

## SESSION 24: Tonglen

### WELCOME

Welcome again to our course on realizing a life of love! It's good to be with you!

If you're new to this course, I strongly recommend that you review the first ten sessions because they make up the core foundation. You'll need this to benefit from the remaining sessions.

### SO LET'S GET STARTED

Again, as a reminder, the 3 As of awakening are *Attending*, *Appreciating*, and *Acting* with love. Attending leads to appreciation, which then leads to skillful loving action. Appreciation has two meanings, however: both understanding the nature of things and understanding the value or sacredness of Reality. Both of these aspects of appreciation arise from careful attending. Together, the twin practices of Attending and Appreciating, called “Appreciative Attending,” generate wisdom and reverence, which enable us to fulfill our purpose—to nurture and savor Life. Inspired by reverence for Life, we can then take *Action* to benefit all of Life—others and ourselves—with a loving heart, while enjoying each brief and precious moment of existence.

In our last session we discussed the practice of collaboration. I hope you've had a chance to practice collaboration this past week.

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Today I will be discussing another practice for cultivating reverence called **“Tonglen.”** This is an ancient practice first developed in Tibet for **healing pain with loving compassion.** “Tonglen” means “giving and receiving.” In this practice, we take in our pain or the pain of others on our inbreath, and then breathe out love and compassion to ourselves and others on the outbreath. In this practice, **Tonglen involves converting pain to love.**

Compassion, equanimity, and loving kindness can be learned with the practice of Tonglen and other compassion meditations. With practice, you will rewire your brain to make it a more loving and peaceful brain. Research has shown that people who practice these meditations are more empathic, altruistic, and forgiving. Compassion meditations like Tonglen also reduce stress, anxiety, and depression.

I am indebted to Caroline Alioto (Lama Palden Drolma) and others who have taught me this practice. Lama Palden’s book, “Love on Every Breath,” describes this practice from a Buddhist perspective.

This is my favorite practice. I do it daily and continue to do it throughout my day. This is a great practice for developing compassion and equanimity. It is also a **great practice for healing a sense of emptiness, self-hatred, or insufficiency.** If you have been wounded or are otherwise in pain, this is a very healing practice. If you feel relatively whole, this practice is a powerful way of developing your love and compassion for others.

I suggest you always start this practice with your own pain. You may need to focus on your own pain for many days, weeks, or months. As you strengthen your experience of love and care for yourself, you will be able to then breathe in and dissolve the pain of others, sending your loving energy out into the world.

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What happens as a result of this practice is that you will begin to feel more loving towards yourself and others as you go about your day. **This practice develops both equanimity and a generosity of heart.** You will find yourself breathing out love to everyone you interact with. You will begin to radiate out kindness. Others will sense and appreciate this. With time, you will trigger a virtuous resonance of loving and being loved.

This practice also helps us to face and embrace our pain and the pain of others so that we can heal it. This **helps counter the human impulse to avoid pain**, which shuts our hearts down, makes us insensitive to the suffering of others, and only perpetuates pain and suffering. Tonglen also counters our tendency to pursue pleasure for our sake alone. Instead, we breath out love, compassion, and relief to others—we freely give away what we would normally keep for ourselves. This enhances our capacity for loving generosity.

By reversing our human tendencies to avoid suffering and seek pleasure, Tonglen **helps us to break down our habitual patterns of self-preoccupation, selfishness, and avoidance.** Tonglen triggers a shift from self-preoccupation and judgment to a preoccupation with the suffering and concerns of others and a caring desire to alleviate that suffering. With practice, you will become less avoidant of pain and more open-hearted. Tonglen dissolves our protective shell of indifference and awakens our innate capacity for universal compassion.

Tonglen can be done either as a formal meditation practice or informally as you go about your day, on the spot, whenever you encounter suffering in yourself or others.

