

Breathing In: Suffering Breathing Out: Compassion

By Fran Grace

In this narrative reflection, Professor Fran Grace describes students' reactions in her Compassion course during their first exposure to Tonglen meditation. As one of the first "contemplative classrooms" in the country, the space created in this course with the Meditation Room allows students to connect with new pedagogical approaches in unique ways. The evolution of students' willingness and openness to this new practice demonstrates how integrating contemplative practices into our classroom spaces can help foster transformative learning experiences for students.

CREATING CONTEMPLATIVE SPACES

In 2007, the University of Redlands opened its Meditation Room, one of the first "contemplative classrooms" in the country. Instead of traditional desks and chairs, students learn on meditation cushions and yoga mats. Professor Fran Grace's "Seminar on Compassion" course is one of several academic courses taught in the Meditation Room. Eight weeks into the course, after the students have already worked with several different meditation methods, Professor Grace introduces the most challenging meditation: Tonglen, taught by the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan Buddhist authors featured in the course. Also referred to as "Taking and Giving" meditation, this method involves "taking in" the pain of others and "giving out" hope, healing, and relief. The meditator "exchanges" his or her peace with the suffering of others. At first, the students are resistant to this new practice. However, after working with the meditation for a week, the students are convinced of its power to transmute suffering into Light. This powerful example of transformative pedagogy and practice is best showcased through the students' reactions and development in the following narrative example.

INSIDE THE MEDITATION ROOM

“YOU WANT US TO WHAT?” All twenty-eight students stare back at me. Eyes wide with disbelief, while mouths fall open as if to say: “Okay, Professor, listen here! We have been exceptionally agreeable to all of the meditative methods you’ve asked us to try, even the ones that scared the heck out of us, like the Death Meditation. But this one makes no sense. Actually, it might destroy us. How can we breathe in the suffering of the world without it killing us?”

I let the silence hang there. I want them to voice the terror. Eventually, a student quivers: “I can’t face the suffering of my own life. How can I possibly breathe-in the suffering of others?”

What follows is the students’ most honest conversation so far in the course. “If I willingly breathe in the pain of others – like disease and dying – won’t that make me sick? Didn’t Gandhi, or one of the other exemplars we’ve studied, say: ‘You become what you think about’? I don’t want to think about disease!”

“Yeah,” rings-out another student, “and I don’t want to breathe-in more stress! Isn’t this class supposed to be helping us with inner peace?”

A senior honors student agrees: “Exactly. I already have too much stress and worry in my life. I feel like I’m barely getting by as it is. I don’t even know how I’m going to get everything done so I can graduate! I certainly don’t have the stamina to take on other people’s pain and worry.”

“This meditation makes me feel depressed. And I haven’t even tried it yet.” The student slouches down on her meditation cushion. Other students seem to slouch in agreement.

Oddly, however, the atmosphere begins to feel lighter. Despite the weight of their words, I sense relief in the room as they begin to name their fears. It is quiet again. We can hear cars driving by through an open window. The sheer soft-yellow curtains, illuminated from the afternoon sunlight, respond gently to a spring breeze. The students’ fears seem to dissipate into the spaciousness and serenity of the Meditation Room.

“Truthfully, I feel helpless,” confesses a student whose constant activism has often left her feeling burned-out. “There’s so much suffering everywhere, I don’t even know where to begin. And, even if I did breathe-in a little bit of it, how does that really help? I mean, I’m only one tiny little person in a limitless sea of human suffering.”

Finally, after eight weeks, students are being honest. They are facing their own disappointing truth: *real suffering terrifies them*. When the course started, they claimed they wanted to become compassionate. But now, they realize that they would rather *read* about compassion than *cultivate* it. They’d rather keep “all that suffering stuff” at a distance. My mention of their next assignment, Tonglen meditation, seemed to call their bluff.

