

MEDITATION: MINDFULNESS AND TONGLLEN

Meditation – Sept. 30, Oct. 28, Nov. 25, Dec. 30, Jan. 27, Feb. 24, March 31, April 28, May 26, June 30

Last Sunday of the month (9:30-10:00 AM)

Each month members of St. James join together to receive instruction, guidance and support regarding various forms and elements of meditation, followed by a time of group meditation. During this time you will learn helpful techniques regarding how to meditate and, if you already meditate, how to deepen your meditation practice. Come join us once, or come and join us each and every month.

How to do Mindfulness Meditation

In mindfulness meditation, we are trying to achieve a mind that is stable and calm. Begin your meditation practice with short periods of time: 10, 15, or 20 minutes.

Most meditation is done sitting down in either a chair, on meditation cushion or meditation bench. Make sure your posture is erect. When you sit down, remind yourself that you are there to train your mind.

Next, inhabit your body. Spend time settling into your posture. If you find yourself getting dull or hazy or falling asleep, you should check your posture.

You may choose to close your eyes during meditation or merely partially shut them and gaze softly focusing downward a few inches in front of your nose.

As you start the practice, you have a sense of your body, and a sense of where you are, and then you begin to notice your breathing. The breath should not be forced, but rather just breathe naturally.

As you begin having thoughts, just label them. In your mind, say, “Thinking”. Do so gently, and without judgment, and then come back to the breath.

Another way to practice Mindfulness Meditation

1. Being in the body – When you first sit down to practice meditation first ask yourself, “What is going on right now?” Then be in touch with your physical, emotional and mental state. The point is not to think about the body, the emotions, or the environment, but to actually feel them. Then bring your awareness to your breath. Feel the actual sensation of it entering and leaving your body. The practice is to be aware, to simply observe and experience whatever is happening. Attempt to see and experience life as it arises by letting it just be there – minus our opinions or judgments.
2. Labeling and experiencing – As we sit, emotions arise. As emotions arise,

- we can ask, “What is this?” Where do you feel that emotion in the body? Notice the quality or texture. The practice is to label the thoughts over and over to see them clearly and to break our identification with them.
3. Opening into the heart of experiencing – Is the third aspect of sitting practice. This is where we breath the painful reaction into the center of our chest. Why? Because experiencing our emotions fully will allow them to break through the layers of self-protective armor and awaken our heart. Fully felt, our emotions will clear the deep well of love and compassion that is the essence of our being.

Ultimately that what practice is all about, experiencing the present moment, just being there.

The Practice of Tonglen

(From *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* by Pema Chodron)

“Each of us has a "soft spot": the place in our experience where we feel vulnerable and tender. This soft spot is inherent in appreciation and love, and it is equally inherent in pain.”

Often, when we feel that soft spot, it's quickly followed by a feeling of fear and an involuntary, habitual tendency to close down. This is the tendency of all living things: to avoid pain and cling to pleasure. In practice, however, covering up the soft spot means shutting down against our life experience. Then we tend to narrow down into a solid feeling of self against other.

One very powerful and effective way to work with tendency to push away pain and hold onto pleasure is the practice of *tonglen*. Tonglen is a Tibetan word that literally means "sending and taking." The practice originated in India and came to Tibet in the eleventh century. In tonglen practice, when we see or feel suffering, we breathe in with the notion of completely feeling it, accepting it, and owning it. Then we breathe out, radiating compassion, lovingkindness, freshness; anything that encourages relaxation and openness.

In Tonglen practice, through our compassion, we take on (embrace without resistance) the various sufferings of all beings: their fear, hurt, frustration, pain, anger, guilt, bitterness, loneliness, doubt, rage, and so forth. In return, we give them our loving-kindness, happiness, peace of mind, well-being, healing, and fulfillment.

