

As part of this program we strongly suggest that you practice daily to increase your capacity for compassion. This material can be very uncomfortable and it is important to properly process it emotionally.

One of the most powerful compassion practices is the Tibetan Buddhist practice of tonglen, also known as giving and receiving. We use instructions from the American Buddhist nun, Pema Chodron.

Before You Begin

Please read the short article linked below:

[Transforming the Heart of Suffering](#) by Pema Chodron

Formal Practice Instructions

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

1. The first stage is traditionally referred to as “flashing openness.” This flash of openness is done very quickly. One experience that everyone has had of this is when you’ve had a loud electric fan going, and then suddenly someone turns the fan off. There is some sort of natural flash of silence and space.
2. The next stage is working with textures: breathing in dark, heavy and hot; breathing out space, light and cool. The idea is that you are always breathing in the same thing which is fixation. Fixation is the tendency to hold on with a vengeance to yourself: to “ME,” capital M, capital E.

You may have noticed that – when you get very angry or very poverty stricken or very jealous – you experience that fixation as dark, hot, solid and heavy. That is actually the texture of neurosis, the texture of fixation. You may have also noticed times when you are all caught up in yourself, and then some sort of contrast or gap occurs. It's very spacious. It's the experience of mind that is not fixated on phenomena: it's the experience of openness. The quality or texture of that openness is generally experienced as very light, spacious, fresh, clear and cool. Those are the qualities of openness.

So the second stage is simply working with those textures. You breathe in dark, heavy and hot through all the pores of your body, and you radiate out space, light and cool. There is a sense of it coming in through all the pores of your body and radiating out in three hundred and sixty degrees. So you work with the texture until you feel that it's synchronized, until it is clear that dark is coming in and light is going out on the medium of the breath: in and out, in and out.

3. In the third stage you work with suffering. This part of the practice should be very, very real. It should be totally untheoretical. It should be heartfelt; it should be tangible and honest and true to you and vivid.

It could be your own anger, for example, that you might be feeling at that moment; or it could be the fixation of someone else whom you love very much, someone with whom you can connect very easily without any complications.

Suppose that you are involved in a horrific relationship. Every time you think of a particular person you get furious. That is very useful for tonglen! Or perhaps you feel completely left out. Your life is making you feel more wretched every day, and you feel completely poverty stricken. It was all you could do to get out of bed and come to hear this talk. You're so depressed that you want to stay in bed for the rest of your life. You have actually considered hiding under your bed. That is very useful for tonglen practice.

It should be real, just like that.

Let's use another example. You may be formally doing tonglen or just sitting somewhere having coffee. And. . . "Here he comes". . . "Here he comes." You want to hit him, grasp him or wish that he weren't there at all, just forget about him altogether and not pay any attention to him. Let's use anger as a specific example. The object is, "Here he comes," and here comes the poison, fury. Then you breathe that in. The idea is to develop sympathy for your own confusion. And the technique is that you do not blame him; you also do not blame yourself. Instead, there is just liberated fury. It is hot, dark and heavy. And you experience it as fully as you can.

You breathe the anger in, you remove the object, you stop thinking about him. In fact, he is just a useful catalyst. You could be grateful to everyone. You could drive all blames into yourself, breathing them in. This doesn't mean to say that you blame yourself, but you own it completely. It takes a lot of bravery, and it's extremely insulting to ego. In fact, it completely destroys the whole mechanism of ego. So you breathe in.

Then you breathe out sympathy, relaxation and spaciousness. Instead of just a small, dark situation, you allow a lot of space for that feeling to exist in. Don't slow down the process by trying to think what the proper antidote would be. Just allow space. When you breathe out, it is like ventilating the whole thing, airing it out. Breathing out is like opening up your arms and just letting go, altogether. Fresh air. Then you breathe the rage in again: rage . . . the dark, heavy hotness of it. Then you breathe out sympathy, relaxation and spaciousness. Instead of just a small, dark situation, you allow a lot of space for that feeling to exist in. Then you breathe the rage in again: rage . . . the dark, heavy hotness of it. And then you breathe out, ventilating the whole thing allowing a lot of space.

What you are actually doing is cultivating kindness towards yourself. It is very simple in that way. You don't think about it, you don't philosophize, you simply breathe in very real

emotion. You own it completely and then ventilate it allowing a lot of space when you breathe out. This, in itself, is an amazing practice even if it didn't go any further because, at this level, you are still working on yourself. But the real beauty of the practice is that you then extend that out which is stage 4.

4. Without any pretending, you can acknowledge, you can actually know, that about two billion other sentient beings are feeling that exact same rage in that second of time. They are experiencing it exactly the way you are experiencing it. They may have a different object, but the object isn't the point. The point is the rage itself. So you breathe it in from all of them, so they no longer have to have it. It doesn't exactly make your own rage any greater; it is just rage, just fixation on rage, which causes so much suffering.

Sometimes, at that moment, you get a glimpse of why there is murder and rape, why there is war, why people burn down buildings, why there is so much misery in the world. It all comes from feeling that rage and throwing it out instead of taking it in and airing it. It all turns into hatred and misery which pollutes the world and, obviously, perpetuates suffering in a drastic way. So, because you feel rage, therefore you have the kindling, the connection, for understanding the rage of all sentient beings. So first you work with your own emotion, and then you extend that and breathe it all in.

At that point, sort of simultaneously, it is no longer your own particular burden; it is just the rage of sentient beings which includes you. You breathe that in, and you breathe out a sense of ventilation, so that all sentient beings could experience that. This goes for anything that bothers you. The more it bothers you, the more awake you're going to be when you do tonglen.

These things that really haunt us and drive us nuts, actually, have enormous energy in them. That is why we fear them. It could even be your own timidity. If you are very, very timid and afraid to speak, afraid to walk up and say "hello" to someone, afraid to

look someone in the eye, there is enormous maintenance and energy in that. It is the way you keep yourself together. So you have the chance to own that completely, not blaming anybody, and to ventilate it with the out breath. Then you might better understand why some person over there looks so grim. It isn't because they hate you, but they also feel the same kind of timidity and don't want to look anyone in the face. So your own pain is like kindling or a stepping stone.

By practicing in this way, you definitely develop your sympathy for other people and you begin to understand them a lot better. As you do this practice and your heart develops more and more, even if someone comes up and insults you, you could genuinely and without a second thought understand the whole situation. You could feel that sort of pain – like the hair on the eyeball, instead of the hair on the hand – because you understand so well where everybody's coming from. You also realize that you can help by simply breathing in the pain of others and breathing out that ventilation. So the second way of doing tonglen is to work with other people. That is actually the point of the practice altogether: working with others and developing your sense of caring for others.

(Adapted from <http://www.spiritsong.org/tonglen.htm>)

Spontaneous Tonglen

It may be that formal practice of tonglen is too much, too soon. If that is your reaction to the practice, you can instead do a simplified form. The article linked here, "[Tonglen in Daily Life](#)" describes ways to open to others without having to sit in formal meditation. The description starts in the section, "Tonglen on the Spot".