# The Tonglen Experiences of Individuals with Established Sitting Meditation Practices: A Grounded Theory Study

by © Jeff Pardy

A thesis submitted to the

School of Graduate Studies

in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

**Master of Education (Counselling Psychology)**

Memorial University of Newfoundland

**May 2016**

St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador

**Abstract**

While there is an ever expanding body of research on various forms of meditation, there is currently a relative absence of academic literature on tonglen. A form of meditation which involves both visualizations and breathing elements, during tonglen one takes in the negativity and suffering experienced by others and, in return, sends back happiness and compassion. The current study explores the tonglen meditation experiences of individuals who have established sitting meditation practices. A qualitative, grounded theory approach was used in looking at what tonglen means to participants, how they engage with the practice, why they practice tonglen, and what they perceive to be the benefits of tonglen in the context of a 28 day practice period. Based on the findings from this study, a model was developed that describes the tonglen experiences of participants.

**Acknowledgements**

First, I would like to thank my thesis supervisors, Dr. Sarah Pickett and Dr. Jackie Hesson. Their guidance and advice during each step of this process has been immeasurably helpful. I am grateful to them for their efforts and for always making time for me in their hectic schedules. Their patience and support has been fundamental in ensuring the completion of this project.

I thank Erin Kirby for her constant love, support, and encouragement. While I doubted myself at many points along the way, she never doubted me. She has taught me much about what it means to authentically experience and demonstrate compassion.

Thank you to my family, which has been supportive of not only my work on this thesis, but also this degree in general. Pursuing one's M.Ed. is not a lucrative enterprise. I could not have persevered without them welcoming me home and encouraging my studies.

I would also like to thank the Faculty of Education, Graduate Studies, for their assistance with my thesis and my studies as a M.Ed. student. I have greatly appreciated the help and support of both the professors and administrators of this program in assisting me with my many queries and requests.

Finally, I would like to thank the St. John's Shambhala Meditation Group. While there is no doubt that this study would not have gotten off the ground without their support and interest, their humor and energy made the entire process both immensely enjoyable and worthwhile.

## Table of Contents

## List of Figures

## List of Abbreviations

| | |
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| LKM | Loving-Kindness Meditation |
| MBSR | Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction |
| PTSD | Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder |

## List of Appendices

# Chapter 1

# Introduction

## Background

Tonglen is a visualization and breathing based form of meditation which began in India and has been practiced for more than 1000 years (McKnight, 2014). Refined in large part by Tibetan Buddhist practitioners, tonglen is often called "sending and taking" (Chodron, 2001) or "giving and receiving" (Gaffney, Harvey, & Rinpoche, 1993). It involves visualizing that one is taking in negative, difficult, or painful elements, such as the suffering and unhappiness of others. These visualizations are imagined as being transmuted into positive feelings, emotions, or things – such as compassion, tolerance and understanding – which are sent back to the object(s) of meditation. Tonglen can involve a single focus (such as an animal that is suffering), a more expanded focus (such as when one practices for a group of people), or a mix of these approaches. It is sometimes done with the intention of challenging one's biases, preferences, and ego-based habitual patterns. For example, people that the practitioner likes as well as those he or she dislikes or feels ambivalent about can become the focus of a practice session (Chodron, 2001).

Tonglen is a flexible form of meditation, as the various stages of tonglen one engages in and objects visualized differ from one Buddhist tradition to another. While some argue that tonglen is a practice that can be taught to individuals who are novices to meditation (McKnight, 2014), others note that tonglen is most beneficial when one already has an established sitting meditation practice (Chodron, 2001).

It is important to consider both the dangers and the benefits of tonglen to counselling clients. For example, as tonglen practice involves contemplating and

envisioning the suffering of loved ones, it can be both a stressful and challenging practice (Raison, 2013). Therefore, tonglen should only be pursued after the client has had a chance to establish a regular meditation practice. However, tonglen can also be incredibly beneficial for clients as it assists in the development of compassion and open mindedness. The development of such qualities can assist those struggling with fear, paranoia, and anger, helping them challenge habitual negative, destructive thinking habits such as the tendency to become reactionary with others. Furthermore, as tonglen is geared towards contemplating one's interconnections with others, it can lessen one's feelings of being intimidated by personal interactions (Chodron, 2001). Given these benefits, it is clear that clients suffering from anxiety, depression, avoidant personality disorder, and social anxiety disorder might benefit from tonglen. In this way, tonglen could become a potentially invaluable tool to counsellors.

Relatively few academic studies have been done on tonglen. Indeed, McKnight's 2012 and 2014 studies are, at present, the only stand alone academic examinations of tonglen. The current study is the first qualitative, grounded theory work on tonglen. It explores the tonglen experiences of individuals who have established sitting meditation practices, utilizing data collected from interviews, written reflections, and also time logs that reflect how frequently participants practiced tonglen during a 28 day period. The data collected provides the basis for rich textual descriptions of the experiences of the participants in this study and their tonglen practices.

A much larger body of academic literature exists on Loving-Kindness Meditation (LKM). LKM has been used in the day-long practice period component of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). LKM is a meditation approach

which has been called a “cousin” practice to tonglen (McKnight, 2014) due to the similarities between these practices. While there are critical differences between tonglen and LKM, information gleaned from studies on LKM can help to shed a critical light on tonglen practice in the context of this study.

By exploring the experiences of participants and reviewing the literature on sitting meditation, LKM, and tonglen, the current study is designed to help add to the body of academic knowledge on tonglen, specifically with regards to individuals who have established sitting meditation practices.

**Personal Experience**

My interest in tonglen arose from a number of personal experiences with the practice which illustrated its potential to positively influence personal change and reflection. I became interested in Buddhism as I was finishing up my first degree – a BA, joint honours, in English and History from Memorial University. I was writing my thesis on Jack Kerouac, and read a few books on Buddhism after studying Kerouac’s reflections on Buddhist philosophy. One of those books, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, introduced me to tonglen practice.

I had recently tried sitting meditation (Shamatha) and found basic instructions for tonglen in Rinpoche's text. As a somewhat jaded and cynical undergraduate student, I was not prepared for this practice which allowed me to deepen my experiences of compassion. Over time, tonglen helped me to cut through my negative thoughts and to touch in with something beyond the frustration and anger I felt.

About four years ago I applied for temporary monasticism at Gampo Abbey, a Shambhala Buddhist monastery in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. While personal illness kept

me from completing my intended six month stay, I had a wonderful experience with tonglen while I was there. A group of individuals who had established sitting meditation practices came to the monastery for a day to learn more about Buddhism and Buddhist monasticism. I attended a meeting in the library with this group and, during the meeting, one of the senior monks talked about tonglen. After this talk, we all engaged in the practice. While I enjoyed the session, I was not prepared for the impact it would have on some of the individuals from the visiting group. Reflecting on their experiences, they emotionally discussed touching in with memories and emotions that they had not felt – or, perhaps, allowed themselves to feel – for some time. They talked of how the practice allowed them to powerfully, compassionately connect with others, despite the fact that tonglen was entirely based in their own minds.

In general, Buddhist practices have had a powerful impact on my life. It did not take me long to settle on the area I wanted to explore in my Master's thesis. Upon further reflection and study, I discovered the wealth of literature on meditation, as well as the dearth of empirical research on tonglen. This fact, and my experiences with the practice, led me to choose this topic as the focus for the current study.

**Problem Purpose Statement**

While there is a growing body of research on meditation practice, there is a relative absence of research on tonglen. This is problematic given the multitude of contexts in which various meditation practices have been used and the accompanying benefits of such practices. Research has been conducted on the tonglen experiences of mindfulness and meditation novices (McKnight, 2014). However, there have not been any stand-alone explorations of tonglen with regards to experienced sitting meditation

practitioners.

Given this gap in the academic literature, the current study was designed to explore tonglen with regards to individuals with established sitting meditation practices. Specifically, the study looked at tonglen meditation in the context of approximately a month long study period in which participants were asked to regularly engage in the practice. Such research helps to expand the current body of academic knowledge on tonglen not only with regards to experienced practitioners, but also with regards to how regular tonglen practice may impact individuals. The results of this study could have important implications for those with established sitting meditation practices with various degrees of familiarity with tonglen.

The study asked participants, who were connected with the St. John's Shambhala Meditation Group, to engage in tonglen practice, at their discretion, over a period of 28 days. Participants were not given tonglen meditation instructions, but instead were asked to engage in the form(s) of tonglen of their choosing. At the end of the 28 day practice period they were asked to submit a short report discussing their experiences and time logs which tracked the days and lengths of their tonglen practice sessions. As well, each participant met the researcher for a single one on one interview. Using these forms of data, the experiences of participants and their views on tonglen were studied.

**Research questions**

1. What does tonglen mean for participants in this study?
2. How do participants engage with the practice?
3. Why would someone want to practice tonglen?
4. What do participants feel are the benefits of tonglen practice, and why do they

think these benefits arise?

As noted earlier, there is not only a lack of academic research on tonglen, but there is an absence of stand-alone studies on tonglen with regards to individuals who have established meditation practices. Therefore, it is important to begin to develop a base of knowledge on how tonglen is experienced by these individuals. Such research should also explore the ways in which they carry out tonglen practice and, in general, why they practice tonglen. Furthermore, given the various benefits that have been linked to numerous meditation practices (Davis & Hayes, 2012), the researcher is curious if participants in the current study experienced any perceived benefits of tonglen practice. Such questions will help to illuminate various aspects of tonglen practice – and, in particular, sustained tonglen practice – on those with established sitting meditation practices.

# Chapter 2

# Literature Review

## Sitting Meditation

The term meditation is often used by contemporary scholars to refer to a wide range of mindfulness practices which have been shaped by cultural, societal, and religious contexts. While some of these practices cultivate focus of a given object, others may be more geared towards developing awareness of what is happening in one's environment from one moment to the next. Still others may be designed to assist in stress relief or even the deepening of one's faith (Hinton, Ojserkis, Jalal, Peou, & Hofmann, 2013; Van Leeuwen, Müller, & Melloni, 2009). Hence, it is critical that the specific meditation practices relevant to this research project be identified and discussed. As Lutz, Slagter, Dunne, and Davidson (2008) argue, "failure to make such distinctions would be akin to the use of the word 'sport' to refer to all sports as if they were essentially the same" (p. 163).

It is important to briefly note the difference between mindfulness and awareness. Awareness can be thought of as a sort of knowing. For example, it is the quality that recognizes that one is no longer focusing on and following one's breath during meditation practice. Mindfulness, on the other hand, is akin to focus. It is the quality of following the in and out of one's breath, and of paying attention to this experience and the related sensations (Mipham, 2003). As Gunaratana (2002) notes, mindfulness is seeing "reality exactly as it is" without the accompanying "endless thought-stream" that often accompanies our daily lives. Awareness, on the other hand, is an experience of paying attention to what is happening in the environment and in one's own mind and body

without having a particular object of focus, such as the breath (Trungpa, 1995).

The Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program developed by John Kabat-Zinn has had a large role in uniting ancient mindfulness practices with contemporary psychology. Kabat-Zinn (1990) has noted that mindfulness is a type of nonjudgmental practice in which one pays attention to moment to moment feelings and experiences. Typically referred to as Mindfulness Meditation in academic literature, the practices that comprise MBSR involve various physical postures and movements which are accompanied by contemplative mental approaches. The common thread between the various Mindfulness Meditation practices is the cultivation of present-moment awareness and acceptance of one's subjective experience (Ortner, Kilner, & Zelazo, 2007).

Sitting meditation is one of the key forms of Mindfulness Meditation practice used in MBSR, and has existed in various forms for thousands of years (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). It involves exploring one's relationship with one's self, as, by engaging in sitting meditation on a regular basis, an individual is able to make a habit of becoming more sensitive to what is going on in his or her life. This sensitivity is an awareness that encompasses the way we experience various phenomenon such as sights and sounds, our behaviours and thoughts, and our emotions (Trungpa, 1995).

**Introduction to Shamatha and Vipashyana.** Given that the current study is on tonglen meditation, it is pertinent to question the role of sitting meditation with regards to tonglen. Buddhist teachers, such as Pema Chodron, often stress the practice of sitting meditation before, after, or both before and after tonglen practice, with Chodron (2001) noting, “sitting meditation and tonglen always go hand in hand” (p. 21). Sitting meditation, like tonglen, helps to train the individual to focus, overcome distraction, and

let go of thoughts and emotions. Sitting meditation can be seen as preparing the individual for the challenges experienced during tonglen practice, as well as providing training in continuing to practice despite the arising of difficult and painful memories and feelings (Chodron, 2001). **S**itting meditation also teaches the individual how to follow the in and out breath, a skill which is also required in tonglen practice. Specifically, in tonglen, that which is good goes out with the out-breath, while difficulties and challenges are taken into one's self with the in-breath (Trungpa, 1993).

Given this connection between sitting meditation and tonglen, the styles of sitting meditation most relevant to the current study should be discussed. Specifically, participants were recruited from the St. John's Shambhala Meditation Group. This group is part of the larger Shambhala International organization, which was started by Chogyam Trungpa. Shambhala Buddhist practices were developed based on Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and approaches (Fields, 2014). Lutz et al. (2008) write that there are two common types of sitting meditation in Tibetan Buddhism: Focused Attention (or Shamatha) and Open Monitoring (or Vipashyana).

In academic literature, it appears that the terms Focused Attention meditation – traditionally referred to as Shamatha meditation in Tibetan Buddhism – and Mindfulness Meditation have both been used to refer to this type of meditation. However, as noted above, Mindfulness Meditation has also been used in many studies to refer to mindfulness practices as a whole. Open Monitoring meditation – typically referred to as Vipashyana in Tibetan Buddhism – has also been called Awareness Meditation in various academic studies (Chiesa, 2013; Lutz et al. 2008). Mindfulness, by its very nature, is a complex phenomenon. Challenges encountered when studying meditation are exacerbated by

issues such as the clear lack of consensus regarding the terminology that should be used when referencing these meditation practices (Chiesa, 2013). As the participants in the study were recruited from the St. John's Shambhala Meditation Group, and the terms Shamatha and Vipashyana are predominantly used in Shambhala related Buddhist Literature, these terms will be used throughout this study.

**Shamatha meditation.** Trungpa (1995) noted that "Shamatha meditation practice is the vanguard practice for developing [...] mindfulness" (p.15). Shamatha meditation involves the observation of an object or sensation. In the majority of studies and teachings, the breath is the chosen object of observation. This observation is carried out with non-judgemental awareness (Chu, 2010). From time to time, especially for those new to the practice, attention is lost and the mind wanders. The practitioner notes such when it occurs. In some practices, this noting is accompanied by the word "thinking" which is brought to mind (Trungpa, 1995). After noting a loss of attention, the practitioner brings his or her focus back to the chosen object or sensation (Van Leeuwen et al., 2009). As one becomes more experienced with this type of meditation practice, he or she increases in awareness of his or her own destructive habitual patterns. This helps to develop an understanding of how to simply observe these patterns when they arise (Chu, 2010). During Shamatha meditation practice, the mind should be neither "too tight" or "too loose" – not strictly focused singularly and strictly on the breath, but not involving a lack of focus either (Trungpa, 1995, p. 19). Shamatha involves an acceptance of whatever arises in the mind. Instead of becoming angered, frustrated, or saddened by difficult thoughts and, subsequently, aggressively challenging them, Shamatha teaches the individual to be open to, accepting of, and even compassionate towards such thoughts

(Van Leeuwen et al., 2009).

Given the relation of Shamatha meditation to the current study, it is important to touch on some of the research that has explored the effects of this form of meditation. For example, Elliott, Wallace, and Giesbrecht (2014) studied participants that engaged in a seven day Shamatha meditation retreat, finding that participants' alerting and executive attention networks were improved afterwards. Additionally, MacLean et al. (2010) completed a longitudinal study on the effects of long-term daily Shamatha meditation on attention, linking the practice with improved visual discrimination and perception. Finally, Zeidan et al. (2010) studied the effects of brief amounts of Shamatha on those who had not tried meditation before. Participants experienced significant mindfulness increases in comparison to the control group, as well as improvements in sustained attention and mood, and reduced fatigue and anxiety.

**Vipashyana meditation.** As discussed earlier, along with Shamatha meditation, Vipashyana meditation is the most common type of meditation practiced in Tibetan Buddhism. When engaging in Vipashyana, the practitioner maintains an awareness of thoughts that arise in the mind, physical experiences that occur in the body, and sounds which arise in the environment. In this attentive, non-reactive state, these elements are simply observed, and, unlike in mindfulness meditation, there is no directed, consistent attention placed on any explicit object or sensation (Krygier et. al., 2013; Lippelt, Hommel, & Colzato, 2014; Lutz et. al., 2008; Van Leeuwen et al., 2009).

Many teachers and scholars argue that Shamatha meditation is a necessary precursor to Vipashyana practice (Lutz et al., 2008; Van Leeuwen et al., 2009; Lippelt et al., 2014). This is because the Vipashyana approach is believed to be too challenging for

novice meditators. For one, Vipashyana, unlike Shamatha, involves the absence of an object of meditation. Hence, the novice meditator is more likely to be overcome by distracting thoughts during Vipashyana, as opposed to Shamatha, meditation. However, once a level of sustained mindfulness during Shamatha meditation has been reached, one can then venture into working with the Vipashyana approach (Lutz et al., 2008).