COMPASSION COURSE BACKGROUND

The students enrolled in my Compassion course resemble the college juniors surveyed by HERI in 2007 where 82.8% of the juniors shared that “becoming a more loving person” is very important or essential, and 66.6% endorse the life goal of “reducing pain and suffering in the world” (Redden, 2007; HERI, 2005). The ethically conscientious students in my Compassion course are truly committed to social change. They have logged many more community service hours than the eighty required by our university for graduation. They are officers of charitable organizations, on and off campus. They are pursuing degrees in service-oriented fields because they “want to make a difference, not money.”

They have excitedly enrolled in a contemplative-based and service-learning course called “Compassion,” in which they will learn interior methods to cultivate a compassionate heart-mind and study exemplars of compassion such as Mother Teresa, the Dalai Lama, Gandhi, Viktor Frankl, Mary Oliver, Mattie Stepanek, and Nelson Mandela. The course has a substantial place in our overall curriculum: it allows students of any major to fulfill their graduation requirement of “community service,” and it counts as an “ethics” course for Religious Studies majors and minors.

However, this course is not the rosy, “feel-good” haven that many students expect; students generally assume that compassion will be defined in such a way as to *enhance* their narcissism rather than *dis-assemble* and *transcend* it. They have never thought of compassion as something that must come from *within* – as natural, even, as their very own breath (which Tonglen meditation becomes). In their eyes, compassion is always an *action* they do or a *role* they play.

“It’s hard enough to have compassionate behaviors,” they often say around the third week of the semester. “You mean we have to be compassionate in our thoughts *too*?”

Over time, students rise to the task of self-formation. They learn from the Dalai Lama (1962), our first biography on the syllabus: “If there is no peace in one’s *mind*, there can be no peace in one’s approach to others, and thus no peaceful relations between individuals or between nations” (p. 28). As the keynote speaker at the “Educating the Heart and Mind” conference in 2007, the Dalai Lama – who meditates five hours a day – repeated this emphasis on inner education: “Inner disarmament first, then outer disarmament.” At that point, the students realize that they have had it all backwards!

My students had preferred the idea of changing others and changing the world. So the task of changing *themselves*, of re-wiring their psychology from self-enhancement to self-transcendence, triggers resistance. When we study the compassion teachings of the world’s great religions, this basic truth dawns on them: You cannot give to another what you do not have. As we hear at the inception of every airplane ride: “Put the oxygen mask on yourself, and, only then, help the person next to you.” When facing their insides so directly, the students are often not pleased with what they find. They are shocked by the un-loving content in their thought-streams.

As we begin to work with various meditation methods in the course to cultivate inner observation, students notice the relentless berating of self and others that goes on in their mind. It is like they are being asked to tune their inner dial to a very disagreeable background noise that has always been there, but which they have never noticed. They hear a relentless array of judgment, criticism, fantasy, hostility, anxiety, pride, lust, idealizing, guilt, anger, jealousy, and craving. Their inner self is anything but calm and rarely compassionate! One student likened this self-discovery to an apple: while the outer fruit is shiny, the closer you approach the core of the fruit, the more poisonous it becomes.

This course aims to teach students an inner science for cultivating compassion, from the inside-out. When the source (heart-mind) is radiant with compassion, the outflow (actions) cannot help but be compassionate – much like a pure water source cannot help but dispense pure water.

As one of our textbooks describes, there is a difference between genuine compassion and “do-gooderism”: “True benevolence is felt directly by the heart; it transcends any egoistic accounting of our apparently good actions. Because compassion is a state of mind or of heart, it cannot be measured by a person’s outward behaviors” (Ladner, 2004, 13). Many students see that they have been “doing” compassion for the rewards. This became obvious to them when, in one of their first assignments, they were asked to spend a week simply observing their inner motives when they helped someone.

“I never realized how much I want people to like me. People say I’m generous. But, really, I think I give a lot of things to my friends because I want them to like me. I’m afraid to say ‘no’ when they ask for something – like a ride, or to borrow clothes, or help on a project – because then, if I say ‘no’, they won’t be my friend.”

