

Using Tong-Len in Daily Life

(From the teachings of Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche and Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye. Compiled and edited by Kathy Wesley. Last revised 9.16.02)

From the teachings of Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche:

The goal of Buddhist practice is to pacify our minds. Why is this the aim? When we have different thoughts, the mind pushes us to do whatever it thinks. Therefore, all verbal and physical actions – positive and negative – begin with the mind. So the goal is to pacify the origin of all these actions.

When the mind is well-trained, like a well-trained horse, it will obey its master and be useful; if it is not trained, like the untrained horse, it can harm its master – even threaten its master's life. So it is very important to train the mind.

In Buddhism, the initial technique of mind-training is shinay meditation (shamata in Sanskrit), which is also called “calm abiding” meditation.

Shinay is important for beginners because at first the mind is very vulnerable to distraction. Like a round object placed on a table, it has a tendency to roll. Shinay helps the mind to develop stability.

Developing calmness through shinay is not the final stage of meditation, however, because we still have neurotic thoughts. To reach that final stage [where neurotic thoughts are uprooted] we need the other skillful means of Buddhism.

The Source of Happiness

We should recognize that mental happiness does not come from an external source; it is internal in origin. And we should see that internal happiness is the ultimate happiness.

If one is always aggressive [or filled with greed and other negative emotions], one is unable to experience any inner happiness, even if external conditions are good. The remedy for this is to develop true love and compassion, which destroy hate [and other afflictive emotions.]

Attachment, aggression and all the other conflicting emotions come from grasping at the concept of self, or “I.” Since we are preoccupied with this “I,” we forget others.

But when we have true love and true compassion, we are not concerned with our own needs only, but instead are concerned with the needs of others.

Ignorance is eliminated once we have developed loving kindness and compassion, which is the absence of anger and [attachment.] And in the absence of ignorance, one will know how to help others. In essence, we become selfless.

When we talk about becoming selfless, people tend to get frightened, because they think that becoming selfless means they will not take care of themselves. But becoming selfless actually means caring without clinging. When we have no fixation on the self, we have the capacity to care for others. ...

... To overcome the notion of self, we need to train our minds, because what we are doing in essence is changing our habits.

Tong-Len, a Practice of Letting Go

The Bodhisattva Sutra says “give yourself to others,” and contains stories of how the bodhisattvas [or, buddhas in training] gave even their bodies when it was necessary to benefit others.

But we are not being asked to give blindly. We are being asked to give when we are ready.

To get to the highest level of giving – giving all – we must first learn how to give. So we have to make a habit of letting go and detaching ourselves from self-clinging. The main practice for developing this ‘letting go’ is called Tong-Len, or “Sending and Receiving.”

The practice of Tong-len is very simple. You sit in meditation posture, breathing normally. Then, think when you are inhaling that you are taking on all the negative karma, illness, misfortune and unfavorable conditions of all beings and accepting them into yourself. When you exhale, send all virtue, merit and excellent qualities of yourself (even those from all your previous lives) to all sentient beings. ...

... Tong Len minimizes and gradually uproots conflicting emotions and engages us physically, mentally and verbally in accumulating merit and developing tolerance. This explains the expression, “Enlightened beings have reached enlightenment by working for the benefit of all sentient beings. Sentient beings remain in samsara because they are working for themselves alone.” By letting go, we work to benefit others, rather than working merely to benefit ourselves.

Tong Len in Daily Life

Tong Len is not just for when you are sitting in meditation; it should be a part of your life wherever you go, live, work, or eat.

When you walk, review these thoughts in your mind: “May all beings experience happiness; may I take upon myself the suffering of all beings.” When you inhale, think, “may I be able to take on others’ sufferings,” and when you exhale, think, “may I be able to give others merit [and happiness].”

In fact, you can use your own conflicting emotions to practice Tong Len. The text on this practice [The Great Path of Awakening, by Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye] gives a slogan about this: “Three objects, three poisons, three seeds of virtue.”

When training the mind as beginners, we still have neurotic thoughts, but we must know how to handle them. The text implies that we can transform conflicting emotions into virtue. But how can we practice this?

First, we must apply mindfulness. For example, the moment we are aware that we are experiencing anger or another conflicting emotion, we should think, “may I experience the neurotic emotion of all sentient beings and may all sentient beings be free of that neurotic emotion.”

The emotion itself is not positive, but the way you have handled it is positive. And you have actually accumulated merit.

Similarly, when you make a mistake out of confusion, instead of giving yourself a hard time, you should accept the mistake, and realize that it arises from the confusions that come from negative karma. Think, “everybody has made these mistakes. So now I take on all of their confusion.” So, even if you make a mistake out of confusion, it can become an “object of virtue.”

In short, you try to make it a habit to think of other sentient beings’ welfare and practice accordingly.

You have to be able to practice everywhere. When you’re practicing anything – meditation, a sadhana (chanting meditation) or whatever, think, ‘I am practicing to benefit living beings,’ in the beginning, middle and end of the practice.

You can even transform sleep into the practice of virtue. If you go to sleep thinking, “I will help living beings,’ your sleep will benefit living beings. But you must remember to do this every time you go to sleep – even when you wake up during the night and then return to sleep. ...

... Since we need to have a technique for accumulating merit in everyday life – even if we can't sit down and practice – if we can think of others, we are practicing. If we enjoy a meal and we think of sharing the joy with others, that is practice. In this way every activity of life can become practice. So, we must immediately mentally share any happiness and joy we feel and immediately take on the suffering of others when they are upset, etc

Tibetans are trained to think, "If something makes me happy, may all beings share in this happiness; if I meet circumstances of suffering or frustration, may my frustration eliminate the sufferings of all sentient beings."

In this way, Tong Len is the origin of immeasurable merit, and by practicing it we break through fear and ego-clinging. With it, we become courageous and tolerant, and become willing to work for the benefit of beings. – *from an unpublished transcript, Columbus, Ohio, Karma Thegsum Choling, 1991*

From the teachings of Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye

Slogan 8: THREE OBJECTS, THREE POISONS, THREE SEEDS OF VIRTUE

The three poisons continually arise in connection with three objects. Compulsive attachment arises for objects that are pleasant or useful; aversion arises for objects that are unpleasant or harmful; and stupidity or indifference for other objects. Recognize these poisons as soon as they arise. Then, for example, when attachment arises, think:

"May every bit of every sentient beings' attachment be contained in this attachment of mine. May all sentient beings have the seed of virtue of being free of attachment. May this attachment of mine contain all their disturbing emotions and, until they attain buddhahood, may they be free of such disturbing emotions."

Aversion and other emotions are used in practice by working with them the same way. Thus, the three poisons become three limitless seeds of virtue.

From THE GREAT PATH OF AWAKENING, by Jamgön Kongtrul, translated by Ken McLeod. © 1993 by Ken McLeod.