is a good way of expressing gratitude to the therapist.

The practice of tonglen expanded to all beings

From the traditional Buddhist point of view, we are expected to expand our object of focus. First, we can focus on the human level and whatever suffering we encounter there. We begin with one individual and expand our focus to two, three, four or five and multiply that. Eventually, in our Mahayana practice, the focal point becomes all beings, without leaving anyone out—all beings with the physical appearance of the people we know, with all their difficulties, with their normal egoistic characteristics.

The traditional teachings will tell you that when you are focusing on the hell realms, you take the suffering of the hell realm beings completely. You either do the eighteen hell realms one by one, working with their eighteen different characteristics, or you work with them more simply by dividing them in two, taking the hot hells and the cold hells separately. You could also take them all at once, taking the hot and cold hells all together. You do it according to whatever time you have and whatever is convenient for you. Then you move to the hungry ghost realm, then to the animal realm, the demi-god realm and the god realm. You cover all six realms, or even eighteen realms, whatever you want to do. But you always begin with the people you know and recognize.

Visualize those who are suffering in the hot-hell realm. Visualize that light rays of your body manifest there as a cold shower or a rainfall that has a tremendous cooling power. You take their suffering: the heat, the fear, the pain. You take the causes of their suffering: the karmic cause as well as the delusional cause—in particular the anger and hatred—together with the imprints. When you give your light, it goes out and reaches to the hell realms, and just by the touch of the light, it purifies the environment. This is extremely important, because most hell realm people suffer because of the environment. So purify the environment, and take their hot and cold sufferings. Bring it in and use it to destroy your ego. And then give. Empty the hell realms completely; close the hell realms altogether. All those people become free of suffering.

Similarly, you meditate on the cold realms. There, your body's light rays will manifest as powerful sunshine, something to make them warm. Not only do you separate them from the pain of being cold, but also you give your body to them and they become human beings. You can also transform your body into houses—not shabby old houses but good solid ones. Transform your body into food to satisfy them; give it as clothes for them to put on, as medicine, whatever they need. You can also visualize manifesting your body as a teacher giving them teachings. They are ready to become a buddha.

Similarly you give food to the hungry ghosts, wisdom to the animals, weapons to the jealous demi-gods and lovely flowers to the gods. Whatever their needs are, you fulfill them. For human

beings, however, you take a different approach. Human desires are limitless. You cannot make a blanket statement about what they want. So you give them whatever they want, whatever they desire. Manifest your body in that form and give it to the human beings.

Give your wealth and your virtues. You give body, wealth and virtues to your teachers and the buddhas, in the form of offerings, so they may have long life and prosperity. You give all your virtues of the past, present and future. You give your body and wealth of the present and future—you can't give those of the past, the past is gone.

Compassion in action

Training in compassion is a mental activity. But our mind should also be brought to the level where every action we take is influenced by compassion. That means engaging ourselves in compassion in action. The Judeo-Christian tradition has tremendous examples of compassion in action. In the West, people have built hospitals and schools in peacetime and have also relieved the suffering of people in war. There are groups who look after refugees and address human rights issues. There is a tremendous amount of work being done on social and environmental issues. If this is done with kindness, it is an example of compassion in action. If we get personally involved in such activities, it is compassion in action. If we don't, it is only compassion at the meditative level. That may not be sufficient.

If we only practice on the mind level, we run a great risk of our compassion being just talk. As we know, talk is cheap. To develop true compassion, we have to put our money where our mouth is. That is why we need to combine the mind training practice of tonglen with compassionate action. We are fortunate to live in a society that provides us with many opportunities to put our compassion into practice. That is what will really make a difference in freeing ourselves from the tyranny of our ego-cherishing thoughts. That is what will help us to gain true control over our lives so that we can be of real benefit to ourselves and others. That is how we awaken true bodhimind.

Gelek Rinpoche (1939-2017) was the founder of Jewel Heart, a Tibetan Buddhist Center located in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and the author the bestselling *Good Life, Good Death*.

Tonglen: A Lesson in Giving and Taking

Tonglen is a meditation practice through which we can connect with suffering and change our relationship with others. In the following piece, Emily Strasser visits with a Tibetan monk in India who's putting tonglen into practice to help the children in his community.

Ten years ago, a young Tibetan monk, Jamyang, sat outside his room in Dharamsala reading about the tonglen practice. The day was sunny, and above him the clouds played in the mountain peaks. From the Tibetan words tong, “to give,” and len, “to take,” tonglen describes a meditation in which the practitioner visualizes breathing in the suffering of the world in the form of thick black smoke, and breathing out his own joy and comfort, as clear and luminous air.

When Jamyang looked up from his reading, he noticed three Indian boys in ragged clothes picking food out of a rotting garbage pile. The next day, Jamyang cooked a large lunch and shared his food with the boys. Over simple daily meals of rice and dal, Jamyang and the boys formed an unlikely friendship.

