

Introduction

It All Started with Tonglen

It is said that the Buddha began his path to enlightenment one thousand lifetimes before he took birth as an Indian prince. He and his friend were suffering the torments of a hellish existence. They were forced to pull an impossibly heavy cart up a steep hill by straps tied to their foreheads. The cart would hardly budge, but every time they tried to rest, their ruthless guard would whip them. At one point, the future Buddha, despite his unbearable pain, saw how much his friend was suffering and felt an unexpected surge of compassion. He asked the guard if he could take the entire load himself so that his friend could rest. The angry guard replied, “You can’t prevent someone from experiencing the result of his actions!” With that he struck the Buddha in the head, knocking him out.

When the Buddha came to, he was in a completely different realm, a place where he had the opportunity and peace of mind to continue deepening the altruistic impulse that had first entered his mind in hell. He was now on the path to letting go of his own self-interest and putting the interest of others first. He was now on the path to becoming the fully enlightened Buddha, who appeared in our world 2,500 years ago and has had a profoundly beneficial effect on humankind ever since.

In the story of the Buddha, this is the first example of the power of *tonglen*. The Tibetan word *tong* means “giving”; *len* means “taking.” In its most well-known form, *tonglen* is a meditation technique that involves coordination with the breath. Breathing in, we visualize

lives taking on the suffering of others; breathing out, we visualize lives giving others happiness. This powerful method for transmuting our minds vividly illustrates the exchange of self and other as the essence and spirit of tonglen. But the wider meaning and function of tonglen, both in spiritual practice and ordinary life, far beyond this specific technique. In general, *tonglen* refers to the act of exchanging self and other. We can even apply the term to mundane exchange between an employer who pays wages and an employee who does work. Since, as we will see, the entire aim of the Buddhist path is to lessen the importance of the self and to increase the importance of others, *tonglen* is at the very heart of all practices, but having an orientation toward *tonglen*, it is unlikely that our spiritual path will have a profound effect on our mind and heart.

Before I go into too much detail about techniques for contemplation and meditation, I want to start off by saying more about what teachings mean by these crucial terms, *self* and *other*. Without fully understanding what these words mean—in the books, but important, in our own experience—it will be easy to go astray and mistake *tonglen* for other things, such as being a martyr or beating ourselves. It's important to see, right off the bat, that practicing *tonglen* is in our best interest, leading toward the freedom, peace, and well-being in our lives.

First, I'll begin with *self*, which sometimes goes by the name *ego*, or familiarly, *I* and *me*. What is this self, really? We can investigate by trying to analyze this self, to locate it or pin it down, to see if it even exists in the first place. This can be a highly illuminating contemplation for the purposes of this book, I would like to focus more on everyday experience. Let's identify how having a self feels. In our stream of consciousness, there is always some kind of feeling of having a self, which is the center of all our thoughts and emotions. One Tibetan phrase for this phenomenon is *dak che dzin*. *Dak* means "self"; *che* means "important" or "dear"; *dzin* means "holding" or "regarding." The term has various translations, which all capture different nuances:

self-centeredness, self-clinging, ego-clinging, self-absorption. I like to use all of these terms in different contexts, but my favorite translation is "self-importance." This word may make us think *dak che dzin* has mostly to do with being proud and arrogant, but such pride is nowhere near the whole story. Self-importance includes both self-cherishing and self-protection. It is the source of the five main types of painful emotions, known as the "five poisons": attachment, aggression, jealousy, arrogance, and stupidity. It can manifest as feeling like we're better than others, but just as easily it can manifest as low self-esteem, or even self-hatred. The bottom line is that we regard this self—whatever or wherever it is—as the most important thing in the entire universe.

Self-importance can be blatant or extremely subtle. In fact, most of the time, it's not obvious to us. It doesn't just pop out and announce itself. And even if we can see it clearly, we don't usually find anything wrong with it. Either we don't have the knowledge that self-importance is a problem, or we simply don't want to see it as a problem. But according to the Buddhist teachings—and we will explore this idea further in the course of this book—all the suffering we have ever experienced, all that we experience now, and all that we will experience in the future, come from self-importance.

Anyone who has been studying Buddhism for some time has probably heard this notion expressed many times. But what is our reaction to this statement? Do we take it seriously, or do we say "Yeah, yeah..."? Are we even open to the possibility of accepting this idea? Our tendency is to pick and choose what we would like to be the cause of our suffering. The cause we choose is almost always something outside ourselves. Basically, the world and the people in it are failing in their duty to make us happy. We can manipulate the world and even try to demand that it bring us fulfillment, but the world will always refuse to play along. In fact, having this attitude is precisely what prevents us from having peace and joy in our lives. Shantideva, the author of *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, perhaps the greatest work on this subject, hits the nail on the head with this famous and provocative statement:

the misery the world contains has come from wanting pleasure for f."

we look around, the evidence for these words is ample. There is a difference in well-being between people who focus on helpers and people who are preoccupied with their own pleasure. There is still something inside us that refuses to acknowledge the ice. What is that something? It is none other than our self-importance. This puts us in a tricky situation. The thing that chooses—exactly—what to blame for our suffering is the very same thing causes all our suffering. We tend to give our self-importance absolute and unquestioned authority over our lives. We are so enmeshed that we have no idea how we could ever let it go. The thought it can bring on such a mental disturbance that it almost like letting go of a baby that we're holding over the edge of a cliff.

g go of our self-importance can feel like insanity. n you recognize this feeling within yourself? Can you feel it fully? Can you find it in your body, speech, and mind, in your thoughts, emotions, and actions? If so, then you know what I mean: *che dzin*, self-importance. If you don't feel it, then ask yourself simple questions: At this moment, what is guiding your mental notional state? What is guiding your body, speech, and mind? Is itism? If it's not altruism, what is it?

