

Tonglen Instruction

Excerpts from the Commentary on the Slogan:

“Slogan 7, Sending and taking should be practiced alternately. These two should ride the breath.”

From *Training the Mind and Cultivating Loving-Kindness* By Chögyam Trungpa, Pages 26-35

Sending and taking is a very important practice of the bodhisattva path. It is called *tonglen* in Tibetan: *tong* means “sending out” or “letting go,” and *len* means “receiving,” or “accepting.” *Tonglen* is a very important term; you should remember it. It is the main practice in the development of relative bodhichitta.

The slogan says: “These two should ride the breath. “We have been using the breath as a technique all along because it is constant and because it is something very natural to us. Therefore, we also use it here, in exactly the same way as we have been doing in shamatha discipline.

The practice of tonglen is quite straightforward; it is an actual sitting meditation practice. You give away your happiness, your pleasure, anything that feels good. All of that goes out with the outbreath. As you breathe in, you breathe in any resentments and problems, anything that feels bad. The whole point is to remove territoriality altogether.

The practice of tonglen is very simple. We do not first have to sort out our doctrinal definitions of goodness and evil. We simply breathe out any old good and breathe in any old bad. At first we may seem to be relating primarily to our *ideas* of good and bad. But as we go on, it becomes more real. On the one hand, you can't expect a friendly letter from your grandmother with whom you have been engaged in warfare for the past five years. She probably will not write you a kind letter after three days of tonglen. On the other hand, sending and taking will definitely have a good effect, quite naturally. I think it is a question of your general decorum and attitude.

Sometimes we feel terrible that we are breathing in poison which might kill us and at the same time breathing out whatever little goodness we have. It seems to be completely impractical. But once we begin to break through, we realize that we have even more goodness and we also have more things to breathe in. So the whole process becomes somewhat balanced. That always happens, but it takes long training. Sending and taking are interdependent. The more negativity we take in with a sense of openness

and compassion, the more goodness there is to breathe out on the other side. So there is nothing to lose. It is all one process.

In tonglen we are aspiring to take on the suffering of other sentient beings. We mean that literally: we are actually willing to take that on. As such, it can have real effects, both on the practitioner himself and on others. But tonglen should not be used as any kind of antidote. You do not do it and then wait for the effect—you just do it and drop it. It doesn't matter whether it works or not: if it works, you breathe that out; if it does not work, you breathe that in. So you do not possess anything. That is the point.

Usually you would like to hold on to your goodness. You would like to make a fence around yourself and put everything bad outside it: foreigners, your neighbors, or what have you. You don't want them to come in. You don't even want your neighbors to walk their dogs on your property because they might make a mess on your lawn. So in ordinary samsaric life, you don't send and receive at all.

Basically speaking, the mahayana path is trying to show us that we don't have to secure ourselves. We can afford to extend out a little bit—quite a bit. The basic idea of practicing sending and taking is almost a rehearsal, a discipline of passionlessness, a way of overcoming territory. Overcoming territory consists of going out with the out-breath, giving away and sending out, and bringing in with your in-breath as much as you can of other people's pain and misery. You would like to become the object of that pain and misery. You want to experience it fully and thoroughly.

We have a way of practicing putting others first—by placing letting go and receiving on the medium of the breath. The first stage of tonglen consists of the practice of sending and taking mentally, psychologically, slowly and slowly. But if you develop the attitude of being willing to part with your precious things, to give away your precious things to others, that can help begin to create a good reality.

All along there have been people who have done things for you. You should think of those situations and work them into your tonglen practice. As your breath goes out, you give them the best of what is yours, in order to repay their kindness. In order to promote goodness in the world, you give out everything good, the best that you have, and you breathe in other people's problems, their misery, their torment. You take in their pain on their behalf.

When you begin to do tonglen practice, you begin to think of the goodness that you can give out, what you can give to others. You have lots of good things to give, to breathe out to others. You have lots of goodness, lots of sanity, lots of healthiness. All of that

comes straight from the basic awakened and enlightened attitude, which is alive and strong and powerful. So what you give out is no longer just imagination, or something that you have to crank up; you actually have something good to give out to somebody. In turn, you can breathe in something that is painful and negative. The suffering that other people are experiencing can be brought in because, in contrast to that, you have basic healthiness and wakefulness, which can certainly absorb anything that comes to it. You can absorb more suffering because you have a lot more to give.

The idea of warmth is a basic principle of tonglen practice. What we are doing is also called maitri practice, or in Sanskrit, *maitri bhavana*. *Maitri* means “friendliness,” “warmth,” or “sympathy,” and *bhavana* means “meditation” or “practice.” In tonglen, or maitri bhavana, we breathe out anything gentle and kind, feeling good about anything at all—even feeling good about eating a chocolate cake or drinking cool water or warming ourselves by the fire. Whatever goodness exists in us, whatever we feel good about, we breathe out to others. We must feel good sometimes—whether it lasts a minute or a second or whatever. And then we breathe in the opposite situation, whatever is bad and terrible, gross and obnoxious. We try to breathe that into ourselves.

I would like to say quite bluntly that it is very important for you to take tonglen practice quite seriously. I doubt that you will freak out. The main point is actually to do it properly and thoroughly. Beyond that, it is important to take delight that you are in a position to do something which most other humans never do at all. The problem with most people is that they are always trying to give out the bad and take in the good. That has been the problem of society in general and the world altogether. But now we are on the mahayana path and the logic is reversed. That is fantastic, extraordinary! We are actually getting the inner “scoop,” so to speak, on Buddha’s mind, directly and at its best. Please think of that. This practice will be extremely helpful to you, so please take it seriously.

Tonglen practice is not a very subtle thing. It is not philosophical, it is not even psychological. It is a very, very simple-minded approach. The practice is very primitive, in fact, the most primitive of all Buddhist practices. When you think of Buddhism and all the sophisticated wisdom, philosophies, and techniques that have been developed, it is amazing that they came up with this practice, that we do such a simple and primitive thing. But we do it and it works. It seems to have been fine for several centuries, and those centuries have produced a lot of bodhisattvas, including Buddha himself.

Just relate with the technique; the discursiveness of it doesn’t matter. When you go out, you are out; when you come in, you are in. When you are hot, you are hot; when you

are cool, you are cool. Just cut into that situation and be very precise. Make it very literal and very simple. We don't want to make this into a revolutionary sort of imaginary, mind-oriented social work approach or psychological approach. Let's do it properly.

We have to be honest to begin with. That is a very important point. And we have to be very literal with the technique. It has already been worked on by generations of people in the past, and it has proven to be true. So we can afford to be literal.

Sending and taking is an extension of shamatha discipline. In shamatha discipline, we do not dwell on anything, but we are processed by working with movement. We don't just try to hold our mind completely steady, completely settled, but we try to use the fickleness of our mental process by following our breath and by looking at our subconscious thoughts. We develop bodhichitta in exactly the same way that we practice shamatha, only our practice in this case is much more highlighted because, instead of working with subconscious mind or discursive thoughts alone, we are looking much further, to the *content* of our thoughts, which is either anger or lust or stupidity. So we are going slightly beyond shamatha technique, to include the contents of these thoughts.