

Tonglen: Giving and Receiving Meditation

The practice of Sending and Receiving helps us to get in touch with the obstacles that prevent us from understanding and caring. Through our own experience with suffering and cultivating an atmosphere of openness toward it, we can begin to accept and be with others and ourselves in a more open, kind and understanding way. Our own personal challenges then become the bridge that leads us to compassion for others.

Gentle loving-kindness toward ourselves is what it takes to be present for our own suffering. We need to learn to stay with our own suffering without trying to change it or fix it.

Meditation:

To begin, sit comfortably, close your eyes and let your body and mind settle. Allow yourself to feel relaxed and open.

Set an intention or say a prayer that you may be of service as you open to your own suffering and that of others.

Begin by breathing in whatever you are feeling—fear, agitation, anger, resistance—and accepting it. On the exhalation breathe out well-being.

Clear your mind by bringing awareness to what is agitating you and breathing it in, accepting it with kindness. Then, as you exhale, give yourself some spaciousness. Do this breath until you are calm and alert.

When you feel settled, begin the second stage of the practice, which is establishing a rhythm of breathing. On your in-breath imagine that you are inhaling heavy, hot, black air into your open heart. On your outbreath visualize exhaling light, cool, white air. Continue with this pattern—breathing in heaviness and breathing out lightness—through your open heart. The heaviness is suffering; the lightness is well-being.

Now bring your awareness to the suffering of the many others who find themselves suffering in a similar way. In the same way you did for yourself, imagine that you are inhaling heavy, hot, black air your open heart. On your outbreath visualize exhaling light, cool, white air. Continue with this pattern—breathing in heaviness and breathing out lightness—through your open heart.

Return to your own suffering again, breathing in the pain and breathing out the lightness.

This practice takes a lot of courage. You might find yourself resisting breathing in the suffering. If so, you can breathe in your resistance as hot, heavy smoke. You can breathe in alienation, pity, boredom, arrogance, confusion, grief, or clinging—whatever flavor your suffering of the moment takes. Then breathe out willingness, softening, peace.

Greet all of it with loving kindness and acceptance.