

When There Are No Words – Using Tonglen To Help Us Be with Our Own Distress and the Distress of Others

In our home there are many times when using words does not help. This has been especially true with my youngest who bravely faces some notable behavioral challenges. Sometimes I find any words can ignite or escalate difficulties even when it feels like my presence is of value. I still find this hard. Even once I have regained my composure or when I manage to stay calm from the beginning it is difficult to just be present. I can struggle to stay quietly with my child as they work through their distress. I have wondered how best to share something with my kiddo when words and even physical touch are not good. I try to ensure my presence with her can be experienced as a vote of confidence in her abilities to find her own way and not as a desire, on my part, to save her from her struggle.

Tonglen provides one mindset I find helpful to cultivate when words do more harm than good and my presence is needed or beneficial. I have included the instructions here mostly verbatim. I hope this is at least partially as helpful to even one other person as it has been to me.

TONGLLEN INSTRUCTION by Pema Chödrön

Tonglen practice is a method for connecting with suffering-our own and that which is all around us, everywhere we go. It is a method for overcoming our fear of suffering and for dissolving the tightness of our hearts. Primarily it is a method for awakening the compassion that is inherent in all of us, no matter how cruel or cold we might seem to be.

We begin the practice by taking on the suffering of a person whom we know to be hurting and wish to help. For instance, if we know of a child who is being hurt, we breathe in with the wish to take away all that child's pain and fear. Then, as we breathe out, we send happiness, joy, or whatever would relieve the child. This is the core of the practice: breathing in others' pain so they can be well and have more space to relax and open-breathing out, sending them relaxation or whatever we feel would bring them relief and happiness.

Often, however, we can't do this practice because we come face to face with our own fear, our own resistance or anger, or whatever our personal pain happens to be just then.

At that point we can change the focus and begin to do tonglen for what we are feeling and for millions of other people just like us who at that very moment are feeling exactly the same stuckness and misery. Maybe we are able to name our pain. We recognize it clearly as terror or revulsion or anger or wanting to get revenge. So, we breathe in for all the people who are caught with that same emotion, and we send our relief or whatever opens up the space for ourselves and all those countless others.

Maybe we can't name what we're feeling. But we can feel it-a tightness in the stomach, a heavy darkness, or whatever. We simply contact what we are feeling and breathe in, take it *in*, for all of us- and send *out* relief to all of us. People often say that this practice goes against the grain of how we usually hold ourselves together. Truthfully, this practice *does* go against the grain of wanting things on our own terms, wanting everything to work out for ourselves no matter what happens to the others. The practice dissolves the walls we've built around our hearts. It dissolves the layers of self-protection we've tried so hard to create. In Buddhist language, one would say

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that it dissolves the fixation and clinging of ego. Tonglen reverses the usual logic of avoiding suffering and seeking pleasure.

In the process, we become liberated from very ancient patterns of selfishness. We begin to feel love for both ourselves and others; we begin to take care of ourselves and others. Tonglen awakens our compassion and introduces us to a far bigger view of reality. It introduces us to the unlimited spaciousness of shunyata. By doing the practice, we begin to connect with the open dimension of our being. At first this allows us to experience things as not such a big deal and not so solid as they seemed before.

Tonglen can be done for those who are ill, those who are dying or have died, those who are in pain of any kind. It can be done as a formal meditation practice or right on the spot at any time. We are out walking, and we see someone in pain-right on the spot we can begin to breathe in that person's pain and send out relief. Or we are just as likely to see someone in pain and look away. The pain brings up our fear or anger; it brings up our resistance and confusion. So on the spot we can do tonglen for all the people just like ourselves, all those who wish to be compassionate but instead are afraid-who wish to be brave but instead are cowardly. Rather than beating ourselves up, we can use our personal stuckness as a steppingstone to understanding what people are up against all over the world. Breathe in for all of us and breathe out for all of us. Use what seems like poison as medicine. We can use our personal suffering as the path to compassion for all beings. When you do tonglen on the spot, simply breathe in and breathe out, taking in pain and sending out spaciousness and relief.

When you do tonglen as a formal meditation practice, it has four stages:

1. First, rest your mind briefly, for a second or two, in a state of openness or stillness. This stage is traditionally called flashing on absolute bodhichitta, or suddenly opening to basic spaciousness and clarity.
2. Second, work with texture. Breathe in a feeling of hot, dark, and heavy-a sense of claustrophobia-and breathe out a feeling of cool, bright, and light-a sense of freshness. Breathe in completely, through all the pores of your body, and breathe out, radiate out, completely, through all the pores of your body. Do this until it feels synchronized with your in and out-breaths.
3. Third, work with a personal situation-any painful situation that's real to you. Traditionally you begin by doing tonglen for someone you care about and wish to help. However, as I described, if you are stuck, you can do the practice for the pain you are feeling and simultaneously for all those just like you who feel that kind of suffering. For instance, if you are feeling inadequate, you breathe that in for yourself and all the others in the same boat, and you send out confidence and adequacy or relief in any form you wish.
4. Finally, make the taking in and sending out bigger. If you are doing tonglen for someone you love, extend it out to those who are in the same situation as your friend. If you are doing tonglen for someone you see on television or on the street, do it for all the others in the same boat. Make it bigger than just that one person. If you are doing tonglen for all those who are feeling the anger

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or fear or whatever that you are trapped in, maybe that's big enough. But you could go further in all these cases.

You could do tonglen for people you consider to be your enemies-those who hurt you or hurt others. Do tonglen for them, thinking of them as having the same confusion and stuckness as your friend or yourself. Breathe in their pain and send them relief. Tonglen can extend infinitely. As you do the practice, gradually over time your compassion naturally expands, and so does your realization that things are not as solid as you thought. As you do this practice, gradually at your own pace, you will be surprised to find yourself more and more able to be there for others even in what used to seem like impossible situations.