

Ethan Nichtern
Week Four, *Overcoming Spiritual Bypassing*
May 25, 2015
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So welcome back to our fourth and final session of *Overcoming Spiritual Bypassing*, my online series for *Tricycle Magazine*. I'm Ethan Nichtern. I wanted to just do a very brief practice of what often can, and will, be done as a more in-depth practice of a form of compassion or empathizing meditation, which some of you may be familiar with. It comes from the Indo-Tibetan tradition, in Tibetan called *tonglen*, which literally means “sending and receiving.”

It has to do with how we're present with the difficulty of ourselves and another person—or another person. I want to do it in a slightly abbreviated way. But it's practice that I think is really super helpful to working with relationships, super profound. Every time I return to this practice, I experience just how profound it is, and it's also practice that there's a lot of material that *Tricycle* has covered that you could find a lot more information about online or reading books.

So even though we're going to work within a very abbreviated way, I really want to look at it as something that we can work with further in our own practice, but the way I want to look at it today is how this practice actually is meant to bridge, kind of, this notion of ultimate truth, of nothing to hold onto, of non-independent, non-permanent existence, with the experience of relative truth, relational compassion. You're there and I'm here, and that means we have—even though it's an online relationship—we have a relationship with each other. And how those two aspects of the Buddhist teachings, ultimate and relative, can ultimately, and need, ultimately, to be joined, otherwise we will use ultimate truth as a way to push away from the details of life.

So I just ask you to take a comfortable seat. I know when you're sitting in front of a monitor, sometimes, how to work with the eye gaze is tricky. Some of us like to do mind focus meditation with our eyes open, some with our eyes closed. For this few moments of ultimate awareness, or ultimate awakened mind, *bodhicitta*, I just encourage you to open your eyes and maybe look slightly up above your monitor screen until there's a sense of really being as you're listening to my voice in the space that you're in, in kind of a panoramic sense. So if this is not natural to you, I just ask you to try it out, nothing to lose, for a moment.

And as you're having the sense of panoramic awareness, if you can really have a sense of the peripheries of your vision, so that there's a real almost 180 degree swath of awareness out of the corners of your eye and there's a real bodily awareness of the back of your body. And even though you can't see behind yourself, there's a real sense of awareness of that which is behind the body, so that we're really allowing our mind to rest in a large space, even if you're in a small room. There's a sense of all directions, above and below, and just see if you can rest your mind in space.



Often, we have an anchor, like the breath, or like a particular mantra, or an aspiration for positive thought. May I be happy? But here, there's just a sense of opening to the space that you're in. Could be called formless meditation as well. So on the ultimate level, this notion of emptiness is meant to lead us to a kind of open mindedness and open heartedness that's not clinging, not caught. It's just available. So see if you can make yourself available to whatever sense perceptions are happening right now. Sound, sight, sensations in the body, just let there be space for whatever arises in your mental experience. And also see if you can make yourself available to whatever thoughts are arising, without having to push them away, without having to chase them, just kind of like you're watching a wave on the shore of a vast ocean or lake.

If it's a little to-do list thought, if it's a strong feeling of stress or exhaustion, or if it's a strong emotion, just see if you can let it be there in a way that's open. So in this kind of ultimate *bodhicitta* practice, there's just a sense of non-exclusion. Sometimes when we meditate, it feels like we're trying to exclude aspects of the present moment to practice mindfulness. But here, there's a sense of including whatever comes—just becomes part of the space of your mind.

And then out of this, if you want, at this point, you can lower your gaze, or close your eyes. But out of this, we can begin to work with generating compassion, or at least noticing our feelings in relationships. So if you'd like to close your eyes, we're first just going to, out of this space of availability, try to generate compassion for yourself. And I'd ask you to be really simple and specific, just notice one way, right now, that you are struggling, that you are experiencing *dukkha*, suffering. It doesn't have to be a big deal. It could just be stress. It could just be working too hard. It can just be that meditation is hard and irritating. Or it could be something you're going through that's more difficult in life. Just bring to mind a way that you are struggling.

And as you inhale, imagine that you can actually stay present with that specific instance of suffering or difficulty. And as you exhale, just imagine offering to yourself some kind of relief. It could be as simple as imagining yourself having a pillow and a good night's sleep. It could be imagining yourself having more understanding or more clarity, more self-compassion.

So now we're working with relative truth, because we're working with our relationship to our self. Just see if you can, as you breathe in, again, just imagine that you are taking on, or at least staying present with the perceived difficulty. And as you exhale, it's just this generous moment of offering yourself relief, healing, good vibes. You can visualize the light, or pure air.



