

~ Meditation : Taking and Giving (Tonglen) ~

From "Heart Advice for the Dying" by Lama Zopa Rinpoche

Introduction

In the taking and giving meditation, we generate great compassion and take the suffering and causes of suffering of numberless other living beings upon ourselves. We use their suffering to destroy our self-cherishing thought, the source of all our problems. By generating great loving kindness, we then give other living beings everything that we have: our body, our relatives and friends, our possessions, our merit, and our happiness. We perform this practice of exchanging self for others after we have meditated on the shortcomings of self-cherishing, on the kindness of other living beings, and on the benefits of cherishing them. We should do the practice of taking and giving whenever we have a problem, whether it is AIDS, cancer, some other disease, the breakdown of a relationship, failure in business, or difficulty in our spiritual practice.

The taking and giving meditation is a profound and powerful practice in which we use our own pain to develop compassion for other living beings. Through this meditation, we experience our disease and all our other problems on behalf of all living beings. Doing the meditation well helps to stop our pain, and it is not uncommon for it to even heal disease. The main point of taking and giving, however, is that it purifies the causes of disease, which are in our mind.

Exchanging self for others is a brave practice, and it is far more important than visualizing light coming from healing deities or any other meditation. By taking all the suffering of others upon ourselves and giving them all our own happiness, we use our disease to generate the ultimate good heart of bodhichitta. This is the very heart of healing.

The Meditation

Taking

First generate compassion by thinking of how living beings constantly experience suffering even though they have no wish to do so, because they are ignorant of its causes, or because, although they know the causes of suffering, they are too lazy to abandon them.

Think: How wonderful it would be if all living beings could be free from all suffering and the causes of suffering, karma and delusions. Then generate great compassion by thinking: I myself will free them from all their suffering and its causes.

As you breathe in, imagine that you take in all the suffering and causes of suffering of other living beings through your nostrils in the form of black smoke. If you have an illness or some other problem, focus first on all the numberless other beings with that same problem, then think of all the other problems experienced by living beings, as well as their causes. As you slowly breathe in the black smoke, take in all this suffering and its causes. Like plucking a thorn out of their flesh, you immediately free all the numberless living beings from all their suffering.

Next, take all the subtle obscurations from the arhats and higher bodhisattvas. There is nothing to take from the gurus and buddhas; all you can do is make offerings to

them. The black smoke comes in through your nostrils and absorbs into the self-cherishing thought in your heart, completely destroying it. Your self-cherishing, the creator of all your problems, becomes nonexistent. Like aiming a missile right on target, aim right at your self-cherishing thought, the target in this meditation.

Take from others all the undesirable environments that they experience. Breathe in through your nostrils in the form of black smoke all the undesirable places that sentient beings experience. For example, imagine that you are breathing in the red-hot burning ground of the hot hells, the ice of the cold hells, the inhospitable environments of the hungry ghosts and animals, and the dirty places of human beings. The black smoke comes in through your nostrils and down to your heart, where it absorbs into your self-cherishing thought and completely destroys it. Your self-cherishing becomes nonexistent.

Self-cherishing is based on the ignorance that holds to the concept of a truly existent I. Even though no truly existent I exists, we cherish this false I and regard it as the most precious and most important among all beings.

At the same time as your self-cherishing becomes completely nonexistent, the false I that ignorance holds to be truly existent also becomes completely empty, as it is in reality. Meditate for as long as possible on this emptiness, the ultimate nature of the I. Meditating on emptiness in this way brings powerful purification, purifying the actual cause of disease, which is the best way to cure disease.

Giving

Next, generate loving kindness by thinking that even though living beings want to be happy, they lack happiness because they are ignorant of its causes or lazy in creating them. And even if they achieve some temporary happiness, they still lack the ultimate happiness of full enlightenment.

Think: How wonderful it would be if all living beings had happiness and the causes of happiness. Then generate great loving kindness by thinking: I myself will bring them happiness and its causes.

Visualize your body as a wish-granting jewel, which grants all the wishes of living beings. Then give everything you have to every living being. Give all your good karma of the three times and all the happiness that results from it up to enlightenment, your possessions, your family and friends, and your body, visualized as a wish-granting jewel. Also, make offerings to all the enlightened beings.

The living beings receive everything that they want, including all the realizations of the path to enlightenment. Those who want a friend find a friend; those who want a Guru find a perfect Guru; those who want a job find a job; those who want a doctor find a qualified doctor; those who want medicine, find medicine. For those with incurable diseases, you become the medicine that cures them.

Since the main human problem is difficulty in finding the means of living, imagine that each human being is showered with millions of dollars from your body, which is a wish-granting jewel. You can also think that the environment becomes a pure land—the pure land of Amitabha or of the Buddha of Compassion, for example. You grant all human beings everything they want, including a pure land with perfect enjoyments. All these enjoyments cause them only to generate the path to enlightenment within their mind, and they all become enlightened.

In a similar way, give the worldly gods, the asuras and suras, everything they need, such as protective armor. They all also then become enlightened. When you do the practice of giving to all the hell beings, completely transform their environment into a blissful pure land, with perfect enjoyments and no suffering at all. Visualize the hells as pure realms, as beautiful as possible. All the iron houses of the hell beings, which are one with fire, become jewel palaces and mandalas. All the hell beings receive everything they want and then become enlightened.

Do the same for the hungry ghosts. Transform their environment into a pure realm and give them thousands of different foods that all taste like nectar. The hungry ghosts receive everything they need, but the ultimate point is that they all become enlightened.

Since animals mainly need protection, manifest as Vajrapani or another wrathful deity to protect them from being attacked by other animals. They receive everything they want, and everything they receive becomes the cause for them to actualize the path and become enlightened.

Give also to the arhats and bodhisattvas. Give them whatever realizations they need to complete the path to enlightenment.

After everyone has become enlightened in this way, rejoice by thinking: How wonderful it is that I have enlightened every single living being.

Integrating Taking and Giving with Our Death

The time just prior to death is crucial, and if we can manage to use this meditation to transform our mind into bodhichitta at that time, it is better than winning a million dollars in the lottery. Rather than rejecting death as something to fear, we can use it to develop our mind in the path to enlightenment. If we cannot practice this meditation at the time of our death, we miss an incredible opportunity to benefit ourselves and other living beings.

Even when we are dying, we should try to make our death beneficial for all other living beings. At the time of our death, we should think: I prayed in the past to take upon myself the suffering of death from other living beings. I am now experiencing my death on behalf of all the other living beings who are dying now and who will have to die in the future. How wonderful it would be for all of them to be free from the suffering of death and for me alone to experience it. Let them have this ultimate happiness.