

Transforming Suffering

Over the course of this year, we've talked about ways to integrate Buddhism and meditation into all facets of your life; we've managed to turn our breath, our sight, what we smell and what we perceive into points of meditation. Essentially, the goal with our practice is make our entire lives an expression of meditation and mindfulness.

However, when we recall the First Noble Truth, we realize we are suffering; thinking about this, we often try to push our suffering away. Very often when we teach about suffering, people's response is "Sweet Mother-of-Mumford, that sounds depressing." Then we ignore it; we don't think about it. We meditate to escape. This is natural. But as we've discussed before, when we ignore our suffering, it gets worse—then we have problems, but we just choose to ignore them. We can actually integrate suffering into our practice when we remember the practice of *metta*, or loving kindness.

So, today I'll be talking about how to integrate suffering into our practice not only as a way of making us more compassionate, but as a way of actually removing our own suffering (or in the least, taking the edge off the pain). We'll start by looking to working this into our meditation, and then our daily life.

Tonglen

We'll start with the meditation practice of *tonglen*, and then discuss further application. This meditation is unique to the Tibetan tradition in practice, although its origins and basis exist as the *metta* meditation in others (which we've learned before from Adeesha). Essentially, *tonglen* means "giving and taking," or specifically the giving of one's own happiness and the taking of another's suffering. In this practice (as the name sounds) we give our happiness to others, in the hopes of removing their suffering. Often times in the Tibetan tradition, we call this 'praying,' but we are not praying *to* anything. We are praying *for* others, and to take their suffering.

However, we have to have happiness to give, so we meditate for ourselves first. So, start out with concentrative meditation, and meditate that way for a while. Follow your breath. As usual, a thought will come up; stop and recognize that thought. If that thought is making you suffer, or you know of any suffering in your own life, keep it in your consciousness for a little.

Yourself

- 1) Then "breath in that pain"; momentarily internalize it. You can visualize the pain as hot smoke
- 2) Breath that "smoke" into your heart; imagine it melting any indifferent coldness you have.
- 3) Then, exhale the release to that pain, breath out the antidote; imagine this as a cool breeze, relieving the pain.
- 4) So, "Breath in my anxiety, breath out assurance," "Breath in my illness, breath out acceptance," "Breath in my sorrow, breath out calm," "Breath in my pain, breath out the release."

Others

Now, do this for others.

1) Imagine at first a friend with the same problem; breath in their pain into you, and give them your calm.

***YOU ARE NOT ACTUALLY TAKING THEIR ANXIETY. The reason we take their pain is not that it will destroy us, but because we practice meditation, we can handle their pain; it does not break us. This is an exercise in intention. You are conceptually taking their pain.

2) Now imagine someone you're indifferent to; a professor, an acquaintance, a boss, etc.

Imagine that they've been through the same pain, and breath in their suffering.

3) Now imagine an enemy—someone who really bothers you. Do the same.

Why do we do this?

As you know, the bodhisattva in Tibetan/Mahayanna Buddhism vows to take the pain of all the world; thus, we take vows to help everyone. Santideva once said: "So long as sentient beings remain, until then too may abide, to dispel the misery of all the world." This practice is an extension of that.

However, does it really work? If I just breath in someone's pain, are they going to be well? There are miracle stories, which experience cannot deny, but logic cannot accept. But that's not the point of this meditation.

The beauty of *tonglen* is that it makes us realize the universality of suffering. We start with ourselves, and we feel our own pain. Then we realize our friends are in that same pain; we realize that the people we see are in this pain as well; we realize our enemies are in this pain too. You realize we are all the same, we are all suffering the same. You begin to have equanimity towards all people—you may not like someone, but you see them as human no matter what.

But the power of all of this *stems from our own pain*. By touching our pain—by seeing it and understanding it—we instantly understand everyone; in fact, everyone in the entire world. Pain and suffering transcend cultures; tears mean the same thing in every language. We may not have similar opinions or views with all people, but we begin to see them as our brothers and sisters. We look at each person we meet and think "You are just like me." When you realize this, you cannot hate anyone—you may not like them, you may not enjoy their company, but in a sense you will love them. And trust me, if you do this enough, you *will* help them in any way that you can, should anyone need it. The words will ring in your mind: *I take your pain, I give you my happiness*.

So, the purpose of *tonglen* is not really to change the world around us, but to change how we operate in that world. John F. Kennedy once said: "Do not pray for easier lives. Pray to be stronger men." This is what we do: we are not asking for our prayers to be answered, but rather we are becoming the answer ourselves.

How sharing suffering alleviates our own suffering

So, this is how we take other's pain—through the intentional practice of *tonglen*, which inspires us to help in the more tangible world beyond meditation. We are taking other's pain, but in a sense we are also alleviating our own.

As the practice of *tonglen* naturally shows us, suffering is universal. I think often times, pain (the natural reaction to something unsatisfactory) becomes suffering (a lasting, emotional woe or discomfort) when we feel alone. This is when we begin to ask the age-old “Why me?” We feel as if we are singled out in our suffering.

But through *tonglen* and loving-kindness, we realize we are not alone. When you're walking through campus, drowning in your own thoughts and anxieties, look at each person who passes you; ask yourself, “Have they been through this too?” Have they had tons of term papers piling up? Have they ever fought with a friend? Have they ever had their iPod break? Have they ever been dumped, hurt, lied to? Have they ever been sick? Have they ever had a loved one get sick, or die?

Probably, yes. And so have you, and so have I.

Don't fall into the trap of “Oh, they've been through it too, so suck it up.” People may have it worse than you or the same as you, but that doesn't illegitimate your own pain; likewise, someone may seem to have it better than you, but that doesn't illegitimate their own pain. Just know you're not alone in your pain, and that likewise you should never let anyone be alone in their pain.

Pain is what makes us human—it is our shared human experience. Empathy and compassion stem from pain and suffering. Suffering equalizes us; suffering makes us one. Know this: integrate it into your practice; make this knowledge a part of your life. Transform your suffering into compassion, to take others pain; transform your suffering into compassion to alleviate your own.

Suffering does not have to destroy you. It can inspire you. This is the beauty of suffering.