It is important to discuss research which has explored Vipashyana, given its links to tonglen and, subsequently, this study. For example, Singh, Sharma, and Talwar (2012) studied long term Vipashyana practice and physical, emotional, and cognitive changes associated with neural plasticity and the brain's structure and functioning. The researchers correlated long term Vipashyana practice with greater levels of acceptance of past and present experiences, a heightening of one's awareness of the present-moment, and reductions in rumination.

While the current study explored the tonglen experiences of participants during a 28 day practice period, Krygier et al. (2013) studied the effects of short term, focused Vipashyana practice by following the experiences of participants who enrolled in a ten day Vipashyana meditation retreat. The participants, all of whom were enrolled in the retreat for the first time, experienced significant increases in well-being, as the researchers noted that numerous participants had more stable measures of heart rate variability after the retreat. In addition, participants perceived increases in their levels of satisfaction with life, greater mindfulness, and increases in positive affect after the retreat. These benefits were accompanied by decreases in depression, stress, and negative affect.

Finally, it should be noted that some studies on Vipashyana focus not only on psychological elements but also physical differences between experienced Vipashyana

meditators and non-meditators. For example, Hozel et al. (2008) studied the physiological effects of Vipashyana practice by examining MRI brain images of twenty experienced Vipashyana meditators with a mean of 8.6 years of practice. The gray matter of these participants, who typically engaged in Vipashyana for approximately two hours a day, was compared to the gray matter in non-meditators. It was found that experienced Vipashyana meditators had greater amounts of gray matter in regions involved in interoceptive awareness. Based on this finding, Hozel et al. argued that Vipashyana practice could be linked with increases in grey matter in areas of the brain that are involved in this type of meditation.

**Shamatha-Vipashyana meditation**. Trungpa (1995) notes that the combination of Shamatha and Vipashyana styles of meditation is a key stage in the development of one's meditation practice, as mindfulness turns into awareness. During this process, one develops a greater understanding of thoughts, sensations, and the mind; the breath is related to "in a more expansive way;" and one is first introduced to awareness that involves "totality rather than one-sidedness (pp. 21-23).

While few studies have been completed on Shamata-Vipashyana meditation, these can help to offer some context to tonglen practice. For example, Van Leeuwen et al. (2009) studied Shamatha-Vipashyana meditation practice with regards to attentional blink. Specifically, attentional blink refers to a noted phenomenon of the failure to detect a second visual stimuli when it is presented in quick succession (between 200 and 500 milliseconds) after the first. The study compared young non-meditators (with a mean age of 24.3), older non-meditators (with a mean age of 50), and experienced Shamatha–Vipashyana meditators (with a mean age of 49.8). The experienced Shamatha-Vipashyana

meditators demonstrated fewer instances of attentional blink in comparison to both the younger and the older non-meditator participants. The researchers argued that the results suggested greater efficiency in the way attentional resources are distributed for experienced Shamatha-Vipashyana meditators.

**Loving-Kindness Meditation**

Loving-Kindness Meditation (LKM) is a form of Mindfulness Meditation practice which is geared towards cultivating compassion for one's self and others. Through this interpersonal and intrapersonal form of compassion, one nurtures a deeper sense of interconnectedness (Hinton et al., 2013). Through LKM practice, a deeper understanding of one's own pain develops and, over time, the individual comes to realize similar pain in others. LKM assists in the development of one's love for, and understanding of, humanity. LKM (as well as tonglen) can be practiced formally through meditation, as well as informally during one's day to day interactions (Leppma, 2012).

The term loving-kindness has been translated from the Pali word *metta* (Kearney et. al., 2013; McKnight, 2014). Metta is one of the four immeasureables – along with compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity – that were taught by Shakyamuni Buddha. The practice of LKM originates approximately 1200 years before tonglen. While tonglen is part of the Buddhist lojong (or mind-training) commentaries, LKM is typically seen as a preliminary practice to studying these commentaries (McKnight, 2014).

LKM is used during the daylong session in MBSR, which typically occurs near the end of the eight week program (Corcoran, 2007). In this context, LKM has been used to help participants to release feelings of resentment and stress, to nurture positive approaches to relationships with others, to generate compassion for others, and to

improve overall well-being (Leppma, 2012).

As with tonglen practice, LKM typically begins with a period of sitting meditation. Following this, LKM practitioners shift their focus towards their hearts in order to assist with the process of centering as well as directing attention towards the development of compassion (Leppma, 2012). Next, they place their attention on themselves and mentally recite a series of compassionate sayings. Often, the following four phrases are used: “May I be free from enmity. May I be free from ill-will. May I be free from suffering. May I be happy” (McKnight, 2014, p. 38). These statements are repeated a number of times, while thoughts and images of love and compassion are directed inward (McKnight, 2014).

After a period of time, practitioners visualize those they love and care for, mentally repeating the same phrases but changing them so they are directed at the chosen individuals. Next, someone (or a group of people) one feels ambivalent about is brought to mind and the mantras are once again recited as love and compassion is directed towards the individual. The process is repeated for someone, or a group of people, the practitioner has had conflicts with in the past. Finally, the universe becomes the object of LKM practice. With each object of focus, the practitioner returns to the mantras, concentrating on the development of safety, happiness, health and a better quality of life for the object(s) of meditation (Leppma, 2012; McKnight, 2014).

McKnight (2014) argues that there are numerous similarities between tonglen and LKM. For example, both help individuals to develop loving-kindness, compassion, happiness, and a greater appreciation for how all beings experience suffering. Both practices focus on developing deeper feelings for not only loved ones, but also for those

one feels ambivalent about or dislikes. McKnight suggests that, given their similarities, LKM can be considered a cousin practice to tonglen, and that it is possible to infer how tonglen may impact practitioners based on the results of studies that have been done on LKM.

It is important to keep in mind that while these two practices are quite similar, there are differences between tonglen and LKM. The most critical difference between the two practices is that tonglen involves both giving compassion and taking negative energy away, while LKM focused solely on the giving of positive energy (McKnight, 2014).

**Research on Loving-Kindness Meditation**. Given the similarities between tonglen and LKM, reviewing various studies on LKM can help to shed some light on how tonglen might impact those who practice it. Given that there are numerous studies on LKM, the ones discussed below were chosen based on their relevance to the current project. These studies note a wide variety of positive outcomes connected with LKM practice.

Some studies have examined LKM in the context of sitting meditation practice. For example, Sears and Kraus (2009) conducted a study on the impact of Shamatha-Vipashyana meditation, LKM, and the combination of LKM and Shamatha-Vipashyana. Participants were divided into four groups: a control group, a brief meditation group using Shamatha-Vipashyana, a brief meditation group using LKM, and a longer meditation group which combined both Shamatha-Vipashyana and LKM. The 57 participants were students with various amounts of experience with mindfulness practice in classroom settings. The group that engaged in longer meditation sessions that involved both Shamatha-Vipashyana and LKM experienced a significant reduction in anxiety and

negative emotions, as well as increases hope.

The impact of the separate practices of sitting meditation and LKM have also been compared and contrasted. A study by Lee et al. (2012) monitored the brain activity of 22 Shamatha meditators – 11 experts and 11 novices – and 22 LKM practitioners – 11 experts and 11 novices. Both baseline and in-meditation measurements were taken as the subjects performed cognitive and affective tests. The study found that the neural activation in those experienced in Shamatha meditation was greater in on task performance tests. The LKM experts were better at controlling the spread of negative emotions when shown pictures of sad faces, and at regulating compassion. Lee et al. suggested that this may mean that LKM can be helpfully applied in strengthening one's emotion regulation abilities.

It is also interesting to note the influence that LKM has on how one perceives others. Leiberg, Klimecki, and Singer (2011) examined the effect of LKM on those in positions of power. They found that participants who practiced 8 minutes of LKM meditation before engaging in a game where they were given dictatorial powers were more likely to give out greater amounts of resources than those who did not engage in LKM.

It should also be noted that LKM has been used to positive effect in counselling related contexts. For example, Hinton et al. (2013) discuss using LKM to help minority groups and traumatized refugees. Arguing that LKM can decrease ruminative thoughts and improve emotional regulation, the researchers used LKM as part of a Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment model. Specifically, they argue that LKM teaches new ways of processing information which can help clients to achieve greater psychological flexibility;

challenge hardened, aggressive thought patterns; and better cope with stress, anger, and other negative mental states. The researchers also note that LKM practice is flexible and can be altered to harmoniously fit with clients' cultural and social backgrounds. For example, in working with a refugee who survived the Pol Pot period, they used a more traditional LKM approach to address trauma and aggressively negative thought patterns. On the other hand, their LKM approach was modified to incorporate the image of Jesus when the practice was explored with a Latino population.

As the participants in the current study are experienced with sitting meditation and familiar, to varying degrees, with the practice of tonglen, it is also useful to look at studies involving participants with previous LKM experience. For example, Corcoran (2007) completed a grounded theory study in which seven experienced practitioners and two teachers of LKM were interviewed regarding their LKM practices. The interviews were compared in order to identify similar changes in participants' thoughts and behaviours which could be connected with their LKM practices. Those studied experienced more control over their emotions and noted less intense experiences of anger, less fear and anxiety, and fewer experiences of helplessness than they had experienced in the past. The participants also felt they were less judgemental, had greater feelings of compassion, and experienced improvements in overall well-being. These changes were connected with LKM practice, as it was seen as helping them develop skills they needed in order to cope with challenging situations and feelings. Such skills also helped them to deal with situations they would have previously found difficult. Furthermore, the participants noted stronger feelings of connection with other people, and, in general, viewed others in a more positive light than they had before they learned about LKM practice.

As both LKM and tonglen involve mentally sending positivity to others, it should be noted that the influence of LKM on others has previously been studied. Specifically, Kemper and Shaltout (2011) examined the effects of LKM when a specific individual was chosen as the focus of LKM practice, but did not know that someone was practicing for him or her. An experienced LKM practitioner practiced for a chosen, target individual for 10 or 20 minutes. Some sessions involved the experienced LKM practitioner touching the hands and legs of the participant, while no touch was involved during other sessions. A drop in the respiration levels and heart rates of the participants was correlated with both the tactile and non-tactile LKM sessions.

Finally, similar to sitting meditation, it appears that LKM may impact practitioner's grey matter. Leung et al. (2013) employed brain imaging technology to examine the brains of ten males who had been practicing LKM for five years or more. These participants were compared to fifteen control participants who were matched with the experienced meditators on the basis of various demographics. It was noted that the experienced LKM meditators possessed greater volumes of left temporal lobe, right angular, and posterior parahippocampal gyri gray matter. The researchers noted that these areas of the brain are connected with affect regulation, specifically with one's empathic responses, as well as anxiety and mood. This may suggest that LKM can thicken gray matter which is involved in affective regulation.

**Tonglen**

Tonglen is a form of Buddhist meditation practice that began over 1000 years ago. While the practice of tonglen began in India, it further developed and gained popularity as part of the Buddhist lojong, or mind-training, practices which were compiled

approximately 900 years ago in Tibet. Atiśa, who was born in what is now Bengal and lived from 980-1054 AD, has been attributed with collecting the lojong teachings and bringing them to Tibet (McKnight, 2014). These teachings are thought to have come from various key texts in the Buddhist tradition, including Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland* and Santideva's *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* (Lichty, 2009; McKnight, 2014).

As part of the lojong teachings, tonglen is often presented via the Seven-Point Mind Training practice of Tibetan Buddhism. This practice is designed to create a shift in one's mental state towards clarity and focus, as the practices challenge difficult states such as anxiety, desire, and frustration (Trungpa, 1993). Of the seven points, tonglen is part of the second point which focuses on the development of an understanding, and view, of the world that unites wisdom and compassion (McKnight, 2014).

Tonglen practice has also been called "sending and receiving," "sending and taking," "giving and taking" and "exchanging self and/for others" (McKnight, 2014, p. 3). It has been popularized for Western audiences by Buddhist teachers such as Pema Chödrön, Sogyal Rinpoche, and Chogyam Trungpa. While, as noted above, tonglen has traditionally been taught as part of the larger context of lojong teachings, contemporary teachers have presented it as a stand-alone practice to be utilized in conjunction with sitting meditation (McKnight, 2014; Chodron, 2001).

Tonglen is a useful meditation practice for a variety of reasons. For one, it has been used to challenge habitual tendencies of avoiding, suppressing, and fighting pain, and to shorten the emotional distance between self and other (Franklin, Farrelly-Hansen, Marek, Swan-Foster, & Wallingford, 2000). It assists in the development of emotional insight and understanding which manifests through compassion, such as compassion

directed towards difficult situations and those in such situations (Grace, 2009). Tonglen can be used to help individuals develop empathy and sympathy, as well as nurture intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence (Parker & Wilding, 2012). It has been proposed as a strategy to help nurses deal with chronic stress and burnout, as it helps to cultivate resilience as well as feelings of interconnectedness (Gorman, 2005), and has been proposed as a tool for developing altruism (Wallmark, Safarzadeh, Daukantaitė, & Maddux, 2012). Tonglen can help individuals to cultivate greater personal insight, as well as alter how they process their experiences. Tonglen can be useful in helping to reduce egotistical tendencies via the development of feelings of interconnectedness (Chodron, 2001). Finally, McKnight (2014) argues that tonglen practice is linked with elevated levels of compassion and can increase feelings of social connectedness and satisfaction with life. In addition, by developing compassion, McKnight notes that one becomes more adept at dealing with mental and physical pain, depression, and social isolation. As tonglen practice is steeped in non-judgmental acceptance, it can help individuals take on a compassionate, rather than critical, stance when reflecting on their own challenges and faults. By using tonglen to breathe in others' shortcomings and difficulties, those who practice tonglen learn to direct compassion towards human weakness and suffering (McKnight, 2014).

**The practice of tonglen.** Tonglen evolved over time as it spread throughout various streams of Buddhism, especially those of the Tibetan schools of Buddhism. Hence, there are a wide variety of teachings on tonglen which offer different iterations on the central practice (McKnight, 2014). While a general summary of tonglen practice is discussed below, it should be noted that this is not a definitive depiction of this form of

meditation practice.

Sitting meditation (Shamatha, Vipashyana, or Shamatha-Vipashyana) is typically practised before, after, or before and after one engages in tonglen. This not only prepares the practitioners for the challenge of tonglen, but also helps to build the stability and focus needed to practice tonglen effectively (Chodron, 2001). Following this period of sitting meditation, formal tonglen practice can be broken down into four stages. The first stage consists of "flashing a sense of openness," which involves experiencing a state of open, empty, fresh, and expansive reality (Chodron, 2001, p. 26). Chodron suggests that this can involve picturing something that reflects the characteristics of spaciousness, such as a cloudless blue sky. While the time one spends in this openness – which is about the tone of a bell – is quite brief, Chodron argues it is the essence of the practice as it reflects a sense of welcoming and space to whatever happens in life.

The second stage involves matching one's breath with specific visualizations. Anything that is unwanted or negative, such as feelings of pain, suffering, stuffiness, and darkness, is visualized as coming into the body with the in-breath. Peace, freshness, and clarity are released from the body with the out-breath (McKnight, 2014). Chodron (2001) writes that this practice can be done by visualizing the in and out breath as not simply leaving and entering the body via the nose and mouth, but throughout "all the pores of your body, 360 degrees in all directions, as well as above and below" (p. 26).

The third stage of tonglen consists of selecting a focus for the practice. Traditionally, the first individual of focus is one's mother (McKnight, 2014). However, this focus can also be another person, an animal, one's self, or even a sensation or set of emotions (Chodron, 2001; McKnight, 2014). On the in breath, something that is

unwanted by the focus of the meditation is taken into one's self. This feeling, sensation, or thing can be visualized as black smoke, dirty water, insects, or something else of an undesirable nature, and is visualized as entering the practitioner's heart. Upon entering the heart, it dissolves and is transformed into healing, white light. The practitioner then sends this positive energy back to the object of the meditation. This positive energy is visualized as something beneficial, such as white light, food, clothing, or money. Something more abstract, such as faith or love, can also be sent to the focus of the meditation. As the practice progresses, the practitioner can envision the focus of the meditation as becoming happier, stronger, and more at peace. One's focus during the tonglen session can be shifted. For example, the practitioner can switch focus from a single person to a group of people. Additionally, the practitioner can move his or her focus from someone that is loved, to someone she or he is indifferent to, and finally to someone that is disliked (Chodron, 2001; McKnight, 2014; Gaffney, Harvey, & Rinpoche, 1993).

The final stage of tonglen practice consists of expanding one's focus to the entire universe. This step is not meant to be a theoretical exercise. Instead, it is steeped in empathy and compassion. As one's tonglen practice grows and progresses, the practitioner begins to develop a deep appreciation for the universality of pain and suffering (Chodron, 2001).

It should also be noted that a more informal version of tonglen, known as tonglen on the spot, also exists. While formal tonglen meditation is traditionally practiced while one is seated on a cushion or chair, tonglen on the spot is used in the moment during day to day life as it can help when problematic and challenging everyday situations, such as arguments, arise. In these situations, one visualizes negative energy from the target

individual as being taken into one's self, while positive energy is sent back to that person (Chodron, 2001).

