

Guided Meditation: Tonglen: Awakening the Heart of Compassion

The Tibetan practice of tonglen trains us to let in suffering and offer out compassion (karuna). On this page I introduced a version of this practice that focused on contacting our own fear and arousing self-compassion. The following trains us to imagine and feel the reality of others. As we include the suffering of others in our heart, we naturally respond with tenderness and care.

Sit in a way that allows you to be relaxed and alert. Let go of any habitual tension and allow your body and mind to settle.

The traditional practice of tonglen begins by taking a moment to sense the stillness or openness that is already here. This is considered a flash of remembrance, a reconnecting with our awakened heart and mind.

Now bring your attention to the natural rhythm and quality of your breath. As the breath flows in, allow your cells to receive this life energy. With each in-breath, open with total receptivity, like a balloon gently expanding with air. Be aware of the experience of no resistance, of allowing yourself to be touched by the sensations of the breath.

With the out-breath, notice the sensations of letting go and releasing into the space that surrounds you. Imagine your total body and consciousness flowing outward with the breath and mingling with the vastness of space. Breathe out into relaxation, ease, and spaciousness.

Continue meditating on the essence of receiving, being touched with the in-breath, and letting go into openness with the out-breath.

Now invite into your awareness someone you know personally who is suffering, someone you want to help. Imagine yourself in this person's circumstances, experiencing this person's fear or hurt or loss. What is it like to look at the world through these eyes? Live inside this particular body? Feel with this heart? What is the most vulnerable, painful part of this person's experience? What does he or she most need?

Now breathing in, invite all this pain into your heart, allowing yourself to feel it fully. Inhale, taking the pain into yourself, so that the other person will have relief. And as you breathe out, respond to his or her needs by sending out relaxation, space, love, or whatever will bring ease and happiness.

Sometimes as you inhale, you will meet your own resistance to pain. If this happens, shift the focus and breathe for yourself and countless others just like you who are feeling this same stuckness, anger, revulsion, or fear. Then as you breathe out, offer whatever helps you and others like you find space and relief.

As your resistance softens, return to breathing for the person you intend to help. As you inhale and let the person's pain touch you, feel how he or she is held in your heart. And

as you exhale, send whatever prayer or expression of care feels most sincere or most needed.

Now, enlarge the taking in and sending out to include all those who are in the same situation, experiencing the same suffering. If the person you want to help is grieving a loss, breathe in and out for all those who are experiencing the pain of loss. If this person feels like a failure, breathe in and out for all who feel like failures. Sense, as you breathe in, the unconditional willingness, tenderness, and receptivity of your heart; and as you breathe out, the vastness of loving awareness that is here, holding this world.

Continue breathing, opening to the universal experience of this suffering and letting go into spaciousness with prayer. As your heart opens to the enormity of suffering, you become that openness. As you offer your tenderness, your awareness becomes suffused with compassion.

Flexibility in using the breath: If at any point you find the breathing instructions interfere with the actual experience of taking in suffering and sending out ease and love, adjust however most serves the meditation. For instance, you might find you need to focus on just the in-breath or just the out-breath for several cycles to more fully contact experience, or to let go. Or you might find that it is easier not to focus on the breath at all.

Throughout your day: You can do an abbreviated version of tonglen whenever you encounter suffering. If someone you meet is having a hard time, pause. For several breaths, silently breathe in his or her pain and breathe out relief. If you feel yourself resisting, turned off, or afraid of the pain, do tonglen for yourself and all those like you who are having difficulty opening to pain.

No matter what comes up, it is an opportunity for practicing compassion. Rather than ignoring pain or judging ourselves, we can train ourselves to open into our full potential to love.

When tonglen may be inappropriate: If you are struggling with trauma-related fear, unrelenting depression, or severe psychological imbalance, tonglen may cause emotional flooding or a sense of being stuck. In these situations, seek guidance from a spiritual teacher, therapist, or trusted guide in finding what best helps you move toward healing.

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