They took Jamyang down to the Charan slum in Lower Dharamsala, where their families lived in temporary shelters made of bamboo poles covered in plastic sheeting. Jamyang was shocked

to see that children without even garbage to eat were dying of malnutrition and diarrhea. The slum had no sanitary facilities. Alcohol abuse, disease, and domestic violence were rife.

Himachal Pradesh, a fertile mountainous state with a growing economy, is home to more than 10,000 internally displaced people, driven from their homes in Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and Uttar Pradesh by environmental degradation and economic changes that have made their previous livelihoods unsustainable. They come to Dharamsala, with its thriving Tibetan exile community and steady stream of tourists, to maintain the winding mountain roads, haul cement for new guesthouses, fix the hiking boots of foreign trekkers, and beg. Many families move seasonally to follow the festival and tourist seasons.

Jamyang immediately began collecting food, medicine, and clothing. He took people to the hospital. Yet he soon realized that addressing the material needs of the people was not sustainable. The Tong-Len Charitable Trust was registered in India in 2005 with the goal of supporting internally displaced people in the region by combating the root causes of poverty, focusing primarily on education for the children.

The local government school is free, but child beggars provide an essential source of income for many families. Children enrolled in school attended only sporadically because their families moved so frequently. In 2005, Tong-Len set up a hostel near the slum to house school-aged children, provide meals, supervision, and academic support. That first year, there were just ten kids. In

November 2012, a new hostel building was inaugurated by the Dalai Lama, and Tong-Len now houses about 90 children between the ages of seven and sixteen, divided equally between boys and girls. Jamyang hopes that after the children graduate and find jobs, they will return to help their communities. The four oldest students are in 10th class and will graduate in 2-3 years; they are some of the top students in the state.

The tonglen meditation scares me—I do not want to take the black smoke into my body; I am afraid to give away my own happiness. Stories like Jamyang’s also scare me—when we allow ourselves to really see people and feel true compassion, we may never be able to turn away again.

How much can we afford to let in? Jamyang did not ask himself that question when he shared his lunch with the slum kids that first afternoon. His hair has begun to gray at 37, but his smooth face creases only at the eyes when he smiles. We are sitting in his bare concrete office; the only decorations are a painting of Mother Theresa and a photograph of the Dalai Lama hung above his desk, both draped in kataks, white Tibetan blessing scarves.

I tell Jamyang about my fear of the tonglen meditation. I ask him how he does not become overwhelmed by the endless need he sees around him, by the limits of his ability to relieve that suffering. As I am speaking, Jamyang nods, and punctuates my words with “yeah, yeah, yeah,” as if he has heard all this before.

“The important thing is we have the desire to help all,” he tells me. “We cannot do as we are thinking, but we need to act as much as we can.” But Jamyang does not really want to talk about this—he admits that while he occasionally attends prayers in the Dalai Lama’s temple, he does not meditate. He would rather tell me about his hopes to expand health and educational programs to the more than three-dozen other displaced communities in the region. He has moved from his quiet quarters in Upper Dharamsala to a room near the hostel in Lower Dharamsala. For Jamyang, his work is his prayer and meditation, as constant for him as a breath.

When I visit the girls’ hostel, I am greeted by high, clipped voices, “Good morning Madam.” Small hands lead me to a chair. The girls wear worn but clean clothes, and their hair is oiled and tightly braided. They stand up one-by-one to tell me their names, ages, and “aims”—they want to be doctors, scientists, and engineers. I can’t keep the smile off my face as they show me around their hostel, tugging at my elbows, proudly pointing out their bright clean bunk beds.

The staff of Tong-Len, a mixture of Indians and Tibetans, can tell you how many children, families, and communities they serve. Every year, they must make difficult decisions about which children the hostel can take. What they cannot count are the infinite needs of all those they are unable to help. Neither can they count the immeasurable effect of their compassion. “My aim is astronaut,” says twelve-year-old Poonam, the quietest girl in the room.

When I leave the hostel, gently untangling myself from the small fingers and high voices of the children who come from nothing but aim high, I feel lighter.

*To donate or learn how to volunteer to the Tong-Len hostel, visit its website:
<https://tong-lencharitabletrust.org/>*

Emily Strasser has spent time living and studying Buddhism in Dharamsala, India. A writer and traveler, she is rooted for the moment in New York City, where she writes and edits The Pushcart Journal and serves on the editorial board for the PEN America Journal.

Helping Others – and Yourself – through Tonglen Meditation

Make your vow to help others heal with this meditation teaching from Pema Chödrön.

The first stage in the practice of tonglen, or taking and sending, is a pause, a moment of stillness and space, a brief gap. If you need an image for this, you can reflect on any experience of wide-open space, such as gazing out at the ocean or looking up into a cloudless sky.

