

PEMA CHÖDRÖN

LIVING BEAUTIFULLY

with Uncertainty
and Change



...them did the only thing they could to support those who hadn't survived. Breathing out, they found a way to put into practice a deep longing to be of help, whatever that might mean. Of course, thousands of people in New York City and elsewhere immediately volunteered their support. In fact, there was such a flood of volunteers that many had to be turned away. But no one was turned away from the tonglen gatherings, and people who could not help in any other way joined with many others whose intention was to ease the suffering of those who had died in unimaginable pain and those they had left behind.

Tonglen is a core practice for warriors in training, the most effective tool for developing courage and arousing our sense of oneness with others. It's a practice for staying in the middle of the river. It gives us the strength to let go of the shore.

There are various ways that tonglen is taught, but the essence of it is breathing in that which is unpleasant and unwanted and breathing out—sending out—that which is pleasing, relieving, enjoyable. In other words, we breathe in the things we usually try to avoid, such as our sadness and anger, and we send out the things we usually cling to, such as our happiness and good health. We breathe in pain and send out pleasure. We breathe in disgrace and send out good reputation. We breathe in loss and send out gain. This is an exceedingly counterhabitual practice. It helps us overcome our fear of suffering and tap into the compassion that's inherent in us all.

The word *tonglen* is Tibetan for “sending and receiving.” It refers to our willingness to take on the pain of others we know are hurting and extend to them whatever we feel will ease their pain, whatever will enable them to stay

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Practicing tonglen awakens our natural empathy, our innate ability to put ourselves in others' shoes. Caring about people when they're scared or sad or angry or arrogant can be a challenge; it confronts us with our own pain and fear, with the places where we're stuck. But if we can stay with those unwanted feelings, we can use them as stepping-stones to understanding the pain and fear of others. Tonglen allows us to acknowledge where we are in the moment and, at the same time, cultivate a sense of kinship with others. When painful feelings arise, we breathe them in, opening to our own suffering and the suffering of everyone else who is feeling the same way. Then we send relief to us all.

This is the style of tonglen that has been the most liberating for me. It uses the very immediate and unsettling rawness of our own discomfort as a link to others. It allows us to understand in an experiential, nonconceptual way that our suffering is not unique but is shared by millions and trillions of other beings, animal as well as human. We find out that we have cancer, and we breathe in the fear, the disbelief, the pain of all cancer patients and send relief to all. We lose someone dear to us, and it connects us to everyone who is overcome with grief. We lie awake with insomnia, and it links us to countless others who are lying awake. On the spot, we breathe in our sleeplessness and the sleeplessness of others, breathe in our anxiety, our agitation, and the same discomfort felt by others. On the spot, we send out restfulness, peace of mind, contentment—even a visualization of all of us sleeping soundly.

Tonglen is a practice for thinking bigger, for touching into our sameness with all beings. Instead of withdrawing

into ourselves, we can use the grittiness, the harshness of the human condition as a way to rouse our natural ability to love, to care, to understand our interconnectedness. With tonglen, our misfortunes become a means to awaken our heart, enabling us to work wholeheartedly for the sake of others and at the same time be a true friend to ourselves.

Tonglen isn't just a practice to do on the meditation cushion. It's particularly useful right in the midst of our life, wherever we are as we go about the day. Maybe a letter or an e-mail arrives from a friend who's having a hard time, who's depressed, who's grieving an upsetting loss. Right then, you can start breathing in your friend's pain, connecting with his sadness or despair and wishing for his suffering to lift. Then, as you exhale, you can send him relief—joy, caring, peace of mind, or whatever seems most appropriate.

Perhaps you're out on the street and see someone abusing a dog, beating it or yelling at it or yanking on its leash. You can breathe in the pain you assume the dog is feeling, then send out relief. It might be a wish for the dog to experience kindness and safety, even a nice, juicy bone. You can also breathe in what the abuser is likely to be feeling—the rage and confusion that are causing her to strike out so cruelly. Breathe in her anger and, on the out breath, send her anything you think would allow her heart to soften. It could be feeling loved, feeling okay about herself, feeling more space in her mind and more tenderness in her heart.

Tonglen is especially useful when we get into a conflict with someone and feel our own pain and confusion rising. Let's say you walk into a room and someone says something you don't like or gives you a nasty look. Ordinarily you might shut down or go blank or obsess about getting even, or whatever you do to exit when you don't want to

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deal with painful feelings. With tonglen, however, you can work with the emotions right then. Maybe you're feeling fear. You can open yourself completely to it—the smell of it, the texture of it, the tension in your body—and breathe it all in. As you continue to breathe in fear, you can open to include everyone everywhere who's afraid. You can even stretch your limit and include the person who triggered your fear, with the wish that he or she be free of suffering. Then, as you breathe out, you can send out an aspiration for all beings who are feeling fear, yourself included, to be free of it.

Right on the spot, you own your feelings completely. Instead of pushing the emotions away, you're completely in touch with them. This isn't the same as being self-absorbed, caught up only in your own distress. Far from it. Tonglen puts us in touch with all the others who are just like us, who feel the way we do. We all experience pain and pleasure. We all gravitate to what's comfortable and have an aversion to what's not.

Often people ask me, "But how do I know that other people are feeling the same thing I am?" I think it's safe to say that there's almost nothing we feel that millions of other people aren't also feeling—or haven't felt at some time. Our story lines are different, but when it comes to pain and pleasure and our reaction to them, people everywhere are the same.

Tonglen goes against the grain of how we usually deal with the world: wanting life on our own terms, wanting things to work out for our own benefit, no matter what happens to others. The practice begins to break down the walls we've built around ourselves, begins to liberate us from the prison of self. As this protective shield starts to

come apart, we naturally feel a wish to reach out. People need help, and we can provide it—both literally and at the level of aspiration for their well-being.

Tonglen reverses the usual logic of avoiding suffering and seeking pleasure. To the degree that we can open to our own pain, we can open to the pain of others. To the degree that we can stay present with our own pain, we can hang in with someone who's provoking us. We come to see pain as something that can transform us, not as something to escape at any cost. As we continue to practice tonglen, our compassion is bound to grow. We'll find ourselves increasingly more able to be there for others, even in what used to seem like impossible situations.

Not that there won't be times when we simply can't do the practice. It may be that when we're confronted with suffering, our own or someone else's, we can't face it, so we go numb. Or we may have no problem getting in touch with pain, but we can't send out relief. The situation may seem so overwhelming that we can't think of any form of relief that would make a dent in what we're witnessing or feeling. But whatever the reason we can't do tonglen, it isn't grounds for self-criticism or despair. Life is full of opportunities for us to try again.

Resistance of any sort points to how important it is to bring a sense of spaciousness to this practice. One way to do this is to imagine that you're breathing into a space as vast as the sky. If you sense your body as boundless, transparent, and big enough to accommodate any amount of suffering, you can breathe in knowing that there is nowhere for the pain to get stuck. Then, as you breathe out, you can send out that same feeling of openness and freedom, the feeling that there's lots of room, unlimited room, enough

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room to accommodate anything—misery, delight, the whole gamut of human emotions.
As a formal meditation practice, tonglen has four stages:

The first stage 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 tonglen 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 tonglen for all of those experiencing the same pain that 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