This student bravely admits: *everyone loves those who love them in return*. Yet such love is conditional and tribal. Unconditional and universal compassion, however, as taught by the exemplars we study in the course, is much more rigorous: “loving beyond boundaries” (Makranksy, 2007). Even though all of the ethical exemplars we examine in the course suffered horrific racial, gender, or religious oppression – as well as deep personal losses – they saw the benefit of suffering and the necessity for compassion towards all of life, including oneself and one’s “enemy.” Likewise, Tonglen is a practice that does both: affirms suffering and extends compassion (Walker & Chodron, 2005).

INTRODUCING TONGLLEN MEDITATION

Back in the Meditation Room at Larsen Hall, the students have named the terror: breathing-in suffering. Suffering, they were taught, should be avoided at all costs. The underlying assumption is that pain is stronger than anything else. But everything we read and study in the course asserts the opposite view: love is more powerful than suffering.

I remind them of a moment in Viktor Frankl's memoirs when he transcended the physical-emotional agony of the concentration camp by keeping his mind focused on a mental image of his wife: "Love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire.... A man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss in the contemplation of his beloved" (Frankl, 2006, p. 38).

I explain: "In Tonglen, you are asked to acknowledge that suffering is real, yes. But, you are breathing the suffering of yourself and others into an Infinite Love which transmutes the suffering into healing. With your willingness, this Love offers itself through you. See if you can let go of the belief that you have to do it all on your own. All you are doing is breathing, accepting that suffering exists, and offering yourself as a source for Love and Light to others."

Sensing that they are now ready to learn the meditation, I pass out the homework sheet and note that reads "This practice differs from some of the compassionate actions you may be accustomed to because":

- It is invisible to others, anonymous, and without rewards or even a "thank you";
- It starts with welcoming the world or a situation as it is, rather than being displeased with it or trying to change it. The welcoming or acceptance of suffering is not the same as resignation or approval; and
- It empowers others as their own change-agents, rather than enhances you as a helper (there is no "pity" on others, giving "help" or "advice").

Suddenly a student brightens as if a light-bulb has gone off in her head. "Omigod! This is the meditation that my dad did for me when I was in the hospital for knee surgery! At the time, I didn't know what he was talking about- 'I'm going to breathe-in your knee pain and breathe-out comfort and healing for you.' Now I get it! It was very weird at the time because it actually worked. When he did that, I remember I felt so much better."

The energy in the room shifts again, like when the traveler in a hot air balloon cuts the tethering rope, suddenly releasing the balloon upward. The student's spontaneous testimony about her dad suddenly lifts the class energy from fear to willingness. Although the room is silent, the overall mental field is saying: "Okay, let's try it."

"So, you are ready to learn tonglen?" I smile encouragingly. They smile back and straighten themselves into a meditation posture on their cushions, and we begin our first Tonglen meditation. Silently, I mark how blessed I am to be with a group of people whose dedication to love is stronger than their fear. I breathe in their remaining fears and breathe out a loving relief to them.

A gentle strike on the meditation bowl ends our silence. A peaceful calm pervades as the students prepare to leave, stuffing their homework sheet into backpacks, notebooks, and coat pockets.

First-Person Tonglen Practice: Homework Assignment #4

It is recommended that you experiment with the practice in two different ways:

1) **Solitude:** *Set aside thirty minutes away from all other distractions and activities, and do the practice in solitude. As the book describes, you may choose to “take in” the suffering of those you know personally (people, animals, groups), or you may choose to “take in” the suffering of those around the world who suffer from a particular pain or hurt that you do (e.g., heart break, addiction, stress, migraines, oppression, abortion, loneliness, anxiety, depression, etc.). You breathe in the suffering as a black cloud. Imagine the black cloud coming into your energy body and exploding your self-cherishing narcissism. Then imagine the Infinite Love and Radiant Light, which is what you really are, dissolving the dark cloud and transmuting it into Healing Light. You might imagine this Light radiating out from you and your room in a way that expresses your uniqueness (e.g., as a flower’s fragrance, a lovely melody, a multiplicity of your healing hands, splendid jewels for all, refreshing breezes, medicines, etc.)*

