

Sending and Taking – Excerpted from *Your Mind Is Your Teacher* by Khenpo Gawang Rinpoche

“Sending and taking” (*tonglen* in Tibetan) is the practice of sending our good qualities and helpfulness to others with the out-breath and taking into ourselves the problems and suffering of others with the in-breath. This method was taught by Shantideva in his *Bodhicharyavatara*.

We begin by considering thoroughly how similar we all are. Everyone wants to feel well and to avoid pain and discomfort. For Shantideva’s method to work, we must accept that this basic attitude holds true for us all.

The practice of sending and taking means that we sit quietly in meditation posture and use our normal breathing in and out as a focus of attention, joining it with a wish in our hearts.

As we breathe out we wish:

May my happiness and my good qualities flow out with my breath and make all sentient beings happy and saturated with good qualities.

When we breathe in, we wish:

Let the discomfort, uneasiness, suffering, and pain of all sentient beings be taken away from them. May I may take the burden off their shoulders.

Breathing evenly, in and out, we sit and make these wishes.

Most of us have the attitude that we want to do things and take care of ourselves first, and then we will think about others. If we look honestly at our minds, we cherish our selves as more valuable than others. In Shantideva’s tradition this is seen as a deception. The fact that self-cherishing is stronger than other-cherishing is actually what causes our problems. Our troubles come from this attitude of seeing ourselves as so important, and from all the reactions that are based on this wrong view. When implemented and done regularly, tonglen practice is powerful enough to reverse the attitude that has literally brought us so many problems from beginningless time until the present moment.

This exchanging oneself with others needs to be real and heartfelt to work. Often it is helpful to start with some being you care for deeply, someone for whom it is easy to wish the best and feel a desire to take on their cares. Gradually you can move outward to include more and more beings until even the most dreadful being or circumstance can be a part of your practice.

Sometimes people tell me they can’t do tonglen practice because they have enough of their own problems or that most people they know cause them problems. They can’t imagine wanting to take on their enemies’ problems or feeling love for them. Really, we do not know or come in contact with over ninety-nine percent of the human beings on even this world. We do

not have a personal connection with many people. We can start with the beings we do have affection for and then enlarge our practice to include the huge numbers of beings that are unknown and neutral. When we are stable in our practice, we can start to add those whom we dislike or who have caused us harm.

All those people living in the houses you pass, in the cars next to you on the freeway, or those you see on TV, are just like you. The birds outside with their seeds, the raccoons eating dog food on the porch, or the squirrel peeking in my window, they are like us too. They want to be happy and safe, and they don't want to be caught in troubles and harmed.

Your motivation for doing Contemplative Meditation and these practices that give rise to bodhichitta should be the wish that all beings have good fortune and a happy life. Studying and practicing to help oneself is not wrong, but from a Mahayana view it is not the best motivation.

We have been thinking of "self" for a long time, and still we have a lot of suffering and trouble. We are thinking about one person's life and working to benefit one person. This is not bodhichitta. Bodhichitta is thinking of others first and wishing them to be free from suffering, and that they will discover that lasting freedom from suffering, which is enlightenment.

We are practicing for all the countless sentient beings. We are not being narrow-minded, thinking of only of ourselves or of a few people whom we love. Rather, we are thinking of innumerable beings. This mindset is called the "hero's mind" or "big mind" because it has a wide view.

Sitting down and thinking, "I'm going to sit here and meditate, and then I'll feel better," is fine, but there is a better method to bring us greater happiness. All around us—among our family and friends, in our community, nation, and world—the habit pattern of complaining and finding fault abounds. Instead of focusing on our own pleasure or happiness, we could resolve to remove our misperceptions and misunderstandings through contemplative analysis and to cultivate this extraordinary attitude of bodhichitta. These practices can give us the wisdom and strength of purpose to do something about all the problems we see and hear every day. We start by having a larger motivation of whom we are going to benefit by our practice.