The second stage is a visualization, working with texture. As you inhale, breathe in hot, heavy, thick energy—a feeling of claustrophobia. breathe it in completely, through all the pores of your body. Then, as you exhale, breathe out a sense of freshness, of cool, light, bright energy. radiate it outward 360 degrees. Continue for a few minutes, or until the imagery is in sync with the in and out breaths.

The third stage involves breathing in a specific painful situation, opening to it as fully as possible, then breathing out spaciousness and relief. Traditionally we begin tonglen for a person or animal we wish to help, but we can also begin with our personal experience in the moment—a feeling of hopelessness or anger, for example—and use that as a stepping-stone for connecting us with the painful feelings of others.

In the fourth stage, we extend tonglén further. If we're doing it for a friend with AIDS, we extend it to all of those with AIDS. If we're doing it for our alcoholic sister, we extend it to all alcoholics, to all of those suffering from addiction. If we're already doing tonglén for all of those experiencing the same pain we are, we can extend it to all of those, all over the world, who are suffering in any way, mentally or physically. And we can extend it still further to include all of us caught up in self-absorption, all of us tormented by our fixated minds and our inability to let go of hope and fear.

As a general guideline, we start tonglén practice with a situation that is immediate and real, not something vague or impersonal. Then we extend it to include more and more beings who are suffering in a similar way, as well as all of us suffering from ego clinging, all of us suffering from resistance to uncertainty and impermanence.

If we ourselves have had even a glimmer of what egolessness feels like, of what awakening feels like, of what freedom feels like, then we want that for others too. When we see that they're hooked, instead of being critical and judgmental, we can empathize with what they're going through—we've been there and know exactly how they feel. Our wish for other people is the same as our wish for ourselves: to appreciate ourselves, to recognize when we're caught and disentangle ourselves from those feelings,

to stop reinforcing the dysfunctional patterns that prolong our suffering, to reach out to others, to experience the goodness of being human.

Whether we do tonglén as a formal practice or on the spot, does it take time to get used to? Yes, it does. Does it take getting accustomed to the rawness of pain? Does it take patience and gentleness? Yes, it does. There's no need to get discouraged when the practice seems too hard.

Allow yourself to ease into it slowly and at your own pace, working first with situations that are easy for you right now. I always remember what my teacher used to say when I was losing my confidence and wanted to give up. He'd sit up tall and smile broadly and proclaim, "You can do it!" Somehow his confidence was contagious, and when I heard those words, I knew I could.

I once read a poem about practicing tonglén in a time of war. The imagery was of breathing in bombs falling, violence, despair, losing your legs and coming home with your face burned and disfigured, and then sending out the beauty of the earth and sky, the goodness of people, safety and peace. In the same spirit, we can breathe in hatred and jealousy, envy and addiction—all the sorrow of the human drama—using our personal experience of that pain and extending tonglén to all others caught in the same way. Then we can breathe out flexibility, lightheartedness, nonaggression, strength—whatever we feel will bring comfort and upliftedness and relief. The pain of the world pierces us to the heart, but we never forget the goodness of being alive.

The time has come for us to try the opposite approach: to take in the bad and give out the good. Compassion is not a matter of pity or the strong helping the weak; it's a relationship between equals, one of mutual support. Practicing tonglén, we come to realize that other people's welfare is just as important as our own. In helping them, we help ourselves. In helping ourselves, we help the world.

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With her powerful teachings, bestselling books, and retreats attended by thousands, Pema Chödrön is today's most popular American-born teacher of Buddhism. In *The Wisdom of No Escape*, *The Places that Scare You*, and other important books, she has helped us discover how difficulty and uncertainty can be opportunities for awakening. She serves as resident teacher at Gampo Abbey Monastery in Nova Scotia and is a student of Dzigar Kongtrul, Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, and the late Chögyam Trungpa. For more, visit pemachodronfoundation.org.

Tonglen In 4 Steps

“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 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 Tonglén 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.

Ethan Nichtern is a Buddhist teacher and the author of *The Road Home: A Contemporary Exploration of the Buddhist Path*, *One City: A Declaration of Interdependence*, and the novella/poetry collection, *Your Emoticons Won't Save You*.

The No-Escape Button

Rather than try to escape from painful feelings, Alixa Doom started practicing tonglen at her job at a psychiatric hospital, breathing in the pain and fear she witnessed there.

A panic button at eye level, beneath the shelf bordering my desk, provides me with a sense of security. The touch of a finger and I can call forth a flotilla of staff to assist if a patient's behavior places others or myself at risk.

Panic buttons are located in offices throughout Minnesota Security Hospital. Whenever a panic is signaled the social workers, security counselors, teachers, doctors and psychologists thunder, shoulder to shoulder, through the hallways to the “panicked” unit. There they provide a show of support while other trained staff talk down, or take down the aggressive client. Most often this is all that is needed.

Although I have never had to use my panic button, I have fantasized a similar system to touch off an instant response to the fear I felt escalating after the sudden disruption of my relationship. Ultimately, however, I was left to deal with my panic in other ways. I began to practice tonglen. It's a meditation practice I learned reading Pema Chödrön's book, *The Wisdom of No Escape*.

