

The Wise Brain Bulletin

News and Tools for Happiness, Love, and Wisdom

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Tonglen: Spinning Straw Into Gold

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[Excerpted with permission from *How to Be Sick: A Buddhist-Inspired Guide for the Chronically Ill and their Caregivers* (Wisdom Publications, 2010)]

*O that my monk's robe
Were wide enough
To gather up all
The suffering people
In this floating world.*

Ryokan

Tonglen is a compassion practice from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Nonetheless, I find that Ryokan's Zen poem above captures for me the essence of *tonglen*. Of course, they are both inspired by the example of the Buddha.

When I first got sick, it didn't take long for me to accumulate a collection of healing CDs from a variety of spiritual traditions. They had one thing in common: I was instructed to breathe in peaceful and healing thoughts and images, and to breathe

out my mental and physical suffering. In *tonglen* practice, however, the instruction is to do just the opposite. We breathe in the suffering of the world and breathe out whatever kindness, serenity, and compassion we have to give. It's a counter-intuitive practice, which is why the Buddhist nun and teacher Pema Chödrön says that *tonglen* reverses ego's logic.

Tonglen practice was brought to Tibet from India in the eleventh century as part of a group of teachings known as the "seven points of mind training," a collection of 59 "slogans" for practicing the path of compassion. The practice of *tonglen* is described in the slogan: Train in taking and sending alternately; put them on the breath.

Those two sentences don't give us a lot of

Greetings

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Rick Hanson, PhD edits the Bulletin, and this issue was designed and laid out by Laurel Hanson.

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guidance, but for hundreds of years, this slogan along with the other 58, have been a favorite subject for commentary by Tibetan masters. Recent commentaries can be found in the writings of Chögyam Trungpa, Dilgo Khyentse, and Pema Chödrön, among others. These commentaries flesh out the meaning of each slogan. And so, *tonglen* becomes: Breathe in the

suffering of others; breathe out kindness, serenity, and compassion. We are, in effect, breathing out the sublime states of mind introduced above.

I had learned *tonglen* practice before getting sick, but I didn't use it very often. Now it's my principal compassion practice. My bond with *tonglen* occurred on the first day I returned to work, six months after getting sick in Paris.

Like everyone else around me, I couldn't believe I wasn't well enough to continue with my profession, at least on a part-time basis. So, a half-hour before my scheduled class, Tony dropped me off at the front door of the law school. It was the second week of January 2002. I took the elevator up one floor to my office. I was to teach Marital Property to second- and third-

year students. As soon as I sat down in my office chair, I knew I was too sick to be there. I began to panic, so I lay down on a couch in the office. Unexpectedly, my thoughts turned to the millions of people who must go to work everyday even though they're sick. I realized that many of these people were in a worse position than I was—if they didn't go to work, they wouldn't be able to pay the rent or buy food for their families.

I'd been in the work force for dozens of years but had never before thought about people being forced to work while sick. As I was contemplating this, I began to breathe in their suffering (which, as a sick person myself, now included my own suffering). Then I breathed out what kindness, serenity, and compassion I had to give. To my surprise, the panic subsided and was replaced with a feeling of deep connection to all these people. Even more astonishing was the realization that, as sick as I was at that moment and as preoccupied as I was about the task awaiting me in less than ten minutes, there was still some kindness, serenity, and compassion inside me to send to others on the out-breath.

A few minutes later, I arose from the couch, took a chair with me, and for the first time in twenty

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years, taught a class while sitting down. For the next two and a half years of part-time teaching, I used *tonglen* in my office, followed by adrenaline in the classroom to get me through the work week. Only Tony saw the devastating effect that continuing to work had on me as I went straight from the car to the bed and stayed there until the next class I had to teach. When I think of those years, *tonglen* and that couch in my office are inseparable in my mind. I don't know how I would have survived without both.

After that first day back at work, I began to use *tonglen* all the time. I'd use it while waiting for the results of medical tests. It took me out of my small world—out of exclusive focus on my illness—and connected me with all the people caught up in the medical system who were

anxiously waiting to hear the results of tests.

