

Singing The Four Limitless Ones and Tonglen

John Rockwell, February 26, 2026

The Four Limitless Ones

The four limitless ones is a training in intention and aspiration. Saying “may such and such happen” expresses a wish and desire for something to take place. Working with intention may seem weak compared to actually doing something, but unless we wholeheartedly desire something to happen, it can be difficult to initiate and sustain action to do what needs to be done. In this sense, intention is not ramping up thoughts in preparation for action, as in “I think I can, I think I can, etc.” It is rather opening our heart to whatever is actually happening, and taking it step by step.

In Buddhism, intention (cetana) is foundational to all action, and therefore of crucial importance. If we are already willing to help others, then when the time comes to do so, we leap into action based on seeing what needs to be done. So instead of aspiration practice being just a beginner’s practice, it is essential at all levels of the path.

First, chant the traditional Four Limitless Ones one time or more, as you wish.

May all sentient beings enjoy happiness and the root of happiness.
May we be free from suffering and the root of suffering.
May we not be separated from the great happiness devoid of suffering.
May we dwell in the great equanimity, free from passion, aggression, and prejudice.

Translated by the Nālandā Translation Committee.

Then begin to sing the verse:

May all beings be happy and be awake.
May all beings not suffer and be awake.
May all beings have joy and be awake.
May all beings awaken to the light of their true nature.
May all beings be free.

The source for the melody and wording comes from Winfield “Binnie” Clarke, who was a senior student of Chöygam Trungpa Rinpoche and also a highly trained singer and composer. For his song, he used a version of the four limitless ones that is different from what we practice. So I have made a few changes to the wording to accord with our tradition. Note that to enjoy “the root of happiness,” to be free from “the root of suffering, and to “not be separated from the great happiness devoid of suffering” are all connected to being “awake.” To wake up is the root of happiness, freedom from suffering, joy, realizing our true nature, and freedom.

Singing the four limitless ones is a practice of heart radiance. When we speak from our heart, we are wholehearted in our intention. Rather than having to think our way toward what we wish to do, we can feel our way. We don’t need to mentally think about and contemplate the meaning of the words we are saying so much as to open our hearts to what we are saying such that the meaning of our intention blossoms into clarity and radiates out.

It often feels natural to hold our hands in añjali, i.e. with fingers and palms touching together, in front of our heart as we sing. Lama Ugyen told me that he was taught to have the palms relaxed and “curved,”

i.e. not flattened against each other. This creates a inner hollow space like a heart.

Singing is like reciting a mantra. When we recite a mantra, it is not an intellectual exercise, but an expression of awakened energy and insight through the sound of the words, their meaning, and our heart-felt intention. Mantras are designed to be like earworms. They start out as something we say with effort and focus, but at some point, they melt into our heart and flow with us wherever we go, just as our favorite songs do. Chögyam Trungpa once called mantras “sonorous embodiments.” When we sing, we sing with our whole body, and as “the whole world is our body,” the world resounds along.

When we sing the four limitless ones, we can do so in different ways. We could think of someone in particular and insert their name, such as, “May Robin be happy . . .” We could alternate back and forth between singing for specific people and then singing for all beings. As with tonglen, we could start with people we love, then expand it step by step to people we know, to people we dislike and even hate, and finally expand it to all beings. To limit our audience to only people we care about is called “mistaken compassion,” which Trungpa Rinpoche translated as “twisted compassion.” Overall, the view is to find our own way to bring the practice alive and relevant to our life experience.

We could also work with just one of the four limitless ones at a time, but still use the complete melody and the last two lines:

May Robin be happy and be awake.
May Robin be happy and be awake.
May Robin be happy and be awake.
May Robin awaken to the light of her true nature.
May Robin be free.

Tonglen: Sending and Taking

Tonglen is a profound practice and can be very challenging. The principles are the same as with the four limitless ones. It is a heart practice of opening out and radiating light and love to a difficult situation and taking in any pain, confusion, darkness and letting it dissolve into our heart space. It is very important that we do not focus on the physical organ of our heart, as this will put a strain on it. Instead we are expanding our natural soft spot in this region of our body and feeling how there is an open space of our whole being without a particular center or fringe.

Training the Mind and Cultivating Loving-Kindness, pp. 14, 16-17

Compassion is based on some sense of "soft spot" in us. It is as if we had a pimple on our body that was very sore—so sore that we do not want to rub it or scratch it. During our shower we do not want to rub too much soap over it because it hurts. There is a sore point or soft spot which happens to be painful to rub, painful to put hot or cold water over.

