

A Meditation on Tong Len (Taking and Giving)

A simple tong-len practice using a personal problem

Preparation

Sit comfortably and relax your body.... Relax your mind by letting go of or putting aside any other thoughts that might be in your mind – of the past or future, people, activities, etc. Decide to keep your attention focused on the meditation, and to bring it back any time it wanders away.

Motivation

When your mind has settled down in the present, generate a positive motivation for doing the meditation. The most positive motivation is wishing to benefit others. So open your heart to others, with the understanding that they wish to be happy and free of suffering just as you do. Think that you are going to do this meditation in order to work on your own mind—decreasing the self-centered and negative aspects of the mind and developing the positive aspects of the mind—so that you can become more and more able to be of benefit to other beings.

Body of the meditation

Bring to mind a problem you currently have in your life.... Allow yourself to feel the pain, the discomfort of the problem.... See if you can notice how your mind does not like the problem and wants to push it away, to get rid of it....

Then think: "I am not the only person experiencing a problem like this. There are many others...." Think of other people who may be experiencing the same or a similar problem—you may actually know some people who have the same problem, or you can use your imagination to think of others, around the world... Also, you can probably think of some people who have this problem to an even greater degree than yourself. (For example, if you have lost a loved one, think of people who have lost many loved ones, such as in a war or a famine.)

Then generate compassion, thinking: "How wonderful it would be if all those people could be free from their suffering." Because you have your own first-hand, direct experience of this problem, you are in a good position to be able to understand and empathize with what they are experiencing. So generate as strong and purely as you can the compassionate wish for them to be free....

Then decide that you will accept or take on your own experience of this problem, in order that all those other people could be free from theirs. The simplest way to do this is to reverse the attitude that wants to push the problem away—"I don't want this problem"—and to voluntarily accept it, with the thought, "By my accepting and experiencing this problem, may all those other people be free from theirs. I will experience this problem on behalf of them." Contemplate that.....

If you wish, and are comfortable to do so, you can also do the following visualization of taking on the suffering of the other people. First imagine your self-cherishing

attitude (the selfish attitude of caring more for yourself than for others) in your heart, in the form of a solid, dark spot or a big, dark rock. Then you imagine the suffering of others coming out of their bodies in the form of dark smoke or fog. It comes into your heart and absorbs into the self-cherishing attitude and destroys it. Alternatively, you can imagine other's suffering turning into a bomb or missile, which blows up the solid rock of self-cherishing.

Following that, imagine that all your goodness—good qualities, positive energy, happiness, etc—in the form of a radiant sphere of light, or a wish-fulfilling jewel, in your heart. Visualize rays of light emanating from this light or jewel, going to all the people whose suffering you just took away. The light rays transform into whatever they need to be happy—food for those who are hungry, money for those who are poor, homes for those who are homeless, friends for those who are lonely, courage and strength for those who are frightened and helpless, and so on. Feel that you are really giving them what they need, and they become happy and satisfied, all their needs and wishes fulfilled.... You can also imagine sending them spiritual teachers who teach them the path, and help them to progress along the path all the way to enlightenment.

Spend as much time as you wish doing this visualization and contemplation. Feel joy in what you are doing—taking away other's suffering and giving them happiness. Even if it's just on the level of imagination, it is still extremely beneficial—to purify your own mind, and to cultivate loving-kindness, compassion and other positive qualities. In this way you help yourself to become more beneficial for others now, and bring yourself closer to enlightenment, at which time you can be of the greatest benefit to all beings.

Dedication

Conclude your meditation by dedicating the merit or positive energy that you have created. Remember the motivation you had at the beginning— wishing to benefit others—and dedicate the meditation that it will be the cause for them to be free from suffering, to enjoy greater peace and happiness, and to quickly reach their highest potential, the perfect state of enlightenment.