In tonglen you are willing to feel your pain and that of others as you breathe in. On the out breath you share pleasure and joy of life with them. Willing to try anything that might shift my focus on myself, I followed Pema's instructions. First you flash a sense of openness and spaciousness. Then you imagine breathing

a heavy black in and white light out. After that you feel your own pain, breathe it in, then ventilate it on the out-breath. Sense the spaciousness. After working with this for a while you do it for all feeling beings; breathe in their pain so they no longer have to experience it, and then breathe it out, sharing the sense of opening and joy.

By this practice of tonglen, says Pema, you “awaken your heart” and uncover the most tender part of yourself. “You are cultivating a fearless heart, a heart that doesn’t close down in any circumstance. It is always totally open, so that you could be touched by anything.” I recognized the wisdom of Pema’s words, and the “deadliness” of my old pattern of attempting to escape painful feelings.

That fall, during my work breaks, I took to the hallways with tonglen. Wearing my Reeboks I lapped the length of the red brick passages. Breathing the darkness of fear deeper in to my chest, I held it, and then let it out as I envisioned streams of light pouring out from every cell of my body. The simple steps of my meditation began to bring me calmness. The line of patients moving toward me might have been monks, heads bowed with prayer instead of confinement.

Practicing tonglen I breathed in the pain and the fear I’ve witnessed sometimes here. That of the young mother who fears she will not return to her small son, the middle-aged man who cannot be released for his mother’s funeral, the husband who knows his obsessive behavior has destroyed his marriage forever. I breathed

in the fear of all those who know they will not go home. Then I let it go, imagining its density become as weightless as the air my breath pushed into.

Occasionally windows of a courtyard alleviate the passages. Looking through the glass I have the sensation of looking into an aquarium. Instead of fish, however, I see blooming bushes, orange of lilies, purple of iris and and the hot pink of roses. I always slow in this slab of light, cast like grace across the dim hallway by the sun of the inner sanctum.

Alix a Doom also writes poetry, and her chapbook, Cedar Crossings, was awarded the Blue Light Poetry Prize and published in the spring of 2010. She has completed two book manuscripts, one of poems and one a memoir. After retirement from her work at the hospital, she moved from her home of many years in the Minnesota River Valley to South Minneapolis, where she is a member of Common Ground Meditation Center.

Reversing Ego's Logic

Pema Chödrön on the brilliance of the seemingly counterintuitive Buddhist practices of tonglen and mind-training with lojong slogans.

The slogan “Begin the sequence of taking and sending with yourself” is getting at the point that compassion starts with making friends with ourselves, and particularly with our poisons—the messy areas. As we practice tonglen—taking and sending—and contemplate the lojong (mind training), gradually it begins to dawn on us how totally interconnected we all are. Now people know that what we do to the rivers in South America affects the whole world, and what we do to the air in Alaska affects the whole world. Everything is interrelated—including ourselves, so this is very important, this making friends with ourselves. It’s the key to a more sane compassionate planet.

That’s one of the points about this tonglen practice of exchanging oneself for other; that what you do for yourself—any gesture of kindness, any gesture of gentleness, any gesture of honesty and clear seeing toward yourself— will affect how you experience your world. What you do for yourself, you’re doing for others and what you do for others, you’re doing for yourself. It becomes increasingly dubious what is out there and what is in here.

If you have rage and strike out, rather than surrendering to yourself and allowing yourself to see what’s under all that rage—especially if you feel very justified in striking out—it’s really you



who suffers. The other people and the environment suffer also, but you suffer more because you're being eaten up inside with hatred, causing you to hate yourself more and more.

We strike out because, ironically, we think it will bring us some relief. We equate it with happiness. Actually there usually is some relief, for the moment. When you have an addiction and you get to fulfill that addiction, there is a moment in which you feel some relief. Then the nightmare gets worse. So it is with aggression. When you get to tell someone off, you might feel pretty good for a while, but somehow the sense of righteous indignation and hatred grows, and it hurts you.

On the other hand, if we begin to surrender to ourselves, begin to drop the storyline, and experience what all this messy stuff behind the storyline feels like, we begin to find bodhicitta, the tenderness that's under all that harshness. By being kind to ourselves, we become kind to others. By being kind to others—if it's done properly with proper understanding—we benefit as well. So again, the first point is that we are completely interrelated. What you do to others, you do to yourself. What you do to yourself, you do to others.

Start Where You Are

The second point is: Start where you are. This is really important. Tonglen practice and actually all meditation practice is not about later, when you get it all together and you're this person you really respect. You may be the most violent person in the world—that's a fine place to start. That's a very rich place to start—juicy, smelly. You might be the most depressed person in the world, the most addicted person in the world, the most jealous person in the world. You might think that there is no one on the planet who hates themselves as much as you do. All of that is a good place to start. Just where you are—that's the place to start. That's the richness; where we are and what we are is actually our wealth.

