

Practice sending and receiving alternately on the breath. and Begin sending and receiving practice with yourself.

The original *Seven Points of Training the Mind* text is famous for introducing a meditation practice called sending and receiving (*tonglen*).

Every form of religion, and every form of Buddhism, has its cultural prejudices, and in Zen practice (especially my school of Zen, Soto Zen), the prejudice is to be antitechnique. As I've said, Zen even denies the difference between meditation and nonmeditation. How much more, then, would it be resistant to particular meditation techniques? Zen meditation is radically simple: just sit still and breathe and see what happens. Everything else seems overly fancy. So in Zen if we practice special techniques, we always hold them very lightly, without worrying too much about the details or taking them too seriously. Focusing on technique as technique seems somehow against the whole proposition of religion. It just doesn't seem reasonable that our spiritual well-being is somehow going to be ensured if we master a technique, that religion is an art form, a matter of virtuosity. Or that the reverse would be so, that somehow our spiritual path would be wrecked or invalidated because we can't master a certain technique. On the other hand, it would also be foolish to have a dogmatic principle against any technique. Sometimes a technique can come in handy when you need it. So, given this antitechnique prejudice and this flexible spirit of willing curiosity, we take up the technique of sending and receiving.

There are two slogans that describe the practice:

7. Practice sending and receiving alternately on the breath.

8. Begin sending and receiving practice with yourself.

Sending and receiving is a technique to directly develop compassion. Remember that *compassion* literally means "to feel passion with." Passion means pain. Com-

passion is the willingness to feel pain with another, to feel another's pain as one's own. We usually think of compassion as something sweet and nice, positive and wonderful. Everybody wants to be compassionate. And it's true—compassion feels good. But we overlook the fact that compassion is also essentially a painful feeling. Feeling another's pain as our own is painful. And it turns out that it's impossible to take in the pain of another unless we are able to take in our own pain. And most of us are not so good at accepting our own pain; we prefer to deny it or distract ourselves from it. We are so intent on making our own pain go away that we don't allow ourselves to feel it. We can't take it in. Consequently we are incapable of feeling another's pain, so we are incapable of actual compassion, although we may think we are quite compassionate.

The practice of sending and receiving has two main purposes: first, to train your heart to do what it usually does not want to do: to go toward, rather than away from, what's painful and difficult in your own life; and second, to realize that your own suffering and the suffering of others are not different. When you discover that this is so, you see that when you are willing to really take in your own suffering, you find, within that very suffering, the suffering of others; and the reverse is also true: when you are able to truly take in the suffering of another, you find within it your own human pain. Being willing to receive pain, we come to understand, is the only way to open our hearts to love. The practice will make this an experiential truth.

Sending and receiving begins and ends with the absolute bodhicitta slogan **Rest in the openness of mind**. It is this comforting and supportive resting that gives us the basis we need for the hard work that the practice entails. In the beginning we gather courage from it, and in the end we return to it for rest and recuperation.

Start by breathing in the openness of mind that you can feel in the clarity and strength of the inhale. And then exhale, letting go completely and merging with openness of mind, so that there is nothing else present but that. Breathing this way, we open to a complete release of everything and trust of everything, especially when we exhale, resting in the natural openness of our own being and of everything. In a way, there is nothing at all to this. It's no big deal. It's not colorful, it's not spectacular, it's not profound or special. It's just an easeful opening and letting go. It feels as if we're floating, buoyed up by the waters of reality. That's how we begin the practice, staying with this part for as long as we need to.

Next, we practice sending and receiving, as the slogan says: practice them alternately; they should ride the breath. So the next time we breathe in, we breathe in our own pain and the suffering. Not only do we not avoid it as we usually do, as it is our natural impulse to do, we actually breathe it into our body. We gobble up all the suffering and the pain. We may well be squeamish about this, and it might be difficult at first, but with practice we can do it. We can visualize the pain and suffering as a dark, sticky substance or smoke or some kind of goo that we are breathing in, taking into our bodies. The goo is coming from all around us, and we are taking it in, with all the pores of our body as well as through our nostrils as we breathe in. If you are not so visually oriented and this image of goo is not useful, then in some other way imagine that you are actually breathing in the pain and suffering, really taking it in. This is receiving.

Of course, we don't only breathe in, we also breathe out. When we breathe out, something miraculous happens. It turns out that our bodies are transformation machines. They transform the goo, the suffering, the pain, into lightness, ease, peacefulness that comes out of our nostrils and all the pores of our body as a light sweet mist (or if you are not visually oriented, as a more imaginative and vague sense of lightness and ease, maybe even joy). Unharmed by the pain we breathed in, we have now transformed that pain, so that we now breathe out bliss and ease and lightness and healing power, as if we were breathing out healing light. This is sending. We are sending healing light to ourselves and to many others.