That sore spot on our body is an analogy for compassion. Why? Because even in the midst of immense aggression, insensitivity in our life, or laziness, we always have a soft spot, some point we can cultivate—or at least not bruise. Every human being has that kind of basic sore spot, including animals. . .

Not only that, but there is also an inner wound, which is called tathagatagarbha, or buddha nature. Tathagatagarbha is like a heart that is sliced and bruised by wisdom and compassion. When the external wound and the internal wound begin to meet and to communicate, then we begin to realize

that our whole being is made out of one complete sore spot altogether, which is called "bodhisattva fever." That vulnerability is compassion.

Shambhala: Sacred Path of the Warrior, pp. 43-44

When you awaken your heart in this way, you find, to your surprise, that your heart is empty. You find that you are looking into outer space. What are you, who are you, where is your heart? If you really look, you won't find anything tangible and solid. Of course, you might find something very solid if you have a grudge against someone or you have fallen possessively in love. But that is not awakened heart. If you search for awakened heart, if you put your hand through your rib cage and feel for it, there is nothing there except for tenderness. You feel sore and soft, and if you open your eyes to the rest of the world, you feel tremendous sadness. This kind of sadness doesn't come from being mistreated. You don't feel sad because someone has insulted you or because you feel impoverished. Rather, this experience of sadness is unconditioned. It occurs because your heart is completely exposed. There is no skin or tissue covering it; it is pure raw meat. Even if a tiny mosquito lands on it, you feel so touched. Your experience is raw and tender and so personal.

The genuine heart of sadness comes from feeling that your nonexistent heart is full. You would like to spill your heart's blood, give your heart to others. For the warrior, this experience of sad and tender heart is what gives birth to fearlessness.

Conventionally, being fearless means that you are not afraid or that, if someone hits you, you will hit them back. However, we are not talking about that street-fighter level of fearlessness. Real fearlessness is the product of tenderness. It comes from letting the world tickle your heart, your raw and beautiful heart. You are willing to open up, without resistance or shyness, and face the world. You are willing to share your heart with others.

In the same way, the importance of flashing absolute bodhichitta before we start tonglen practice shows that this is not an intellectual contemplation but comes from the vast space of our being. Whenever we get lost in this practice, we can flash open space again and again—simply stop, open our heart abruptly, and be—and then start our practice again.

There are four sets of verses, each one expanding the practice further. However, you don't have to do all four sets. It's up to you, and it can be different each time you do the practice. There is really no set way to do this practice. In fact, you don't have to follow what's set out below at all. You are welcome to come up with your own words and melody, and if you do, please share it with me!

SET ONE

I am sending you light
I am sending you love
To heal you and free you
To heal you and free you

I am taking your pain
I am taking your fear
To heal you and free you
To heal you and free you

SET TWO

We are sending you light
We are sending you love
To heal you and free you
To heal you and free you
We are taking your pain
We are taking your fear
To heal you and free you
To heal you and free you

The first set is the basic view that we are personally doing this practice for someone in particular. The second set has the view that we are doing this as a group for someone. The group could be the people in the room, our sangha, our family, whoever we feel connected to, whoever shows up in our heart/mind, etc. We can invoke the “Indra’s net” principle. Indra’s net is a teaching that the world is like a cosmic lattice of mirrorlike jewels, each jewel reflecting all the other jewels simultaneously. It’s a teaching on how we are all interconnected, and affecting one person affects us all. Therefore, whatever we send out will shine and reflect throughout the world. Whatever we send out is contagious and can inspire others to radiate out and touch the people they are close to, and so forth. Trungpa Rinpoche once said that this is how a society can easily become enlightened:

Student: Is it possible that there will ever be a time when all sentient beings become enlightened?

VCTR: Attain enlightenment? Yes. All sentient beings of this earth or—what are you talking about?

S: Well, that seems to be as far as my knowledge of sentient beings—

V: Yeah, but there are a lot of people outside. And there are a lot of insects and animals and worms and germs. [Laughter] And soon they will replace us.

S: That’s really possible? It just seems so remote.

V: Well it’s possible, yeah. It’s highly possible. It’s been done, particularly in places with a heavy population: it seems to be easy to do it, I suppose, if the message is correct, and if there’s skillfulness, kindness, and compassion. It’s much easier to work on a larger scale with people because then they can learn from each other as well. They don’t have to have a one-to-one relationship with one particular master. They begin to catch the flu, so to speak, in a positive sense. It is easy to liberate people, but after that they are replaced by more.

