



## Dolpo Tulku Rinpoche · Teachings

### Advice on *Tonglen* Practice

Please start with giving rise to the mind of enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings before reading this advice on how to practice *tonglen*<sup>1</sup>.

Whatever we do depends on our motivation we have in the beginning of undertaking a task, may it be a dharmic activity or a worldly one. We know that through our own experience. For example, if we do something with the intention to help someone the best we can, or if we do that hoping we'll get something in return, we can easily see that in the first case we are more likely to get a positive result. If I give something to my friend thinking he'll give me something in return and then he doesn't, I might feel some regret for my generosity. But if I give or do something with the pure thought of simply helping the other and I don't get any reward for it, this won't worry me.

If we work for a charitable project, for example, and we spend money on it, investing our time, putting a lot of effort into it with the hope that we will gain something from it, the work will be very strenuous. But if we do not think of ourselves in the first place but have the benefit of others in mind, then all the effort we put in won't feel so great. We know that from experience. We have all been witnesses to our own happiness.

In my life, I have done things with one intent or another because I wanted to help. I felt the greatest happiness and satisfaction when I acted altruistically.

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<sup>1</sup> Tonglen means to send (in Tibetan 'Tong') and to receive (in Tibetan 'Len'). It is a practice of giving rise to compassion by sending out one's own happiness, well-being and everything else deemed positive to others when breathing out. When breathing in, one takes in all negativities, illnesses and afflictions from others.

As humans we have more highly developed brain and consciousness than animals. What makes us different is not the physical form but the ability to use our mental faculties to consciously help others.

We have to understand that our motivation is the most important factor and therefore it has to be pure. This pure motivation is called “the mind of enlightenment”. To develop this pure motivation, we have to contemplate suffering, which is part of the nature of all beings, and give rise to compassion. Without compassion, whatever we do is difficult. We tend to think then 'Oh, I have to do this. It is my responsibility.', but we have no genuine interest.

As a mother, for example, we try, based on compassion, to alleviate all problems and difficulties of our child and to help them. We don't have the thought: 'Oh, now I have to get up to help the child even though I don't want to. Now I have to take care even though I am busy with something else', but we react automatically. Our main thought is to help the child. Afterwards we don't contemplate how difficult it was. And the reason for this is having compassion.

But our compassion is very limited and only extends to the people near and dear to us, like our children or family. The mind of enlightenment in contrast extends to all sentient beings and therefore, the compassion it is based on has to include, without any bias, all sentient beings who are conscious of suffering and happiness.

There are many people who claim they practise *tonglen*. They breathe in and out and hold some visualization. But the *tonglen* practice needs to be based on compassion. That is very important. To just start meditating without having invoked compassion is wrong. If a mother didn't know that her child is suffering, she wouldn't generate the thought to help them.

How to give rise to this kind of compassion? We have to be clear on the existence of suffering of all sentient beings in the first place. In Buddhist texts there are many explanations on the sufferings of the beings in the six realms<sup>2</sup>. But what is paramount is to be clear on how much suffering there is in our own lives. We have to draw on our own experiences and understand that all beings suffer in the same way. Then genuine compassion will arise without us having to fabricate anything. This compassion should go so deep that we have tears in our eyes and the hairs on our body stand up. Only then should we begin with the *tonglen* practice.

So to sum up, first of all we have to contemplate the suffering of all beings; then develop deep-rooted compassion and only then begin with the *tonglen* practice. These are the steps that we have to follow.

In the Himalayan culture for example, the main requirement for a medical professional is to have compassion. It is said that there's a difference whether the patient is taken

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<sup>2</sup> Hell-beings, hungry ghosts, animals, human beings, demi-gods and gods

care of with love and compassion or not, even if the treatment is the same. If the patient is being treated roughly, without a friendly word or explanation of the illness, his reaction to the treatment will be other than if he is cared for in a warm-hearted way. If we become aware of suffering of others, compassion will develop all by itself without any effort.

During the mediation-session our body should be relaxed in the seven-point-posture of Vairocana<sup>3</sup> The main point is that the backbone is straight. The cushion should be two inches high, so the hips get slightly tilted forward. If we are practitioners of the Ngöndro, the preliminary practices, we recite it until we have received the four empowerments of the Guru Yoga practice. If we are not Ngöndro practitioners, we simply visualize the Buddha surrounded by bodhisattvas and other deities in front of us and take refuge. In return we get their blessings. Then we start our contemplation on the suffering of all beings, give rise to compassion and start with the tonglen practice.

If we start our tonglen practice too fast without having properly invoked compassion, it won't be very successful. If we have an hour to practice, we should at least use half an hour for the development of compassion. This can also be achieved through the practice of "exchanging oneself for others". If you travelled in Nepal or India for example, you'd see a lot of beggars at the side of the road. They have to bear heat as well as cold. Sometimes they don't get enough to eat, and get abuse. Nobody would do that voluntarily. But these people have no choice. We should imagine what it would be like to be in their place, if we had to be outside 24 hours a day, if we were humiliated by others. What would that feel like? If we think about that long enough, then from the depths of our hearts compassion arises.

The moment we have this kind of compassion we can start with the main practice. We breathe normally without any extra effort. When we breathe out, we imagine we send out all the merit of the three times, all our happiness and well-being without holding anything back for ourselves. When we breathe in, we imagine we take upon ourselves all the suffering we can think of. For that, we need a lot of courage and certainty that we are capable of doing this. We can repeat this seven times, twenty-one times or depending on how much time we have. If we get tired, we can relax and again contemplate on the suffering of all beings. When compassion arises again, we continue with our tonglen practice. In this way we can practice both types of meditation at the same time.

Finally, it is important to say that the Dharma practice has to be integrated into everyday life. Whatever we do, we can do it with the pure motivation to benefit others. At the same time our own wishes will be fulfilled. If we act that way, anything we do

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<sup>3</sup> The 7-Point-Vairochana posture: 1) sitting in the lotus posture; 2) the hands either on the knees or the right hand on top of the left hand in the lap; 3) the elbows slightly away from the body and the shoulders straight; 4) straight backbone; 5) the chin slightly tucked in; 6) the tongue touches the palate; 7) the gaze is down the nose in front

will turn into Dharma practice. It is wrong to think that we need a special time for Dharma practice or an extra place apart from our everyday life. The Buddha taught the Dharma in order to improve our everyday life so we can experience more happiness and well-being. He didn't teach in order for us to throw away our current life and create a new one.

Many people say that they have no time to practice the Dharma. I ask them if they have time to work. Most people have to work for at least eight hours a day. That is the best time to practice the Dharma because that's the time our mental afflictions, like anger and jealousy are at their strongest. If we linger happily tucked away at home, there's no opportunity to get angry - and therefore no opportunity to practice patience. When we are by ourselves we can't get jealous and therefore can't practice rejoicing in the success and good fortune of others. But when we go out, that's when all negative mental states arise. If at that moment we are able to put the Dharma into practice, our lives will improve and we can experience happiness and satisfaction.

A doctor, for example, only prescribes medicine when the patient is sick. If someone is well, he doesn't need any medicine. In the same way we have to use the Dharma when we have difficulties.

After reading and contemplating this teaching we should dedicate our merit that we have accumulated by doing so. The cause of this cyclic existence with all its suffering is that we all mainly think of ourselves first. We should dedicate with the intent that this self-centeredness may subside. In the last few months there have been many natural catastrophes and we should pray that they will be pacified. And finally, we should dedicate on behalf of the people holding political power. May compassion arise in them.

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