**Knowledge gap, Buddhist contexts, and dangers of tonglen practice.**

McKnight (2014) argues that there is currently a dearth of academic research on tonglen, despite the fact that both medical professionals and various research articles have noted the potential of this practice. Furthermore, McKnight argues that once the benefits of tonglen have been established, it can be studied with greater regard to its usefulness in therapeutic and medical contexts. Until then, it is difficult to determine exactly how it can be utilized (McKnight, 2014).

McKnight's arguments are supported by both Chu (2010) and Lutz et al. (2008), who note that meditative practices that can help people nurture states of empathy, affection and compassion are critical areas of future research. Lutz et al. argue that while mindfulness practices that cultivate focus and openness are fundamental to developing awareness, these practices must be supplemented by approaches that help to develop empathy.

Both academics and Buddhist teachers argue that tonglen can be taught, practiced, and, in general, carried out in a manner that does not include strict Buddhist theoretical and religious contexts (Chodron, 2001; McKnight, 2014). Indeed, Chodron promotes tonglen as a practice which is accessible to all, but also notes that formal tonglen practice should be done only after one has already established a regular sitting meditation practice. As Grace (2009) notes, the experience of actually contemplating the suffering of other beings can be quite intimidating, or even terrifying, especially for novices. However, Gaffney et al. (1993) argue that tonglen poses the biggest threat not to one's personal

safety but to one's ego, as it challenges selfishness and barriers standing between self and other.

**Research on tonglen.** As noted, few studies have been completed on tonglen practice. However, it appears that tonglen has been linked with various positive outcomes. For one, tonglen may be a useful practice for psychotherapists. Lichty (2009) studied Shambhala Buddhist psychotherapists and their use of Buddhist practices and principles. The eleven participants were interviewed regarding work stress, the benefits of their practices, and how they coped with challenges. Specifically, Shamatha-Vipashyana, as well as tonglen, were noted as helping the psychotherapists with regards to burnout prevention. It should be noted, however, that Lichty did not discuss how long the participants had been practicing tonglen, nor how regularly they engaged in tonglen practice.

It also appears that tonglen can assist potentially help to assist individuals who have suffered traumatic experiences. Lee, Zaharlick, and Akers (2011) studied tonglen as part of a larger mindfulness approach designed to help female trauma survivors via the use of present moment focus and mindfulness based awareness. The researchers argued that mindfulness tools could nurture the development of positive emotions, and encourage the deployment of coping tools participants already possessed. Thirty-two trauma survivors participated in a six week course which taught breathing meditation, LKM, and tonglen. Participant's Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms, levels of mindfulness and positive emotions, and abilities to regulate emotion were measured before and after the study. It was found that feelings of interconnectedness increased and PTSD symptoms decreased. In addition, two participant reflections which were discussed

in the study noted improvements with regards to maintaining calmness, accepting self and others, being aware of their emotions, and expressing and controlling emotions, especially negative ones.

To date, McKnight has completed the only (two) empirical, stand-alone studies on tonglen practice. McKnight's (2012) first study involved eight novice meditators whose levels of compassion were measured both before and after being taught tonglen. Tonglen practice was taught via three sessions that were eighteen minutes long, and presented forty-eight hours apart. Participants rated their levels of compassion both before and after the study using Neff's Self-Compassion Scale and the Santa Clara Brief Compassion Scale. As well, a short written answer questionnaire was used, and small group discussions were conducted. McKnight noted that the participants' levels of self-compassion increased to a significant degree according to Neff's Self-Compassion Scale. McKnight argued that even thought tonglen was not presented in a Buddhist context, mindfulness meditation was not conducted beforehand, and the practice only occurred for a short period of time, there was evidence of increases in participant self-compassion.

McKnight's (2014) second study examined tonglen with regards to compassion for both self and others. Fifty three participants were chosen for the study, all of whom were screened to ensure they did not practice any type of mindfulness or contemplative style practice for more than 60 minutes a week. Participants were given ten minutes of initial tonglen instruction followed by eighteen minutes of tonglen meditation guided by McKnight. Following this, participants practiced tonglen for six days, with each day involving two, thirty second tonglen sessions. Participants also took part in another eighteen minutes of guided tonglen period after the six day period. Pommier’s

Compassion Scale was used but provided inconclusive results. Neff's Self-Compassion Scale was also included and, based on participants' scores on this scale, McKnight noted a statistically significant increase in participant's levels of self-compassion.

Given the relative absence of research on tonglen and the positive outcomes that have been linked to this type of meditation practice, it appears that this is a field where further research and study is required. While stand-alone studies have been completed on the tonglen experiences of novice meditation practitioners, little is known about tonglen with regards to more experienced meditation practitioners. Furthermore, by offering participants a period of time to engage in tonglen practice and reflect on its perceived influence, it is possible to glean insights into the impact of engaging in tonglen on a regular basis.

# Chapter 3

# Method

## Introduction

The current study involves participants with established sitting meditation practices who were familiar with and/or had previously practiced tonglen. It explores the tonglen experiences of these participants, and what they perceived as the challenges, benefits, and core aspects of engaging in tonglen practice using a grounded theory approach. Participants were asked to record the amount of time they practised tonglen over a 28 day period in time logs they kept during this practice period. Subsequently, participants were interviewed on, and wrote about, their tonglen experiences.

**28 day practice period.** While tonglen is a powerful practice that helps reverse the atrophy of emotional connection with others through the development of love and compassion (Chodron, 2001), it may not be a form of meditation that all sitting meditation practitioners engage in on a regular basis, even if they are familiar with the practice. For example, while many of the study's participants attended the regular one hour meditation session on Wednesdays and/or the two hour meditation session on Sundays at the St. John's Shambahla Group, only 15 minutes of that three hour time period during those two days is dedicated to tonglen practice. The rest of the time involves walking meditation, discussions of Buddhist philosophy and, primarily, sitting meditation.

Therefore, the 28 day practice period was seen as a critical element of the current study in order to allow participants a set period of time in which they could regularly engage in tonglen and develop (or renew) an intimate, experienced based understanding

of the practice. For those who were familiar with tonglen but did not practice it regularly, this period could serve to refresh their familiarity with the practice and even expand their knowledge of it. For participants with regular sitting meditation practices who had not practiced tonglen, or had practiced it very little before the study, the practice period was seen as possibly allowing them to connect with the practice in a way they had not experienced before. The dates of the practice – from Monday, June 8 to Sunday, July 5, 2015 – were chosen as the beginning and the end of the week was viewed as presenting logical, clear dates to begin and end a study. Finally, a 28 day period of time was chosen as a month was considered to be a reasonable amount of time to ask participants to practice tonglen on a regular (once a week minimum) basis.

**Sampling**

Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2003) argue that it is necessary for researchers to access their sample populations, and that such access must work for both researchers and participants on a practical level. The sample for the current study was accessed with the assistance of the St. John's Shamahala Meditation Group, a community that consists of individuals who are familiar with sitting meditation and tonglen practice.

First, gatekeepers at the site – individuals at the site who, in an official or an unofficial capacity, look after the maintenance and governance of the organization – were considered (Creswell, 2007). Having practised with the Shambhala group, on an off, for a number of years, I was well acquainted with the gatekeepers at the site. The gatekeepers in this case were individuals on the council that oversees the operation of the meditation group. These individuals allowed me to enter the site, helped me locate participants, and assisted me in my research.

Participants were identified by the researcher and gatekeepers via making announcements during a designated community announcements time period immediately following the Wednesday night sitting meditation period. Word of mouth between members was also beneficial in the process of recruiting participants. Additionally, a notification about the study was sent out with the announcements in the community email list.

Cohen et al. (2003) argue that among other factors, researchers must determine sample size and how that sample will be accessed. Sample sizes vary depending on the purpose of one's research. Typically, sample sizes in qualitative research are small, as the more participants that are added, the more difficult it will be for researchers to provide detailed explorations of each participant's experience (Creswell, 2012).

14 individuals were originally interested in participating in the study. 3 participants dropped from the study before data collection began. Reasons given for dropping out of the study at that point in time ranged from a lack of time to practice sufficiently for the purposes of the study; to a deficit of knowledge about, and experience with, tonglen; to geographical distance and ill health. Additionally, one participant was dropped from the study following the 28 day tonglen practice period, as she did not practice tonglen during this time frame.

Ultimately, ten participants successfully completed the study. A population of this size was manageable enough to allow for rich, detailed, developed accounts of participant experiences to evolve, and provided the context for data saturation to occur. Pseudonyms are used in the study in order to ensure the anonymity of participants.

**Informed Consent**

Participants were given consent forms to read and review as part of the process of informed consent. All 10 participants returned the forms signed to indicate that they wished to participate in the study. These forms gave participants a basic idea of what the research was about and what participation was to involve. They were given the option of contacting the researcher regarding any questions they may have had about the study, and were free to withdraw from the research at any time during the data collection process. In addition, participants were informed that their data could be removed at their behest up to two weeks after data collection had finished. Contact information (email addresses) for the study's supervisors was also provided.

Participants were informed that their tonglen experiences would be studied over a 28 day period. In order to participate in the study, participants were required to have established sitting meditation practices, and to know how to practice tonglen. They were informed that, as tonglen is a meditation practice where there are numerous variations on the core approach, they were to practice using the form of approach to tonglen they felt most comfortable with. Participants' approaches to tonglen were discussed during post-study interviews.

It was recommended that participants practice tonglen at least once per week during the month-long study. Otherwise, the amount of time tonglen was practised was up to each individual participant. There was no maximum recommended time limit. Participants were asked to accurately record the dates and times they practised tonglen during the study. No other stipulations, guidelines, or directions for tonglen practice were provided. Participants were welcome to practice tonglen wherever they chose during the

designated practice period. The proposal for this study was reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy.

**Participants**

The 10 participant sample was 80% female and 20% male. Participants ranged in age from 36-69 years with the average age being 55.9 years. In terms of education, one participant had a high school diploma. Two participants attended commercial or technical school after high school. One participant went to college, but did not note the length of the program, while two participants completed a 2 year college program. Three participants had earned their undergraduate degrees, and one participant had completed two Bachelor's degrees.

With regards to participants' religious or spiritual affiliations, four participants noted they had no current religious affiliation. Three participants identified as Buddhist. One participant identified most closely with Buddhism and another participant identified as Buddhist/Christian. One participant identified as Christian.

Participants were also asked about the type and length of their sitting meditation practices. Nine participants practiced Shamatha-Vipashyana meditation, while one participant practiced Shamatha regularly. In terms of the length of participant practices, two participants had been practicing sitting meditation being between 1 to 2 years and four participants had been practicing for 3 to 4 years. Two participants had practices 9 to 10 years in length. One participant had been practicing sitting meditation for 13 while another had for 15 years.

Participants in the study were also asked about how long they had been practicing

tonglen. Four participants did not give an answer to this question, as they either weren't sure, or did not say, how long they had been practicing tonglen. One participant began practicing tonglen at the beginning of this study, while another participants began practicing tonglen eight months before the study began. Two of the participants had practiced tonglen for a year while another had practiced tonglen for 2 to 3 years. A single participant had been practicing tonglen for 10 years.

In general, participants found it difficult to say exactly how long they practiced tonglen for during any given week. Some participants noted that they typically practiced tonglen sporadically when something came up in their lives, while others mentioned practicing tonglen during Sunday sitting meditation sessions at the St. John's Shambhala Meditation Group.

Finally, aside from practicing sitting meditation and tonglen, participants noted engaging in a variety of other mindfulness practices. For example, half of participants practiced some form of yoga. An array of other mindfulness practices were noted, including: loving-kindness meditation, mindfulness breathing practices, forgiveness meditation, Pilates, visualization, mantras, Werma practice, body mindfulness, body scanning, bio-spirituality practice, chi-gong, chanting, singing, contemplations, Nia dance, guided meditation, watching videos on mindfulness and Buddhism, knitting, and journaling. A detailed breakdown of various aspects of participant demographics can be found in Appendix 1.

**Data Collection Methods**

The current study was conducted using a grounded theory approach. As Charmaz (2006) has noted, studies that utilize grounded theory should include two or more forms

of data collection. For this study, data was collected via three approaches. First, participants kept time logs in order to record the dates and amount of time they practiced tonglen for during the 28 day practice period. Secondly, at the end of the practice period, participants were asked to submit a short written summary of a few paragraphs which reflected on their experiences with tonglen, and the perceived impact of those experiences, during the preceding 28 days. Finally, participants engaged in one-on-one interviews with the researcher in order to discuss not only the practice period, but also to explore tonglen – as well as sitting meditation and mindfulness practice – in general.

**Time logs.** Participants were asked to keep time logs during the 28 day practice period. These logs noted the dates participants practiced tonglen, as well as the amount of time they dedicated to tonglen practice during each session. In conjunction with the written summaries and the one on one interviews, the time logs were used into order to achieve triangulation of data.

The time logs were collected in order to review the amount of time participants engaged in tonglen during the study. The number of times participants practiced tonglen during the study, the length of each sitting, and the total amount of time participants practiced tonglen during a single session was noted (this data can be found in Appendix 2).

Data collected during interviews was compared with the time logs in order to determine whether or not the amount of time participants practiced tonglen played a role in the perceived impact of tonglen. Unfortunately, the time logs did not appear to demonstrate a connection between the amount of time participants sat and their subsequent reflections.

There was a noted range regarding the number of times participants engaged in tonglen during the study. Three participants practiced between 4 and 9 times during the study, three participants practiced 10 to 14 times, while another three participants practiced 15 to 19 times. One participants practiced tonglen 30 times. For the entire sample, the mean total number of tonglen sessions was 12.8.

The average (mean) length of a tonglen session for each participant during the 28 day study period was also calculated. Two Participants engaged in tonglen an average of 5-9 minutes per session, while one participant typically practiced for 10-14 minutes. Three participants averaged 15-19 minutes of tonglen practice per session, while two participants typically practiced for 20-24 minutes. Finally, the mean length of a tonglen session for two participants was between 25-29 minutes. For the entire sample, the mean tonglen session length was 16.87 minutes.

The total amount of time each participant practiced tonglen during the study was also calculated. Four participants practiced tonglen for a total of 1-100 minutes. Three participants practiced tonglen for 101 to 200 minutes, and two participants practiced for 201 to 300 minutes. One participant practiced well over 300 minutes (815 minutes). The mean amount of total practice time for all participants was 216.2 minutes. A breakdown of each participants' tonglen practice record can be found in Appendix 2.

**Elicited texts.** Charmaz (2006) notes that elicited texts are textual records elicited from, and created by, participants at the request of the researcher. Such texts provide a way to add to the wealth of data the researcher has to draw from, offering insights into participants' thoughts and feelings and providing clues to cultural, social and contextual factors in participants' experiences. Elicited texts can provide a forum for participants to

reveal details that might not be uncovered in the formal interview process.

The written accounts collected from participants are elicited texts. At the end of the practice period, participants were asked to write (or audio record) a brief summary in which they reflected on how their tonglen practice, over the course of the month, had impacted them. Most of the reflections received were a paragraph, or two, while other submissions ran a few double spaced, 12 point font pages. These tracts helped to illuminate the general experiences, beliefs, perspectives and understandings of the sample population (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

The elicited texts were compared to, and used in conjunction with, the data collected during the one on one interviews in order to develop a clearer understanding of participant experiences. Combining these forms of data collection helped in the development of rich, thick descriptions of participant perceptions of the influence of tonglen practice.

**Interviews.** Dilley (2004) notes that interviews help researchers get to the heart of participants' experiences. They allow for an exploration of the depth of participants' thoughts and feelings, allowing researchers to reconstruct events that neither reader nor researcher were present for. In qualitative research, interviews typically consist of a series of open-ended questions designed to help participants produce a maximum amount of information while simultaneously demonstrating their individuality (Kuna, 2014).

In the current study, interviews helped to reveal insights regarding participant understandings of their tonglen experiences. Charmaz (2006) has noted that grounded theory interviews create space for participants to delve into their experiences, and for rich descriptions to unfold. These interviews dig into the perspectives of participants from

their various vantage points. The interview format in grounded theory is not rigid, but, instead, is negotiated. As such, the interviewer must understand how he or she is impacting the participant, and how such is shaping the interview. The interviewer also should understand how he or she is positioned in the context of the researched environment. When using a grounded theory approach, the researcher should be keenly aware of threads that arise during the interview that are related to the experiences of other participants. He or she must also not let preconceived notions dictate the course of the interview. The number and content of questions is flexible when using a grounded theory approach, as even a few questions may elicit the type of information the researcher is curious about. While one may enter the interview with questions in mind, these are necessarily changeable based on how the interview progresses. Furthermore, by transcribing the interviews him or herself, the research can endeavour to find patterns in the data, and more deeply connect with the data, than when having the transcribing process completed by someone else.

Participants were asked to participate in a single one on one interview. Each interview spanned no more than one hour in length. The majority of these were conducted is a small, private room adjacent to the Shambhala group's room on LeMarchant Road in St. John's, NL, which had been set aside, in conjunction with the group, for this purpose. If this was not possible for the participant, they were given the option of conducting the interview via skype or phone. One participant elected to conduct the interview in this manner.

Though direct quotations from interviews (and written reflections) are used in the study, participants were given pseudonyms and all identifying information was removed.

