

ECLIPSE TODAY - A WALK-AROUND PRACTICE
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First, this is the day of the New Moon Eclipse, tonight at 8:29 PM EDT, so take note. That being said, I want to continue looking at our reactionary self.

It should not surprise us that the Tibetan Buddhists have a special practice designed just to handle our reactions. This practice is distinct from any sitting meditation we might do and is called Tonglen, which in English translates to something like "Taking and Sending," and it has to do with gradually becoming aware of our reactions, our likes and dislikes, and disarming them.

Tonglen is about becoming aware of our own reactions, our prejudices, likes, dislikes, etc., and owning and clearly seeing them. We take in or become aware of our reactions, and we send out or respond with openness and kindness. Literally we breathe in what we react to (like or don't like, including the suffering of others) and send back out whatever is good and in us in return, the best thoughts and energy we have within us. The concept takes some getting used to by westerners. It took me a while.

When I first heard about Tonglen I was shocked. It was everything that the various trance-mediums and psychics I had known said not to do. Those same psychics had me washing my hands after every astrology reading I did to help remove the negative energies my clients may have brought with them. These negativities supposedly went down the drain with the water.

And here were the Buddhists telling me just the opposite, to breathe in and absorb the negativity of my worst reactions and to respond in return with all the goodness within myself that I could muster. Confusing.

Let me tell you, I had to just sit down and think about that for a very long time. It went against everything that I had been taught up to the moment that the Rinpoche I had recently met suggested as a practice that could benefit me greatly.

And I did not just casually read about Tonglen in some book. Instead, I had driven over 800 miles on one of the coldest days of the year, with my entire family, including our youngest, who was only a year and a half old at the time. It was so cold as we drove up the steep mountain to the monastery where Rinpoche lived that I had to use a piece of cardboard to scrape a tiny hole on the inside of my windshield just to peer through. It was even cold inside the car.

And we had not even phoned ahead. I don't know what we were thinking. No one knew we were coming as we pulled up to this large old building that had at one time been a hotel in the mountains above Woodstock, New York. Now it was the beginning of a monastery yet to be built. It was mostly dark inside and the bitter wind on the mountains whirled around us as we stood in the doorway huddling together, my wife and I, and our three children.

When someone finally opened the door, I stammered out that we had come to see the Rinpoche, and I can only be eternally grateful that Rinpoche was who Rinpoche is, a great master, who in that dark night received us with the utmost grace and kindness. We talked of many things, but that is another story.

I bring this up here because Rinpoche did leave us with one request when we parted, and that was to learn to practice Tonglen, and he gave us a small book called "The Torch of Certainty" which had the proper instructions as we said goodbye and prepared to leave.

We stayed that night in a small motel down in Woodstock, NY, one that had no regular furnace, but just one of those little infrared heaters stuck in the wall. It was there that Margaret and I turned the pages of the book Rinpoche gave us and first read about Tonglen, and what we read more-or-less frightened the bejesus out of us, because it said very clearly to accept, take in, and breathe in all the negative reactions we had (and we had), and breathe out and give back instead all of the best goodness that was in us.

Believe me folks, there was a see-saw moment when we teetered back and forth as to whether to accept Rinpoche's advice and learn Tonglen, or to just cut and run. All of this in a tiny motel room on one of the coldest nights of the year, those days just after Christmas and before the New Year, some 800 long and frozen miles from home.

It was only due to the sense of truth we saw in Rinpoche (whom we barely knew) that we did not just give up and get out. But the connection there, from the first moment we met Rinpoche, was so real, and so genuine, that we just put all our eggs in that basket and took a chance. Of course that chance was well-founded, and we have worked with Rinpoche now for thirty years this October.

Ton-Len is a mind training exercise that is IMO much easier to learn than standard sitting meditation, and aside from doing Tonglen on the cushion, we can do it throughout the day as things come up in our mindstream, and you know that they do.

As I pointed out, many years ago on that cold day I recounted above, it was Ton-Len that Rinpoche pointed out as the place to start. In the Buddhists textbooks Tonglen consists of taking on (breathing in) all of the suffering and disharmony in the world and sending out (breathing out) all the goodness we can feel inside us. This is why it is called taking and sending. And this taking in and sending out is done over and over again until we have kind of neutralized the reaction we find ourselves having.

Everything we react to in the world, be it the suffering of others or any other reaction we have is fuel for practicing Tonglen, all of it. And although the technique is traditionally presented as a way to (virtually) take on the sufferings we see in the world, the net effect of this practice is to become aware of and neutralize our own reactions. We don't so much change the outside world through Tonglen, as we change ourselves, and our attitude toward the world. It can be a game changer. It was for me.

So if you have problems getting into sitting meditation or have not noticed much change from that practice, I sincerely suggest that you give Tonglen a try. It is very much a pay-as-you-go practice, meaning you get back feedback and resolution from Tonglen on a reaction by reaction basis. You can see the effect and the progress easier than in sitting meditation, at least I did.

If there is interest out there in this topic, I will go into more detail on this easy-to-do practice in another blog.



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