Keeping Your Heart Open in Hell: Tonglen

Heart Thought 20, 13/5/08 by Nicholas de Castella

Learn the alchemy true human beings know.
The moment you accept what troubles you've been given,
the door will open.' **Rumi**

Keeping your heart open when you are in Hell?

Last week in 'What is Tantra?' I set out the path to celebrating your life, cultivating joy and pleasure, by savouring the moment.

But what do we do when things are not going well? When we are in pain or feeling sick, when we see someone we love suffering, when we are under pressure, when things seem to be going wrong, when other people are giving us a hard time - being moody or aggressive, when we are rejected, disapproved or humiliated, or even worse, when we are contracted, up tight and giving others a hard time...?

How can we make the best of it and remain peaceful and open hearted when things are not going well? How can we best respond with compassion to others suffering?

A most powerful and liberating way of responding when there is suffering is to welcome the experience 'in' (like an old friend) and give back peace and love. We sometimes call this 'Conscious Suffering'. Like many spiritual attitudes we do the opposite of what is the norm. At the centre of most Christian churches is a statue of Christ on the cross and on the wall are plaques to the suffering of the crucifixion.

"Are you nuts?" I hear you say. Yes in our culture we try to avoid discomfort, kill pain (take Pain Killers) and distance ourselves from suffering. Both our own and others. We often don't want to get too involved in others suffering because it brings up our own.

Tonglen

The practice of welcoming in and giving back in Buddhism is called Tonglen. It is a path that leads to compassion, peace, love and freedom. (I am most grateful to Pema Chodren for her teachings on Tonglen and I suggest if you have not heard of her you look up her website).

The Practice of Tonglen

The full practice of Tonglen is to welcome negativity in and to give back positivity. It is like recycling. A basic tenant of Buddhism is that life involves suffering (called The First Noble Truth). One of the three causes of suffering is aversion. Pushing away what we don't like. It leads to anger and increases our suffering.

The practice is as follows:

Upon realisation of discomfort, pain or suffering (in ourselves or others):

Let go of any judgements about the experience (as being bad, horrible, terrible...).
Let go of any general labels (such as pain) and experience the sensations directly.
Become fully aware of the nature of the what we are feeling.
Open to the willingness to feel the feelings fully.
Happily welcome the feelings 'in'.
Keep your breath flowing gently and easily
Maintain an attitude of willing to experience what is for as long as it takes.

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Tonglen is the way out of suffering.

Dear Nicholas, I want to share something of my year that was after the completion of Breathwork training. After realising that I went into fear about almost anything, I decided it was time to welcome it in. I woke one morning with a very strong message in my head that I was going to get very sick. Instead of going into panic about caring for myself or the work that had to be done, I just allowed it and thought I would look for the positives out of the experience. I didn't get sick, in fact I didn't have one illness all year. There were plenty of opportunities, one of my children was sick with the flu five times. Every time I felt the start of a cold coming on, I would welcome it in and it would be gone by the next day. I also felt I had a Gastric attack coming on three times in the middle of the night. I was so convinced I was going to be sick, I went and got a bowl and towel ready. Then I lay there and welcomed in the feelings. My mind sort of went into confusion, " are you sure?" I could hear it ask. The next morning I was fine each time.

I can't be sure I was actually going to be sick, because I wasn't but I know my previous record was 2 or 3 colds a year and at least one gastro attack. It is also interesting to note that these events seem to be "clearings". As though I was letting go of something I had been holding onto and it was looking for an exit. A feeling I had was I was willing to let go of everything, so there was little fear about the future, but I also had faith that I wouldn't be tested anymore than I could handle at the moment.

Thank-you Nicholas for all your work and your faith and your friendship and support. I have learnt that under every rock there is something beautiful growing, just waiting. God Bless, Stretch.

Resistance causes pain, welcoming eases pain

Strangely enough, resistance to experiencing what 'is' is what causes pain. Pain is a measure of resistance. What ever you resist will become more and more painful. Be it an unhappy work situation, relationship feeling in your body, whatever you resist will become more and more uncomfortable until you take action on it. That is the way it is and that is the way it is meant to be. Pain is a sign to us that we need to pay attention to something. When we apply full attention, usually the pain will disappear.

A healing principle I work with is: "Any unwanted feeling, when fully experienced, vanishes instantly'. A friend of mine who was suffering from a tooth ache went to the dentist. The dentist did his best to help but $350 later the tooth was still aching. As he was driving to a meditation group I run he suddenly thought 'Nicholas would say to welcome this in'. So he did. A few minutes later he noticed that his attention had wandered to the song on the radio. When he turned his attention back to the tooth - he could not find the pain. It was gone!

What you resist controls you.

We tend to go out of our way to avoid the chance of feeling what we do not like. If we fear confrontation we will become very 'nice'. We will not be totally honest with others, not speak our truth, not put ourselves 'out there' in case somebody doesn't like it. This effectively means that we ill not be living our truth. We modify our actions and life to try to avoid feeling what we don't want to experience (that we don't like). In this way our resistance to discomfort runs our lives.

