

SUNLIGHT ON SHADOWS: Embracing Great Compassion

Meditation 36

Tonglen Meditation in the ICU

Again, we start with pure motivation—we're doing this meditation for the short- and long-term welfare of all beings equally.

We imagine there's a patient who's been hit by a drunk driver, who's in and out of consciousness, and who's absolutely terrified. In this moment, there's nothing to be done outwardly but to wait. The medicine has been administered, the family has been called, and this semi-conscious person may be struggling just to breathe. We imagine what it would be like if we were in their situation, what it would mean to us if somebody showed us kindness, displayed a genuine concern, and tried to help in any way they could. We consider that, at least, we can do this meditation for them.

As we exhale, we imagine sending them the radiance of whatever they need. As we inhale, we take away all the causes of their suffering, and the conditions of their suffering. We inhale that directly into our heart. With our exhalation, we send them benefit, the radiance of our love and compassion. With our next breath, we take in their suffering and, as we exhale, we send them benefit.

Do this meditation for a few minutes, imagining this person who's struggling to stay alive. Next, we think of the other patients in the ICU and do the same meditation with them. Imagine the suffering of each of them, breathe in their suffering, and send them benefit. Do this for several people simultaneously.

Then expand the meditation to include the nurses and doctors who are struggling to help these people. Imagine these stressed, determined, and capable professionals who are trying so hard to help.

Then imagine paramedics in an ambulance bringing in another patient—who, it turns out, is the drunk driver who hit the patient we were just practicing for. We think about that driver and how that person, just like us, wants to be happy and doesn't want to suffer. Maybe that person was having all kinds of conscious or unconscious pain and was drinking to numb the pain—just as we've done so many times when our pain was so bad that we didn't think about the people around us. This person, just like us, made some bad decisions, but theirs caused an accident, and the person they hit may or may not live.

For this driver, we breathe in the causes and conditions of their suffering. We're not trying to analyze or develop stories about this person's life. We're simply imagining all their suffering and fear as sticky tar that we're taking into our heart. Maybe they, too, have a body that was mangled in the accident. We breathe in their suffering, the causes and conditions of their suffering. Our compassion isn't

based on liking them or not liking them or agreeing with them or not. Here's a being who's really suffering, and we want to take that suffering away. We want to send them the causes and conditions of benefit and happiness.

We breathe in their suffering as well as the suffering of the paramedics, the police, and whoever came in with them. Maybe there was a big accident involving many people, and everyone is upset. We breathe in all that upset-ness of everybody and send everybody the essence of what's beneficial—compassion, clarity, steadiness, the ability to problem-solve in the middle of an emergency, and anything else they need to help themselves and each other—as radiant moonlight. With each in-breath, we continue to breathe in suffering, and, with each exhalation, we send benefit and happiness to everyone involved.

At the end of our meditation, we dedicate the merit we've created to all those who are suffering in the ICU, all those who are trying to help them—the paramedics who were the first to assist them, the ambulance drivers, and all the medical personnel in the emergency and surgery rooms. We pray they may all know the causes and conditions of happiness and never again have to experience suffering. We wish this not only for them but for all beings.