It never failed to amaze me that no matter how worried I was, there was always some serenity, some good wishes, some compassion inside me to send out to others in the same situation. Finding our own storehouse of compassion is the wonder of *tonglen* practice. Gradually, the fear over my test results would diminish, and I could wait with equanimity to see what the world had in store for me next.

I love that *tonglen* is a two-for-one compassion practice. The formal instruction is to breathe in the suffering of others and breathe out kindness, serenity, and compassion. But the effect of repeated practice is that we connect with our own suffering, anguish, stress, discomfort. So, as we breathe in the suffering of others concerning a



struggle we share with them, we are breathing in our own suffering over that struggle as well. As we breathe out whatever measure of kindness, serenity, and compassion we have to give, we are offering those sublime states to ourselves too. All beings are included.

Yet there came a day when I reached my limit with *tonglen*. I tried the practice on Thanksgiving Day, two and a half years after I got sick, while lying in my bedroom and listening to the sound of my

family chatting and laughing in the front of the house. I tried breathing in the sadness and sorrow of all the people who were in the same house as their family on Thanksgiving, but were too sick to join in the festivities. It was too much. I just couldn't hold everyone's suffering without crying. So I cried.

But four years later, in a similar circumstance, the practice worked. It was a measure of how *tonglen* had slowly worked its magic. My second

grandchild, Camden Bodhi, was born in September 2007. I hosted a welcoming party for her that, as it turned out, I could not attend. When I set the plan in motion in the spring, I was halfway through a year-long experimental antiviral treatment that appeared to be working. But six months later, on the day of the party, I was too sick to take the hour-long trip to Berkeley. I lay in bed that day, thinking about friends and family who had gathered to celebrate my granddaughter's birth and I was overcome with sorrow.

First, I tried mudita practice—cultivating joy in the joy of those who were at the celebration. It helped, but I continued to feel sad and disheartened by my inability to attend, by thoughts about the good time I was missing, by the



Perspectives on Self-Care

Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this Bulletin), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.

feeling that I had let others down. So, I turned to *tonglen*. I breathed in the suffering of all those who were unable to be with their families on a special day of celebration. As I did this, I was aware I was breathing in my own sadness and sorrow, but, unlike that Thanksgiving Day, I was able to hold the suffering—to care for it—without feeling overcome by it. I then breathed out kindness, serenity, and compassion for them and for myself. The connection I felt with all those people was powerful and moving.

If you feel hesitant to try *tonglen* for fear that breathing in other people's suffering could overwhelm you, you're not alone. Here's the response given by the eco-philosopher and Buddhist scholar, Joanna Macy, when that very concern was raised at a Spirit Rock workshop. First, she reassured the woman asking the question that her capacity to hold others' suffering was greater than she imagined. Then she said: *If you really could alleviate all the suffering in the world by breathing it in, wouldn't you?*

Of course, this is a hypothetical and so not a realistic assessment of the effect of practicing *tonglen*. Indeed at times we may cry in response to breathing in the suffering in the world, but it's compassionate crying—a perfectly appropriate

response. And those moments when we can hold the suffering of the world on the in-breath and breathe out whatever kindness, serenity, and compassion we have to give, are like turning straw into gold.



In 1982, Toni Bernhard received a J.D. from the School of Law at the University of California, Davis, and immediately joined the faculty where she stayed until chronic illness forced her to retire. During her 22 years on the faculty, she served for six years as dean of students. In 1992, she began to study and practice Buddhism. Before becoming ill, she attended many meditation retreats and led a meditation group in Davis with her husband, Tony. Toni can be found online at www.howtobesick.com.



Beginning an InterFaith Contemplative Group

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[Editor's note: After the events of 9/11, many people have been looking for common ground at a time when many faiths, sects, and nations seem in conflict with each other. Given the tendencies in the brain – derived from their survival benefits during evolution – to regard “them” as alien, threatening, and a legitimate target for attack (or at least subjugation and exploitation), interfaith initiatives that build bridges across the “us”/“them” divide are a welcome development. They are also an opportunity to investigate how the sense of connection can calm fears and quiet impulses toward aggression. For these reasons, we wanted to publish Dr. Johnson's remarkable account of how he began an interfaith group.]