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**I will now guide you through a practice session of Tonglen:**

1. Get present with the presence practice. As you do this, relax. Let go of tension. Take a few, deep, slow breaths. Anchor awareness in the breath or some other anchor. Let the mind settle as much as is possible. Breathe out and let go of tensions or agitation as much as possible.
2. Close your eyes if you wish.
3. Once you are feeling present and as centered as possible, imagine your sources of love filling your heart with a radiant, glowing ball of love. Refer to the benefactor meditation. Tap into the loving sources that work best for you: loving people in your life, loving beings that you know of, ideal, divine loving parents, God or others divine beings, or even just a loving universal energy. Whatever works best for you.
4. As you take in the flow of love, sense this radiant, glowing ball of love growing in your heart. Sense the force of love coming into you and filling your heart to the brim with radiant, glowing love energy.
5. Now sense any pain in your heart or elsewhere in your body. You can also bring to mind circumstances that trigger upset, fear, hurt, grief, sadness, loneliness, anxiety, anger, boredom, restlessness, or any other painful feeling. You can imagine this pain as a dark, black smoke.

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6. Now breathe in this black smoky pain directly into the radiating ball of love in your heart. Imagine the pain being converted into brilliant white loving energy. Breath out this loving energy towards yourself into the center of your pain. Imagine your love sources behind you radiating love into your glowing, radiating heart from behind. Imagine breathing out this radiating love to yourself.
7. Breath in the black, smoky pain, convert it in your loving, radiating heart, and breath out white, radiant love.
8. If the pain feels too much, just focus on the outbreath of love. Release love from your radiating heart, fueled by your love sources, into the vastness of awareness.
9. When you feel ready, you can then bring to mind someone else who is also suffering. One person you care about who is having a hard time. Sense what is it like for them. Let yourself fully experience their pain as much as you can. Breath in their black smoky pain, let it be converted in your glowing heart, and breath out white radiating love to them.
10. If you wish, you can imagine as many people or groups you want that you know to be in pain: prisoners, people who are sick, people who are heartbroken, homeless people, refugees, or any other person or group. Breath in their pain, convert it in your glowing heart, and breath out radiant white love.
11. At the end of this practice, sense the pain of all those who suffer. Breathe in their pain and breathe out love. Ultimately, you can breath in the pain of the world and breath out love for the whole world.

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12. As you finish, make an intention to continue to tap into your glowing heart and to keep it radiating. Make an intention to breathe in both your pain and the pain of everyone you encounter today and to convert it to loving energy. Make an intention to live with love on every breath.

In bringing this practice into your daily life, it is helpful to practice attending to the essential goodness and vulnerability in everyone. Look closely. See if you can discern the conditioning of others that causes them suffering and causes them to harm others out of ignorance and pain. Attend to their vulnerability and to the divine spirit that shines through. Sense both your and their sacredness. **As you encounter pain, breathe this pain into your radiating heart and breath out love.**

I recommend you commit to a daily practice of 10-30 minutes of either Tonglen or another compassion meditations we will learn in this course. **As you do this practice, including on the spot during the day, do the practice without expecting anything in return. Remember that true love is given for love's sake alone.**

Start with your own pain. Then move on to taking in the pain of others. **Think of this as building your compassion “muscle.”** Just like with weightlifting, start with milder pains to develop your capacity for compassion before breathing in the greater pains of the world. When you breath in your own pain, remind yourself that “other people feel this too.” You are not alone, but part of a common humanity that endures pains both great and small, just like you. Breath in the pain of people who suffer like you and breath out love to them as well as to yourself.

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### OUR NEXT SESSION

In our next session, we'll be discussing the skillful practice of trust—trust in both ourselves and others.

**In the meantime, between now and then, I encourage you to do the following:**

1. Continue your daily presence practice—both a period of silence, solitude, and stillness in the morning and your practice of stillness in motion through the day.
2. Start your day with a morning intention to love. You might want to recite a daily intention in the form of a prayer as in the dedication to love prayer in the meditations in the resource section of my website.
3. Practice appreciative attending. Inquire deeply into your experience with a kind, curious eye, especially if you're in pain. Ask, "what is this?" and affirm, "this is sacred." Continue to let go of negative judgments as they arise.
4. Review this lesson on Tonglen. Begin a morning practice of Tonglen along with your presence practice. Also practice Tonglen on the spot during the day when you experience or encounter pain in others.

**Please take some time after our session today to share your reflections with your fellow members of the WellMind community and to read what others have to say as well. Let us share and support each other in our exploration of love!**