

Tonglen instruction simplified

Tonglen means “giving and receiving” or “sending and taking”. Using the medium of the breath we breathe in the textures of hot, heavy, claustrophobic. We breathe out the textures of light, fresh, cool, spacious and open. Eyes can be closed or open.

Always begin and end the tonglen practice with a period (5 to 10 minutes) of shamatha (peaceful abiding) practice to help you center and be present in the moment.

Four stages of tonglen practice:

1. Flashing a sense of openness: can use an image like looking out from the top of a mountain, standing on the shore of a vast ocean, looking at the blue sky.
2. Working with the textures of claustrophobia and freshness: breathe in the textures of hot, dark, heavy, thick, and cramped. Breathe out the textures of light, cool, peaceful and refreshing. You can manipulate your breath if it helps. You can take longer, slower, deeper breaths. Breathe in hot, dark on inbreath; breathe out light, spacious on outbreath. That is one cycle. Breathe the textures in and out through all pores of your body. 360 degrees. You can visualize your body as porous, transparent, hollow, made of light. There is no place for the dark texture to get stuck because you are not solid--like swiss cheese with lots of holes.
3. Working with specific situations or people in your life: bring up a personal situation that is very real to you. For example, perhaps you have a friend who is dying from cancer. She is in pain and suffering. You can breathe in her pain, suffering, fear, anxiety. Then breathe out relief, spaciousness, freedom from suffering. Again the breath can be deep, slow, with in and outbreaths even in length. If you are doing the practice for someone who is seriously ill and dying, it is important to know that you are not doing the practice to physically remove their disease. You are doing it to ease their feelings of distress, fear, anger, resentment, shame, despair or whatever they are suffering.
4. Expanding the practice out to others: taking the specific situation you were working on in stage three, expand this out to others who might be experiencing the same suffering. For example, your friend dying from cancer could be one of many people in the same hospital or hospice dying from cancer at the same time. Or dying from any disease or cause. You can expand your tonglen practice to all those in the hospice, the town, the state, the country, etc. You can go as far as you can with this. In this stage you recognize and appreciate that this pain is an experience shared by many, if not all, human beings on this planet. So what has started out as personal becomes your connection with all human beings.

You can make this practice your own. For example if you just had a fight with your spouse, child, friend, etc. in stage three you can use your own personal situation to touch the pain you are feeling. You can breathe in the pain, anger, self-righteousness you feel and breathe out relief, spaciousness for yourself. Then if you are able to, you can do this for the other person you had the fight with in the same tonglen session. Or you can do it for the other person later. You can do whatever you feel able to do. Then move on to stage four and expand the practice to all people who feel angry and are fighting. If you feel overwhelmed by the practice, you can always return to shamatha at any time. You can also do the practice “on the spot”. You can go directly to stage three. Tonglen doesn’t have to be done in a formal meditation session.