A Sony TCM-150 Cassette-Corder was used for audio recording during the interviews, which were all conducted, and transcribed by, the researcher. Also, personal notes and research memos were taken during the interviews after consulting with the participants that such was acceptable during the interview.

As per Charmaz's description of grounded theory interviews, the interviews were not rigidly structured. While the goal of the interviews was to learn about participant tonglen, meditation, and study experiences, this was done via questions that were by their very nature loosely constructed and changeable. Basic demographic information – gender, age, education level, and religious affiliation – was gathered at the outset of the interview. Following this, interviewer and participant explored the participant's sitting meditation habits and experiences, as well as any related mindfulness practices. General views on tonglen were touched on next. Finally, the participant's experiences of tonglen over the practice period were discussed in detail. The interview format was flexible and was directed towards areas of curiosity and potential. New questions that arose in the interviewer's mind, based on previous interviews and common participant threads of experience, were discussed when they arose. In order to aid in the development of thick data, the interviews were guided, in part, by information provided in the previously collected elicited texts.

**Validity**

Creswell (2012) argues that it is critical that qualitative researchers ensure the data collected and themes developed from that data, as well as any subsequent conclusions made, are valid and accurate. In order to confirm the credibility of their studies, researchers use a variety of methods. One approach used to help achieve validity is

triangulation. Triangulation consists of using multiple methods and sources of data collection in order to help verify the data that has been collected. Triangulation is a process through which evidence if corroborated by drawing on the perspectives of multiple individuals in various manners (Creswell, 2012). By drawing from numerous sources and utilizing multiple methods of data collection, a broader, more organic understanding of the data can form in researcher's mind (Rich, 2011). In the current study, time logs, elicited texts, and one on one interviews were used in order to achieve triangulation.

Member checking is another method that can be used to help achieve validity. It involves asking participants whether or not descriptions that were collected were accurate reflections and interpretations of their experiences. Member checking typically involves checking with participants about the accuracy of the themes that have been developed, ensuring that interpretations that have been made accurately, and reflecting on the actual understandings of participants regarding this process (Creswell, 2012). Member checking was used during the research and writing process by sending sections of texts to selected participants in order to verify the validity of these excerpts.

**Data Analysis**

Grounded theory is a qualitative method of research design that was created by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in the late 1960's to both develop theory and conduct social research (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). It typically involves individuals who have experienced a given action, interaction, or process (Creswell, 2012). In the years since its inception, grounded theory has expanded outside of the nursing and sociological contexts in which it was originally taught and moved into various other fields of study (Clarke,

2007). It has recently become more accepted as an approach to research in the educational psychology field (Creswell, 2012).

Grounded theories can always be traced back to the data collected in the study. Theories that emerge during the study are fluid and adaptive, changing as new data and patterns emerge. Ultimately, these theories are grounded in the data, as they have arisen directly from the data itself rather than being overlaid onto the data. Voices of the individuals or groups studied often appear in the final product. Data is not simply reported but is also interpreted, along with the experiences and perspectives of the study's participants (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

This style of research must allow for narratives to emerge from the data. These narratives assist in the development of themes and theories which are based on the identification of common threads, which allow the researcher to carry out successive levels of analysis. Through this analysis, the researcher is submerged in the data, and, subsequently, in the lives and experiences of participants (Clarke, 2007).

Data is typically collected via interviews and is organized into themes through the use of coding (Creswell, 2012). Coding is the process of organizing data for the purpose of interpretation. As the first step in the analysis of data, coding involves naming data via a process of selecting and sorting. The codes developed should closely reflect the data itself, as they are the framework through which one's analysis evolves. Codes link raw data and assist in the development of theories. These theories allow the researcher to find meaning in the data (Charmaz, 2006).

Coding involves two key phases. First, words, lines, or segments of data are named. Second, the most frequent codes are identified and grouped together. Throughout

this process, the researcher defines what he or she interprets as significant, and insignificant, data. The use of gerunds in naming code allows the researcher to explore the actions and processes inherent in the participants' experiences while ensuring that the codes stay closely linked to the data (Charmaz, 2006).

The data collection and coding process is not geared towards testing a specific hypothesis. Instead, the researcher attempts to decipher inherent patterns in participant data. Themes which arise from the coding process are subsequently developed into concepts, which are compared and analyzed for the development of theories. These theories reflect the data and the participants' experiences (Charmaz, 2006). The theoretical conceptualizations and models that arise from the coding process are based on thick descriptions which have emerged from participants' reflections on their experiences. These theories analyze how participants' actions and understandings change, and how this process of change evolves (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Researchers glean a greater understanding of participants' experiences by immersing themselves in the data and, often, the world that their participants inhabit. As Charmaz (2006) has argued, this form of deep immersion is more important than simply following methodological techniques and applying investigative tools. Ultimately, the researcher's background, previous experiences, and understandings of the topic or situation at hand will guide the way he or she experiences the data and interprets its possibilities. Hence, it is important for researchers to overtly acknowledge their subjective positioning within the research. Research is written and evolves from the subjective viewpoint of the researcher, and is based on his or her unique viewpoints which have been shaped by social, cultural, political, economic, and various other

contexts. While the research is presented and is grounded in the data collected, the researcher cannot completely step outside of these subjective perspectives. Ultimately, grounded theories are simply renderings and interpretations of the world that the researcher has studied, which has been seen through the lens of the researcher's positioning. Such studies are not exact reproductions of the worlds they examine (Charmaz, 2006).

Currently, three branches of grounded theory – established by Glaser, Strauss and Corbin, and Charmaz, respectively – have been recognized by scholars (Creswell, 2012). The current study specifically utilizes the method of grounded theory research advocated by Charmaz.

Coming from a constructivist perspective, Charmaz (2012) argues that the grounded theory approach espoused by Glaser and Strauss, as well as that of Corbin, is overly systematic. Charmaz notes that grounded theories need to be flexible, to delve into the meanings participants invest in their experiences, and to reflect on the presence and role of both researcher and participant in the research.

When using Charmaz's (2012) grounded theory approach, data is not simply collected and analyzed after the research process has ended. Instead, theories about the data are developed using a constant comparative method. Sets of data are compared throughout the interview process and theories develop as the researcher's understandings evolve. As the researcher processes data both new and old, the continuous interplay that occurs between these various sets of data assists in the coding process and in the development of thick descriptions of, and theories about, the data.

The researcher writes notes, or memos, to him or herself as the data is analyzed

which aids in the analysis process and allows the researcher to identify patterns that have arisen. These memos often manifest as spontaneous reflections and realizations that arise during the coding process. Memo writing should occur throughout the research process as data is collected, transcribed, and organized. They help the researcher to process codes as the pure, raw data is refined into theoretical categories. As well, memos provide an avenue to explore the data, engage with it, make comparisons between various sets of data, and to develop ideas. Memo writing should not be a mechanical process that forces researcher and data into set formats based on preconceived notions of how research should progress. Instead, the researcher should use the method of memo writing that works best for him or her (Charmaz, 2012).

The current study does not attempt to focus on objective facts that can be established, nor to describe participant experiences in an objective manner. As well, the beliefs and values of the researcher are not hidden in this study (Creswell, 2012). The study examines the values, perspectives, and feelings of participants in relation to their tonglen practices. As noted in the introduction, the researcher practices both Shamatha-Vipassana meditation and tonglen as it is taught in the Shambhala tradition. This will, no doubt, influence the research, and the themes that are developed.

**Initial coding.** The initial coding process allows the researcher to not only organize the data into categories, but to see processes inherent in participant experiences (Charmaz, 2012). With regards to the initial coding carried out for the current study, both line-by-line and incident to incident coding was used.

In line-by-line coding, the researcher connects code to each line of recorded data. This allows the researcher to identify themes and concepts that may have been missed by

simply reading the data. A line-by-line approach allows one to maintain an openness towards the data so that themes can emerge organically, patterns can be discovered, and data can be seen in new and unique ways (Charmaz, 2006).

While it had originally been my intention to only use line-by-line coding with the data, it became clear early on in the coding process that utilizing such an approach would make the coding too mechanical and rigid for the type of data that was being collected. In order to be able to identify and group common experiences that were emerging from the data in a more efficient and organic manner, it became clear that incident by incident coding should also be used.

The decision, and motivation, for using this approach in the current study appears to reflect its natural purpose, as Charmaz (2006) notes that the use of incident by incident coding is often dictated by the nature of the data collected for the study. This type of coding involves comparing incidents, or larger ideas that push beyond single lines of data. By evaluating such coding via the constant comparative method, the researcher can tap into larger concepts and properties that may not be identified during the process of line by line coding alone.

Not only the type of coding, but also the codes that are applied during the initial coding process must fit the data. This means that codes are constructed in a way that does not simply organize the data, but also reflects and emphasizes key aspects of participants' experiences. Hence, *in vivo* codes – codes that present or represent language unique to the participants' subculture – were noted during the initial coding process (Charmaz, 2006).

Ideas for memos that arose during the initial coding process were immediately noted. Memos were compared and contrasted throughout the initial coding process, as

well as during subsequent coding. Key passages and ideas that could be further fleshed out as research progressed were highlighted and reflected upon.

A constant comparative approach to interpreting the data was used not only during initial coding, but throughout the entire coding process. This involved comparing and coding data collected as the interview process unfolded. Interviews were not transcribed after all of them had taken place, but rather after each interview had occurred. This allowed for a greater immersion in the constant comparative approach, and a greater awareness of participant discussion of common themes during the interview process (Charmaz, 2006).

Additionally, the process of coding and comparing interviews was interwoven with an analysis of the brief summaries and time logs, which had been collected before the one on one interview process began. This provided context and helped to illuminate participant reflections collected during the interview sessions.

**Focused coding.** The coding process is meant to assist the researcher in identifying pivotal concepts. These concepts are not necessarily expected by the researcher, but simply arise as patterns emerge from the data. Focused coding provides the ground for this arising to occur, as the researcher notes the most frequent codes that were collected during the initial coding process. In addition, codes that are given special significance by participants – as they are discussed for longer periods of time or are given more emphasis than other concepts – are noted as well (Charmaz, 2012).

During focused coding, memo writing helps to further refine categories and narrative threads. Memos also help identify significant codes, and determine how these are connected to important code patterns that emerge. This process clarifies critical points

in the data, and, by revisiting earlier memos, the evolution of key themes can be seen (Charmaz, 2006).

Charmaz (2006) notes that axial coding is the process of connecting various categories and subcategories of code. This involves asking how each are related, and how they illuminate the larger themes in the study. In order to sustain the desired simplicity of the coding process for the study and avoid limiting what could be learned from participants' experiences, axial coding was used in the form that Charmaz describes, rather than via the approach promoted by Strauss and Corbin. Specifically, subcategories of various categories evolved as part of a larger process of learning "about the experiences the categories represent" (p. 61). Possible links between the various subcategories were explored in order to delve deeper into the commonalities of participant experiences.

**Theoretical coding.** Theoretical coding was also used in the current study. This involved taking the codes which had been identified in the focused coding process and noting patterns those codes formed. Identified patterns were presented as theories that emerged from the data. In this way, the data that was first deconstructed through the use of initial coding was finally put back together and unified into a consistent whole. The use of set strategic coding families was avoided in order to ensure that the experiences of the participants were not forced into preconceived categories that did not fit the data. The theoretical coding approach employed in the current study allowed for organization, interpretation, and presentation of the data to occur systematically yet flexibly without applying a forced, ill-fitting framework (Charmaz, 2006).

**Reflections on Method**

Researchers need to consider how their relationships with participants and gatekeepers will influence both participant and researcher behaviour, and how such elements might impact data collection and the study in general (Creswell, 2012). With regards to the current study, it appears that the largest concern would be that the participants gave more positive feedback regarding their tonglen sessions than what was actually experienced.

It is important to keep in mind that each participant necessarily experienced tonglen in his or her own, unique way. A portrait of this uniqueness can be pursued, but never completely captured, through rich, thick data collection. Any understanding of what tonglen means to these participants, and what that experience was actually like, will only be hinted at by the research. The actual truth of such experiences will always be hidden as the medium of language is required to transmit that experience. Ultimately, something is lost in that transmission that can only be fully captured via one's own experience of the practice itself. As I understand it, this, in itself, points towards a central concept of Buddhist philosophy.

# Chapter 4

# Results

## Introduction

305 analytic units, or codes, were identified during the initial coding stage of analysis. In the focused coding stage, codes that arose most frequently during initial coding, or were particularly emphasized by participants, were organized into subcategories. At the end of the focused coding process, 25 subcategories were identified as being pivotal to participant experiences and reflections. These subcategories were further analyzed, compared with memos that had been taken throughout the coding process, and were determined to fall into 5 overarching categories: Motivation, Synergy, Benefits, Interconnection, and Challenges. All of these categories were found to be inter-related, falling under a core category: The Process of Exploring Tonglen.

## Overview of the Model

A conceptual model of the theory is presented in Figure 1, illustrating the general tonglen experiences and reflections offered by participants of the current study. The model begins with motivation, which arose for participants in various forms. For example, a number of participants noted experiencing something challenging in their lives which triggered a desire to practice tonglen. Another form of motivation was the study itself.

This motivation led to tonglen practice, and from this there arose a sense of synergy from regularly engaging in tonglen. This synergy was supported, and added to, by meditation (and mindfulness) practices such as Shamatha-Vipashyana. Ultimately, participants found that their ways of practicing tonglen changed via natural, organic

processes of evolution. Specifically, tonglen became a personal experience that was unique to each individual.

As motivation spurred practice and synergy encouraged regular engagement in tonglen, participants were able to note benefits they began to receive from tonglen practice. Such benefits were both concrete – things they could specifically note and describe – and more abstract – experiences and ideas they felt but could not necessarily explain. For example, with regards to concrete benefits, some participants noted that tonglen helped to alleviate stress. As for abstract benefits, many participants noted the sense that tonglen was a form of prayer that allowed them to send out positive energy to others.

On a deeper level, the practice of tonglen led to a greater sense of connection with others. This sense of interconnection challenged concepts of participants' independence from others, and connected participants with the suffering of others. While this could possibly be seen as a benefit, this experience appeared to have a more expansive and ego challenging quality that did not simply fit under a definition that utilized a good/bad dichotomy. Both the benefits that participants received from tonglen practice and this sense of transcendence via interconnection fed back into a desire to engage in tonglen.

Various challenges arose throughout the entire process. For example, a number of participants discussed the intensity inherent in tonglen practice. Experiences of self-doubt and adversity often made engaging in tonglen more difficult. Ultimately, the challenges were part and parcel of the journey, or process, of exploring tonglen.

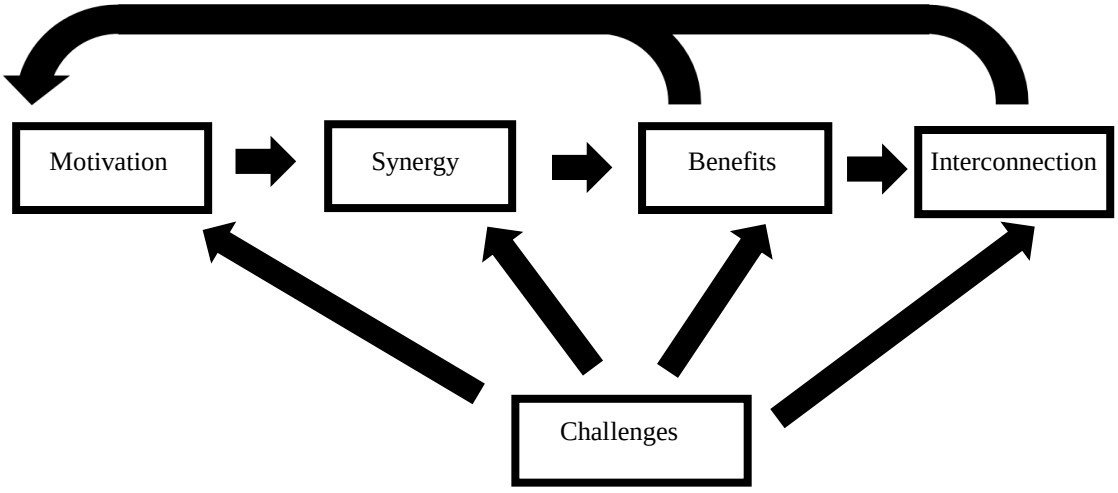


**Fig. 1** The Process of Exploring Tonglen

**Core Category: The Process of Exploring Tonglen**

In the one on one interviews and elicited texts, participants reflected on their tonglen practices and the 28 day practice period. It became clear during the interviews that for each participant, the experience of engaging with tonglen practice constituted an evolving process of discovery. For many, this process started before the study began, as 9 of the 10 participants had practiced tonglen previous to the study. For others, the process of exploring tonglen had just begun. For example, one participant had not practiced tonglen before, but had been practicing sitting meditation for more than a decade, regularly practiced LKM, and understood how to practice tonglen. Regardless of the amount of experience any given participant had with tonglen, all participants experienced tonglen as a process which allowed them to learn more about themselves and their interconnectedness with others.

Eighty percent of participants discussed how their experiences with tonglen deepened the more they engaged in the practice. As Georgia noted:

> The more I've practice and done tonglen, the more it has opened up for me. I've gained a better understanding altogether of what I am doing and what it's doing – how it works.

