

# Tonglen: The Practice of Taking and Sending

compiled by George Draffan, [NaturalAwareness.net](http://NaturalAwareness.net)

The practice of taking and sending (*tonglen*) interrupts the habit of grasping whatever we like, rejecting whatever we dislike, and undermines the sense of a separate self that needs to be defined and satisfied and defended. *Tonglen* is a subset of the Mind Training (*lojong*) tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.

**Settle and take refuge:** As with any formal practice, settle down in the breathing body for a few minutes, resting in the experience of whatever is arising. Then form the intention to free yourself and others from suffering and the causes of suffering.

## **Step 1: Ultimate awakening: opening to the nature of experience**

A phrase or a way of looking might help elicit the opening. Here are a few ways:

- Regard everything as being like a dream...
- or
- Regard everything as like a reflection in a mirror...
- or
- Like a mirage... Like an echo... Like a memory...
- or
- Feel your body as a whole. Feel your skin, all your skin. Feel the space in the room. Whenever your awareness collapses down to something in the room, let go of it and return your awareness to sensing space.
- or
- Relax and open completely to all the senses: everything in your visual field, the sounds around you, the sensations in the body, the sense of space. Rest, open to all sensations... Then, *look at what is aware of experience*.

Don't try to sustain an opening; just open for a moment or two, and then, as you do the practice taking and sending, return once in a while to just being open -- by feeling space, or opening all your senses, or by reminding yourself that everything is like a dream.

## **Step 2: Relative awakening: taking suffering and giving happiness**

Take in physical, emotional, and mental experiences of pain, discomfort, struggle, unhappiness, and failure. Whatever you dislike, fear, or avoid -- completely take it in. Gradually imagine taking in others' experiences of pain and discomfort too; imagine you experience the pain, and others are relieved of it.

Give away physical, emotional, and mental experiences of happiness, good fortune, success, and virtue -- anything you like, give it away to others. Completely give away your good qualities and resources, your happiness and pleasure. Imagine that by your giving, others have all those good experiences.

**Riding the breath:** If it supports the feeling of taking and sending, as you inhale imagine the unpleasant experiences coming into your body in a thick cloud of black smoke. As you exhale, imagine giving away pleasant experiences on a stream of cool radiant moonlight. Breath in and out of the center of the chest.

**Extending over time:** Always begin a session by opening to your own unhappiness and happiness. Gradually, extend the taking and sending to more and more people. Imagine taking the pain and suffering of those who are dear to you, and giving them your happiness and pleasure. Then extend the taking and sending to those who you feel neutral about. Then extend to those who are difficult. Eventually, extend to many -- everyone in the city, whole ethnic groups, animal species, and all beings.

When the session is done: drop your efforts and just rest again for a while in the sensations and movements of the breathing body. Then close by aspiring to share the benefits of your practice with all others.

### **On the Spot Practice**

*Confess all your hidden faults!*  
*Approach what you find repulsive!*  
*Whoever you think you cannot help, help them!*  
*Go to places that scare you!*  
*Sentient beings are limitless as the sky. Be aware!*  
~ Machig Labdron

At home, at work, on the street, whenever you feel grasping or aversion, regard all things as like a dream. If you feel grasping for pleasure, happiness, or success, instantly give it away to others. As you taste something delicious, give that delight to others. When you feel pride arising, give all the accomplishment and credit to others. When you feel the warmth and security of having friends, give away warmth and security to others.

Whenever you see someone struggling, or feel pain, discomfort, unhappiness, or failure, don't avoid it -- instantly take those difficult experiences in completely. When someone insults you, take in the feelings of anger or embarrassment. When you fail at something, take in the feelings of failure and inadequacy. Imagine taking in everyone's pain and discomfort, so that you experience it and they don't have to.

## Tonglen Tips

**Tip:** Be sure to do the ultimate awakening first. Opening to the way things actually are -- without ground or boundary -- undermines the felt sense of being a separate, solid self.

**Tip:** The moment you grasp at anything, give it away. The moment you reject anything, take it in. Recognize that the self that grasps and rejects is insubstantial, like a dream or a reflection. Again and again, interrupt the habit of grasping, rejecting, and solidifying. That's mind training.

**Tip:** Be sure to do both taking and sending. You don't have to take and send on each inhalation and exhalation, but do explore alternating back and forth so that you don't get hung up in thinking and trying. Just go right against your habitual tendencies: take in whatever you find unpleasant, scary, or disgusting; give away whatever you find pleasant or joyful or uplifting.

**Tip:** Don't struggle to match the taking and sending. Take and send whatever arises in your mind or experience. Take in disgust for rotten food and give away your intelligence. Take in the pain of arthritis and give away your wealth. Take in the grief of losing someone dear and give away your health. Take in annoyance and pettiness and give away enjoying music.

**Tip:** Include all the physical, emotional, and mental resistance as you take in what is painful and give away what is pleasant. If you experience tightening against taking in pain, include the tightness and take it in completely. If you feel inadequate, as if you have no good experiences or qualities to give to others, take in the sense of inadequacy. If you feel selfish and unwilling to give away your successes and pleasures, take in the feelings of selfishness and unwillingness.

Every experience is fair game. All painful experience is taken in; all pleasant experience is given to others.

**Tip:** Don't fall into magical thinking about how you're going to get sick by taking in others' pain, or how you're going to become a savior by transforming others' pain into happiness. By deliberately going against your usual patterns of attraction and aversion, you are undermining your selfish territoriality and transforming reactivity into presence. Keep the practice secret; don't undermine it by boasting or expecting credit or trying to use taking and sending to make things better or easier.