Two Further Verses of Tonglen Practice

SET THREE

We are sending our light
We are sending our love
To heal us and free us
To heal us and free us

We are taking our pain
We are taking our fear
To heal us and free us
To heal us and free us

The third set has the view that we are all in this together. Tonglen is a relationship practice and a society practice, which is all beings, not just human and not just animate. All the elements can be included. We

also certainly include ourselves in the practice and be both giver and recipient of light and love.

SET FOUR

We are sending our sad-joy
We are sending our sad-joy
To heal us and free us
To heal us and free us

We are taking our sad-joy
We are taking our sad-joy
To heal us and free us
To heal us and free us

The fourth set expresses an instruction that Trungpa Rinpoche gave on tonglen at the 1983 Vajradhatu Seminary at Drala Mountain Center (present name). He said:

Mind training also consists of exchanging yourself for others. You begin to relate with other people's pleasure and pain. You take their pleasure and pain into yourself, and you offer your pain and pleasure to others; you begin to send that out.

In the question and answer session at the end of the talk, people asked many questions to try to clarify this instruction as it was so different from the normal instruction for tonglen. With each question, his answers were more conceptually elusive such that it was impossible to nail this instruction down to one particular logic. It seems that this instruction was written off as confusing and perhaps a mistake. At least it was never included in the general instructions on tonglen.

However, I have found it to be a very helpful instruction for a total exchange with other beings. We are not the superior bodhisattvas trying to help confused sentient beings, but we are all complete human beings with a full spectrum of experience and we could just share this full experience with each other on the spot. When I shared this practice with Pema Chödrön, she also saw it as a practice of equality or equanimity, an eye to eye level of exchange. I have taught this practice to many people, calling it "ultimate tonglen" as it is a total and equal exchange. I changed the wording from "pleasure-pain" to "sad-joy" as "pleasure-pain" seems more body oriented, whereas "sad-joy" is more heart oriented. "Sad-joy" is a key phrase the Vidyadhara often used to talk about the full range of experience.

Importance of Tonglen Practice

These two practices of the four limitless ones and tonglen are at the heart of our tradition. Sam Bercholz, the founder of Shambhala Publications said:

About one year before his passing, Trungpa Rinpoche invited me into his office at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado (it was called Naropa Institute at that time). During this meeting, we discussed the plans for the publication of his future works. Although we discussed many topics, the two items that were stressed as being of the utmost importance were the publication of his teachings on mind-training (published as *Training the Mind and Cultivating Loving-Kindness*) and the publication of his magnum opus, a three-volume set that was to be edited from the transcripts of the various seminars that he had taught in North America. He made me solemnly promise that I would do everything within my "publishing power" to fulfill his request. It is with great joy and pride that

these volumes now exist and that Shambhala Publications and I have been instrumental in bringing them into the world. [Chögyam Trungpa, *The Path of Individual Liberation*, p. xxiv.]

As for the crucial importance of tonglen practice in our journey of the three yantras of the Great Eastern Sun, Trungpa Rinpoche said:

Tonglen is also very important in terms of vajrayana practice. Therefore, vajrayana practitioners should also pay heed to this practice. They should do it very carefully. Without tonglen, you cannot practice the vajrayana disciplines of utpattikrama and sampannakrama at all. You become a deity without a heart, just a papier-maché deity. There is a story about two vajrayana masters who were exchanging notes on their students. One said, "My students can perform miracles, but somehow after that they seem to lose heart. They become ordinary people." The other one said, "Strangely enough, my vajrayana students cannot perform miracles, but they always remain healthy." The two teachers discussed that question on and on. Then somebody said, "Well, how about having all of them practice tonglen?" Both teachers laughed and said, "Ha! That must be it." From that point of view, it is very important for us to have a basic core of reality taking place, so that when we do vajrayana practice, we don't just dress up as deities, with masks and costumes.

Even in hinayana practice, we could just wear our monks' robes and shave our heads, and all the rest of it. Without tonglen practice, both hinayana and vajrayana become like the lion's corpse. [Because the lion is the ruler of beasts, when a lion dies, it is said that its corpse is not attacked by other animals, but is left to be eaten by maggots from within.] As the Buddha said, his teaching will not be destroyed by outsiders but by insiders who do not practice the true dharma. At that point the Buddha was definitely referring to the bodhisattva path. It is the mahayana tradition and discipline that hold the hinayana and vajrayana together. Please think of that. [*Training the Mind*, pp. 63-4]