As we begin to practice shamatha meditation, following our breath and labeling our thoughts, we can gradually begin to realize how profound it is just to let those thoughts go, not rejecting them, not trying to repress them, but just simply acknowledging them as violent thoughts, thoughts of hatred, thoughts of wanting, thoughts of poverty, thoughts of loathing, whatever they might be. We can see it all as thinking and can let the thought go and begin to feel what's left. We can begin to feel the energy of our heart, our body, our neck, our head, our stomach—that basic feeling that's underneath all of the storylines.

If we can relate directly with that, then all of the rest is our wealth. It isn't that lead gets transformed into gold, but that the poison already is the medicine. You don't actually have to transform anything. Just simply letting go of the storyline is what it

takes, which is not that easy. That light touch of acknowledging what we're thinking and letting it go, that's the key to connecting with this wealth that we have. So with all the messy stuff, no matter how messy it is, just start where you are, not tomorrow, not later, not yesterday when you were feeling better, but now. Start now, just as you are.

Demons Took Over The Joint

Milarepa is one of the lineage holders of the Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. Milarepa is one of the heroes, one of the brave ones, a very crazy, unusual fellow. There's a story about the main turning point in his life. He was very much a loner and lived in caves by himself and meditated wholeheartedly for years and years and years. He was extremely stubborn and determined. If he couldn't find anything to eat for a couple of years, he just ate nettles and turned green, but he would never stop practicing.

One evening Milarepa returned to his cave after gathering firewood. He went back to his cave only to find out it was filled with demons. They were cooking his food, reading his books, sleeping in his bed. Basically, they had taken over the joint. He knew about nonduality of self and other, but he still didn't know quite how to get these guys out of his cave.

Even though he had the sense that they were just a projection of his own mind, and that they were all the unwanted parts of himself, he didn't know how to get rid of them.

So first he taught them the Dharma. He sat on this seat that was higher than they were and talked about compassion and shunyata and how poison is medicine. Nothing happened. The demons were still there. Then he lost his patience and got angry and ran at them. They just laughed at him. Finally he gave up and just sat down on the floor, saying, “I’m not going away and it looks like you’re not either, so let’s just live here together.” At that point, all of them left except one. Milarepa said, “Oh, this one is particularly vicious.” We all know that one. Sometimes, we have lots of them like that. Sometimes we feel that’s all we’ve got. He didn’t know what to do, so he surrendered himself even further. He walked over and just put himself right into the mouth of the demon and said, “Just eat me up if you want to.” Then that demon left too. The moral of the story is, when the resistance is gone, so are the demons.

That’s the fundamental underlying logic of tonglen practice and also of lojong altogether. When the resistance is gone, so are the demons. It’s like a koan that we can work with by learning how to be more gentle, how to relax, and how to surrender to the situations and people in our lives.

Having said all of that, now I’ll talk about tonglen. I’ve noticed that people generally eat up the teachings, but when it comes to having to do tonglen, they say, “Oh, it sounded good, but I didn’t realize you actually meant it.” In its essence, this practice of tonglen is that when anything is painful or undesirable, you breathe it in. That’s another way of saying you don’t resist it. You surrender

to yourself, you acknowledge who you are, you honor yourself. As unwanted feelings and emotions arise, you actually breathe them in and connect with what all humans feel.

We all know what it is to feel pain in its many guises. This breathing in is done for yourself, in the sense that it's a very personal and real experience, but simultaneously there's no doubt that you're at the same time developing your kinship with all beings. If you can know it in yourself, you can know it in everyone. If you're in a jealous rage and it occurs to you to actually breathe it in, rather than blame it on someone else, if you get in touch with the arrow in your heart, it's quite accessible to you at that very second of time that there are probably seven hundred million people all over the world feeling exactly what you're feeling. This practice cuts through culture, economic status, intelligence, race, religion. People everywhere feel that kind of pain—jealousy, anger, being let out, being lonely. Everybody feels that exactly the way you feel it.

The storylines somewhat vary. Someone is speaking to themselves in Tibetan, someone else is speaking to themselves in French, in English, in Italian or in Chinese or Japanese, and so on. But the underlying feeling is the same for us all.

By the same token, if you feel some sense of delight—if you connect with what for you is inspiring, opening, relieving, relaxing—you breathe it out, you give it away, you send it out to everyone else. Again, it's very personal. It's your feeling of delight, your feeling of connecting with a bigger perspective, your feeling of

relief or relaxation. If you're willing to drop the storyline, you feel exactly what all other human beings feel. It's shared by all of us. In this way if we do the practice personally and genuinely, it awakens our sense of kinship with all beings.

