

TONGLEN: RESOLVING OPPOSITION  
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Tonglen was introduced into Tibet in the 10th Century by an Indian named Atisha (Atiśa), who had learned this practice in Indonesia (Sumatra). Tonglen practice is most often associated with a text by Chekawa Yeshe Dorje (1101-1175 A.D.) called "Seven Points of Mind Training," which includes some 59 slogans, pithy aphorisms intended to be meditated on. These slogans are very remarkable. The first time I read them I immediately felt that they were essential truths. You can read them here and see for yourself:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lojong>

The tonglen practice is about taking and sending, breathing in and breathing out, and typically is introduced by asking the practitioner to breathe in all of the suffering in the world, take it on (and inside oneself), absorb it, and then breathe back out (on the out-breath) all of the goodness we have within us. And continue to do this until some kind of equalization occurs.

In other words, tonglen is the exact opposite of what most of us are trying to do in our lives, which is bring all of the goodness of life to us, and keep all of the badness of life as far away from us as possible. Tonglen is a prime example of how Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhist psychology functions.

I should say a few words about why Tonglen may be easier for you to learn than other forms of meditation. For one, there are few variations here in the west for the tonglen practice. With traditional sitting meditation, there are literally hundreds of practices that are referred to as "meditation." Most of them are not traditional or "authentic," historically speaking. And everyone seems to be getting something out of each one of them.

This makes it very difficult to say to someone, "Wouldn't you like to learn the traditional (tried and true) form of meditation?" That does not go down well, even though it may be clear that they are getting nowhere with whatever it is that they are doing. Because meditation in this country is considered "spiritual" and thus personal, you don't question someone's spirituality, even though this kind of behavior would never fly in a real practice-oriented eastern society. Someone would insist on making sure you knew what to do and that you did it correctly, in addition to whatever lava lamps and incense you might want to use. Thus very few people that I have met who insist that they meditate know how to meditate properly, in my opinion. And there is very little to be done about it.

I am not going to repeat the many instructions you can find on tonglen just by searching the Internet. Instead, I want to focus here on tonglen as a means for disarming our habitual preoccupation with the self, effectively weakening our habitual identification with our self, and causing the sense of the self to gradually become transparent to us to the point where we can recognize our true awareness shining through from behind it. Tonglen actually works.

So yes, by all means, do the tonglen practice with the object or focus being all the suffering you can imagine in the world. This is good, of course, but it is also somewhat abstract, and not so much a part of our day-to-day experience, like what we actually bump into as we go about our life.

But, in addition to that practice, let's also get more real, a little closer to home. Tonglen is a practice that confronts our habitual duality of thinking in terms of subject and object, the "I in here" and the "they and them out there," and gradually resolves that difference. And while it is grand to take on all of suffering humanity as the subject for tonglen, I find that I have learned more from taking on all of my own petty likes and dislikes, especially dislikes – my personal reactivity.

Our reactions are what trouble us the most, and to be perfectly clear here, and take careful note when I say that our reactions are all "self-related." Our reactivity, like fat in a hot frying pan, does not come from basic awareness (our true nature), but rather from the various likes and dislikes that we have collected into this coat of many druthers we call our self.

Our self is what is reactionary, liking this a lot, and hating that on sight, etc. In other words, at least in my opinion, before we can meaningfully take on the sufferings of humanity, we might be better served to cherry-pick among our own copious reactions. I mean, they happen all day long. All we have to do is to admit them, become aware of them, and do tonglen with them.

And we might as well start with the small stuff, like around the corner comes this guy with the big nose. You never liked that nose and you can't help but react without thinking. Just be aware of what is happening, and do some tonglen with, yes, with the nose, at least your reaction to it. Own it and unify that dualism as your own creation.

And learn to do this all day long with every reaction that you can catch yourself having. I don't know of any better (or faster) way of deconstructing the excess attachment to the self than by doing tonglen with each and every reaction, no matter how small. I have done this and it really, really works. It is easy, can be done while we do all the other things we have to do in a day, and is relatively painless. We can log many hours of practice this way, and most of us need many hours of practice to get anywhere at all with meditation. It takes real time.

With Tonglen, we basically are making friends with our self, or at least ironing out the wrinkles of bias, prejudice, and other reactionary ingrained behavior we have accumulated. Our self is the unabridged current history of all our likes and dislikes, right down to the number of angels we think should be dancing on the head of a pin.

Like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, we can deconstruct our self (one reaction or bias at a time) with relatively little pain, as opposed to having to go through some huge collapse or vacating of the self as sometimes happens.

It is tricky. Somehow a loss of self-confidence, confidence in the self is warranted, even necessary, but how to bring this about in a gentle, gradual way, is what tonglen excels at. Sure, we can have some catastrophic event in our lives, like the death of a loved one, and the self is vacated in a New-York minute, but the rebuilding of that self (which in the course of time must take place) is very hard on the system, and still does not solve the problem. After something catastrophic happens, the self wants to make us even more airtight. Tonglen gently does this, a reaction at a time.

Yet at those times when the self 'is' vacated (empty), we often can see what is really important in life, not clouded by all the entertainment our day-to-day self demands of us. Self-transparency is pretty much required for spiritual awareness. It is the Sine Qua Non for awakening. So there you have the idea.

Tonglen is all about the self and its reactions, better therapy than a dozen psychologists could provide, because it gets at each and every reaction and begins to neutralize and sooth it, ending the dichotomy, and bringing the subject and object back together into harmony. Tonglen is holistic in the true sense of that word. It makes us whole.

I like to tell myself that tonglen is the great equalizer, and I use the analogy of a pebble dropped into a small pond. Its ripples gradually spread outward, enclosing more and more of the pond within its embrace. Tonglen is just like that. Unification.

As we acknowledge and make friends with more and more of our reactions, we identify with more and more of the world around us and not just with or through the lens of our self as we are habitually used to. In the process, we see that the filter of the self distorts our view of life enormously, and that by thinning out the attachments we have, removing them one-by-one, the self gradually becomes transparent. We begin to see through it and to the awareness we actually are (our true nature) starts to shine through.

Once we begin to recognize our true nature, we are good to go, which simply means, we don't need help because we perceive how this self-thing works. We see the problem and begin an orderly exodus from imagining we view the world from the vantage point of a self, and learn to take up the vantage point of awareness itself. We shift our view.

We transmigrate while still here on Earth from self-dependence to independence of the self. Please note. We are not trying to remove the self, because the self is a natural function of the mind to help organize our day-to-day existence. Instead, we just want to thin out the membrane of the self, the filter, so that we can see through it to recognizing our true awareness nature.

Once we have done that, it is relatively smooth sailing from there on. We transmigrate, moving all our eggs from the one basket of the self and placing them with confidence in the awareness behind and beyond the self. The self becomes the tool it always was, a tool that we use with awareness.

Sorry this is so long. Let me know if you understand this, please.



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[Photo taken yesterday. The lilacs are ready to bloom. Last year, due to the frosts, we had none at all. A year without lilacs is not the same.]