

Pointers for *Tonglen*/Bodhichitta Practice

Tonglen – giving and receiving – is a very effective way of working on bodhicitta. However, it is easy to practise it in a way that produces its ‘near enemies’ (such as lack of self-esteem, a martyrish tendency, or becoming overwhelmed by suffering) rather than bringing about greater compassion, joy and wisdom. For the practice to be of real benefit, several foundational understandings and supports need to be in place:

1. **Heart Wish** – connecting the practice with what our heart longs for, what is most important and meaningful to us.

2. **Entrusting** ourselves to something much bigger and less limited: the buddhas and bodhisattvas, the nature of reality, the power of love and compassion, or positive influences in our lives. This can be through invocation, mantra, taking refuge, etc. It is something much deeper than our selfing tendency that performs the practice.

3. **Confidence** – in *tonglen*, the source of our confidence is in the Dharma, in the ungraspable, unlimited, open nature of reality. So there’s no need to worry about whether ‘we’ can do the practice.

4. **Understanding that the source of all suffering is self-clinging.** This tendency – to secure the self and grasp at whatever supports that – is addressed and met directly by *tonglen*. So, we need to be clear that it really is the source of the suffering, stress and tension in our lives. Then, although the practice can be uncomfortable and demanding at times, we will put ourselves into it happily, knowing that it is working as the antidote to the fundamental cause of all our struggles and difficulties.

We also need the perspective that we are not alone in this suffering – all beings suffer terribly from not recognising how deeply embedded in self-clinging tendencies we are and therefore how we continue to create the conditions for more suffering. There is then a focus and urgency about overcoming the ‘selfing’ tendency, which gives a real force to the practice.

5. **Riding on the breath.** In the practice we breathe in accepting and really receiving; we breathe out giving support, love and the transformative power of the Dharma. Allowing the breath to carry the practice helps us avoid getting caught up in conceptualisation. *If* we find it helpful, we can visualise taking in dark smoke or shadow.

As we become more absorbed in the practice, the experiences of giving and receiving may become longer, so they no longer naturally synchronise with the breath. In that case, we needn’t try to make things ‘fit’, but instead allow the breath to recede to the periphery of awareness or vanish altogether, while we focus on the experience of what we are giving and receiving.

6. Not leaving ourselves out. All our own suffering is included in the receiving and giving, including our feelings of inadequacy or whatever reactions are provoked by the practice. It is only when we acknowledge these things in ourselves that we can fully accept them in others.

7. Recognising that others are like us. Whatever form of life they are, they are subject to ageing, sickness and death. They all seek pleasure and dislike pain. This connects us directly through our own experience to all beings. It also leads to a focus on the suffering itself rather than the ‘owner’ of the suffering. In his seminar on Shantideva’s *Bodhicaryavatara*, Sangharakshita talks of a ‘black cloud’ of suffering that needs to be dispelled (without worrying about whether it’s ‘my suffering’ or ‘suffering out there’).

8. It is important to visualise a joyful result. This is the follow-through of the confidence in conditionality of point 3. Positive intentions have a positive impact and we can visualise the outcomes of relief of suffering, freedom, happiness or bliss arising from the support, love, awareness, openness and other Dharma qualities that have been received. Again, it is not about whether *we* have done the practice well enough and are capable of making a difference; it is about the power of the Dharma, of bodhicitta, to manifest when we get out of the way and entrust the practice to what is beyond selfing.

The practice takes the goal as the path. We focus not just on the suffering but on it being relieved, the end-result that practice of the bodhisattva path and the power of the Dharma will eventually bring about. So, the practice is essentially joyful, or we could say that it moves from compassion to sympathetic joy.

9. We use difficulties and ‘hindrances’ as part of the practice. Whatever suffering we have, including difficulties and obstacles in the practice, can be used to help us empathise with others. If we feel frustrated in the practice, we breathe in the frustrations of all beings. If we feel completely unable to meditate, we breathe in the suffering of all those who are confronted with a task to which they feel completely inadequate.

Thus, the practice is a little like Judo, in which the weight and momentum of an opponent is used to help with a throw. In *tonglen*, all obstacles and difficulties are included in the process of giving and receiving. There is nothing that cannot be used in this way.

10. *Tonglen* is first and foremost a mental training. We needn’t be disappointed if we have spent time working with it to help one of our friends, only to find that what we have done has made no difference to them. (Although we shouldn’t discount the possibility that it could.) It is a training in developing compassion and appreciation of people’s potential. Over time, through *tonglen* practice we will come to embody the bodhisattva ideal.

It is a particularly effective practice to help us turn towards suffering, whether our own or the suffering in the world, without becoming overwhelmed. If we have trained for a while in *tonglen*, when we encounter or hear about some suffering, our natural responses are positive and supportive.

When we come up against suffering in ourselves, we become trained to respond by: a. Opening to our experience with kindness for ourselves; b. Going for refuge and drawing/calling on deep resources from beyond the egoic level; c. Becoming aware that we aren't alone in feeling this way; there are many others in similar situations. In this way, suffering which used to close us down – not wanting to have our current experience; feeling inadequate to dealing with it; and feeling alone with it – now becomes a catalyst for openness; finding deep inner resources; and feeling linked to life.

When faced with the suffering of others, we become trained to respond by: a. Opening our heart and letting ourselves be moved by it; b. Going for refuge and drawing/calling on deep resources from beyond the egoic level; c. Responding from those resources in an appropriate way, with empathy, kindness and an awareness that whoever is suffering need not finally be defined or limited by it.

[These brief guidelines for tonglen practice were put together by Vessantara and Vijayamala. This version is from June 2019, lightly edited in 2020.]