Reversing Ego's Logic

The other thing that's very important is absolute bodhicitta. In order to do tonglen, we've first established the ground of absolute bodhicitta because it's important that when you breathe in and connect with the vividness and reality of pain, there's also some sense of a lot of space. There's that vast, tender, empty heart of bodhicitta, your awakened heart. Right in the pain there's a lot of room, a lot of openness. You begin to touch in on that when you relate directly to the messy stuff. It's said that the reason space begins to open up when you're willing to relate directly with the messy stuff, is that it's completely undoing or turning around the way ego holds itself together.

We shield our heart with an armor woven out of very old habits of pushing away pain and grasping at pleasure. We push away what's unwanted and grasp what's wanted. When you begin to breathe in the pain instead of pushing it away, you begin to open your heart to what's unwanted. When we relate directly in this way to the unwanted areas of our lives, the small, dark room of ego begins to be ventilated.

In the same way, when we open up our clenched hearts and let the good things go—radiate them out and share them with others—that's also completely reversing the logic of ego, which is to say, reversing the logic of suffering. So lojong logic is the logic that transcends mess and unmessy, transcends pain and pleasure. Lojong logic begins to open up the space and it begins to ventilate this whole cocoon that we find ourselves in. Whether you are breathing in or breathing out, you are opening the heart, which is awakening bodhicitta.

From *Be Grateful to Everyone: An In-Depth Guide to the Practice of Lojong* by Pema Chödrön. Reprinted by arrangement with Shambhala Publications, Inc. Boulder, CO.

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Kindness to Ourselves and Others

Suffering is more than the first noble truth of Buddhism. To see our own and others' suffering is the first step on the path, the birthplace of compassion. Judy Lief offers guidance on the journey.

When the Buddha was a young child, he led a sheltered life, brought up in a wealthy family. His father was a regional king, and as such, officiated at ceremonies and state occasions. One of these annual celebrations was the planting festival, which took place when the farmers were about to sow the year's crops. It was a big event, with booths and games and entertainment, and the local farmers and villagers would come from all around to celebrate. The highlight of the ceremony was the ritual plowing of the first furrow. Only after this official opening of the planting season and the blessing of the crops would local farmers begin to sow their fields.

At one of these planting ceremonies, when the Buddha was just a young boy, he was happily playing with his friends until he saw the plow go into the earth. As the plow cut through the soil and made a furrow, he became upset. The young Buddha was touched by how much life was disrupted and destroyed in the simple act of planting food. He saw the little bugs scurrying away from the plow and the worms cut in two. He saw lots of confused

little grubs and other beings that were down below abruptly thrust to the surface, and beings that used to be on the surface buried down below. As their world was flipped upside down they seemed to be totally disoriented and unhappy. So many beings were suffering.

The Buddha was so struck by this experience that he left the festivities and sat by himself under a tree to think about what he had seen. It appeared to him that just to survive on the earth, we must inevitably cause other beings to suffer. No matter how kind we try to be, we cannot avoid it. And seeing the suffering of others, we experience suffering ourselves. We could stop eating meat, we could be vegetarians, we could wear screens over our faces like the Jains, but nonetheless we can't go through a day without causing someone harm. Even the seemingly innocent act of growing food inevitably causes some beings to suffer and die.

That realization, which took place when the Buddha was just a boy, was like a seed that later ripened and inspired the Buddha to begin his personal search to understand the nature of suffering, why there is so much suffering in the world, and whether anything can be done about it. The awareness of suffering had touched his heart and awakened his kindness.

When we open ourselves to others, we are also opening ourselves to pain. As in this story of the Buddha, when we are aware of the suffering of other beings, as well as of our own suffering, kindness arises as a natural response. But we have a tendency to shield ourselves from pain and cover over that awareness. We

reject those parts of our own experience that are painful and we also avoid facing the pain we see all around us. By distancing ourselves from pain, we distance ourselves from one another. We lose the ground of connection that makes kindness possible.

The only way to maintain that connection is to extend our awareness to include all of our experience, not just the parts that we find comfortable. Meditation practice is a good way to begin because it is a process of becoming aware of whatever comes up in our mind, both good and bad, painful and pleasurable. We are learning to be open to who we are, and whatever we are experiencing. So meditation practice is not just a mental exercise; it is a way of making friends with ourselves at a very basic level. Step by step we are learning more about ourselves and accepting and integrating those parts of ourselves we had rejected.

As we learn to accept ourselves, we are at the same time learning to accept other people. It may seem that there are always other people around and we have no choice but to accept them, unless we throw everyone out or become a hermit, but just putting up with people is not the same as accepting them. Acceptance is the tender and gentle process of opening our hearts to others, to ourselves, and to our common ground of suffering. Kindness begins at this immediate, personal level of experience.

By cultivating an attitude of acceptance and fundamental friendliness, we can lessen not only our own fear and tension, but also that of the people around us. We can actually shift the atmosphere in the direction of relaxation and kindness, and in that way



be a force for healing. To the extent that we are relaxed and open ourselves, the people around us begin to pick up on it. It is like putting a drop of water on a blotter—one little drop just spreads and spreads.