Nothing has informed me of other faiths, nor has any practice so affected my faith, as participating in an InterFaith Contemplative Group. This group mainly represents the five major faiths, but welcomes those of other faith orientations. Here's how it all got started.

The Request

One day Jan Swanson, whom I regard as Mrs. InterFaith of Atlanta, and I were at a Muslim

restaurant near the 14th Street Mosque, the Al-Farooq, in Atlanta, Georgia. While we were waiting, Jan and I exchanged stories that explained how we got to the present moment. She told me her story of transition from Kansas to Berkeley to Atlanta, and I shared my journey from Alabama to Georgia by way of Kentucky, Indiana and Mississippi. Then she made a daring and hard request.

“I want you to teach me about contemplation,” Jan said.

I responded, “I don't think that I can do that. I am not sure that one can teach another about contemplation. But, I have wanted to be part of an InterFaith Group and if we formed one, we could learn together.”

Testing the Idea

When Jan agreed to the group idea, she began to name various people whom I did not know who represented the other faiths. We set a date for the luncheon in Virginia Highlands, an old section of Atlanta now being beautifully redeveloped. On a

Wednesday in April (I don't recall the exact date) we met at The Red Rooster Cafe to talk about the formation of an InterFaith Contemplative Group. In addition to Jan and me, who are both Presbyterian Protestants, in the circle sat four other people. First, there was Michael, who is a Zen Buddhist and who also directs the Soto Zen Center; Kemal, a Muslim layman who develops and manages a software company; Victor, a preceptor in Sahaj Marg, a group associated with the Hindu faith; and Judith, a female rabbi who was serving as an associate in one of the synagogues in Atlanta. After the meal we introduced ourselves to each other, focusing particularly on our religious background. I then indicated that I would like to begin meeting regularly as a group in which each

of us would have the opportunity to speak more deeply about our faith. There was a consensus that this would be a desirable follow-up to our luncheon. We set a date for the first meeting, which was a month away. Michael volunteered the use of the Soto Zen Center for our monthly Sunday evening meetings. The group began with those who were present at the initial luncheon, plus a few others who heard about the meeting and were interested in participating.

The First Meeting

Before the first meeting I made no assumptions about being the leader. I called Michael to see if he would facilitate our meetings, and without



hesitation he pushed that responsibility back to me. Though I was shocked by his response, I suppose it was natural that having suggested the gathering, I would be the first facilitator. As I thought about the first gathering, it seemed to me that we needed a simple format that focused on our personal experiences of faith. So when we sat together for that first meeting, I suggested to the group that we begin with thirty minutes of silence together. Michael offered a few words about getting quiet

and participating in a group silence. We began the silence when Michael struck the large gong with a padded tip that created a tone that went on and on beckoning each of us into our center.

The half hour of silence ended with another sounding of the same large gong. I waited a few minutes for people to become refocused. I then suggested that Kemal tell us what had happened in his life that caused him to want to be part of

this contemplative group. He spoke for fifteen or twenty minutes, telling his story from the standpoint of what had created his desire to be part of an interfaith group.

After he finished, each of us sought a deeper understanding of his faith by asking him questions. These inquiries were always respectful even as we sought more information about his life, his faith and his experiences. The members who had been good listeners not only asked him questions about his background and the strong influences in his life, but they also shared from their experience and their faith perspective insights that seemed relevant to his story. We anticipated that the meeting would last about an hour. In actuality it lasted for about two hours. For the first year this was the format. One by one, each of us shared our story of



what had happened in our lives that caused us to desire participation in an interfaith group. Each month the personal stories were always followed with good, enabling questions, and with positive responses from the listeners.

Month by month as we met, one after another shared his or her story. During the year some dropped out, but others came to take their place. Representatives from the Catholic Church, other Protestants, a couple of Vedantists and a couple of Jewish people came to the meeting. The initiation for new members consisted of the privilege of telling their story. As these various stories were shared, our trust in each person increased. Sharing stories also provided a way for each of our lives to become enmeshed in that of the others. A committed community was born!

