

Tonglen: Radical Compassion

A Short Talk and Guided Meditation from the IMCW Spring Retreat, 2017 Tara Brach

We'll be exploring the heart practice of compassion today. And when you consider *radical compassion*, or living compassion, there are two major components. One, that it's embodied—that there's a visceral quality of tenderness. And the other main quality is that it's all-inclusive, which means that as we open and feel that tenderness for one expression of suffering, it's really a tenderness that has a vast quality that includes all suffering everywhere.

And so, practices that cultivate radical compassion are actually practices of undoing our resistance to contacting vulnerability. The alchemy of compassion is that it arises naturally when we allow ourselves to connect with the vulnerability that's here. The compassion practices actually undo the resistance. And there's another undoing, which is the grasping that has us keep holding on to experience versus letting it really be held by the wholeness of being. Compassion practices undo grasping too.

And, to me, the practice that is most powerful in the domain of compassion is a variation of the Tonglen practice, which is a Tibetan practice. It's formally described as *taking in and offering out*. For many people, using the breath as a key kind of way to practice with Tonglen is powerful. And for some people, it's not. So you'll have that option as we go...

So, feel free to adjust how you're sitting if that's helpful, and find the position that you think will allow you to be at ease and also alert...

I often like to set the grounds of heart practices with this earthy body of ours, softening in ways so we can actually feel *embodied Metta*, using the imagery and felt sense of a smile.

So, I invite you to do that by first envisioning the curve of a smile spreading through a great, open, brilliant blue sky—sensing that openness and vastness of a smile spread through the sky. And sensing that your mind can merge with that sky...the top of your head opens out...and just sense that sky like mind of

awareness filled with the curve of a smile...the openness and the receptivity and brightness of that mind...

Sensing that curve of a smile lifting up the outer corners of the eyes, spreading through the eyes. Let the flesh around the eyes soften and the brow be smooth... slight smile at the mouth, the inside of the mouth smiling... all the micro muscles of the face can begin to relax. Again, that sense of receptivity. The eyes smiling...the mouth...

Visualizing and sensing a smile spreading through the throat...you can feel with the breath...the breath touching the throat, and the curve of a smile helping to create space for the aliveness that's there. The eyes soft, smiling...the mouth, the throat...

Now allowing the smile to spread through the heart and chest area...smiling into the heart and sensing a space that can include whatever's here—tender, receptive, open.

The eyes smiling, the throat, the heart...

Sensing the rings of opening outward that can include the shoulders...letting the shoulders relax, the hands are soft...open, vibrating...and allowing that smile to fill the whole upper torso...

Visualizing and sensing the curve of a smile through the belly, and feeling that from the inside out—a space that has room for the life that's here.

Feeling the breath more deeply in the torso, visualizing and sensing the curve of a smile spreading to the whole pelvic region and opening to the energy and aliveness that's there...

And then, at the base of the spine, that curve of a smile where there's contact with the seat, chair, cushion...if you can imagine allowing the earth energy to flow up into that vase of a smile and upward through your whole body...energy and openness and receptivity. The whole body is filled, vibrating with the spirit and sense of a smile.

And sensing the space around you also filled with that brightness and openness...

You might begin by exploring Tonglen with the breath and let it drop away if it's not of support to you.

Just beginning to bring the attention to the inflow and outflow of the breath, feeling the heart—feeling as if you're breathing right at the heart...

And taking some moments to scan and sense if there's any part of your being that's calling for a healing attention...if there's anything in the background going on in your life that is expressing in your body, your heart...has hurt or woundedness or fear or sorrow. Something unresolved, some conflict. Some aggression towards others or judgment, hurtfulness towards yourself.

If you find there isn't something that wants attention, that's causing any suffering, then you can just practice with whatever's predominant. But if there is, letting the situation be very close in so you can get in touch with it...

And this is where the story can be a skillful means—that you let the story of what's happening run a little in your mind. If there's a situation—let's say it involves other people—see the person clearly, hear what was being said. So, you're going right into a scene where you feel most what has triggered what's going on in you. And freeze it where you get most stuck.

And finding where that stuck place lives as vulnerability in your body...you might check your throat, your chest, your belly...begin to sense, with the in-breath, that you're agreeing or allowing yourself to fully touch what's here—whatever part of you is most needing attention, whatever you perhaps have been unwilling to feel fully—with the in-breath. It's like saying yes, touching you, connecting with you, feeling it in the body.