2) **Regular Activity:** *As you go about your interactions with others and regular activities, do the practice as part of your normal breathing. You may find it especially effective when you come face-to-face with the emotional pain, reactivity, or physical suffering of others. You breathe in the pain and breathe out healing light. You can do this without saying or doing anything else. The practice helps you be present with the suffering of others – without avoiding it, without feeling helplessly overwhelmed by it, without jumping in to give advice or rescue them. Just breathe in and out. That’s all.*

THE BREAKTHROUGH: STUDENTS’ REFLECTIONS ON TONGLLEN

I entered the classroom the next Monday, curious to see how the students were connecting with this new practice. Given their resistance in the previous class session, I was unprepared for the students’ brimming-over enthusiasm for their Tonglen practice! Their essays (excerpts quoted below) revealed several breakthroughs.

Some students found the meditation helpful in dealing with the suffering of their family members and close friends. For example, one student worked with Tonglen in relation to her mother’s terminal diagnosis:

This week’s meditation was especially powerful for me. I chose to take in the suffering of my mom because she has been having a particularly rough time lately. She recently found out that she has a terminal illness, and I have seen her spirit drop dramatically. I focused very closely and thought of all the emotional as well as physical suffering that she has been experiencing. I was aware of each breath and I kept visualization the black cloud growing with each of her worries. Pretty soon, I felt as though I had come more to terms with her illness and I felt more relaxed as well. It was almost as if a weight was being taken off of my shoulders each time I breathed in her suffering and replaced it with pure love.

Another student found Tonglen useful as a means to express care for an ex-boyfriend:

I decided that focusing on all the suffering in the world was a bit much for my second time of doing such an intense meditation. I imagined my ex-boyfriend.... We had been together for almost a year and a half, and the break-up was very hard on him.... I imagined myself breathing in the dark cloud of heart-break and loneliness, and I imagined it expanding within me. When I imagined my ego-self dissolving in the dark cloud, I could actually feel my heartbeat slow down, and I focused on a bright light as the Healing Light.... By imagining the light shining through my body like some sort of ray, I felt like my body had been cleared of some sort of impure and unjust feeling within. After opening my eyes, I actually imagined my ex-boyfriend feeling a little more relieved, which made me smile and hopeful as well.

Other students experimented with the practice while at their community service site:

I practiced at the Alzheimer's home today....One woman, Maria, had never felt comfortable enough to speak to me before. As I saw her struggle with a trivia game, I sat next to her calmly and practiced breathing in her suffering. I thought about all of the frustration she must feel, as well as the heartache from recently losing her husband. Soon, I calmly pointed out how to play the game. She turned to me and, for the first time, told me "Thank you." It was the most genuine and heartfelt "Thank you" that I have ever heard. It was almost as if I could feel her soul telling me "Thank you." For the rest of the game, she was very serene and she thanked me repeatedly with a smile on her face all the while.

I applied it in my community service work at the animal shelter. Each time I took a dog for a walk, I breathed in some of the dog's suffering and breathed out hope and healing. I hope it helped.

Another student found it to be the perfect way of companionship for a team-mate of hers who was upset but unapproachable:

At tennis practice, everyone was a little sluggish and tired....One girl, in particular, was having a rough day. I noticed her posture was down, and her emotional state was negative. I knew that it was a great time to practice Tonglen, with her obvious suffering. With every breath I took in, I told myself that I was taking in her pain, and, when I breathed out, that I was releasing some healing and positive energy. I could have sworn I saw a difference in her posture and attitude almost immediately. It was as if she realized that she had the power to turn things around, and it was amazing to see such a change in being. I wanted to cheer her on and verbally encourage her, but I decided to do Tonglen and silently cheer her on instead.

Still another student had a positive experience by trying Tonglen in routine activities, like driving:

Ever since class yesterday, I have been practicing the breathing in of others' suffering and breathing out kindness and happiness to all, especially when I can see that they are in some sort of physical or mental pain.... When driving, I could smile and take in the stress and anger of other stop-and-go drivers, and it made it much less about me and where I was trying to get to. The most interesting thing about this whole practice is the response I have been feeling from strangers. I feel like people are more receptive to me, more open.

