Tonglen:

Brings the practices of mahakaruna - great compassion, the wish that all beings be free from suffering -and mahamaitri - great love, the desire for all beings to have happiness – together.

We are *taking* and *giving*; taking is the willingness to take away suffering, and giving is the willingness to give happiness.

Compassion

* Receiving the other as they are, letting go of judgement and projection/reaction
* We can still see the wholesome or unwholesome nature of someone’s actions and have compassion
* Compassion doesn’t grow from ideals of perfection but from the recognition and acceptance of our human frailty
* A deep empathic resonance with our vulnerable, fallible imperfect humanness
* Requires an ability to stay with what a person is going though and not panic. We may need to do nothing more than this – and allow them to grow from their experience.
* We may feel powerless, overwhelmed

“It is at these moments that we need to place ourselves in relation to the presence of universal compassion – place the pain we see in the greater hold of something beyond our individual selves, a transpersonal element”
* This could be where we seek refuge, what we rely on – the Buddhas, the bodhisattvas as the embodiment of compassion
* We are inevitably limited in our ability to respond to pain and distress in others – we may need to surrender the ego and be held by something bigger
* We learn to feel and be with, without being overwhelmed – to be separate without disconnecting. We are with pain but it’s not our pain. A quality of care but also robust and clear.

The practice of Tonglen

Stage 1

1. Connect with our motivation – what is the quality you would like to bring in to being in the world? And then let go!
2. Open to the expansive, open dimension of being, of the heart and mind. Open to the forces of compassion and wisdom, the Buddha’s and bodhisattvas, the Refuges. Invite that fully into the heart, fully receiving it in, activate the heart
3. Allow this to stabilise in whatever way it will – maybe just by sitting and connecting with the natural rhythm of the breath.

Stage 2

1. Become accustomed to the practice – Traditionally we imagine breathing in suffering as something heavy, dark, and breathing out openness, light, clear. Feeling the texture, the energy as we breathe.

Stage 3

1. Decide where to start – a particular situation or experience, a particular person.
2. A suggestion would be to practice with ourselves – start where we are, not needing to be perfect. Where there is difficult or painful experience breath in being aware and present with it, not pushing it away. Breathe the difficulty in, receiving it directly, how it really feels. Giving it lots of space. Receiving into the heart – the seat of wisdom that is open, spacious, that doesn’t tighten or solidify.
3. Attend to the out breath – giving what is needed to respond to pain. Breathing out openness, kindness, compassion – let your response be natural, find your own words. Imagine this being received and felt.
4. Alternate taking and giving, equalising the exchange with each in breath and out breath.
5. Imagine the situation you have brought to mind being affected, freed from obstacles, eased.

Stage 4

1. Extend out to include other people who experience similarly, or invite others to bring their difficulties, taking in how it feels for them. Remembering we don’t have to relate to ‘my suffering’ or ‘your suffering’ – just suffering which is breathed into the wisdom and release offered by the Buddhas and bodhisattva, the refuges.
2. Completing the practice – just let go, let all dissolve and sit in the open dimension, ending with a period of ‘just sitting’ meditation flavoured with tonglen.