If you need more to help you get in touch with the feelings of vulnerability, you might sense: *What's the worst part of this? What am I afraid of? What's most upsetting? What am I believing is wrong?* And then, again, come right to the body, sense where it's the strongest, and breathe right into that place. Letting the breath help you to contact, directly and intimately, what's here...

And if it helps to bring your hands to your heart, or your throat, or your belly to help bring the attention...as if you're sending a message: *I'm here. I'm contacting this.* Let your hands help you.

With the in-breath, you're actually investigating and feeling into what's there—right into the heart of it, the core of it. It's kind of a courageous willingness to touch what's most difficult.

And with the out-breath, there's a sense of having what you're experiencing—the vulnerability—be held and offered into a very vast space of tenderness. You might imagine this as a field of love and presence that's your own most awake heart. Or you might imagine it as a universal field that is, in some way, the heart of the beloved—Kuan Yin, God, Jesus, Great Spirit. You're offering the vulnerability to be held in the truth of living, open compassion. With each in-breath, touching what's right here, and with each out-breath, sensing that you can offer it into love.

You might find that there are some words that go with that: *May you feel safe. May you know your belonging. May you realize the truth of who you are. May you be free of fear. May you experience your fearless heart.* Whatever words or message or prayer resonates. In some way, sensing the vulnerability that's here being held in the arms of the beloved...

And now, widening the attention to imagine others who experience this same kind of pain or suffering—others here, or others in the world. So, as you breathe in, you're breathing in for all of us—breathing in all of our vulnerability...the collective suffering, letting yourself be touched by the realness of our shared suffering. Visualize others sense the reality of the collective suffering.

And with the out-breath, your heart is like a flow-through to transform the suffering in the world. With the out breath, sense offering it into the boundless space of loving presence...that there's room for this. It can be held. Become a flow through, a transformer of suffering.

We continue our practice with the invitation to bring someone to mind, in your life, who could use your healing energy right now...someone you care about, that you'd like to bring your presence to and include in your heart more directly.

Let that person be close in right now, so you can see their eyes and see what they look like when they're having a hard time. And remind yourself of what's going on. Really sense—in their face. their posture, their voice, if you can hear it—how the fear, disappointment, hurt, sorrow, is living through them.

And then begin again with the breathing...to breathe in and let yourself touch and bring into your own being. And feel directly that vulnerability—as if they're inside you, and you can breathe and feel how they're living inside you. Breathing in, you can sense what it's like to be in this being...looking through those eyes, feeling with that heart.

And as you breathe out, sense that you can offer that pain and vulnerability...have it held in a very vast, healing, compassionate presence. Sense, with the out-breath, your prayer for this person. You might offer it with the out-breath. And sense how the space of compassionate presence is large enough you can breathe in and directly feel the angst or hurt or pain, and breathe out and be a flow-through. Let it be held in this empty, radiant, tender heart space.

In that vastness, you might sense exactly what this person most needs to feel from you. And imagine, energetically, that flavor of loving bathing them, surrounding them, and holding them...letting them know your heart is truly with them.

Widening the attention to sense all those that are struggling and suffering, just as this person is... think of others, particular others, you know. And sense breathing in and letting yourself be touched by that collective suffering.

You're breathing in for all those that are suffering this way...into this tender, open heart...and being a flow-through—breathing out, and sensing it being offered into absolute, boundless, loving space. Healing space. Sensing your prayer for all these beings.

Sensing, where breathing in and breathing out cease to be distinguished, that there's just this open heart space—that the life everywhere is floating in it—this boundless heart space that holds all of life...so that as you continue in the silence and stillness, whatever arises can be received in that compassionate presence.

The closing prayer is from Diane Ackerman:

In the name of the daybreak
and the eyelids of morning
and the wayfaring moon
and the night when it departs,

I swear I will not dishonor
my soul with hatred,
but offer myself humbly
as a guardian of nature,
as a healer of misery,
as a messenger of wonder,

as an architect of peace.

In the name of the sun and its mirrors
and the day that embraces it
and the cloud veils drawn over it
and the uttermost night
and the male and the female
and the plants bursting with seed
and the crowning seasons
of the firefly and the apple,

I will honor all life
—wherever and in whatever form
it may dwell—on Earth my home,
and in the mansions of the stars.¹

Namaste and blessings.

¹ Ackerman, D. (2000). School Prayer. In *I Praise My Destroyer* (p. 3). New York, NY: Vintage Books.