This sense of the practice "opening up" was echoed by a number of participants in various ways. In general, while regular tonglen practice involved challenges, it also allowed participants to gain a deep sense of appreciation and compassion for themselves and others.

Sometimes, tonglen practice was an intimidating experience. However, regular engagement in the practice allowed it to become something that participants looked forward to. For example, Harry noted, "I was afraid at the beginning of the study, as taking on the suffering of others seemed burdensome and intimidating. However, I found the practice to be beneficial." In general, participant reflections suggested that tonglen practice changes and evolves over time as the practice more and more becomes one's own.

As participants' tonglen practices evolved, they appeared to expand as well. Feelings of interconnection with others extend to more than those in participants' immediate circles of friends and family. For example, Victoria commented on her plan for the 28 day tonglen practice period:

> With the practice that I did this time, it was just sort of settling myself. My intention was to do it for an individual and then expand that outward to include other people in general, and even go beyond that to all mankind. So that was the difference for me.

This expansion of tonglen practice appeared to mirror the development of a greater sense

of interconnection with others. This interconnection extended beyond loved ones to acquaintances, those participants felt ambivalent about, and even strangers.

Experimentation was critical in order for participants to relate with tonglen in different, or unexpected, ways. While participants noted the need to develop familiarity with, and consistency in, their tonglen practices, they also stressed interest in exploring aspects of, or approaches to, tonglen they had not previously focused on. Such explorations further deepened participants' experiences with tonglen, as well as their understandings of the practice.

In general, it appears that tonglen practice begat practice, as many participants discussed their aspirations to practice tonglen consistently in the future. For example, Ophelia commented, “I have to look back at making it a regular practice,” while Cynthia noted, “I think I will incorporate it in my practice because now I see how it has already benefited me.” As Sarah commented,

> I've made it a part of my regular mindfulness practice. The part it plays, I don't really know how to answer that because it is just something that I do. I've made it a part of my practice and it is a very important part because it helps me deal with the suffering around me. It makes me more aware of it rather than becoming desensitized to it.

The 28 day practice period appeared to be a microcosm of this process of exploring tonglen. The study offered an environment and a reason to engage in tonglen on a consistent basis for a short period of time. For new and experienced tonglen practitioners, the study was a journey which either introduced or reintroduced them to tonglen. It allowed them to connect with the practice in intimate ways via the cumulative

experience of regular tonglen sessions.

**Category 1: Motivation**

Various types of motivation spurred participants to practice tonglen, both before and during the study. Generally, motivation fell into five sub-categories: participants' life experiences, a sense of needing to do tonglen, tonglen arising spontaneously, tonglen on the spot, and making a commitment to regular practice. An example of a life experience that motivated tonglen practice might be the illness of a loved one. Participants sometimes felt the need to engage in tonglen due to a pressing thought or concern that lingered during Shamatha-Vipashyana practice. Participants also engaged in "tonglen on the spot" (Chodron, 2007), a less formal version of tonglen which was done outside of sitting meditation because of something that happened in their daily lives. Finally, committing to the practice on a regular basis also motivated engagement in tonglen.

**Life experiences.** Ninety percent of participants discussed previous situations and experiences in their lives which motivated them to turn to tonglen. Sometimes normal, day to day experiences inspired practice. For example, Laura discussed volunteering in an old age home. The difficulties and challenges the residents faced motivated her to practice tonglen. She also noted that seeing individuals suffering in the news, such as civilians being bombed in Afghanistan, provided motivation as she felt empathy for their suffering. Others noted past experiences that acted as motivation, as Cindy discussed how her daughter had been picked on as a child. Her daughter's bullies became a focus for tonglen practice on a few occasions, as she wanted to "put herself in their shoes," understand their actions, and develop compassion for them.

Participants also noted being motivated to practice tonglen when an illness arose

or a tragedy occurred. For example, one participant noted the challenges experienced by a family member with autism, and how it was a regular focus of her tonglen practice. Death was also noted as something that motivated practice, as Hannah recalled being asked to do tonglen for someone who had passed away. She said, "I couldn't do it. I just burst into tears. I had to leave the room. I couldn't understand how I was going to take all this on."

Personal struggles also served as motivation. For example, Laura recounted the difficulty and fear related to her experiences with thyroid cancer. During the study, she had part of her thyroid removed, but found out after the procedure that the cancer had moved to her windpipe. Her fear and uncertainty became a motivation for, and a focus of, her tonglen practice.

In general, participants found tonglen helped them when they felt helpless to address something that had arisen in their lives. Christopher noted:

> Tonglen is a very useful thing when you are facing a situation where you may not know exactly what to do. The whole atmosphere of that situation may not be a calm space where your mind can be settled down. Tonglen practice will generate space for where you are and what you are doing.

When challenging and frightening situations arose, tonglen practice was seen as something that could addresses them. In some cases, the motivation to practice felt more like a need rather than a choice.

**Needing to do tonglen.** Forty percent of participants spoke of times when doing tonglen practice was something born out of necessity. For example, Hannah discussed personal challenges with, and resistance to, tonglen. She commented that since she was "struggling with tonglen so much [and] finding it so painful," it was something she

"needed to learn to do." For some, a personal sense of having to do tonglen was motivated by positive experiences with the practice. For example, due to the positive impact tonglen was having on her life, Victoria found herself "anxious" to do tonglen during the study period. Hence, it appears that participants felt the need to engage in tonglen because of both challenging and helpful experiences they were having with the practice itself.

**Tonglen arising spontaneously.** Forty percent of participants discussed experiences where they were engaged in Shamatha-Vipashyana meditation and decided to switch to tonglen because of something that arose in the moment. For example, Christopher recalled, "I have been in meditation spaces where someone might break out into tears. And that softens my heart. So you can immediately do tonglen for that person."

In other cases, the desire to do tonglen arose because of something that was on the participant's mind. For example, Wendy noted:

> Someone would come to my mind and I would put some energy towards them but I wouldn't really say, "Okay, now here is this practice that I am going to do for this person right now." But if they came to my mind during practice, I would have a sense of putting good energy out to them.

For others, if a difficult thought arose, tonglen could serve as a tool to work with that thought. This allowed the practitioner to address emotions related to the thought and, after a period of time, return to Shamatha-Vipashyana practice.

**Tonglen on the spot.** While some participants decided to switch to tonglen practice due to something that arose during sitting meditation, a number chose to use tonglen in daily life outside of the formal meditation environment. Pema Chodron (2001)

notes that tonglen on the spot is a simplified form of tonglen practice where, during everyday life, one breathes in negative elements of difficult and challenging situations and breathes out compassion. For example, it can be done when one is in the middle of an argument, sitting in a traffic jam, or spending time with someone in pain.

6 of the 10 participants in the study recalled practicing tonglen on the spot, or a practice resembling tonglen on the spot. Specifically, while some participants were fully aware that they were practicing tonglen on the spot, others were naturally doing a version of this practice without having previously learned about it. For example, Wendy had not heard of tonglen on the spot before the study, but discussed putting "good energy out to" friends and family members going through difficult experiences. She noted "if I am in a situation and someone is agitated or I am nervous about an interaction with somebody, I might, say, in my mind, I am 'sending you love and light.'"

Other participants, like Georgia, knew of tonglen on the spot before the study and practiced it in their everyday lives:

> Ever since I learned about tonglen on the spot I do that often. When I have something good, I have good food, it is a beautiful day, I am happy, it is a beautiful day, I pause long enough to think 'if everybody could have this.' Another part is kind of the opposite. If I am having a bad day or I see something crappy happening, if I could take that away, it is just a quick wish, longing for nobody to suffer and for that not to be happening.

Regardless of whether participants had heard of tonglen on the spot before the study or not, many used it in day to day life when confronted with both challenges and positive experiences.

**Commitment to regular tonglen practice.** Eighty percent of participants noted that the study acted as catalyst to help them commit to tonglen practice over a brief period of time. Many had never embarked on this kind of focused tonglen practice before and found it to be beneficial, impacting them in unexpected, positive ways. However, the study can be seen as, simply, one way to make a commitment to regular tonglen practice. For example, Harry noted his sense of commitment wasn't just to the study, but to himself as well, stating, "I felt like I needed to do it at least once a week. I feel [the study] was an incentive, to make some kind of commitment to yourself to do it for a period of time." Other participants echoed this sentiment that the study acted as a vehicle which enabled their inherent desires to deepen their tonglen practices.

It is also important to note that 60% of participants mentioned the 15 minute tonglen sessions that occurred during the Sunday morning sitting at the St. John's Shambhala Group. For some, it was the place where they tried tonglen for the first time. It also was a platform which allowed for regular tonglen practice. However, participants did not discuss these experiences in detail. As well, some participants mentioned that these experiences were quite different from their tonglen experiences that occurred during the current study.

**Category 2: Synergy**

During the one on one interviews, Wendy noted that she "felt like there were synergies that were around" her practice during the study. In reviewing the data, a number of participants reflected on experiences that involved such synergy, experiences which can be organized into six sub-categories. First, regular Shamatha-Vipashyana practice positively benefitted the development of tonglen practice. Secondly, a number of

participants noted that they became better at tonglen with practice. In general, the more participants practiced, the greater the impact of tonglen. Many participants experienced changes to their tonglen practices as the study progressed. Though participants may have been taught one specific way of doing tonglen, by the end of the study many had altered their practices. Finally, a number of participants noted that they intended to practice tonglen regularly in the future.

**Sitting meditation and tonglen.** All of the participants in the study engaged in regular Shamatha or Shamatha-Vipashyana sitting meditation. Seventy percent of those participants discussed the influence of their sitting meditation practices on tonglen. Wendy commented that she had been practicing sitting meditation more than usual before the study. She noted that this seemed to have had a positive impact on her tonglen sessions during the study, as she experienced the practice in a more powerful way than she had before.

Christopher noted that sitting meditation helps to still the mind and improve focus, which are necessary skills for tonglen practice. He also noted that tonglen tunes the individual into the present moment. Others suggested that tonglen would be more difficult for those who do not have regular sitting meditation practices. Participants also noted that other mindfulness practices, such as yoga, positively impacted their ability to do, and experiences of, tonglen.

**Tonglen improving with practice.** Sixty percent of participants noted that they became more adept at tonglen, and that tonglen became more enjoyable, the more they practiced it. This, in turn, increased their desire to engage in tonglen. For example, Ophelia noted that over the course of the study, she became more adept at relaxing into

tonglen and, subsequently, her practice, and sense of compassion for others, grew in depth. Victoria noted that over the course of the study, the visualizations she engaged in during tonglen became more vivid:

> [I]t was almost like it was an opening and I wasn't bringing people to me, people were flowing in, in my mind, obviously. And all the time I am still taking this cloud of suffering and my light is getting bigger [...]. What was strenuous and challenging was at the beginning, even after the first eight or nine [...] I just felt physically different. The openness that happened as a result of this was probably the most amazing thing.

Some participants noted that while their tonglen practices may have, at first, been quite challenging, these difficulties began to dissipate over time. For many, tonglen became more powerful, familiar, and deepened the more they practiced. Christopher noted that "the longer you go, the more time you practice, the more cutting you do through discursive thought."

**Tonglen improving with frequency.** While 70% of participants noted that their tonglen experiences deepened with practice, 40% commented that the regularity with which they engaged in tonglen also influenced their experiences. For example, when discussing the 28 day practice period, Ophelia commented, "If I had done it less I don't think I would have gained as much from it." Georgia also noted that when one practices on a frequent basis, it appears to lead to a deeper understanding and appreciation of tonglen on the whole.

**Tonglen experiences changing.** Half of the participants in the study discussed changes in their tonglen experiences, especially noting the changes which occurred during

the study period. Wendy, for example, noted: “a very deep feeling of compassion for myself at the end of the [first] practice [session]. This feeling happened at each subsequent session as well.” This was notable as she hadn't had this feeling when she previously engaged in tonglen practice. Victoria reflected that she may have been trying too hard at the beginning of the study, and that this feeling faded as the study progressed. As participants' experiences of tonglen changed over time, many changed how they approached the practice.

**Making tonglen practice one’s own**. As noted in the literature review, there are a wide variety of ways in which one can practice tonglen. Not only can the actual steps and stages be added to or subtracted from, but the visualizations, words, and topics of focus can vary. Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that the majority of participants discussed modifications they made to their tonglen practices. This involved determining what worked best, which was different for each individual. Often, there appeared to be a natural progression of developing practices that suited participants’ needs and preferences.

Commenting on changes to her practice during the study in comparison to a video she had watched on tonglen, Cynthia noted:

> [The teacher in the video] did it in a half hour, with probably ten minutes on yourself. It was quite a long meditation when you considered it for all the things that she said. After three or four days I simply reflected upon myself and then reflected on the various people I had identified […]. I don't think I always ended off with the world in general because I focused on me and those people I had identified. The imagery, she used light. I

> don't think I ended up using light in the end.

Some participants tried doing tonglen for themselves at the start of their sessions, while others didn't find this to be helpful. While some preferred to focus on family members, others tried practicing tonglen for those they did not know. While most participants had been taught to practice tonglen a certain way, the study offered them an opportunity to experiment with variations of the practice.

Participants noted that their focus often varied from one session to the next. For example, sometimes they focused their tonglen practice on one individual for the entire session, while other times they began with one individual and expanded outward to include many people in their practice. This was noted as a process of moving from "specific to general."

Most participants tried different things until they discovered what worked best for them. As Harry noted:

> I just try to make it my own. There are instructions I had and I tried focus on it as much as I could. I think that's true of any kind of meditation that it has to be your own thing. I remember [a meditation instructor teaching] about doing tonglen for the ISIS fighters. That didn't resonate with me, not that they don't deserve compassion.

Christopher commented that there seemed to be "no prescribed formula" for tonglen, and most participants seemed to learn what worked best for them through trial and error. Some noted a desire to eventually bring in other aspects of tonglen they had learned about once they felt more comfortable and ready to expand their practices.

**Desire to regularly practice tonglen.** Eighty percent of participants noted a

desire to make tonglen a part of their regular practice routines following the current study. For example, Ophelia noted, “I almost feel that I need to sign some kind of affidavit saying, 'Are you going to do this forever more?' and I am going to say 'Yes, or you can send the police after me.'” And Georgia commented, “Having this study just made me think, 'okay, where can you fit this in?' And I was able to do it quite easily, actually. And I think I will continue to do it on more of a regular basis.” Others commented that while tonglen would not be an everyday practice, it was something they could use regularly. Harry, for example, felt that the “attitude” of tonglen would continue in his practice.

**Category 3: Benefits**

Participants of the current study noted a variety of benefits as being connected to tonglen practice. A number of these benefits have previously been linked to sitting meditation and LKM. For example, participants connected tonglen with experiences of calmness and relaxation; heightened abilities of addressing chaotic, challenging experiences; and the dissolving of difficult emotions. Other benefits of tonglen that were discussed by participants were unexpected at the outset of the study. For example, participants noted that sending positive energy to others was a benefit of tonglen practice. While it is not surprising that tonglen was perceived to be working in an abstract manner, some participants also discussed how it worked in concrete ways. In addition, some felt that tonglen energized them. Many compared and contrasted tonglen with prayer, and a number of participants felt that tonglen allowed them to help others in ways they could not fully explain.

**General Benefits.** Participants noted a variety of benefits as arising from tonglen practice. Forty percent felt that tonglen had a calming effect on them which allowed them

to relax, even in difficult situations. Georgia commented, “This practice feels like a gift to me, it is a wonderful thing to do. [...] I felt very relaxed and content.” Susan discussed how tonglen helped improve her interactions with others, specifically with regards to her ability to listen to others' fears and challenges:

> I find people don't want to talk about death or being sad. I find that through the meditation and my own experiences and [tonglen], it is pretty healthy to not avoid those things. A lot of people don't have anyone to talk to. This friend is going through a difficult time and is reaching out to me because within her family they are having a difficult time and can't talk about it even though they are going through it.

Sixty percent of participants noted that tonglen helped them to dissolve difficult emotions such as aggression, pain, anger, and fear. This was particularly useful for challenging situations that arose in daily life. For example, Laura noted that tonglen helped her cope with a personal illness she was struggling with:

> In the wake of my surgery on June 12th, I felt a lot of fear when beginning tonglen for myself. I was weak from the surgery and the prognosis wasn't as good as I had hoped. Doing tonglen forced me to confront that reality.

Others, like Cynthia, felt that while these difficult feelings did not disappear after tonglen practice, they were reduced “to the point where [they] just didn't make any difference.” Tonglen helped drain the power from challenging feelings and replaced those feelings with compassion. Instead of attacking, bargaining with, or otherwise trying to get rid of the pain, tonglen was a way to simply sit with difficulties. Maladaptive feelings and thoughts, such as those which involved judging others, dropped away for some

participants. For others, emotions that had been buried for years rose up, were felt and acknowledge, and began to fall away.