But see if you can work with that rhythm. You're breathing in your own difficulty, and you're breathing out relief. Notice if this is difficult to do: to allow yourself to actually take on your own suffering and offer yourself relief. See if we can work with it. Work with staying present with the difficulty of our specific suffering in this present moment, not bypassing. *Tonglen* is a very non-transcendent meditation, which is why it's so transformative.

And now let's see if we can bring someone else to mind and for the sake of this ongoing conversation about spiritual bypassing maybe just think of somebody that you're just slightly avoiding dealing with and I don't want you to think of somebody you have a super difficult or abusive relationship with them, just like a difficult phone call you need to make or you're resisting, or somebody is trying to get in touch with you that you're not so excited about being in touch with, someone you have some gentle resistance towards relating to right now and see if you can bring them to mind.

See if you can imagine what their current difficulty is in a very human way. It's okay if it feels in this sense conceptual or it's just your idea of what they're going through. This ability to imagine another person's experience is the basis of compassion. So it's okay if it feels like we don't really know what they're going to see if you can imagine what their suffering is and see if, as you inhale, you can take that on without there being a sense that it sticks to you, because your mind is open and available like that space. And as you breathe this out, imagine that you can offer them whatever might help them. Offer them a pillow, offer them some peace, offer them clarity. Whatever it is.

And then in this abbreviated form of *tonglen* meditation maybe we could begin to expand the scope of our practice. Just imagine that we could offer compassion not to all beings because all beings is a generalization but to each being. So see just what specific types of human beings or groups of human beings or other individuals come to mind as they come to mind to see if you can breathe in whatever difficulty they might be having and breathe out your own willingness to help them, your own willingness to connect with them, your own willingness to not transcend your interconnectedness with them. Breathing in for each being, breathing out for each being's benefit. Breathing in each being's difficulty, breathing out each being's benefit.

And finally let's let our minds open and rest. Back to that very "whatever is happening" space. That inclusive space, that available space of whatever sounds, whatever sensations, whatever emotions arise, just accommodating. So because we are not creating a conceptual barrier between ourselves in our experience we can actually lean into whatever the present moment is more. We can actually experience our life more fully. That's the idea of emptiness.

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So, thank you. I super appreciate your willingness to practice in this online, this virtual but real format. I wanted to close by just offering a short form of compassion meditation, just to kind of demonstrate how I think we can actually learn and how the tradition is actually really pushing us to use emptiness as a way to connect and lean into our human relationships even more. Not as a

way to push away from our life or our relationships. And I also really wanted to look at this connection, this inseparability between ultimate truth, emptiness and the relative truth of our relationships, our credit card bill, our body, our time and place on this earth in 2015.

I just wanted to close by reading a little bit from *The Road Home* which is my new book from FSG where a lot of these ideas came from and again I want to give a lot of credit for the concept of spiritual bypassing to John Wellwood who is the author and teacher who coined the phrase. And I want to get a lot of props to the various teachers in the Mahayana traditions and the Theravada traditions that I've studied with. Because I think this notion of spiritual bypassing is something that a lot of teachers are really starting to work with and a lot of students are starting to work with. So I definitely want to give credit where credit is due and *tonglen* meditation is something that can and should be studied as well as other compassion practices like *metta* (lovingkindness) and should be practiced. I think that's really how we prepare to lean in gently to our human relationships. So I really encourage if you don't have a relationship to compassion practice or you have a kind of relationship to compassion meditation that's on hiatus that maybe we could think about jumpstarting those.

I just wanted to close with the last paragraph of the last of the chapter on spiritual bypass from *The Road Home* as a way to close our time together.

“Even if we completely realize the ultimate truth of emptiness, we would still have to wake up the next morning and deal with the relationships that make up our life one simple step at a time. This does not mean that our meditation practice or philosophical study don't matter, they matter quite a lot. But if we only focus on philosophy or if we only focus on what deep state of meditative concentration we've achieved we might just bypass the truly beautiful work of our relationships. Glimpsing emptiness should move us toward not away from the details of relationships. After we deconstruct our false views we are left on the doorstep of a real life—ready to deal with our families, our friends, our coworkers and eventually all beings.”

So thank you all so much. I hope there's a chance to reconnect online or in person in what I like to call the third dimension. That would be wonderful and I hope all of your practices go well and hope to see you again. So thank you for participating in this online series. And may all beings be free from suffering.

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