Exercise: Accepting One Another

This exercise takes two people. To begin, sit quietly together, either next to one another or facing one another. Take some time to settle your mind, placing your attention lightly on the breath. Do not rush, but allow enough time to settle and to be at ease simply sitting together in proximity.

The next step is to consciously include your partner in your practice. As you breathe out, extend your attention out to her and as you breathe in consciously include her in your awareness. Be as straightforward here as possible. You are not analyzing your partner's state of mind or trying to figure her out, but simply being aware of her presence.

Finally, pay attention to the space between you and your partner and your connection to one another. Into that mutual space, as you breathe out, project a quality of acceptance and simple friendship to your partner. On the inbreath, take in and receive

the acceptance and friendship that your partner is extending to you. Feel the energy of acceptance and friendship circulate between the two of you.

To conclude, spend a few minutes simply sitting together quietly.

When we sit quietly like this with another person, we gradually become more aware of that person's presence. We begin to accept and appreciate her or him. Those two qualities, awareness and acceptance, are the ground of kindness. But we keep getting absorbed with ourselves, and losing our awareness of others. When we are caught up in our own concerns, our appreciation and awareness vanish. They completely disappear—poof!

We might prefer to ignore our tendency to focus on our own concerns and ignore the concerns of others. However, if we want to cultivate kindness, we first need to understand our own selfishness. That is where we begin. We need to stop and take a good look at this fixation with ourselves.

Most of the time, we are so used to being selfish that we hardly notice it. Our self-interest is like a background noise we no longer hear. It is a constant buzzing that we cannot seem to shut off. As we go about our business we are always saying, "What's in it for me, what's in it for me?" That undertone is there whether we are robbing banks or working in intensive care. Because of it, our actions always have a twist.

With children, selfishness is more on the surface. If you ask a child to cut two pieces of cake, one for her and one for her sister, it is likely that her piece will be a little bigger—or if not bigger, it will have the icing flower on it. Clever mothers have one child cut the cake and the other one choose which of the two pieces she wants. In that way you get surgically exact cake cutting.

By the time we are grown-ups we have been told about sharing and we know better than to let our selfishness display itself so blatantly. This does not mean it is gone, however, only that we are more sneaky. We may just put one little extra particularly yummy looking mushroom in our rice, or we might graduate to a more advanced form of selfishness and give away the best mushroom in order to bask in how virtuous we are.

Our fixation on ourselves may not be so crude; it could be as subtle as the unquestioned assumption that we are the center and all else is the fringe. Our approach is that although other people matter, we happen to matter just a little bit more. If you look at a room full of people, chances are that each one has her little circle around her, of which she is the center and everyone else is the fringe. So everybody is looking out and checking back, looking out and checking back, each from her own little world. It is like a game I used to play with each of my daughters in which I would say, “I’m ‘me’ and you’re ‘you.’” And she would respond, “No, I’m ‘me’ and you’re ‘you.’” Of course this game could go on and on forever, because no one would budge from their position as the center of things.

When we are in the greatest pain, we have the hardest time stretching beyond our own concerns. There is a famous story in which the Buddha encounters a grieving woman carrying the body of her only child. This woman was completely stricken by grief. She had lost everything—her parents, her husband, all her family, and now she had lost her only son. She would not let her fellow villagers take him or bury him; she refused to even acknowledge that he was dead.

When her friends heard that the Buddha would be passing through their area, they suggested that she go and see him and ask him to cure her son. In desperation she traveled to the Buddha and asked for his help. The Buddha told the grieving mother that he could indeed help her, but only if she brought him a sesame seed from the home of a family that had not experienced death.

In great relief, the woman set out to find that seed. But as she went from house to house, she did not find a single one that did not have a tale of loss. In her search for the sesame seed, she was gradually drawn out of preoccupation with her own pain as she realized the level of suffering all around her. And when she went back to the Buddha, she was ready to bury her child.

The contemplative practice called tonglen in Tibetan, or “sending and taking” in English, works directly with this powerful tendency to focus on ourselves. The practice of tonglen exposes the depth of our self-absorption and begins to undermine it. It is

a practice specifically designed to remove that obstacle and the many other obstacles that stand in the way of our natural impulse towards kindness.

The practice of tonglen is sometimes described as a practice of “exchanging self and other.” This is because the goal of tonglen is to flip that pattern of self-absorption around completely, to the point where instead of putting ourselves first, we put others first. So if I were continuing that game with my daughter, it would go differently: “I’m ‘you’ and you’re ‘me.’” No, I’m ‘you’ and you’re ‘me.’” Tonglen practice goes from the starting point of putting ourselves first, through the middle ground of viewing ourselves and others equally, to the fruition of putting others before ourselves.

