

WHAT ABOUT HATE AND FEAR?

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This is about dealing with what you hate and fear in life -- a superior way to work with these. It is clear from comments to these blogs that most of you know something about meditation. It is equally clear from your notes here that not many of you have even heard about "Tonglen," which is a totally different (and equally valuable) Tibetan mind-training technique from that of sitting meditation.

Tonglen has to do with your personal mandala, the mini-world you have created around yourself and what you include in that world and what you consider as definitely outside of that world. And while tonglen can be done while sitting on a cushion (like meditation), it is most often done off the cushion, while we are walking around doing our everyday things. You can use it all the time.

Tonglen has to do with the people and things we don't like, whatever comes up on our radar screen that is "other," awful, threatening, or just different. It is also an approach to all the suffering in the world, but I will get to that. This technique is particularly useful when we hate something or are repulsed by a person, event, or thing. Sound useful? It is very useful. In fact I am surprised that more of you don't know about it.

Along with regular sitting meditation, tonglen is part of the mental toolbox of every Tibetan. For some reason here in the west most people have never heard of it, much less learned how to use it. Let's rectify that now. I have to warn you that Tonglen is (from a western perspective) a radical technique. In this sense it is advanced. It is so direct that it scared the bejesus out of me when I first heard about it. I wanted to run screaming from the thought and I almost did, so be prepared for something different. In fact, here is the story of how a great Rinpoche presented Tonglen to me many years ago.

I had met this wonderful Tibetan lama and rinpoche during his visit to Ann Arbor and Margaret 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 New Year. You 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 terrible cold spell. Our youngest daughter was only about one year 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 Rinpoche again.

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 then entire front inside windshield of the car was frosted over; I was using a business card to scrape a tiny hole in the 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 the small parking lot outside of the large retreat house. This was before the monastery was built, although they were beginning to pour the foundation when winter set in.

We got out of the car and stood huddled by the door and knocking. The wind high on the mountain was blowing and sharp as we waited. 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 time 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 stupid 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 was the fastest way.

Well, I had to think twice about that, because my arrogance was being foolish 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 Rinpoche. It turned out to be one of the classic mind-training texts used in the Karma Kagyu Lineage. And I believe Rinpoche pointed out the section on Tonglen for us to consider, the technique I want to tell you more about here.

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. Anyway, we drove our little car back down the mountain and managed to find a motel 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, we opened this little 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 with our babies 800 miles from home around a tiny heater on one of the most bitter winter nights. 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 it 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, 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 feel 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 handling 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 the way 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. Now: something more about the technique.

The idea of tonglen is very simple and it has to do with your personal mandala, what you consider yourself and what you consider not yourself – outside you. It has to do with when you encounter anything outside yourself, anything other, foreign, negative, opposite, ‘bad’, scary, horrible, hideous, etc. When you recognize something as definitely “not-you,” instead of crossing your fingers at it and trying to keep it at a distance, you do just the opposite.

Instead of pushing it away, you pull it toward you; you breathe and take it in. You absorb it willingly, and in return send out, breathe out, and let go of all that is good, kind, loving, fresh, fine, etc., inside you. You send that back in exchange for all that bad stuff. This is true for anything you consider outside yourself, especially if it inspires fear, loathing, disgust, hatred, anger, or what-have-you – any “otherness.” The concept is easy to grasp.

And you don’t just breathe in and out just once, but continually until you have neutralized or normalized or made friends with whatever is outside. Of course, you do this with whatever suffering you see in the world. You take on the pain and suffering, breathe it in, and breathe out or send your goodwill and kindness back out. And you do this anytime you find yourself being critical, judgmental, nasty, mean, and so on to something outside yourself, something “not you.” I could go on, but let me summarize.

Tonglen is an incredible technique for removing duality, otherness, and extending your personal mandala or world view to accept and in fact embrace more and more of what has been shut out by you as “otherness.” Just think about it and (more important) try it. This is a shortcut to greater compassion and kindness.

As to whether breathing in all this darkness, anger, and negativity is physically harmful? It is not. In fact, it removes your own negativity by shifting the limits of your tolerance in the direction of greater compassion and acceptance.

Tonglen is taught and used hand-in-hand in Tibetan Buddhist mind training along with sitting meditation. These are two main pillars of practice. Tonglen is a brilliant way to gradually remove whatever separates you from the real world around you. You can do it all day long wherever you are and whenever you encounter anything strange or “other.” You can do tonglen and start right on the spot to make friends with whatever is out there and perceived as other or against you.

It is especially good with enemies or not-so-friends. Instead of shutting them out and taking offence, you open up to them, take in whatever offends you, and give out kindness, goodwill, and your good energy. You do all of this in your mind, but physical hugging and kindness is also allowed. Check this most potent technique out for yourself. Try tonglen.

Questions and comments are welcome.

Michael

