

DHARMA TOOLBOX
Sending & Receiving: Tonglen
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Tonglen is a Tibetan method everyone would do well to learn whether they practice dharma or not. It is that useful! And it is easy to learn. Tonglen is also known by the name “sending and receiving” as well as “exchanging yourself for others.” It is similar to the Christian motto “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” but the Buddhists take it to another whole level. Tonglen helps to develop compassion in an organic and very natural way. And the technique is very simple:

When you encounter another person who is suffering or in pain, you simply breathe in (mentally that is) all of their suffering and pain; you take it on or into yourself and you breathe out all your goodness, kindness, happiness, and good will back into them. In other words, you send all your goodness to them and receive from them all of their pain and suffering. You take this (again: mentally) on yourself. This is considered perhaps the quickest method to seriously increase a sense of compassion and to decrease ingrained selfishness. And this can also be done with any world situation, a plane crash, an earthquake, and so on, anywhere there is suffering. Seeing others in pain and suffering is not the only use for this valuable technique. It also works to clear your own personal obscurations on an item by item basis.

In other words, it works equally well for when you encounter people who are angry at you, irritating you, pissing you off, or whatever. The technique is the same. You simply breathe in (mentally) all that which is ‘other’ or different and separate from you in the other person and breathe out and back to them all of the goodness and joy in yourself, whatever you can muster at the time. In other words, you breathe into yourself all of the dark, bad, painful, offensive, and “otherness” and you breathe out all that is good, kind, and happy in yourself.

You send to them (exchange with them) all your well-being, happiness, goodness, and receive from them all of their darkness, sadness, pain, suffering, nastiness, and whatever it is that ‘you’ have labeled or can label as “other” in them. And you do this again and again and again until some equilibrium is achieved between the two of you in your mind. They won’t even be aware of this, so don’t look for them to change their expression. You are detoxing ‘your’ fear and reaction to them, not their own to you. Sounds scary, no?

When I first read about this technique I thought for all the world that tonglen was a Medieval throwback from the Dark Ages. As an astrologer who counseled others for many years I had been taught by western psychics to do just the opposite to tonglen, to get as far away from other’s pain as possible and to not take it on personally. I had been told to always wash my hands in running water after a reading and imagine all the pain, nastiness, and what-not that I might have picked up from my client going down the drain with the water. Tonglen is 180-degrees different from that approach and this was at first very hard for me to appreciate and accept. Frankly I wanted to cut and run.

I am glad I did not because this highly-efficient technique is spot-on for our western tendency to isolate ourselves from others and brand them as ‘bad’ or at least separate from ourselves. And tonglen is perhaps the quickest and most direct way to extend our own boundaries to include something else beyond our own skin as in: family, friends.... all those other than ourselves.

And tonglen is useful beyond those we encounter who are suffering and in pain or who irritate or make us angry. That is just the tip of the iceberg for this technique. People we react to strongly in a negative way aside, tonglen is brilliant as a tool to neutralize whatever confronts us from the outside, whatever we have labeled as different or “other” from ourselves -- everything we have marked as “bad” since our childhood, every attitude we have perhaps unconsciously adopted that separates us from the world around us and send us into a karma-making tailspin every time it appears to us.

All of these are expertly handled with a little tonglen practice. And while proper sitting meditation technique is something that can require time and commitment, most Americans take to tonglen right off. They just get the concept straight away and start using it. It is that simple.

In summary, tonglen is an easy technique that can be learned almost at once and that can be used not only on the mediation cushion but anytime and anywhere during the rest of our day. What tonglen effectively does is extend the perimeter of what we consider to be our ourselves outward to include more and more of the outside world, a world that ‘we’ have labeled as “other” than ourselves or for whatever reason just “bad.”

With just a little training in tonglen we learn to become aware every time we catch ourselves labeling another person as someone to close-off and shut out, and we reverse the process. We accept and take them in, in essence making friends with ourselves because somewhere along the line we have closed the door on that person, food, attitude, or what-have-you?. Tonglen opens that door again.

