

Instructions on Tonglen Practice

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I'd like to give some brief instructions on the practice of tonglen, sending and taking, which will be introduced as regular practice during this sitting period. It will be practiced for one-half hour every day at approximately five o'clock. It probably will be introduced as well in dharmadhatu and centers as part of an intensive sitting practice.

I'm sure all of you are familiar at this point with the basic slogan on tonglen. "Sending and taking should be practiced alternately. This alternation should be placed on the medium of the breath." This is a very brief description of the entire practice. The practice will be initiated with one gong, a large gong. At this point, the first step is to check your posture, straighten yourself, and basically just prepare yourself to shift from shamatha into tonglen practice. Since this practice is for a relatively brief period of time, you should take special care to have good posture throughout.

The next step, which is very brief, a momentary thing, is to have a sudden reminder or flash, a sense of clarity, goodness, basic stillness of mind. This is very abrupt and very rapid, a matter of a few seconds, just a sense of quality of mind at rest.

The practice itself begins with the inbreath since the practice begins with yourself. What you breathe in is the quality of blackness, hotness and heaviness. The beginning of the practice—for the first 10 minutes or so—should be developing a general feeling, which is visually expressed as black and white or, in terms of temperature, hot and cool, or a basic feeling of heaviness and lightness. These are what were working with.

So with your inbreath, you begin to breathe in—in a very thorough manner—the qualities of black, hot, and heavy. With the outbreath, you breathe out what is white, cool, and light. This is very important in terms setting up the environment and the atmosphere of the practice. So when you breathe in, you should breathe in thoroughly and actually have a sense of receiving all of this into your system. When you breathe out, you should have a sense of giving away, thoroughly and completely, and even have a sense that this whiteness that you are giving out is being received by somebody or other out there.

One point about this practice is that you should actually have a sense of total body. It's not just sort of going out on the breath in a very narrow way, but it's a sense of the whole body giving out its lightness and taking on blackness—from top to bottom—through all the pores, in and out. The image of an air conditioning system has been used; you're air conditioning the room by taking in the room's hotness. So it's very deliberate, very heavy.

After you've set up this general quality of feeling, then you can go on to particular themes—ideas of someone you particularly hate, for instance. You might breathe that hatred in and breathe out some attachment to this or that. Make use of particular themes or situations that are close at hand, something that happened today or some particularly inspiring or irksome fact of your existence. The point about this section, which is drawing on situations and ideas and concepts, is that the particular

self-involved situation you begin with should be very quickly expanded to include other people around you and other sentient beings. For instance, you might start out with an aggressive sense of something; you might begin with your own aggression, breathing in the quality of your aggression. Then you expand that to the other people involved in the situation, and then, very rapidly there should be a sense of taking on the aggression generally of all sentient beings. Then you breathe out gentleness and whatever seems good—any kindness you could grasp on to. So you breathe in and out, and you expand very quickly. Don't just fixate on one particular situation for the whole practice.

If the practice starts to get confusing or slightly conceptual, or if some difficulty comes up, you can use the fresh start approach that you are now familiar with in your shamatha practice. You can just return again to that flash of clarity or stillness, and then reestablish the feeling in terms of the more abstract qualities of black and heavy, light and fresh. Then you build up to the next particular detailed situation.

So the whole quality of this practice is developing a general feeling and maintaining that feeling throughout any particular thoughts that come up. It should be balanced—with a sense of breathing in thoroughly and also letting go, giving away thoroughly, a quality of balance—not clinging to either end of the practice.

This practice of tonglen should be done every day. It should only be done in formal group practice during the specific periods set aside for it. It shouldn't be something you just casually go in and out of at whim. You should confine it to this period. Thirty minutes a day (here at seminary). In terms of postmeditation, the advice that the Vajracarya gave was to memorize the slogans and to apply them as situations—cause them to arise in your mind.

So let me just review the main steps, and then we can try it out. It's somewhat an historic occasion actually, the first formal Mahayana practice introduced to the sangha anywhere. When you hear the gong, there's a brief flash; then you begin with the inbreath and the general feeling tone for the first ten minutes or so. The rest of the time, it's much looser: you deal with situations and relationships and whatever comes up. It's fine to be somewhat deliberate and heavy about it.

Basically, the practice has an almost relentless quality. There's not particular gap in the process; you just keep on with it. When you start losing it, you just take a fresh start and build it up again. So let's give it a try.

At the very end, there will be a series of gongs. When you hear the first gong, you should stop the practice at that point. Basically, it's just a period of transition back to shamatha. So the main thing is that at the very first gong at the end of the practice, you just drop tonglen and allow the brief transition into straight shamatha.