

TONGLLEN: TAKING AND SENDING

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Tonglen practice is perhaps the easiest and most-intuitive approach to meditation training that I have come across, at least for westerners. It was the first practice that my teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche pointed out to me many years ago. I didn't think this fact was that important at the time, but now that I think about it, of course Rinpoche knew exactly what he was doing. Trying to learn standard sitting meditation is much more difficult, at least it was for me. With that in mind, let's look at tonglen together. I will try to go slow.

The great Tibetan siddha Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche tells a story in his autobiography about watching some mean person beat a tiny puppy to death. Actually, I don't remember the exact details, but somehow Trungpa witnessed the death of this small animal and was deeply moved. It touched his heart. For the rest of his life, so he writes, whenever he wanted to bring to mind the idea of compassion, he would think of this puppy and how it touched him.

The reason I mention this here is to point out to you that a good beginning target for tonglen practice is an experience like that, where your heart goes out to a person or animal in a natural and spontaneous way.

Keep in mind that tonglen practice is all about breathing in something that moves you or causes you to react (good or bad), taking it in with your breath (and keeping it there), and then breathing back out toward the object all the good energy you can muster, sending your love, so to speak.

Here is the thing. Tonglen is always about duality, about you and something outside yourself that you either care about or don't like at all. It is easier to start with something you love, an experience of compassion or love that you hold dear, but you can also start with something you hate or can't stand. Most find it easier to work with something they love and feel natural compassion for, like Trungpa did that puppy.

Either way, you are examining a reaction that YOU have to something that you consider outside yourself. Tonglen is always about resolving our dualities with the world outside our skin. Actually, we might better say that tonglen is about resolving dualities that our "Self" has, if that is not putting too fine a point on it. And here please bear with me, while I introduce an important sidebar. It is key.

Both eastern and western psychological and spiritual practices consider the "self," (as in our personal self) as something that can stand between us (whomever we are) and enlightenment or at least greater awareness. The self can be an obstacle. I won't revisit this whole "self" issue here, as I have written about it almost endlessly in previous blogs and books. A quick reminder might be this:

In the west there is some confusion about the nature of the self, to the degree that we are told on the one hand to always be our self, and yet on the other never to be selfish. I won't try to resolve that western conundrum here, but am just pointing it out. On the other hand, eastern psychology (Tibetan Buddhism) defines the self as the sum total of all our attachments at any current moment, our likes and dislikes, something we have created, and then identified with – a

long and painful history.

However, where we westerners think of our self as a conscious being (you know, "us"), the Buddhists do not see the self as a consciousness or living being like we are, but rather as a convenient personal assemblage (like a secretary) that helps us organize our daily priorities, keep our appointments, and so on.

As mentioned, at least here in the west, most of us have personified our self as an independent being as opposed to our actual nature, who we actually are. We even tend to see life from the vantage point of this self that we have created and breathed life into. Sorry if this sounds confusing, but it is, and obviously we could have a long discussion about this whole concept of the self, how we created it, and so on.

But here I invoke this concept just to point out that dealing with this self that we all have (and resolving the duality between the self and the outside world) is something that each one of us will have to do, sooner or later. And because the self is nothing other than our attachments (and by definition we are attached to our attachments), this can be very tricky stuff, which is why reverse-psychology exists, of course. Sneaking up on yourself is like sneaking up on a mirror. Every time you look, there you are. At least we habitually believe this is so, and so on.

My takeaway point here is just to let you know that the practice of tonglen has the quite marvelous side-effect of deconstructing the dependence on the self in a gentle, yet very effective way. In other words, if we will practice tonglen throughout the day, it will reduce our dependency and attachment to our self a bit at a time, eventually rendering our self as transparent enough to see through to what is behind the self, which of course, is our own awareness, the same awareness that is aware or conscious of our self, i.e. self-consciousness.

In order for there to be something like self-consciousness, there has to be a vantage point or awareness that is not the self. Otherwise we could not be self-conscious. Make sense? Tonglen practice allows us to transfer our identity (gradually) from our current identification as a Self, to the vantage point of awareness itself. And it is this awareness that will be leaving with us when we die, not the vantage point of the self like most of us tend to believe now.

No wonder we are afraid to die? We are totally attached to a self-concept that by definition is nothing more than something we have created, a montage of our likes and dislikes (our personality), which will eventually dissolve at death like mist on a summer day. And this point is kind of a big deal.

Sooner or later, we each will be transferring our identity from this patchwork-self to the pure awareness we in truth are, a vantage point that is actually portable, which the self is not.

I can see, as usual, I am getting long-winded here, so this will have to be continued. I hope it is not too dense to be boring. If we can get on the same page here, perhaps I can show you how tonglen is such a brilliant and effective practice. And it is easy to do.

Questions are welcome.



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[Photo of a Trillium taken yesterday.]