Traditionally, we begin by doing Tonglen for someone we care about. However, we can use this practice at any time, either for ourselves or others. Tonglen can be

done for those who are ill, those who are dying or have just died, or for those that are in pain of any kind. Tonglen can be done either as a formal meditation practice or right on the spot at any time. For example, if we encounter someone in pain, right on the spot we can begin to breathe in their pain and send out some relief. At any time, when we encounter our own emotional discomfort or suffering, or that of others, we open our heart and fully embrace what we are encountering on our in-breath. Breathing out, we offer the heartfelt radiance of acceptance, loving-kindness, and compassion. This is a practice and a way of life.

Practicing tonglen on one friend in pain helps us begin the process of gradually widening the circle of our compassion. From there, we can learn to take on the suffering and purify the karma of all beings; giving others our happiness, well-being, joy, and peace of mind. Tonglen practice can extend indefinitely, and gradually, over time, our compassion will expand. We will find that we have a greater ability to be loving and present for ourselves and for others in even the most difficult situations. This is the wonderful goal of tonglen practice, the path of compassion.

In this practice, it's not uncommon to find yourself blocked, because you come face to face with your own fear, resistance, or whatever your personal stuckness happens to be at that moment. At that point, you can change the focus and do tonglen for yourself, and for millions of others just like you, at that very moment, who are feeling exactly the same misery.

I particularly like to encourage tonglen, on the spot. For example, you're walking down the street and you see the pain of another human being. On-the-spot tonglen means that you just don't rush by; you actually breathe in with the wish that this person can be free of suffering, and send them out some kind of good heart or well-being. If seeing that other person's pain brings up fear or anger or confusion, which often happens, just start doing tonglen for yourself and all the other people who are stuck in the very same way.

When you do tonglen on the spot, you simply breathe in and breathe out, taking in pain and sending out spaciousness and relief. When you tonglen as a formal practice, it has four stages:

- 1) First, rest your mind briefly in a state of openness or stillness.
- 2) Second, work with texture. Breathe in a feeling of hot (red), dark, and heavy, and breathe out a feeling of cool (blue), bright, and light. Breathe in and radiate completely, through all the pores of your body, until it feels synchronized with your in-and out-breath.
- 3) Third, work with any painful personal situation that is real to you. Traditionally,

you begin by doing tonglen for someone you care about. However, if you're stuck, do the practice for your pain and simultaneously for all those just like you who feel that kind of suffering.

4) Finally, make the taking in and the sending out larger. Whether you're doing tonglen for someone you love or for someone you see on television, do it for all the others in the same boat. You could even do tonglen for people you consider your enemies--those who have hurt you or others. Do tonglen for them, thinking of them as having the same confusion and stuckness as you find for yourself.

This is to say that tonglen can extend indefinitely. As you do the practice, gradually, over time, your compassion naturally expands-- and so does your realization that things are not as solid as you thought. As you do this practice, at your own pace, you'll be surprised to find yourself more and more able to be there for others, even in what seems like impossible jealousy, loneliness, or suffering, be it our own or others. We breathe in with the desire to completely embrace this experience; to feel it and accept it.

Use what seems like poison as medicine. Use your personal suffering as the path to compassion for all beings.

Another Excellent Form of Tonglen

1. Clearly imagine a situation where you have acted badly, one about which you feel shameful or guilty, and which may be difficult to even think about.
2. Then, as you breathe in, opening your heart, accept total responsibility for your actions in that particular situation. Do not judge or try to justify your behavior. Simply acknowledge exactly what you have done wrong and wholeheartedly ask for forgiveness. Now, as you breathe out, send the compassionate radiance of reconciliation, forgiveness, harmony, healing, and understanding.
3. Breathe in the pain and the blame, and breathe out the undoing of harm. Breathe in taking full responsibility, breathe out the compassionate radiance of healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

This exercise is especially powerful. It may give you the courage to go see the person(s) whom you have wronged and the strength and willingness to talk to them directly and actually ask for forgiveness from the depths of your heart.