As I reflect on the months that we have been meeting, a number of insights come to me that I have received through our fellowship. Quite early I recognized that when we shared our experience of God or the Ultimate or the Ground of Being, there was a depth at which we were all united. There seemed to be no barriers when we spoke of our primal experience of God instead of the doctrinal or imagined forms that each of our faiths had given to this experience. As our sharing got deeper and more personal, I realized that I appreciated my own faith more after viewing it through the lenses of those in the group. The members of this group have regularly inspired me through their depth, sincerity and discipline. As I review the months of meeting, I realize that I look upon these group members as brothers and sisters



who are on their journey just as I am. And, I see us journeying together. This has been one of the most inspiring and instructive encounters that I have ever had.

The Great Serendipity

When I began the InterFaith Contemplative Group, I had no idea that it would issue in a ministry together. While I was learning much from this fellowship and growing in my conviction that interfaith was essential for the twenty-first century Church, I was also developing a Weekend Immersion Event. The short version of the development of this event begins with my long conversation with a man who wanted to bring Christians from the churches in his mountain

community to Atlanta to introduce them to the various faiths. Working with this idea, I came up with both a week-long and a weekend event that would show Christians the places of worship, expose them to the spiritual practices, and explore the cultural aspects of the various faiths as we shared meals and conversations with persons adhering to the other major faiths.

What does a typical Weekend Immersion Event look like? We begin on Friday morning with introductions and an orientation, then proceed first to visit an African-American mosque. After lunch and conversation at a nearby restaurant, we share in the worship experience (Juma), which often attracts about a thousand persons. Following worship we journey to a new, larger mosque made

ACCEPTING THE HEART'S HARLOTS

*I make this choice:
I luxuriate with my harem of heartaches.*

*Why not wrap arms around Grief?
She looks so hungry and pitiful with her empty hands,
And she never leaves me.*

*Why not kiss the cheek of Sorrow,
And savor the brine in her bottomless well of tears?*

*I admit to massaging Frustration's shoulders.
He is beefy and buff and his muscles cry out for kneading.*

*I embrace the ancient frame of Rage.
Yes, I hug him as he shudders in my arms.*

*I let Confusion nibble my fingertips as I comb out her curls
While her brother, Doubt, leans heavily against my back.*

*And I snuggle with Disgust,
Though he drools and mutters when he naps.*

*Shame and I share a mattress under the white moon.
She's a naughty lover who hogs the bedclothes.*

*I admit to exploring the furrows of my wounds,
And to caressing the thighs of Fear as they tremble like two captured fawns.*

*Sometimes, when I stroke the eyebrows of Regret,
She points out sunflowers along my path.*

*So I make this choice:
I offer a bouquet to my Catastrophe.
I honor my Decay, my Fractures, and my Pettiness.*

*Yes, I accept my ridiculous Fate.
I accept my Bereavement and my Terror.*

*I won't shun the beast of my Despair.
I will mend its lame forepaw.*

*I know it is the mascot of my Dissatisfaction,
But it is also the defender of my Dreams.*

I make this choice.

Will Meecham, MD, MA
WillSpirit.com

up of immigrants from various Muslim countries. After touring the facility, we interact with the lay leadership.

Saturday morning the group begins with a continental breakfast at the Vedanta Center; Vedanta is a form of Hinduism without the cultural trappings. To further expand the experience of Hinduism, the group journeys to a Hindu temple a half-hour away. Here an oncologist who was trained at Emory University meets us; as a lifelong Hindu he takes us on a tour of two different temples and explains to us that Hindus believe in One God, but this One God has many manifestations. The group makes its final stop on Saturday at a Jewish synagogue where we share in prayers, a lecture presentation, worship and dinner with further conversation.

On Sunday we either worship with the Buddhists and if there are non-Christians in the group, we include a Christian worship experience. At the Soto Zen Buddhist Center we chant with those present and after the service we fellowship with the participants. After time with the Buddhists the group gathers for a meal and reflection on the weekend. The participants are asked to state their discoveries from the experience and then they are invited to express how they would like to be involved in interfaith work.

Who became the leaders for this event? Four

of the persons in the InterFaith Contemplative Group with whom I had been meeting for a year! These leaders wove their personal contemplative vision into their leadership of the immersion week and weekends, which exposed the depths out of which their presentations originated. This was an unexpected, providential outcome to a simple question: "Will you teach me about contemplation?"

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Fare Well

May you and all beings be happy, loving, and wise.