Many students used Tonglen to connect with others who had a similar suffering, such as this very active student who suffered from constant stress. Tonglen brought not only relief from the stress, but also brought an indescribable joy and unalterable calm:

The biggest suffering for me right now is stress, and so I focused on that for my meditation. I allowed myself to feel that overwhelming stress... tightening in my shoulders, a sort of constriction in my throat and a tensing of my facial muscles.... Then I thought of all my friends who are equally being pushed from all sorts of directions and pulled in so many uncomfortable ways....I added my family, acquaintances, and the other people I had seen before, like a homeless man on the streets digging through newspapers. All the stress and pain together created a big, dark cloud, and I slowly tried to bring it into my heart, allowing it to pierce and pop my narcissistic feelings. I then began to cultivate a sense of great happiness inside of me. I felt a white strong light growing from my heart and then radiating out from all corners and sections of my body. I brought the rays of light to people I knew... An overwhelming calm came over me, a great feeling of satisfaction and joy spread from all parts of me. I felt a high that I do not think I have ever felt before.

As these personal accounts demonstrate, instead of being destroyed by suffering, the students were enlightened and uplifted by Tonglen practice. Their willingness to welcome the suffering of others opened their hearts to the unity of all existence:

When I practiced Tonglen in my regular activity, I felt like it made *me* more positive and calmed *me* down.... I feel enlightened from these experiences. It also made me realize how others may be doing such an act of kindness for me when I'm feeling down or when I'm suffering. It all makes me wonder what the world would be like if everyone practiced Tonglen and whether or not it would make the world a calmer place with less suffering.

I have never felt such a genuine happiness and raw awareness.

TEACHING TONGLÉN FOR TRANSFORMATION

Through their Tonglén practice, students discovered that deep peace is possible when they take responsibility for their inner energy, their intention, and their heart-mind. Words and actions are, of course, ethically important. However, spiritual masters such as Mother Teresa have frequently emphasized that genuine compassion is fundamentally an *inner* reality: “It is not how much we do, but how much *love* we put into the doing. Do small things with great love” (Mother Teresa, 2007, pp. 28, 61). Compassionate words and actions spring forth from a compassionate heart-mind. With Tonglén meditation, students awaken to the power of their very own breath as a vehicle for honing compassion in their heart-mind.

I have been teaching meditation-based courses for several years now, and I cannot ignore the fact that many students refer to their learning of meditation as one of the most significant assets from their college education. Why are meditation methods so powerful? Contemplative teaching is transformative for students because it activates the Teacher *within* them – their Higher Self, it might be called. This approach is in harmony with the perennial philosophy and the core of the classical wisdom traditions in their emphasis on transformation as an *inner* change. With contemplative practices such as Tonglén meditation, students learn how to transform their inner landscape from tumult to calm. They learn *self*-mastery, in addition to mastery of subject-matter. How can they give to others what they have not attained themselves? Self-mastery, perhaps, is the ultimate education. Gandhi, one of the exemplars we study in the Compassion course, asserted the primacy of self-governance in the process of collective liberation: “One drowning man will never save another. [If] slaves ourselves, it would be a mere pretention to think of freeing others” (Gandhi, 2002, p.108). Self-mastery requires incisive interior practices to liberate the Self from the self. And then is a person truly “educated” in the sense of the root word “educare”: they have come to know the Teacher within.

As the famous Zen master, D.T. Suzuki, put it: “Teaching is not difficult, listening is not difficult, but what is truly difficult is to become conscious of what you have in yourself and be able to use it as your own” (2005, p. 125). With meditation, students become conscious of their inner resources and learn how to channel those resources for the benefit of the world. Self-knowledge, in the end, leads to the possibility of self-transcendence: To study the self is to become free of its drives and, finally, to radiate the compassionate Self.

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