

The Gateway to Compassion Following 9/11

By Lama Palden Drolma

After it was done—the profound altruism and compassion shown by rescue workers and by people from all backgrounds and cultures became an inspiration to us all. This is a time of opportunity to open our hearts to our own sorrow; a time of opportunity to open our hearts to those who have already experienced great suffering due to hatred, and aggression. The gateway to compassion and loving-kindness is to be able to feel our own pain, and the pain of others. If we are able to open in this way, our hearts can melt, and the healing salve of compassion can anoint all our wounds. In this way we can move beyond our complacency.

At this time, we need to acknowledge our own hatred and aggression, too. This requires mindfulness of the activities of our body, speech, and mind. We now have yet another opportunity to examine our lives, values, and commitments. Where do we put our time, energy, and resources? In Buddhism, as we set out on the two-fold path of the development of compassion and wisdom, we must look to how we interact with both ourselves, and others.

There are a variety of skillful means and practices in Buddhism to awaken the compassion and wisdom at the core of who we really are. When our true nature is awakened, all our activities are spontaneously of benefit. *Tonglen*, the taking and sending practice in the Vajrayana tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, is a profound means of transforming our own mind stream. And tonglen is a means for benefiting others. It is a practice of the bodhisattva path: the path of courage, in which we recognize the interdependence and inseparability of all beings and vow to awaken for the benefit of all of us, doing so by developing wisdom and compassion. Tonglen develops our compassion when we open to the suffering of others; it develops our wisdom when we see that we are actually inseparable from all that is, and that nothing actually substantially exists.

Tonglen can be done in its complete form or in an essential pith form. In its complete form, one begins by taking refuge in the Buddha, dharma, and sangha. Call then upon Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, to be present and imagine him

above your head. He sits on a fully open white lotus, with a flat moon seat; everything appears entirely of white light. His body, too, appears as light, the union of form and emptiness, awareness and emptiness—Avalokitesvara is an embodiment of all the Buddha's compassionate activity, inseparable with your own teacher's pure awareness. Pray for compassion and wisdom, your Buddha nature, to awaken, and imagine that Avalokitesvara, or Chenresi, as he is called by Tibetans, dissolves into light into you. You become Chenresi. Stabilize the sense of yourself as a pure being, a bodhisattva, and feel the heart essence of all awakened beings within your own heart. Feel the mind essence of all awakened beings united with your own mind, the mind essence finding expression as a *vajra*, a ritual scepter symbolic of the indestructible, all-good true nature, of diamond-like white light.

Imagine then your ordinary self appearing in front of you. Generate tremendous compassion and loving-kindness for yourself. On the in-breath draw all your suffering visualized as black smoke toward your awakened heart. As soon as this darkness comes close to the vajra, on the out-breath a thunderbolt of white light brilliantly radiates the light of compassion into your ordinary self, the self imagined in front of you. Gradually, the light fills the ordinary self and heals all wounds, all suffering. The light removes all negative habitual patterns.

See your ordinary self as illuminated and awakened.

Repeat this procedure with people close to you, gradually radiating light out to all sentient beings. All beings becoming illuminated and fully awakened. Then let everything dissolve into open sky-like awareness, and rest your mind naturally. At the end of the session dedicate the merit of the practice to the alleviation of all suffering, to the awakening of all beings.

A pith essence version of tonglen practice can be done in any moment, wherever you are. Simply open to your caring concern, and imagine the Buddha-mind as light in your heart. Breathe in the suffering as darkness, and breathe out lovingkindness as the healing white light.

This practice transforms our own heart-minds, and opens up a space for others to heal and awaken to their true nature.

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