

Living from the Heart

A fresh take on ancient wisdom for living a wholehearted human life.

Tonglen (Sending and Taking)

Tonglen is the main practice for cultivating bodhicitta referred to in Slogans 7 and 8. Here are written instructions for both the formal practice and “Tonglen on the Spot.”

Formal Practice (begin with Shamatha – Vipasyana meditation)

1. Flash on Absolute Bodhicitta: Momentarily connect with the quality of spaciousness and openness.
2. Begin working with texture
 - a. Begin by breathing in the quality of “hot, dark and heavy” – like gooey, thick sludge in a dark cave.
 - b. Continue by breathing out the quality of “cool, bright and light” – like a mountain stream in the sunshine.
 - c. Synchronize the inbreath and outbreath with these qualities.
3. Transition to specific beings or situations
 - a. Bring to mind a person, animal or situation where you believe there is suffering. Refrain from getting drawn into the whole story; just connect with the essence of the suffering of the subject.
 - b. Imagine what might relieve this suffering – some action, resource or aspiration.
 - c. Continue working with texture while holding awareness of the subject and the suffering. The texture “hot, dark and heavy” represents the suffering and “cool, bright and light” represents relief.
 - d. When you breathe in the suffering, it is completely and utterly transformed into relief. There is no possible residue left behind in your being and you are at no risk of taking it on.
 - e. After a few breath cycles, or once the practice for a particular subject feels complete, allow this image to dissolve and invite a new subject into your awareness.
4. Expand to include all beings
 - a. At the end of the Tonglen session, expand your awareness to include others who suffer in the same way. Do this gradually, moving from one person to a small group of people and then bigger and bigger to the whole.
 - b. For the last few breath cycles, allow any images, thoughts or stories to dissolve as you conclude the practice.

Conclude with a brief period of Shamatha – Vipassana meditation. Alternatively, allow the mind to rest without an object of meditation or any technique.

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Tonglen on the Spot

In post-meditation, when you witness or experience suffering in yourself or others, immediately begin to breathe in what is painful and then breathe out relief. This is just Phase III of the formal practice listed above.