r self-importance usually doesn't display itself in an obnoxious way. I once saw a movie in which a character declared: "I'm not! No, really! Monuments should be erected in my honor!" If self-importance goes that far, we may notice it. But in general, we are granted that self-importance is our guiding principle. And when we do have an inkling of its existence, it is rare for us to slow and penetrate it.

we want to have any chance of resisting this troublesome aura of our lives, we have to take the time to sit down and feel it. er to do so, however, we need to do our best to look at it with judgment. If our examination of self-importance turns into self-

disparagement or beating up on ourselves, then how likely are we to keep going with this crucial, life-changing process? How much will we want to investigate what's going on, if the result will only be to find out how terrible we are?

Therefore, the most helpful attitude to have is to see yourself as innocent. Identify with that innocence rather than with the self-importance. You are innocent, but within your heart there is a spoiled rotten rascal who is totally out of control. This rascal is always causing you pain, so many forms of pain. You can't predict the next problem it will make you face. Because of this rascal and its demands, you always have to be on your toes, anxious, struggling, tense. It bosses you around, making you work yourself to exhaustion, like a slave driver. If you don't obey it and meet its needs, it will throw a tantrum. This may all sound like exaggeration, but when we sit with our self-importance long enough and get to know it well, we can recognize it for the rascal it is.

When you recognize it, you may at first feel stuck. What can you do about such a powerful, all-pervasive slave driver who has made a cozy home in your heart? You may feel doomed to permanent enslavement, but in reality you have taken the first step to starting a revolution inside yourself. Before starting a revolution, you must first have a resistance movement. And for that, you need concrete, intelligent reasons for resisting. It won't help your resistance to rely on unclear, emotional, abstract reasoning. When the reasons for a resistance or a revolution are not clear and precise, the movement can be easily infiltrated and bought by the enemy, as has happened many times in human history. Similarly, when we are not clear about how self-importance harms ourselves and others, and about the benefits of counteracting it, our Buddhist practices can actually increase our self-importance. When that happens we truly do become stuck. Then we may be in serious trouble.

So that is why it is crucial to take the time to identify self-importance at the outset. Once we do so, we will come to realize that we have an innate intelligence capable of overthrowing the rascal. For in

our self-importance, despite the havoc it causes, is severely limited. Since it always looks outward and never self-reflects, it is quite limited. Actually, it is more than just stupid; I would go so far as to call it the epitome of stupidity. That is why we can have hope in banishing it from our heart, and with it all of our suffering.

Now that we have some idea of “self” and the problems that come from making it so important, we can turn our attention to identifying the other side of the coin. That is *when the dzin*, which means “holders as important and dear.” A simple translation that captures the meaning is “altruism.” It seems easy to identify this feeling as it comes to your family and friends. You cherish them because they are a bond with them. But what is the basis of that bond? The basis is that these select individuals are related to you. They’re yours. In words, your self-importance is again involved. Occasionally you see a bug drowning in a pool of water and feel enough compassion to rescue it. In that case, cherishing the “other” is more clean and fresh than it lacks the scent of self-importance. But such cases are relatively rare in our lives.

It doesn’t mean, however, that you can only understand the value of love for others if that care is completely untainted. Even with the value of self-importance, to feel love for your children or parents feels good. Without having people or animals to love, your existence would be dull and miserable. Your love for others is what keeps you going. It gives you energy, brightness, and a sense of purpose. But the highest value we love we aspire to on the Buddhist path, is without a trace of self-importance. This is the love of the bodhisattvas, those who strive to develop their wisdom and compassion to the highest possible level in order to lead all beings to ultimate and permanent happiness. This is why the bodhisattva love is really what we are setting out to develop when we practice tonglen.

At the beginning it may seem that such a love is impossible. At the end it seems unnatural. Are we supposed to conjure something out of our heart that doesn’t naturally produce? It’s natural to love your

own child, but to love someone else’s child equally takes a lot of work. We are comfortable confining our deep love to a few people close to us, but if we would like to grow as individuals and eventually become bodhisattvas, we have to go beyond these limits.

Fortunately, there is a straightforward and gradual method for doing this. We start with the love we already have, acknowledging its power and the great joy it gives us. And then we spread that love toward all other beings. This sounds simple enough, but how do we actually spread our love? We begin by looking within. If at this very moment you look at what is going on in your thoughts and emotions, you will notice something very basic and obvious. In your mind you are constantly trying to move toward happiness and away from suffering. Every little thing that appears to your five senses or that arises in your thoughts falls into one of three categories. You like it, you dislike it, or you don’t really notice it. Your mind is continually reacting in these ways: grasping, rejecting, ignoring. You never get a break from this process, even while dreaming. Look at your mind and see if this is true.

Once you’ve seen your own mind in this way, the next step is to put yourself in the shoes of another living being. It could be anyone you think of, from the president of the United States to an ant. The president seems all-important, and the ant seems insignificant, but from their point of view, is their essential moment-to-moment experience any different from yours? The president may be pondering whether to bomb a foreign country, while the ant is merely transporting a bread crumb, but both continually experience the basic grasping and rejection, the never-ending desire and fear that underlies the experience of all beings.

When we spend time thinking along these lines, we inevitably will conclude that we and all other living beings are equal in our desire for happiness. We and all other beings are equal in our longing to be free from suffering. Once we acknowledge this to be true, it becomes much harder to separate ourselves and our loved ones from the limitless