And doing tonglen with people is only part of what this technique can handle. Any attitude, prejudice, hatred, fear, competitiveness, jealousy, etc. that we become aware of in ourselves can be neutralized with this technique. Notice that key phrase “that we become aware of,” because for tonglen to work we have to focus not on the thing we hate and then follow that feeling, but rather we focus on the awareness that here is something that we hate. Got it?

For example, if I hate being called “Mike” instead of “Michael,” and you just called me ‘Mike,’ I focus my awareness of my reaction to what you just said rather than what you just said and make sure not to follow the reaction and launch into setting you straight with more emotion than it is worth. In other words, we learn to recognize when something is “other” or pops into our view reactively. We catch our reaction. Rather than react, we drop it, and do tonglen with our own reaction. This type of tonglen also helps to remove our prejudices and obscurations one at a time.

With tonglen we gradually extend the limits of our dislikes and prejudices outward much like when a drop of water strikes the surface of a calm lake, concentric circles open and reach out in ever-expanding rings beyond the drop. We become ever more inclusive.

Neutralizing the separation and otherness between you and the world around you brings enormous benefits. By ending the isolation and separateness (the so-called labeling and prejudice) we get back all of the energy we have locked in holding on to these prejudices and biases. Better yet, once we have neutralized this labeling we instantly stop creating all of this difficult karma in our mindstream and that stream begins to clear. Remember that every time we invoke a negative reaction to something, even if it is legitimate, we dig a deeper karmic track in our own mindstream, one that will take more and more work to eventually neutralize or erase.

It does not matter if we have a 'right' to get mad at whatever or whomever offends or confronts us. What matters is that when we do get mad, we only add insult to the injury we may have received by the imagined (or real) affront, internalizing it and recording it ever deeper in our mindstream. Every hatred, prejudice, bias, fear, and doubt that we have locked up in the world we imagine as outside us is a reflection of an attitude we maintain inside us. We are the one hurt by it. Each instance takes another little piece of our life energy.

When each bias and attitude is removed, our mind is clearer and our energy greater. And, as mentioned, we are no longer digging our own karmic grave by endlessly reinforcing the trace or track of that "otherness" in our mindstream. It really is a win/win situation, and it is so easy.

Tonglen is the great equalizer and neutralizer. It is perhaps the first Buddhist mind-practice technique those new to the dharma should consider. When I was introduced to tonglen it scared the bejesus out of me at first glance. And tomorrow I will tell that story.

DHARMA TOOLBOX

TONGLLEN: HOW I CAME TO LEARN IT

October 9, 2011

Yesterday I described Tonglen, the powerful Tibetan Buddhist mind practice for developing compassion and paring the ego down to size, not to mention that it helps to remove the myriad of biases and prejudices we inherit from our society or manage to develop ourselves. Here is the story of how I first encountered tonglen many years ago.

I had met this wonderful Tibetan lama and rinpoche during a visit of his to Ann Arbor and Margaret (my wife) and I were so moved by that meeting that we had to see him again. But he lived high in the mountains above Woodstock, New York and it was the dead of winter. In fact it was during those weird bardo-like days after Christmas and before the New Year. We all know those days. My wife and I piled our three kids (at the time) into our little car and began an 800-mile drive across the country in a frigid cold spell. Our youngest daughter was only about one and one half years old at the time and normally we would not take such a young child that far away from home in the bitter cold. But we did. That was how important it was for us to meet this rinpoche again. We knew we could learn from this man and we were hungry for a change in our lives.

It was a long trip that took two days and by early evening of the second day we had reached Woodstock, New York. Darkness had set in and the cold was so intense that the entire front inside windshield of the car was frosted over; I was using a business card to scrape a tiny hole in the frosted glass to peer out of. We were driving up the narrow three-mile mountain road to the Buddhist center. It was slow going. Finally we pulled into a small parking lot outside of a large building that used to be a resort hotel. This was before the monastery was built, although they were beginning to pour the foundation when winter had set in.

We got out of the car and the little group of us stood huddled by the door and knocking. A high wind on the mountain was blowing and sharp as we waited. It was dark and there were no outside lights. At last someone came and the door was opened by a very nice lady; we were invited inside. I guess I should tell you now that we had no appointment. No one knew we were coming. We just had winged it. Even so, the lady (her name was Norvie) was very kind and led us into a small waiting room; she would tell the rinpoche and see if he was available.