**Tip:** Taking and sending is not meant to be emotional trauma nor mere mental exercise. As you take in discomfort, open to all the sensations, feelings, and stories. As you give away happiness, open to all the sensations, feelings, and stories. Experience it all viscerally and regard it as like a dream.

**Tip:** The moment you grasp at anything, give it away. The moment you reject anything, take it in. Recognize that the self that grasps and rejects is insubstantial, like a dream or a reflection. Again and again, interrupt the habit of grasping, rejecting, and solidifying. That's mind training.

**Tip:** Taking and sending combines and integrates the four immeasurables (brahma-viharas). By taking in what we find painful we cultivate compassion. By giving away happiness we cultivate loving kindness. By learning to do both we cultivate equanimity. Our growing willingness and ability to do that brings joy and appreciation. By training in taking and sending, we open to these inherent qualities in every circumstance we encounter.

# Chekawa's Tonglen Instructions

Compiled by George Draffan based on  
Chekawa's *Seven Points of Mind Training*  
and Jamgon Kongtrul's *The Great Path of Awakening*

## Point One: The Preliminaries which teach the support for Dharma

### **Aphorism 1. First, train in the preliminaries.**

#### **Contemplate:**

- Samsara, the cycles of suffering in the six realms of confusion and reactive habits...
- Karma, the seeds and fruits of every thought, word, and deed...
- Impermanence: everything changes, nothing stays the same, every thing and every being will change and end...
- And our rare and precious human life, resources and opportunities that we have but for a moment...

#### **Refuge and Bodhicitta**

In front of us, Buddha Shakyamuni and all the lineage teachers... with their awakened hearts and minds... of the same nature as your awakened heart and mind...

In us, the Dharma, the teachings, written and spoken, and the practices that realize and embody those teachings...

Around us, the Sangha, the communities of noble practitioners, and all sentient beings, taking refuge in awareness and compassion for the benefit of all beings:

*Until I awaken, I take refuge in  
the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.  
Through the goodness of generosity and other virtues,  
may I awake for the sake of all beings.*

## Point Two: The Actual Practice: Training in Bodhicitta

Settle into the breathing body...

### **Aphorism 2. Regard all phenomena as dreams.**

Regard the world and its inhabitants, and all the objects we perceive, and all the sensations and thoughts and emotions that arise -- they are like the appearances in a dream.

Breathing, hearing, seeing, feeling... like the appearances in a dream...

**Aphorism 3. Examine the nature of unborn awareness.**

These dream-like appearances are arising in your mind...

Now look right at your mind -- look at awareness itself --

What is it?

Where is it?

**Aphorism 4. Even the remedy is freed to subside naturally.**

Whatever thoughts you might have about dream-like appearances and mind...

*stop and look right at them.*

**Aphorism 5. Rest in the nature of all, the basis of everything.**

Then just rest in awareness, not grasping or rejecting anything that arises.

**Aphorism 6. In post-meditation practice, be a child of illusion.**

Even when you're not meditating, whatever arises, regard everything as the mind's magical display of appearances, like a dream, like a reflection of the moon in water, like a rainbow... arising yet empty of solidity.

**Aphorism 7. Train in taking and sending alternately, put them on the breath.**

**Aphorism 10. Begin the sequence of exchange with yourself.**

As you breathe in, take in pain and suffering. Whatever sensations, thoughts, and emotions you're experiencing right now, invite into yourself whatever is uncomfortable. Willingly open to whatever is uncomfortable in your experience at this moment.

As you breathe out, bring to mind pleasant experiences and positive qualities -- happiness, clarity, good fortune, kindness, the support of friends -- offer that to yourself.

Practice with yourself first, and then gradually extend the taking and sending to others.

**Aphorism 8. Three objects, three poisons, three seeds of virtue.**

- We can turn every experience into virtue; whatever arises,
- Imagine taking in what you don't want.
- Imagine giving away what you do want.
- Take everyone's grasping and rejecting into yourself.
- Offer all your happiness and clarity and peace to others.

3 objects become 3 poisons or 3 seeds of virtue		
Pleasant objects and experience	Attraction can become grasping and greed	Give the pleasant to others for their happiness
Unpleasant objects and experience	Aversion can become rejecting and hate	Take in the unpleasant in order to relieve all beings
Neutral objects and experience	Indifference can become ignoring	Pay attention to all experience

Example:

I hear of an opening for a great-paying job doing just what I love to do. My mind begins to spin out on how I have to get this job. And when I get it, my life will finally be perfect!

When I feel that grasping take hold, I can stop and imagine taking my worst fears (boring work, lack of opportunity, unemployment, homelessness) into my experience in order to relieve others of that suffering.

And I can imagine offering to others pleasant experiences: success, wealth, good reputation to my colleagues, to the unemployed, to people who have never had an opportunity to make a decent living or enjoy success and recognition.

We can undermine the power of the habitual reactions by embracing them in gentle awareness. We can turn three poisons (greed, hatred, ignoring) into seeds of virtue.

**Aphorism 9. Use sayings to train in all forms of activity.**

Whatever you are doing -- talking, working, resting, eating, walking, sitting, lying down -- use the lojong aphorisms to keep your practice going. Lojong is the cultivation of love, compassion, and bodhicitta, and the ability to dismiss and dispel self-grasping and self-cherishing.

*When I am happy, may my merit flow to others;  
 May its blessings fill the sky!  
 When I am unhappy, may the sorrows of all beings be mine;  
 May the ocean of suffering run dry!*  
 ~ Mind Training Taking Joys and Pains Onto the Path