

# Tonglen



## What is *Tonglen*?

*Tonglen* is the Tibetan word for "giving and receiving" and is the name of a Tibetan Buddhist meditation practice for developing deep compassion and lessening the fear of suffering. Through this practice, we visualize receiving all the pain and suffering of another person and giving back to that person all of our love, joy, well-being and peace.

*Tonglen* can be a difficult practice because our own ego and fears can get in the way. It doesn't seem logical to accept the suffering of another person - we have enough pain of our own to deal with! And it seems frightening to invite in another's illness or negative symptoms. We fear that we will become contaminated somehow and experience the same difficulties.

But, this is precisely why *Tonglen* is such a valuable practice. To engage in *Tonglen*, we must face our fears head-on and confront all our old ideas about suffering. We also must address the selfishness of the ego, which wishes to remain safe and separated from others, concerned only with it's own survival.

## Why Practice *Tonglen*?

There is tremendous potential for personal and spiritual growth through the practice of *Tonglen*. Those who are seeking enlightenment through the path of Buddhism choose to practice it because it helps them develop limitless and fearless compassion for all creation. But there are benefits for others, who are not practicing Buddhists, as well.

When you begin to utilize *Tonglen*, you will discover that the practice actually helps you heal you own past and present suffering, while you are focusing on helping others. *Tonglen* can also help prevent or relieve emotional burnout, and can transform your relationships with other people.

This practice gives you a way to offer help to those you love during times when it seems there is nothing you can do for them. Rather than sitting by

helplessly, observing a loved one suffer, you can actively engage in a practice that can help bring them some relief and give you some peace, as well.

### **How do you Practice *Tonglen*?**

1. Begin by sitting in meditation for several minutes in order to become relaxed and focused. Visualize your "highest self" or "true nature" as the aspect of yourself that is going to be practicing *Tonglen*. It is normal to experience some fear and doubt at this point. That's OK! It's part of the training process!
2. To manage your fears, first focus on breathing in all your own doubt and negativity. Visualize the negativity as a dark cloud that surrounds you. As you breathe in that darkness, your own heart of compassion and love transforms it into light, calmness, joy and peace. Then breathe out this new light so that it begins to surround you and fill the space previously occupied by negativity.
3. When you feel calm and your fear has quieted (which might actually require several sessions to accomplish) begin to turn your attention to the other person whose suffering you wish to relieve. Visualize that person sitting in front of you and open yourself up to all of their suffering, pain and difficulties. Feel your own compassion rising: strong, beautiful and pure. See the suffering of the other person as a dark cloud and breathe it in. Take it all the way into your heart where it will be transformed into brilliant light. Then breathe out this light, filled with peace, joy and comfort, to the other person. Continue this breathing in and out as long as you wish, until you feel calm and peacefulness surrounds you.

### **Practicing Self-*Tonglen***

As you become more skilled at practicing *Tonglen*, you will find that you can also apply it to your own suffering. During times when you are ill, anxious or in pain, you can use the breathing techniques described above to breathe in your discomfort. Just visualize your own symptoms as the dark cloud you are breathing in, then see it become transformed by your heart of compassion. This can be a useful too when you are experiencing insomnia or are unable to stop worrying.

The more you work with *Tonglen*, the greater and deeper your compassion will grow. You will find yourself automatically sending out your beautiful light whenever you encounter another person having difficulties. Rather than automatically judging others for their actions or reacting with anger and resentment, your heart will be engaged and your compassion will pour forth. You will be amazed by the changes you will see around you if you choose to take up the practice of *Tonglen*.