**Energizing impact of tonglen.** While some participants felt that tonglen required mental energy, 40% found that tonglen practice actually made them feel fresh and energized. All of the participants that discussed this experience had at least four years of sitting meditation practice. For example, Georgia noted that the practice "revitalized" her and helped her feel more open and awake. Even when she had done physical activity before practicing tonglen, she noted that tonglen sessions increased her energy "99% of the time." Other participants noted that tonglen had physically energized them during the study when they were feeling run down or sick. While tonglen required energy, at first, in order to engage in the practice, this energy was returned. For example, Victoria noted that while tonglen practice may have been "strenuous" and "challenging" at the beginning of the study, by the end of the study practicing tonglen was "physically different," and absent of stress and strain.

**Sending energy**. Seventy percent of participants felt that sending positive energy to others was a benefit of tonglen practice. This energy was typically discussed as part of the breathing out aspect of tonglen and manifested in various ways, such as visualizing that one was healing another's pain, taking away another's suffering, or simply acknowledging others. Some described this transfer of energy as sending out positive vibrations, while others experienced it more as a sense of healing both one's self and other people. Two participants recalled sending positive energy to the earth itself as part of a desire to address environmental destruction.

Some participants discussed the benefits related to sending out positive energy in

more abstract terms. For example, Wendy felt the practices of all people who were "sending out loving-kindness and compassion through the airwaves" accumulated over time. Others noted that while they weren't exactly sure how tonglen worked, they did feel that something was being transferred. Laura commented, "I don't know if this works in the sense that energy travels […] but the difference I feel in myself I want to share." Victoria noted:

> Whether there is actually anything happening energy-wise or whatever, maybe it is helping me. Maybe it makes me feel like I am doing something to help humanity. And if that is the case, why shouldn't everybody do it?

As illustrated by these reflections, even if participants could not describe exactly why tonglen worked, they ultimately felt that their tonglen practices were beneficial.

**Outside influence of tonglen.** Ninety percent of participants felt that tonglen worked in a way that impacted the world outside of the meditation environment. Some felt that tonglen practice helped others, even though they may not have been able to describe how or why it was helping. For example, two participants felt that their tonglen practices might have directly helped others who were sick. Georgia explains this experience:

> One of my brothers in law […] was really sick, he was dying. I was practising for a while and I didn't see him. When I did have contact with him or his wife I was finding out all these things he was doing and what was transpiring in his life and I was like, "oh my gosh." It really felt like... I don't know if it was because I was doing this but it really felt like that, like "Holy shit, this is making a difference." This kind of inspired me to

keep doing it.

Forty percent of participants felt that tonglen involved a process of sending positivity directly to other people in a way that could be tangibly felt by others. For example, Christopher reflected:

> I have been in meditation spaces where someone might break out into tears. And that softens my heart. So what you do is you can immediately do tonglen for that person, and it helps. It creates a stable environment for that person. They may not know you are doing tonglen practice, but they can feel it.

Christopher further noted that tonglen gives those who practice it a sense of purpose. This sense of purpose, in turn, creates feelings of happiness and contentment. In feeling content and happy, tonglen practitioners positively affect others.

**Tonglen and prayer.** During the one on one interviews, 40% of participants compared tonglen to prayer. Participants felt that, like prayer, tonglen was an act meant to help one's self as well as others. However, participants also noted that tonglen was not the same as praying. For example, Georgia noted that while prayer and tonglen were similar, she experienced tonglen as a practice that was both more concentrated and involved greater depth than prayer. Christopher pointed out that while prayer involves asking for help “through another medium,” tonglen, as a direct exchange of self and other, is “more personal.” He also noted that discussing tonglen as a form of prayer might be helpful for those who find the process of breathing in negativity and suffering challenging.

**Category 4: Interconnection**

Participants experienced a sense of interconnection with others as a result of

practicing tonglen. This sense of interconnection manifested in various ways. First, a number of participants realized that in order to be able to send compassion to others, they needed to be able to feel compassion towards themselves. Additionally, the processes of generating compassion for one's self and generating compassion for others were seen as inseparable. Victoria described these intertwined process via the term "open heart." This experience sometimes led participants to see people they felt negatively about in the past in a different light. Furthermore, through tonglen, participants were able to connect with the suffering and challenges of others, including those both near and far away, and the world in general. A few hinted at an even deeper process which has been discussed in Buddhist literature, especially in works by Chogyam Trungpa, as the challenging of ego. This process involves the breaking down of barriers that protect one's sense of self and was connected to an experience of inherent "emptiness" or absence of a separate, individual, autonomous self.

**Loving one's self.** Half of the participants in the study noted that in order to have compassion for others, they needed to have compassion for themselves and their own suffering first. As Cynthia commented:

> I could see that the first step in the process was showing compassion to my own weaknesses, and my own pains, and my own hurts. It put you in the mindset or the heart sense to be able to show that same compassion to someone else.

By deepening the compassion they felt for themselves through tonglen practice, participants were able to increase their connection to, and compassion for, others. Similarly, Wendy noted that "the deeper, the closer you get to yourself, the closer you get

to others."

A number of participants commented that before the study began, they thought that tonglen was a practice that one engaged in for the benefit of others. By the end of the study, and with a deepening of their tonglen practices, many participants realized that tonglen is also about having compassion for one's own pain and suffering. As Laura commented, "if you don't touch your own situation first, I don't know how difficult it would be to go on to other situations."

Victoria noted that this process of sending compassion to one's self meant opening up, commenting, "in order for me to do [the] practice I had to experience something. And I think what actually happened was by letting out my own emotions I actually opened up." By connecting with one's own feelings, participants were able to find out where they were stuck emotionally. As a result, they could direct compassion towards those places where they were stuck, as well as the accompanying pain.

**Open heart.** Participants also discovered that generating compassion for others and generating compassion for one's self are interrelated processes. In other words, by generating compassion and empathy for themselves, participants found that they were also generating compassion for others, and vice versa. In fact, 90% of participants discussed this experience in some manner. For example, Christopher described this experience as a manifestation of the essence of human nature, noting that it is only natural to care for one's self as well as others. Some participants felt that feeling compassion for one's self was, in essence, a form of experiencing compassion for others.

This generation of compassion helped to dissolve separation between self and other. Victoria noted this process via the term "open heart":

> There were also times when I truly experienced an "open heart." In a selfish way, I felt as though I was doing something meaningful and making a difference. When I fully opened my heart, I was surprised at some of the people that appeared [when I practiced tonglen]. It wasn't a conscious effort to think of them, they were just there.

The compassion that participants experienced created the space necessary to not only understand others and relate to their suffering, but to also connect with them in a deep and meaningful way. People that one liked, disliked, or felt indifferent about all experienced challenges and suffering and, therefore, deserved compassion equally.

This open-heartedness was also an expansive experience. For example, Ophelia commented that "when the compassion is just about me, my world is very tiny. When it is me and the world, my heart becomes very big." This expansiveness appears to reflect a sense of contentment with both the practice of tonglen and one's self. As Wendy noted, the process of generating compassion for both self and others was a "win-win" situation.

**Accepting others.** In generating compassion for self and others, some participants gained a deeper appreciation of the anger and self-destructiveness that led others to treat them poorly in the past. Forty percent of participants felt that tonglen helped them to better accept, and work with, the negative emotional states of others.

Through tonglen, participants were able to step outside of their own pain and better appreciate the perspectives, experiences, and motivations of others. For example, Cynthia noted that while she might have felt resentment towards some people in the past, tonglen helped her to "feel their pain and […] appreciate how this influenced their actions." As Laura commented, "[everybody has] their own set of circumstances. Nobody

is a total winner or a total loser. People just are what they are and we all struggle with things." In this way, tonglen was also useful in challenging all or none modes of thought.

Christopher commented that people who appear aggressive or negative could simply be viewed as "not grounded." Furthermore, he suggested that by doing tonglen for someone who has the same weaknesses and triggers as one's self, it may be possible to connect with that person on a deeper level. For example, if one has a tendency towards anger, doing tonglen for someone who also gets angry easily may be helpful in enabling one to see that person in a different light.

**Connecting with suffering**. Sixty percent of participants discussed the importance of connecting with the suffering that others experience. For example, Susan noted that tonglen was a process of acknowledging the suffering of others in an active way, commenting "Everybody these days is so anxious. And rightfully so. Because we are bombarded by all this negativity. And tonglen practice helps to dissipate that negativity." This awareness of the anxiousness and negativity connected to contemporary life was noted by a number of participants in the study. Participants also suggested that tonglen could serve as a vehicle through which one could relate with, and connect to, others who were experiencing such negative states.

Hannah commented that "the benefits [of tonglen] are connecting with the suffering of the world. To me that is a benefit. It might not be a benefit for some other people but to me that's a benefit." In general, participants felt that connecting with suffering in this way was beneficial, as it brought them closer to others.

**Interconnection.** All of the participants in the current study noted a sense of connecting with other people through tonglen. Cynthia noted that tonglen practice

involves “getting to the core of your own being.” When one connects with that core, he or she connects “to the core of the other person.” As Wendy put it, “the deeper, the closer you get to yourself the closer you get to others.”

Tonglen can also be viewed as a way to address self-absorption and increase appreciation of how we rely on others for our welfare. For example, Harry commented, “I think that we are all walking around in our own isolated bubbles and that [tonglen] has the potential to dissolve that to some degree because you are focusing on other people [...]. It helps you feel more connected, and perhaps less self-absorbed.” Tonglen acted as a tool which helped participants appreciate how they are not alone in their pain, their struggles, and their suffering. Harry described this process as “getting out of yourself and imaging what other people are feeling.”

If a participant was feeling a particular emotion during tonglen – such as anger, fear, or worry – that emotion could become the focus of the practice. In making that emotion the focus of the practice, the participant could immediately connect with all the people who were also experiencing that emotion. Ophelia felt this led to an experience where the “me dropped away and other people came in.” As Victoria put it:

> I do believe we are all connected. I do believe that. I do believe that we are not little molecules bouncing off each other. I think that ultimately, in the world and in the universe, there is something that connects us. Whether there is that mental energy or physical energy that we all feel and share.

Tonglen allowed participants to do more than simply note their interconnectedness with others in a cerebral manner. Instead, it enabled them to experience that interconnectedness and deepen their appreciation of it.

**Challenging ego.** The term ego came into the modern lexicon via the work of Sigmund Freud. In this context, ego refers to the component of one's self that meditates between the id and reality. Chogyam Trungpa, however, was well known for using the term in a different sense – to refer to the "mistaken belief in the self as a solid entity" (2010). In this definition of ego, it is the thing that drives us to desire an easy way out of life's challenges. This does not simply involve a wish for freedom from pain and suffering. It is also a fear of problems and challenges that inherently accompany existence, seeing them as unnatural things and wishing them to go away.

80% of the participants in the current study noted the connection between tonglen and challenging fears of problems and difficulties. Such a process allowed participants to work towards accepting the nature of self, existence, and suffering. For some participants, this manifested as a sense of discomfort with, or perhaps simply a questioning of, the notion that taking in the pain and suffering of others was either bad or dangerous. For example, Hannah discussed a conversation with a friend who was against the process of taking in negative energy. Furthermore, Hannah reflected on the tendency of some spiritual and relaxation practices, such as yoga, to focus on keeping out the "bad" and drawing in the "good":

> Yoga [is] all about feeling good [...] you're going to find some bliss in a yoga class. And you're going to forget all your troubles and only think about how wonderful this class is, which is completely unrealistic. […] To go to yoga class and to not acknowledge all the suffering in the world, to me, is kinda fucked up. Right? […] If we can't acknowledge the suffering in this world then there is something really wrong with us. It is a form of

> denial to me. To sit and face the suffering and take it in and concentrate on it and breathe it out and send something to those people, to me it balances out that other stuff. Because it is the opposite. It's about […] people not wanting to experience any discomfort. And tonglen can be serious discomfort. […] For me, I'm like "If it's this hard for me that means I have to do it." It's important for me to do it. I have to face that discomfort of doing it because I know that if I do that I will grow and I will expand as a result.

As Hannah notes, taking in pain, suffering and negativity goes against some spiritual, mindfulness, and relaxation practices. Many practices, like yoga, focus on taking in the good and sending out the bad. However, where tonglen does the opposite, in challenging traditional self-cherishing and self-protecting attitudes, it appears it can seem threatening to some. However, the process of accepting pain, instead of driving it away, ultimately was seen as beneficial.

In taking in suffering, participants experienced a sense of going against the imperative to protect themselves from the painful aspects of life. Such difficulties were understood as natural, inherent aspects of existence. Tonglen practice allowed them to see suffering as natural, and that avoiding it or driving it away simply made that suffering more painful. For example, Harry commented that while "it is easier to ignore what other people are going through," tonglen does the opposite as it helps one focus "on the negative things that are going on with other people [...] and seeing if you can feel their pain." While the process of touching in with other's suffering was challenging for participants, it was also liberating as it strengthened their sense of connection with others.

In going against the instinct to drive away pain, some participants began to embark on deeper examinations of the concept of self. For example, Christopher commented that tonglen, "is not about self. The more we engage in not self, the better we feel as human beings. The more we engage in what is around us." Ophelia echoed this sentiment, commenting, "As I continued practicing [tonglen] I started to drop the 'me' and it became me and other. […] It got me away from the egoic me." This getting away from the "egoic me" appeared to be a sense of moving away from small minded and self-cherishing ways of thinking. As part of this process, habitual, self-focused thought patterns were challenged

This process of challenging ego involved glimpses of the inherent emptiness of self. Georgia commented, "within that emptiness the compassion is there and radiating and going out and coming back." Hence, challenging ego appears to be directly related to a realization that what we perceive as being ourselves is essentially empty or non-existent. Laura reflected on a related concept in the Shambhala teachings, noting the "ground of everything is basically good." She expanded on this, commenting that "there is a basic ground of goodness" in everything, and that tonglen is a tool that can help one "touch that [goodness and shed] an awful lot of conceptions that we have around things." Tonglen helped participants to question what constitutes self, as well as examine the overlay of thoughts that we experience on a day to day basis. For example, Laura commented that tonglen helps one to see that often actions are motivated by "the ego and not the person underneath." Wendy offered a similar sentiment, arguing that "you have to release the judgement [of those] around you if you are going to be pure in wanting them to be able to be free of their suffering."

**Category 5: Challenges**

Throughout the process of exploring and deepening their tonglen practices, participants noted challenges they faced along the way. For example, 60% of participants discussed confronting doubts they had regarding whether tonglen was making a difference in their lives, while 80% of participants reflected on how difficult tonglen practice can be. Some commented on challenges to tonglen practice that arose in day to day life. Others felt that tonglen required energy and focus, which made it a difficult practice to do when they were tired. Ultimately, these challenges were accepted as an inevitable part of the process of exploring tonglen.

**Life challenges.** A number of participants noted various challenges that arose in their lives that complicated tonglen practice. For example, while having a loved one that was ill made participants want to practice tonglen more, such experiences tended to take away from their time as well as their abilities to practice tonglen in the present. Other participants were going through illnesses themselves. For example, Laura was going through cancer and reflected on how this impacted her tonglen experiences:

> There was one day I had a lot of struggle as I was doing this hot, dark, and heavy. And I was thinking, "I have this cancer and I don't know what the result is going to be and I have to take that in? What if by actually acknowledging this, it'll make it worse?" And it really made it difficult to start, this hot, dark, and heavy breathing in practice.

While tonglen helped her to work with those fears, at other times she was confronted with physical challenges that made it difficult to practice tonglen. For example, she noted sessions where she began to "panic, and sort of began sweating," reflecting that "It was

almost like you would feel that more than what you're thinking anymore."

Feeling obliged to do tonglen for someone that was ill was also noted as a possible barrier to practice. For example, Georgia discussed one such situation she had experienced in the past:

> There was a person who came to this group who had a lot of issues. There was a group of us who were doing tonglen for that person. And in the beginning it was, it felt good but over time there was too much of a push to do it by this person and it almost felt like there was a burnout. And actually, from that experience, I backed off for quite a long time.

Hence, challenges could involve both intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions, which made them all the more difficult to overcome.

Some participants found that tonglen practice required a fair amount of energy. For example, in reflecting on the study period, Victoria noted, "initially I found it emotionally draining. It took a lot of energy, a lot of emotional energy. I don't know if I was trying to hard but the first couple of days it was almost like I felt a pain in my heart." Cynthia commented, "When [tonglen] is done at night it is done with a different speed and motivation. At night it feels more like drudgery and it is much harder because you are just tired." Hence, both when tonglen was done and the emotional and psychological states of participants influenced their experiences of the practice.

**Challenges of tonglen practice itself.** Eighty percent of participants discussed how tonglen could be challenging in and of itself. Three of those participants noted that it was sometimes difficult to synchronize their breath with visualizations of taking in suffering and sending out compassion. For example, Ophelia commented that, "riding the

breath did take some getting used to." Similarly, Victoria reflected that "my thoughts were faster than my breathing and I was trying to match my thoughts with my breath."

The experience of taking on others' struggles was challenging for some participants, especially at the beginning of the 28 day study period. For example, Hannah noted that, "when I try to expand out and think of everybody in the world who is suffering from mental illness, I find that really hard to breathe in and breathe out. I sometimes get overwhelmed and start to cry." When they found they were struggling with tonglen practice, some participants turned the practice towards themselves. Harry commented, "I did Pema Chodron's instructions that I found online and she said that if something comes up inside yourself and you find a barrier is going on you do it on yourself. That happened almost every time." When Laura experienced difficulty at the start of her tonglen practice, she would acknowledge that difficulty. This made it, "much easier to feel compassion and connection with others who are also experiencing difficulties."