Interestingly enough, one of the commonly sited aspects of Emotional Intelligence is the capacity to with stand short term discomfort for long term gain. Every athlete knows about the importance of this principle for success.

Our incapacity to welcome in discomfort is part of the reason for the global environmental disaster that we are standing on the brink of. We keep on modifying the environment because we have difficulty being with discomfort.

What you push away from you you add energy to

What you push away from you you add energy to and therefore increase its likelihood of happening. The person who stays guarded because they are afraid of being hurt or betrayed treats people with suspicion and guardedness and will tend to be controlling. People in turn will respond with equal caution, distancing themselves. All of this guarding, distancing and protecting weakens the relationship connection and increases the likelihood of betrayal from other people. Unfortunately the common response is to become more distrusting, guarded and shut down in the future.

The paradox is that in the willingness to experience what we fear, it is actually less likely to happen. I know of a number of people that found themselves in loving relationships shortly after they overcame their fear of being hurt . They did this by choosing to be willing to be hurt (if it happens).

Tonglen is the answer to end wars. The war in the Middle east is a perfect example: We see the Israelis killing the Palestinians and then the Palestinians killing the Israelis back. We see both peoples killing each other in revenge. Neither peoples are willing to feel the loss, choosing revenge instead. A recent news headline read: “Hamas vows to revenge killing of four Palestinians.”

Fighting keeps us stuck

Like a fly struggling in a spiders web, the more we resist what is happening the more entangled in it we become. For as long as we fight discomfort by pushing it away and trying to control it the more we become tangled up in struggling and suffering. Like when we pull and tug at a tangled piece of string, it only become more tightly bound up. To untangle a knot we need to feed it into itself, open it out, give it lots of space. When we choose to surrender to our suffering and open to it, it kind of unravels and dissolves.

In welcoming it in it is no longer pain

When we relax and open to the experience that is rising, without judging it we experience it simply as energy. In many ways the practice of learning Tonglen is the practice of non-judgementalism and of staying open in intensity.

Tonglen is about surrender, not a macho practice

Tonglen is a surrendering process. The process involves relaxing and opening into the discomfort. Not trying to brace ourselves to ‘get through’ it. And not trying to overcome it, or even get rid of it. It assumes an attitude of I am willing to be present with this for as long as it takes.

Every time we repress or split off from what we are feeling we become more detached from our essence, our true nature which is peaceful, happy loving and whole.

As we learn to stay present with discomfort we connect more and more deeply with our selves. Very often the suffering passes quite quickly and we enter into an experience of calmness spaciousness and connection. But this involves staying still in the presence of discomfort. Like a space shuttle re-entering the Earths atmosphere there is a burning up process as we shed emotional energy and come home inside.

When you practice this you will find yourself maintaining your centredness, being less reactive in relationships and more responsive. You will also find that you take offence less easily and your humour increases.

Tonglen is not masochism.

It is not about senselessly inflicting pain upon ourselves. it is about opening to any suffering that is already here as a way of lessening the discomfort.

There is less suffering in willing to suffer.
Strangely enough, when we practice Tonglen and open to the discomfort, relaxing and welcoming it in - it actually diminishes.

Tonglen gives rise to a gentle Discipline
Discipline involves staying true to an intention even when it is uncomfortable. Tonglen gives us a gentle way of staying true to intentions (following our hearts) when we have to face challenges along the path. When discomfort arises, we just witness it and allow it to pass through us whilst staying true to our goal.

Welcome suffering in Joyously and anonymously
When we practice Tonglen we open to the experience with an attitude of equanimity (calmness). We allow ourselves to open in a state of gentleness and ease. Continuously surrendering and softening.

Tonglen has many applications personal and social
It works equally well for freeing ourselves from our own suffering as it does for creating peace and happiness in relationships. If find that if I do not react with anger or cutting off when I feel hurt in my relationships, but stay open in the pain, then usually my partner will come around and apologise for their behaviour.

Sometimes we have trouble staying present when we see others suffering. I have seen a number of people who distance themselves from people experiencing depression because they get afraid that they are going to ‘go down’ with them. When we see and feel others suffering what is really going on is that our own past suffering is being triggered. We know it in ourselves, otherwise we would not see it in anyone else.

In order to be able to stay relaxed and open and present with them we need to be willing to own that what we are experiencing is our own suffering that is being triggered and be willing to feel our own feelings as they come up. When we do this we are not only able to really meet and support the other person, we are also healing our selves by resolving some incomplete past experience.

Tonglen is a Master Key to Living a Heart Centred Life
Tonglen is a practice that I use multiple times every day. I find it helps me to keep my heart open and stay connected to myself and others. It is a vital practice that assists me in living a Heart Centred Life.

I invite you to experiment with opening to discomfort instead of closing off on it.

Home play this week
Watch out for when you feel hurt or discomfort and practice opening and relaxing into it.

Any questions? Let me know how you go.

May the peace, love, happiness and contentment in your heart abound in the world.

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P.S. I have formatted the Heart Thoughts as pdf's you can download from my website at: http://www.breathwork.com.au/heartthoughts.htm

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