If our view is to focus on ourselves, then our actions will tend to feed that view by grabbing on to whatever builds us up and getting rid of whatever threatens us. Our habitual activity is to protect ourselves by constantly picking and choosing, accepting and rejecting—but in tonglen practice once again we reverse our usual approach. Instead of taking in what we desire and rejecting what we do not, we take in what we have rejected and send out what we desire—basically the opposite of “normal.” Tonglen practice completely reverses our usual way of going about things.

Why in heavens would anyone want to do tonglen? For one thing, our usual way of going about things is not all that satisfying. In tonglen, as we become more aware of the extent of our self-absorption, we realize how limited a view that is. Also, self-absorbed as we may be, we cannot help but be affected by the degree of

pain and suffering in the world and want to do something about it. All around us we see people suffering and, on top of that, creating more suffering for themselves daily. But so are we! In fact, we are they—that's the whole point. The confusion we see—that's our confusion. When we see all those people suffering—that's our suffering. We cannot separate ourselves out from others; it is a totally interconnected web.

In tonglen practice, we are cultivating the same tenderness of heart that started the Buddha himself on his journey to awakening. If we are losing heart, tonglen is a way of reconnecting with it. Tonglen has nothing to do with being a goody-goody, or covering up our selfishness with a patina of phony niceness. The point is not to berate ourselves or force ourselves to be kinder. If we think we are not kind enough, it may not be that we are less kind than other people but that we are more honest. So tonglen begins with honesty and acceptance and goes on from there.

In the same way that it is possible to cultivate mindfulness and awareness through meditation practice, we can cultivate kindness through the practice of tonglen. Through tonglen practice we learn to work straightforwardly with the difficulties we encounter and extend ourselves more wholeheartedly to others. Tonglen is training in how to take on suffering and give out love. It is a natural complement to mindfulness practice, a natural extension of the acceptance and self-knowledge that comes as a result of sitting meditation.

Tonglen Practice

Each time you practice tonglen, begin with basic mindfulness practice. It is important to take some time to let your mind settle. Having done so, you can go on to the practice of tonglen itself, which has four steps.

The first step is very brief. You could think of it as “clearing the decks.” You simply allow a little pause, or gap, before you begin. Although this first step is very brief and simple, it is still important. It is like cracking the window to let in a little fresh air.

In the second step you touch in with the visceral world of feelings and emotions. Each time you breathe in, you breathe in heavy, dark, hot, sticky, claustrophobic energy; and each time you breathe out, you breathe out light, refreshing, clear, cool energy. With each breath the practice shifts direction, so there is an ongoing rhythm back and forth. You are taking the habit of grasping and rejecting and you are reversing it.

The third and fourth steps take that same approach and apply it to specific topics. Start as close to home as possible, with something that actually affects you personally. You should work with a topic that arouses real feelings, something that actually touches you or feels a little raw. It does not need to be anything monumental; it could be quite ordinary. For instance, maybe someone screamed at you when you were driving to work. You could breathe in the aggression they threw at you and you could breathe out to that person a wish to free them from the pain of that anger. If you yourself have just come down with a sickness, you could breathe in

that sickness, and breathe out your feeling of health and well-being. The point is to start with something that has some reality or juice in your life.

Once you are underway, it is good to let the practice develop on its own and see where it takes you. In this case, no matter what comes up in your mind, you breathe in what you do not like and you breathe out what you do, or you breathe in what is not so good and breathe out being free of that. For instance, after you breathe in that driver's aggression and breathe out your soothing of that anger, what might come up next is your own anger at being so abused first thing in the morning when you had started out in a pretty good mood. You could breath that anger in and breathe out the ability not to take such attacks so personally. In that way your thoughts follow along naturally, revealing more and more subtle layers of grasping and rejecting.

In the fourth step you expand the practice beyond your own immediate feelings and concerns of the moment. For instance, if you are worried about your friend, you expand that concern to include all the other people now and in the past who have had similar worries. You include everybody who has suffered the pain of seeing someone they are close to in danger or trouble. You breathe in all those worries and breathe out to all those countless beings your wish that they be freed from such pain.

Tonglen practice is a radical departure from our usual way of going about things. It may seem threatening, and even crazy; but it strikes at a very core point—how we barricade ourselves from

pain and lose our connection with one another. The irony is that the barricades we create do not help all that much; they just make things worse. We end up more fearful, less willing to extend ourselves, and stunted in our ability to express any true kindness. Tonglen pokes holes in those barricades that we create.

Tonglen is always about connection: making a genuine connection with ourselves and others. It is a practice that draws us out beyond our own concerns to an appreciation that no matter what we happen to be going through, others too have gone through experiences just as intense. In tonglen we are continually expanding our perspective beyond our small self-preoccupied world. The less we restrict our world, the more of it we can take in—and at the same time, we find that we also have much more to give.

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Judy Lief is a Buddhist teacher and the editor of many books of teachings by the late Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. She is the author of *Making Friends with Death*. Her teachings and new podcast, “Dharma Glimpses,” are available at judylief.com.