**Not knowing if tonglen is having an impact.** Sixty percent of participants wondered, at one point in time or another, if their tonglen practices were having any impact at all. For example, Laura noted that, "what was confusing about tonglen at first was, 'how could this possibly make a difference?'" Wendy mentioned that while she had the sense that her tonglen practice did send positive energy to others, she also noted "that is what my perception of it is. Whether is just perception, who knows?"

Despite the presence of such doubt, participants still engaged in tonglen. For example, Laura commented, "I might never know the results of doing tonglen and trying to send something out there but I don't think that's the point." Similarly, Hannah noted, "I like what the Dalia Lama says about tonglen, 'We can't know if tonglen does anything for

the people we are doing it for but it does something for us.' And that is really the point.” Participants felt that tonglen was having an impact on them, and that changes caused by their practices would become more obvious over time. As Christopher commented, “It could seem like nothing has happened [as a result of tonglen practice], but a situation could arise where you realize, 'I care.'”

While participants experienced various challenges during the 28 day practice period, they also noted feeling that participating in the study was a worthwhile endeavour. As Victoria commented, “This past month has been a really fulfilling experience – challenging, demanding, painful – but, overall, fulfilling.”

# Chapter 5

# Discussion

## Review of Major Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the tonglen experiences of individuals with established sitting meditation practices. Interviews were conducted with 10 participants who possessed varying degrees of familiarity with tonglen. All of the participants had either regular Shamatha or Shamatha-Vipashyana practices. One on one interviews were conducted with each participant, and participants provided written reflections on their tonglen experiences and logged the amount of time they practiced tonglen over a 28 day period.

Themes in the current study were identified using grounded theory coding procedures. Based on these themes, a model denoting the experiences involved in the process of exploring tonglen practice was created. The grounded theory model for the study involves a process that begins with motivation, is pushed forward via synergy, offers practitioners various benefits, gives them a sense of deeper interconnection with others, and involves an assortment of challenges along the way.

At the outset of the study, a number of questions were posed. These questions asked what tonglen practice meant for participants and how they engaged with the practice. Furthermore, it was asked why someone would want to practice tonglen, and what participants felt were the benefits of practicing tonglen. Finally, the study looked at why participants felt benefits arose from tonglen practice.

Participants noted that tonglen was a beneficial practice. For example, they felt that tonglen allowed them to direct positive energy towards the suffering of others. They

discussed the perception that tonglen helped them to develop compassion. It was also felt that tonglen assisted them in seeing things from others' perspectives. In general, tonglen was used to challenge closed minded ways of thinking.

Participants discussed various ways of engaging with tonglen, as the steps of tonglen practice, the visualizations, and the topics of focus were different from participant to participant. The study offered participants a chance to experiment with tonglen practice, and to try out different objects of focus. All participants noted that sitting meditation accompanied their tonglen practices, though there was no consensus on how long the accompanying sitting meditation should be, nor whether it should occur before, after, or both before and after tonglen. Participants discussed the content of the breathing in and out aspects of their tonglen practices. This content varied a significant amount from participant to participant. Similarly, participants reflected on a number of different focuses which were used during tonglen. Ultimately, there appeared to be no prescribed formula for tonglen practice. Participants generally gravitated towards what worked best for them.

Participants noted a number of motivations which spurred their desire to practice tonglen. Sometimes the experiences others, such as the illness of a loved one, made participants want to practice tonglen. One's own painful experiences and personal struggles also motivated engagement with tonglen, as did daily life experiences that arose in the moment and off the meditation cushion. Making a commitment to tonglen on a regular basis was seen as another support which encouraged practice.

Participants perceived a variety of benefits as being connected with tonglen. For example, the practice was seen as helping them feel more relaxed, patient, and calm.

Some noted that tonglen made them feel more energetic. Participants also linked tonglen practice with increases in compassion for themselves and others. Many felt that tonglen helped them appreciate life, and some felt that the practice empowered them in the process of taking ownership of their lives. Some noted that tonglen made them feel more genuine, while others felt that it helped them to uncover emotions that had been buried.

Participants noted that tonglen positively influenced their interactions with others. For example, many felt tonglen helped them imagine what others were experiencing and lessened their judgments of others. Participants also argued that tonglen helped them to move beyond their own concerns and struggles, and that the practice challenged feelings of isolation as it connected them with the pain and suffering outside of themselves.

When asked why benefits arise from tonglen practice, some participants felt that it was because of the combined effect of tonglen and regular sitting meditation. Specifically, sitting meditation was viewed as a means of helping participants develop the wisdom and understanding necessary to receive the full benefit of tonglen practice. Other participants felt that they would likely never completely comprehend why tonglen worked. Some argued that knowing why certain benefits arose from tonglen was not the point of the practice. As Hannah commented, “It is difficult to explain what I get from it and why I keep doing it. I don't know. It feels like it makes sense to me and it feels like the right thing to do.”

While there is a dearth of academic research on tonglen, there are some noteworthy similarities between participant experiences in the current study and findings in other studies on tonglen. Additionally, given the lack of research on tonglen, comparing the results of the current study to existing research on Loving-Kindness Meditation

(LKM) can help to illuminate the potential of tonglen practice.

One similarity between tonglen and LKM that appeared in both the current study and other studies is the influence of these practices on how one perceives self and others. For example, Lee (2011) examined the effects of LKM on female trauma survivors, noting that participants felt LKM helped them to become more adept at maintaining calm, more able to accept self and others, and more aware of, and better at expressing, emotions. While the current study did not focus on recovery from trauma, participants did note feeling calmer, as well as experiences of becoming more accepting of self and others as a result of engaging in tonglen practice.

Law (2011) studied the positive impact of LKM on social anxiety and experiences of social evaluation and exclusion. Given the results of the current study, it is possible that tonglen could also be helpful in such a manner. Specifically, participants noted that tonglen helped them feel a greater sense of interconnection with others. For those who suffer from social anxiety, feeling a deeper sense of connection with others could possibly make stressful social situations more bearable.

The current study required participants to engage in regular tonglen practice over a 28 day period. Meditation retreats also require participants to practice over a set period of time, albeit in a more structured and focused manner in a closed environment. Alba (2013) studied the impact of sitting meditation and LKM in a meditation retreat setting. Participants in Alba's study perceived increases in happiness and compassionate love. Furthermore, these participants noted reduced desires of avoidance and revenge, and decreases in depression, anxiety and stress levels. Participants in the current study noted similar benefits, such as increases in compassion for others and lessened feelings of

resentment towards others.

Participants in the current study were experienced sitting mediation practitioners. Multiple studies have focused on experienced LKM practitioners. For example, Lutz et al. (2008) examined the brain activity of both novice and experienced LKM meditators with 10,000 to 50,000 hours of various types of meditation, noting that levels of empathy and perspective taking were higher in the experienced LKM meditators. However, the current study was unable to identify any perceived differences in the responses of participants who had more years of meditation experience than other participants.

Kemper and Shaltout (2011) studied whether or not people could be influenced by LKM when they had no idea someone was practicing for them. Those who were the focus of such LKM practice sessions felt more relaxed and less stressed, and had lower respiration levels and heart rates. Given this, it is interesting to note that 90% of participants in the current study felt that tonglen had a positive impact on others in both a concrete and abstract manner.

The current study is the first to use a grounded theory approach to analyze the tonglen experiences of individuals with established sitting meditation practices. As Corcoran (2007) completed a grounded theory study on experienced LKM practitioners, comparing these studies can shed light on further differences and similarities between LKM and tonglen. Corcoran interviewed seven experienced LKM practitioners and two LKM teachers. These participants were asked about their experiences with LKM. Their responses were compared and coded for the purpose of finding major themes. The themes Corcoran noted focused on the perceived changes in participants' thoughts and behaviours as a result of LKM practice.

While LKM and tonglen are different in nature, there are strong similarities in how these practices were experienced by participants in Corcoran's work as well as the present study. Corcoran presented participant reflections on LKM in relation to decreases in difficult emotional and mental states. These experiences included reductions in anger, fear, anxiety, helplessness and judgement of others, reductions which were also perceived by participants in the current study. Participants in both studies felt that they experienced increased interconnection with others as a result of their respective practices, and perceived themselves as having expanded their abilities to understand, and accept, the motivations of others. Participants in the Corcoran study and the current study felt that their understandings of the nature of suffering increased as a result of either LKM or tonglen practice. Finally, participants in both studies also noted how it was sometimes hard to put their practice experiences into words.

Corcoran's (2007) study presents a seven category model of practitioner's experiences with metta practice. Corcoran notes that LKM holds potential as a tool which can be used to support emotional health as well as intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships. While key differences exist between Corcoran's model and the one presented in the current study, Corcoran's model is congruent with the model presented here. Both models explore how participants utilized LKM or tonglen for the perceived promotion of psychological well-being. The current model, however, serves more as a reflection on the process that participants experienced in exploring and developing their tonglen practices. Finally, while the concept of challenging ego in relation to tonglen or LKM practice is touched on in other studies, the current study notes that this aspect of participants' experiences appears to be a critical aspect of tonglen practice.

The current study can also be compared to studies that either included, or focused on, tonglen. Pace et al. (2009) studied how participants were impacted by a six week training course on meditation approaches utilizing compassion, lojong practices, and Shamatha-Vipashyana. Lower levels of stress and improved moods were reported by participants. While some participants in the current study commented that tonglen was a practice that required notable amounts of energy, others felt that engaging in tonglen practice energized them both mentally and physically.

McKnight's 2012 and 2014 examinations of the impact of tonglen on the levels of compassion of novice meditators are the only other stand-alone studies on this topic. McKnight noted that the 2012 work was a pilot study, while it can be argued that the 2014 examination represents a culmination of the scholar's research on tonglen. The current study shares a number of major themes with the 2014 McKnight study. Participants in McKnight's (2014) study experienced increases in self-compassion, self-kindness, and feelings of common humanity, as well as decreases in self-judgement and feelings of isolation. Similarly, participants in the current study perceived increases in their abilities to experience compassion and kindness for themselves, and also noted that it was necessary to feel compassion for one's self before compassion could be directed towards others. Participants in the current study also felt tonglen helped them to develop compassion for individuals they may have disliked in the past, noting that suffering is shared by all beings.

Participants in both the current study and McKnight’s (2014) study experienced challenges with tonglen practice. Despite such challenges, over 75% of the participants in the McKnight study and 80% of participants in the current study noted that they wanted

to continue practicing tonglen following the conclusion of their respective studies.

McKnight (2014) noted that longer studies on tonglen might help to clarify the impact of tonglen practice. Participants in the current study were given the opportunity to engage in more numerous and longer tonglen sessions than in the McKnight study. Additionally, there were variations in the amount of time participants practiced, and all participants in the current study had established sitting meditation practices. However, the current study did not reveal any differences between the experiences of those that practiced tonglen more than others during the 28 day practice period.

In the McKnight (2014) study, participants were completely new to tonglen and were specifically chosen for the study because they did not have established meditation practices. Interestingly, some participants in the current study did not feel tonglen would have the same effect if one did not first have an established meditation practice.

McKnight (2014) argued that the greatest potential benefit of tonglen is the compassion that the practice generates. As such, the tools used to analyze the impact of tonglen in McKnight's study were geared around measuring the compassion participants experienced as a result of the practice, and how tonglen could help deepen their feelings of compassion. While all of the participants in the current study did indeed experience a deepening of compassion, what seemed to underlie that compassion was interconnection. Tonglen helped to break down barriers of isolation, difference, and indifference. What is perhaps remarkable about this process is that the practice of tonglen occurs entirely inside one's own mind. While tonglen is practiced in isolation from others (even when done in groups), it ironically appears to help people experience and develop connections with others, and with humanity in general.

Given the similarities and differences between the current study and the McKnight (2014) study, it is clear that further research on both novice and experienced practitioners' experiences with tonglen should be examined using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. In this way, the questions that remain in the wake of both studies can be further addressed.

**Limitations of the Study**

The current study involves a number of limitations which must be taken into consideration. For example, there are likely specific reasons why participants felt motivated to volunteer for the study as they were self-selected, having heard about the study due to their connection to the St. John's Shambhala Meditation Group. Therefore, it is somewhat difficult to determine whether participants who were not recruited in this manner would have the same experiences.

Most of the participants in the study seem to have had generally positive experiences with meditation and tonglen in the past. A sample with more negative tonglen experiences may not have yielded similar data. Furthermore, the participants were all experienced meditators and the majority had previously practiced tonglen, something that a sample of novice meditators would not have had before such a study. In addition, as only two of the ten participants were male, there was not a great deal of gender equity. Since all were adults, the mean age of the participants may limit the applicability of these findings to other age groups.

Participants did not use a standard form of tonglen. Instead, they were able to use whatever form of tonglen they preferred. Hence, there was quite a variation of tonglen styles and techniques which may have influenced the extent to which the practice

impacted each participant. Given the variation in tonglen techniques, it is difficult to determine the impact that these variations had on participants' experiences and their subsequent perceptions of tonglen.

The current study design offers a heterogeneous assortment of participant expertise with regards to tonglen and meditation. However, this also makes it difficult to determine the extent to which the length and intensity of each participant's practice played a role in their experiences and viewpoints. There may have been more consistency in experiences and reflections with a sample that was more homogenous with regards to meditation experience. On a related note, there was a great deal of variance with regards to the amount of time participants practiced tonglen during the study. Stricter guidelines for the amount of time participants were allowed to practice tonglen could have potentially led to different, and possibly more consistent, results.

It would also have been beneficial to use a quantitative research approach to help further verify the findings of the current study. For example, quantitative data may have helped to clarify the relative degree to which participants benefited from tonglen, as well as elucidated the extent to which participants struggled with challenges. Given that this was a qualitative study, the sample population included a limited number of participants. As such, it is not possible to extrapolate from the data and draw general conclusions that are applicable to larger populations. Hence, similar studies with larger sample sizes would likely be beneficial in order to confirm or refute the results of the current study.

Finally, author bias should be noted as a possible limitation to, but also a potential strength of, the current study. Specifically, I have been connected with the Shambhala Buddhist tradition since 2003. I have lived at Karme Choling, a Buddhist meditation

center in Vermont, and also worked as an editorial assistant with the *Shambhala Sun* and *Buddhadharma* magazines. I spent time in Gampo Abbey – a Shambhala Buddhist monastery in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia – and periodically attend Wednesday meditation sittings with the St. John's Shambhala Meditation Group. I was introduced to tonglen around 2003. Given my involvement with Shambhala and my investment in tonglen practice, my understanding of tonglen and interpretation of participant results may have been impacted in either a positive or detrimental manner. Hence, this context should be considered in conjunction with the previously noted study limitations.

**Implications**

Rapgay, Bystrisky, Dafter, and Spearman (2011) note that Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) has played a major role in the acceptance of mindfulness and meditative practices into mainstream psychology and medical fields. Indeed, Kabat-Zinn's MBSR utilizes various mindfulness approaches in a format that allows individuals to experiment with these tools in an intensive yet controlled manner. Namely, MBSR approaches include body scanning, yoga, sitting meditation, walking meditation, and even LKM (Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

One connection between the current study and MBSR that may be worth exploring is the concept of synergy. In the current study, a number of participants noted the various types of mindfulness and meditation practices they regularly engage in. Specifically, some participants felt that these multiple practices influenced each other in a cumulative manner. It may be worth exploring this notion of synergy by comparing the experiences of participants utilizing various mindfulness approaches and participants practicing a single approach over a given period of time. Participants' experiences could

be compared and contrasted in order to determine whether or not it is better to practice a variety of forms of mindfulness, rather than a single approach.

Kabat-Zinn's efforts have seen MBSR applied in a variety of health related contexts. Indeed, mindfulness and meditation approaches are now being taught to clients in psychotherapy. Presenting issues such as stress, anxiety, depression, borderline personality disorder, substance abuse, binge eating, insomnia, relationship problems, bipolar disorder as well as a host of other issues have been positively addressed using mindfulness techniques and meditation (Shapiro, 2009). However, the application of these approaches in clinical environments should be approached with caution.

As Leppma (2012) notes, if a counsellor is contemplating presenting meditation as a tool a given client could use, it is important to first develop an understanding of what that client knows about meditation in a general, non-religious context. As well, the counsellor should consider the spiritual and cultural background of the client to see if meditation practices could fit in well with those perspectives. As standards with regards to the length of time clients should engage in meditation practices on a daily and weekly basis have not been set, counsellors may find it initially difficult to determine suggested meditation time frames for clients.

Ultimately, it is important to not take the practice of meditation, and the impact it can have on individuals, lightly. Seeing the true nature of the machinations of one’s mind as a result of meditation practice can initially be both embarrassing and stressful for individuals (Kurash and Schaul, 2006). While such occurrences are usually non-severe and last only a short time, meditation can sometimes bring up traumatic memories or trigger existential anxiety (Leppma, 2012). Furthermore, Mascaro, Rilling, Negi, and

Raison (2013) argue that meditation practices that require one to engage in deep and extended contemplations of the suffering of those he or she loves can be quite difficult and challenging. Hence, counsellors must be sure to use meditation based interventions only when clients are prepared to embark on them (Leppma, 2012).