I will spare you the whole story of that visit and just cut to the chase to save space here. Suffice it to say that the Rinpoche was very kind but firm. I wanted to know what I should do in order to become his student. Margaret felt similarly. We liked him that much! And pushy me, because I had been an astrologer and done “spiritual” things for many years, I was hoping to place out of “meditation 101” and get right to the advanced stuff. That tells you how foolish I was. Rinpoche very gently told me that he could see that I had never harmed anyone with my astrology, but that when it came to learning meditation, because I knew little to nothing about it (and had done little to nothing with it so far) that it was best if I started at the very beginning. This, he said, was the fastest way.

The fastest way? Well, I had to think twice about that because my arrogance was acting up again, but I respected this man so much that I was willing to do just as he said. OK, I would start at the beginning. And now I am getting to the point about Tonglen here. When we left, Rinpoche gave us a small book called “The Torch of Certainty” by a high lama named Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye Rinpoche (1830-1899). Later I discovered this was one of the classic mind-training texts used in the Karma Kagyu Lineage. And Rinpoche pointed out the section on Tonglen for us to consider, the technique I described in my blog yesterday.

When Rinpoche had said goodbye and was gone we went outside. In the dark we could see the bare cement walls of the monastery being built and the high winds were whipping the plastic covering that was hanging from the newly poured cement. It was a little eerie and there were no stars out. Anyway, we drove our little car slowly back down the mountain and managed to find a motel in Woodstock where we could stay the night.

There we were, crammed into one room that had a single (and very small) infrared wall heater that barely kept the bitter cold outside where it belonged. Anyway, there with our little kids we opened this small book and began to read the section on tonglen, a technique we certainly had never heard of before. And it was a shocker.

Maybe it was just the night and the fact that we were huddled together around a tiny heater (with our babies) 800 miles from home on one of the most bitter winter nights of that year. What this book said was to breathe into yourself all the darkness and suffering in the world and breathe back out whatever good feeling and well-being you had. In fact the tonglen technique is often simply translated as “Exchanging Yourself for Others.”

Well this suggestion went 180-degrees against what every spiritual person and technique had taught me up to that point. In fact, I had been taught to not take in anything dark, negative, or fear-filled, and to keep such things as far away from me as possible. Psychics had even shown me how to wash my hands after doing an astrology reading and let the harmful and negative thoughts that might otherwise accumulate just go down the drain. So tonglen was saying just the opposite and I mean totally the opposite: that I was to breathe in the bad stuff and give others or whatever was out there any good stuff I had. What?

I know Margaret and I looked each other in the eye and wondered what had we gotten ourselves into? It was scary and very hard to get our mind around it. At first my gut feeling was to just cut and run and to get the hell out of there. Yet here we were shivering together in this tiny hotel room so far from home. There was no instant solution. But we read on. We had nothing else to do.

Gradually we learned that tonglen, despite how it appeared to us at the time, was an advanced shortcut to compassion and the handling of suffering and negativity. All my life I had tried to

keep as far away from anything negative (people and things) as I could. I mean: who wants that? And here was a technique telling me to do just the opposite, to welcome and breathe all this bad stuff into me and exchange it in the outbreath for whatever good stuff, feelings, and thoughts I had. These Tibetans get right to the heart every time. It got my attention.

Well, we got through the night, back on the road, and finally made it all way the home and with the concept of tonglen still intact. We would give it a try and we did. So there you have the story of how we came upon tonglen.

Tonglen has turned out to be an incredible and efficient method to remove obscurations and all the mental prejudice that I have accumulated, including those that society had gifted me with by just being born where and when I did. And unlike sitting meditation, which I found quite difficult to obtain results from, tonglen was easy to learn and do. All it required was that I gradually become more aware of my own negative reactions, biases, and preconceptions. Instead of simply following them as I had all my life, I learned to recognize and neutralize them as they arose using the tonglen technique. I made friends with my own enemies and gradually removed the walls of my personality.