While McKnight (2014) argues that tonglen can be used in contexts where participants have little experience in either mindfulness or meditation, the above considerations should give one pause when contemplating the introduction of tonglen to a therapeutic environment. Furthermore, though it appears that tonglen can help increase both mindfulness and compassion, some participants in the current study questioned the degree to which tonglen practice could be explored by those who do not have established, regular sitting meditation practices. Indeed, Chodron (2001) has argued that while those without established sitting meditation practices could engage in tonglen on the spot, such individuals should approach formal tonglen sessions with caution.

While tonglen may have limited benefits with regards to its adoption by counselling and psychotherapy clients, formal tonglen may be quite a beneficial practice for psychotherapists who have established sitting meditation practices. For example, previous research has noted numerous benefits for psychotherapists that use mindfulness and meditation on a regular basis. Some of these benefits include better attention and concentration abilities, greater tolerance and acceptance, higher levels of self-awareness, greater capacity for empathy, deeper feelings of connectedness with clients, keener empirical understandings of reality, and improvements in non-judgmental awareness of various environments (Greason & Welfare, 2013).

Meditation assists one’s ability to stay focused and mindful in the present moment.

By being present, psychotherapists can strengthen the client-therapist relationship, transmitting a deep sense of empathy for their clients and their concerns. From this deep sense of empathy comes rich experiences of unconditional positive regard for clients (Greason & Welfare, 2013).

Kurash and Schaul (2006) argue that meditation helps psychotherapists to keep in touch with their own emotions. In essence, when they practice meditation, psychotherapists tend to become more aware of the ways in which they are self-defensive. Such awareness of their self-defensive tendencies helps them to develop greater understandings of the various ways in which ego manifests. In addition, meditation can also help therapists to improve their concentration and tolerance levels. This can be especially helpful in contexts where, for one reason or another, the therapist might lose focus and miss a critical client reflection. Furthermore, deeper levels of tolerance and acceptance for self and other can assist therapists when they are confronted with transference and counter-transference concerns. Ultimately, meditation can help when psychotherapists are working with difficult clients, as meditation helps nurture acceptance of paradoxical situations and ambiguity.

Lichty (2009) conducted a study of Shambhala Buddhist psychotherapists, noting the use of meditation practice to help combat vicarious trauma. Participants in the study noted that their Shamatha-Vipashyana meditation practices helped support their abilities to engage in work, and in developing awareness of their mental states. Furthermore, participants also reflected that they used tonglen to positive effect, as tonglen was connected to the prevention of burnout.

While it appears that tonglen can be used to promote positive outcomes for

psychotherapists, it may also play a role in educational contexts. For example, research has suggested that meditation can assist student performance by helping students to improve cognitive functioning and emotional regulation (Waters, Barsky, Ridd, & Allen, 2015). In addition, there are signs that mindfulness and meditation, and the positive effects of these tools, are gaining greater acceptance by governing bodies. For example, the UK has recently launched a significant trial program for the use of mindfulness and meditation in schools (Jozuka, 2015).

In general, it appears that tonglen on-the-spot may be the form of tonglen that is most readily applicable to school settings. In the current study, some participants noted being naturally drawn to on-the-spot tonglen practice, even in cases where they had not been formally taught how to carry out such a practice. Furthermore, Chodron (2001) has suggested that tonglen on the spot can be adopted by those who have little to no sitting meditation experience. While McKnight (2014) argues that tonglen can be used to positive effect by meditation novices, both Chodron (2001) and participants in the current study suggested that it is important to have an established sitting meditation practice before one embarks on tonglen practice. Given these considerations, it appears that tonglen on-the-spot may be most useful to schools. If formal tonglen is explored in school settings, it appears it should only be tried by groups that have well established sitting meditation practices and well trained instructors.

**Conclusion**

The current study looked at the tonglen experiences of individuals with established sitting meditation practices via a grounded theory approach. While various factors supplied these individuals with the motivation to engage in tonglen, positive

tonglen experiences encouraged further engagement in the practice. Participants perceived a wide variety of benefits to be connected with tonglen. While specific benefits tended to range from participant to participant, all experienced a deeper sense of interconnection with others. In some cases, these experiences pointed the way to deeper explorations of the nature of self. Along the way, participants faced a number of challenges. These challenges were ultimately accepted as part of the process of exploring tonglen practice.

Future research could involve following up with participants who noted an intention to continue tonglen practice after the study had concluded. For example, Fredrickson and Cohn (2010) completed a survey in which participants from an LKM program were contacted 15 months after the program ended. The authors noted that participants who continued to practice LKM experienced greater levels of positive emotion than those who had stopped using the practice. In using such an approach with the current study, the researcher could verify whether or not participants actually did continue to practice tonglen, and collect information on further participant explorations of tonglen.

Future qualitative and quantitative studies of tonglen will help to build upon the base of academic literature on this topic and could help to test the model presented in this study. While tonglen is a relatively new field of academic study, this ancient form of meditation practice appears to hold much potential.

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# Appendix 1

## Demographics

**Christopher**

Age: 50

Sex: Male

Education: Technical College

Religion: Buddhist

Length of time participant has been practicing sitting meditation: 10 years

Type of sitting meditation practice: Shamatha-Vipashyana

Average number of days of sitting meditation practice in a week: 6-7

Average number of minutes of sitting meditation practice in a week: 180-420

Length of time participant has been practicing tonglen: 2-3 years

Mindfulness practices: Body mindfulness, Shamatha yoga

Number of times tonglen was practiced during study: 32

Mean of tonglen sessions during study: 25.5 minutes

Length of Shamatha before tonglen: 15 minutes

Length of Shamatha after tonglen: N/A

**Cindy**

Age: 60

Sex: Female

Education: Two year college program

Religion: No religious affiliation

Length of time participant has been practicing sitting meditation: 2 years

Type of Sitting Meditation Practice: Shamatha-Vipashyana (but also alternates between Shamatha and Vipashyana)

Average number of days of sitting meditation practice in a week: 5-7

Average number of minutes of sitting meditation practice in a week: 150-210

Length of time participant has been practicing tonglen: 1 year

Mindfulness Practice: Guided meditation, videos

Number of times tonglen was practiced during study: 16

Mean of tonglen sessions during study: 15.6 minutes

Length of Shamatha before tonglen:15-20

Length of Shamatha after tonglen: N/A

**Georgia**

Age: 60

Sex: Female

Education: Commercial School

Religion: Buddhist

Length of time participant has been practicing sitting meditation: 13 years

Type of Sitting Meditation Practice: Shamatha-Vipashyana

Average number of days of sitting meditation practice in a week: 5-6

Average number of minutes of sitting meditation practice in a week: 600-720

Length of time participant has been practicing tonglen: 10 years

Mindfulness practices: Yoga, pilates, visualizations, mantras, werma

Number of times tonglen was practiced during study: 13

Mean of tonglen sessions during study: 22.6 minutes

Length of Shamatha before tonglen: 5 minutes

Length of Shamatha after tonglen: 5 minutes

**Hannah**

Age: 48

Sex: Female

Education: Two year college degree

Religion: Most closely identifies with Buddhism

Length of time participant has been practicing sitting meditation: 4 years

Type of Sitting Meditation Practice: Shamatha-Vipashyana

Average number of days of sitting meditation practice in a week: 5-7

Average number of minutes of sitting meditation practice in a week: 150-210

Length of time participant has been practicing tonglen: 8 months

Mindfulness practices: Body scanning, yoga, chanting, singing, contemplations

Number of times tonglen was practiced during study: 17

Mean of tonglen sessions during study: 5 minutes

Length of Shamatha before tonglen: 15 mintues

Length of Shamatha after tonglen: N/A

**Harry**

Age: 36

Sex: Male

Education: Undergraduate degree

Religion: No religious affiliation

Length of time participant has been practicing sitting meditation: 15 years

Type of sitting meditation practice: Shamatha-Vipashyana

Average number of days of sitting meditation practice in a week: 4-5

Average number of minutes of sitting meditation practice in a week: 60-75

Length of time participant has been practicing tonglen: Start of this study

Mindfulness practices: Loving-kindness meditation, mindful breathing practices, forgiveness meditation

Number of times tonglen was practiced during study: 6

Mean of tonglen sessions during study: 14.2 minutes

Length of Shamatha before tonglen: 5 minutes

Length of Shamatha after tonglen: N/A

**Laura**

Age: 64

Sex: Female

Education: Undergraduate degree

Religion: Buddhist

Length of time participant has been practicing sitting meditation: 3 years

Type of Sitting Meditation Practice: Shamatha-Vipashyana

Average number of days of sitting meditation practice in a week: 7

Average number of minutes of sitting meditation practice in a week: 140

Length of time participant has been practicing tonglen: Not defined

Mindfulness practices: Nia dance

Number of Times Tonglen was practiced during study: 5

Mean of tonglen sessions during study: 9 minutes

Length of Shamatha before tonglen: 5 minutes

Length of Shamatha after tonglen: 5 minutes

**Ophelia**

Age: 67

Sex: Female

Education: Secondary School

Religion: Buddhist/Christian

Length of time participant has been practicing sitting meditation: 10 years

Type of Sitting Meditation Practice: Shamatha-Vipashyana

Average number of days of sitting meditation practice in a week: 6-7

Average number of minutes of sitting meditation practice in a week: 420-630

Length of time participant has been practicing tonglen: Not defined

Mindfulness practices: Biospirituality, Chi-gong

Number of times tonglen was practiced during study: 15

Mean of tonglen sessions during study: 15.3 minutes

Length of Shamatha before tonglen during study: 20 minutes

Length of Shamatha after tonglen: N/A

**Susan**

Age: 69

Sex: Female

Education: Two year college degree

Religion: Christian

Length of time participant has been practicing sitting meditation: 3 years

Type of sitting meditation practice: Shamatha-Vipashyana

Average number of days of sitting meditation practice in a week: 7

Average number of minutes of sitting meditation practice in a week: 140

Length of time participant has been practicing tonglen: Not defined

Mindfulness practices: Spiritual readings, mindfulness in daily life

Number of times tonglen was practiced during study: 10

Mean of tonglen sessions during study: 20 minutes

Length of Shamatha before tonglen: N/A

Length of Shamatha after tonglen: N/A

**Vicki**

Age: 59

Sex: Female

Education: Undergraduate degree

Religion: No religious affiliation

Length of time participant has been practicing sitting meditation: 4 Years

Type of Sitting Meditation Practice: Shamatha (some Vipashyana)

Average number of days of sitting meditation practice in a week: 4

Average number of minutes of sitting meditation practice in a week: 40

Length of time participant has been practicing tonglen Not defined

Mindfulness Practice: Yoga

Number of times tonglen was practiced during study: 10

Mean of tonglen sessions during study: 16.5 minutes

Length of Shamatha before tonglen: 10 minutes

Length of Shamatha after tonglen: 10 minutes

**Wendy**

Age: 46

Sex: Female

Education: Two undergraduate degrees

Religion: No religious affiliation

Length of time participant has been practicing sitting meditation: 2 years

Type of Sitting Meditation Practice: Shamatha-Vipashyana

Average number of days of sitting meditation practice in a week: 2-7

Average number of minutes of sitting meditation practice in a week: 40-70

Length of time participant has been practicing tonglen: 1 year

Mindfulness Practice: Yoga, mindfulness in daily life, knitting, journaling

Number of times tonglen was practiced during study: 4

Mean of tonglen sessions during study: 25 minutes

Length of Shamatha before tonglen:15-20 minutes

Length of Shamatha after tonglen: 10-25 minutes

## Appendix 2

### Dates and Times Participants Practiced Tonglen

**Christopher**

| Date | Minutes |
|---|---|
| 2015-06-07 | 15 |
| 2015-06-08 | 40 |
| 2015-06-09 | 40 |
| 2015-06-10 | 40 |
| 2015-06-11 | 30 |
| 2015-06-12 | 40 |
| 2015-06-13 | 20 |
| 2015-06-14 | 30 |
| 2015-06-15 | 30 |
| 2015-06-16 | 40 |
| 2015-06-17 | 25 |
| 2015-06-18 | 30 |
| 2015-06-19 | 30 |
| 2015-06-20 | 20 |
| 2015-06-21 | 30 |
| 2015-06-22 | 20 |
| 2015-06-23 | 30 |
| 2015-06-24 | 30 |
| 2015-06-25 | 30 |
| 2015-06-26 | 20 |
| 2015-06-27 | 15 |
| 2015-06-28 | 20 |
| 2015-06-29 | 20 |
| 2015-06-30 | 30 |
| 2015-07-01 | 25 |
| 2015-07-02 | 25 |
| 2015-07-03 | 15 |
| 2015-07-04 | 30 |
| 2015-07-05 | 30 |
| 2015-07-06 | 15 |

**Total: 13 Hours, 35 Minutes (815 Minutes)**

**Cindy**

| Date | Minutes |
|---|---|
| 2015-06-16 | 30 |
| 2015-06-17 | 30 |
| 2015-06-18 | 10 |
| 2015-06-22 | 10 |
| 2015-06-23 | 15 |
| 2015-06-24 | 10 |
| 2015-06-25 | 15 |
| 2015-06-26 | 20 |
| 2015-06-27 | 20 |
| 2015-06-28 | 10 |
| 2015-06-29 | 20 |
| 2015-06-30 | 15 |
| 2015-07-01 | 10 |
| 2015-07-02 | 10 |
| 2015-07-03 | 10 |
| 2015-07-05 | 15 |

**Total: 4 Hours, 10 Minutes (250 Minutes)**

**Georgia**

| Date | Minutes |
|---|---|
| 2015-06-08 | 20 |
| 2015-06-09 | 12 |
| 2015-06-11 | 15 |
| 2015-06-14 | 15 |
| 2015-06-15 | 15 |
| 2015-06-16 | 15 |
| 2015-06-23 | 15 |
| 2015-06-25 | 15 |
| 2015-06-27 | 15 |
| 2015-06-30 | 15 |
| 2015-07-01 | 15 |
| 2015-07-03 | 15 |
| 2015-07-07 | 15 |

**Total: 3 Hours, 17 Minutes (197 Minutes)**

**Hannah**

| Date | Minutes |
|---|---|
| 2015-06-08 | 5 |
| 2015-06-09 | 5 |
| 2015-06-11 | 5 |
| 2015-06-12 | 5 |
| 2015-06-14 | 5 |
| 2015-06-15 | 5 |
| 2015-06-16 | 5 |
| 2015-06-18 | 5 |
| 2015-06-20 | 5 |
| 2015-06-21 | 5 |
| 2015-06-22 | 5 |
| 2015-06-23 | 5 |
| 2015-06-25 | 5 |
| 2015-06-26 | 5 |
| 2015-06-28 | 5 |
| 2015-06-29 | 5 |
| 2015-06-30 | 5 |

**Total: 1 Hour, 25 Minutes (85 Minutes)**

**Harry**

| Date | Minutes |
|---|---|
| 2015-06-10 | 15 |
| 2015-06-11 | 15 |
| 2015-06-18 | 15 |
| 2015-06-23 | 15 |
| 2015-06-06 | 10 |
| 2015-06-30 | 15 |

**Total: 1 hour, 25 minutes (85 minutes)**

**Laura**

| Date | Minutes |
|---|---|
| 2015-06-08 | 5 |
| 2015-06-15 | 10 |
| 2015-06-16 | 10 |

| | |
|---|---|
| 2015-06-24 | 10 |

**Total: 35 Minutes**

**Ophelia**

| Date | Minutes |
|---|---|
| 2015-06-07 | 30 |
| 2015-06-08 | 10 |
| 2015-06-11 | 15 |
| 2015-06-13 | 15 |
| 2015-06-14 | 20 |
| 2015-06-15 | 30 |
| 2015-06-16 | 15 |
| 2015-06-19 | 15 |
| 2015-06-21 | 40 |
| 2015-06-22 | 40 |

**Total: 3 Hours, 50 Minutes (230 Minutes)**

**Susan**

| Date | Minutes |
|---|---|
| 2015-06-08 | 20 |
| 2015-06-09 | 20 |
| 2015-06-10 | 5 |
| 2015-06-16 | 30 |
| 2015-06-17 | 30 |
| 2015-06-18 | 20 |
| 2015-06-22 | 20 |
| 2015-06-24 | 25 |
| 2015-06-28 | 10 |
| 2015-06-29 | 20 |

**Total: 3 Hours, 20 Minutes (200 Minutes)**

**Vicki**

| Date | Minutes |
|---|---|
| 2015-06-10 | 15 |
| 2015-06-14 | 15 |
| 2015-06-16 | 15 |

| | |
|---|---|
| 2015-06-18 | 15 |
| 2015-06-20 | 20 |
| 2015-06-23 | 15 |
| 2015-06-27 | 20 |
| 2015-06-30 | 15 |
| 2015-07-02 | 15 |
| 2015-07-04 | 20 |

**Total: 2 Hours, 45 minutes (165 Minutes)**

**Wendy**

| Date | Minutes |
|---|---|
| 2015-06-10 | 25 |
| 2015-06-17 | 25 |
| 2015-06-24 | 25 |
| 2015-07-01 | 25 |

**Total: 1 Hour, 40 Minutes (100 Minutes)**