

Cycles of noticing

- Anjet van Linge, Zachary Green -

One must always be aware— to notice— even though the cost of noticing is to become responsible.

Thylas Moss, poet

I – The field

Sometimes we find ourselves ‘in the zone.’ What we are normally good at we do very well in that moment, it is almost as if we lose ourselves as a person and we become what we do: the teacher becomes one with the subject and with the classroom, the manager knows exactly what to say to whom in what moment, the members of a sports team know how to find the others without even looking. Sometimes we find ourselves ‘in the zone’ collectively. The ‘in the zone’ experiences are familiar to most people.

Another experience – perhaps somewhat less familiar to people – is like an “in the zone” experience. It is the experience of being part of a ‘field’, a ‘more’. Like the ‘in the zone’ experience, we know that we are (or were) in it but we don’t quite know what the “it” is, or even how we get there. The people we have been thinking about call us at that very moment with the question that was on our mind, someone sends a poem to a meeting that she couldn’t attend which captures exactly the question being addressed, the dream of one person matches the lived experience of another on another continent at exactly the same time, the music system fails at a dance class inviting a surprisingly appropriate dance to silence, etc. etc. One way of describing the field is to imagine it as a vast space of interconnectedness, of connections between people, objects, actions – much like the story of the butterfly who, fluttering its wings in Bali, causes a storm in Miami. We believe these fields are present in and around us all the time, yet often go unnoticed.

On Noticing

In moving in and working with what moves us in these fields, we have become aware of the crucial importance of noticing. In seeking to practice our own noticing, we have started to

write, about noticing what is the field and how we move in it, about the force of intention, the presence of synchronicities, collective wisdom, and the importance of being with not knowing.

Did you notice?

When we say, “Did you notice...” to our friend along the way in our journey, we are inviting each of us to turn our shared attention to a particular moment of focus. Together, we notice. In that noticing we are in the same breath and use our senses to perceive—to take in—what we have been invited to bring to consciousness. Whether that which is to be noticed is within or in front of (before?) us, our quality of attention shifts to the experience. In a literal blink of an eye, all else falls away—millions of bits of other potential moments are filtered and slip into a boundless background. These other sounds and sensations, scents and substance, sights and scenery somehow become secondary to what we notice.

What we then “know” in noticing is a slither of the whole, what neuroscientists, linguists, and psychologist call *symbolic meaning*. In other words, that which we perceive is an extrapolation from those few tiny bits of distilled perception. What we notice is the symbol for the whole of the experience to which we give meaning and through which we make sense of our world.

Any action in a field affects all other actions in the field because all elements of a field are interconnected. When we take an action to notice, by word or movement or any other intentional expression, it changes the field and is a form of co-creation, or intervention, in the sense that it influences the flow of what is already in the field of someone else’s noticing. At the same time, we are also one voice in the field, and sometimes something can only emerge or become available for awareness through us.

It is important to know that we do not create the field. It is already present. What we are able to do is influence in subtle, often unconscious ways, how the field organizes itself. If we look to nature, a combination of factors will allow a seed to germinate and grow. Each element: the fertility of the soil, the presence of water, the amount of sun, the hunger of the

foraging creatures, the space afforded by other growth, are among the factors that allow a seed to become a plant---and one day blossom. This microcosm of a field in an ecosystem self-organizes. Nature works with what is present and life grows. Noticing involves a kind of self-organizing as well. The seed is what takes root in our perception. With sufficient attention this noticing grows into something that breaks the ground of our consciousness. The proper conditions being present, the noticing grows and can in time be harvested as action that sustains us in some way. Much as in agrarian times when people worked collectively in the field, each worked separately but for the same purpose to nurture growth that could one day be harvested to sustain our lives.

In our modern practices we sometimes do not take the time to see the self-organizing nature of the systems that are a part of our lives.

This raises many questions about the practice of noticing. How does my noticing influence the field, how can I make myself available for what needs to emerge through me, how can I get out of the way and move away from thinking that my noticing is somehow crucial, and is there a way of noticing that moves with the flow, instead of interrupting the flow (and is it even possible to 'know' what the flow is?).

2 – A definition of noticing

One day while working on this chapter, we walked down the street to the café and noticed a child being captured by a flower. The child in a split second sees the flower and the color and wants to smell it and touch it and even often wants to possess it (by picking it) so the noticing thing continues. The parents want to walk on. Someone once said that a single flower has more things to notice than all that is in every book that has ever been written. So the child is in that instant seeking to notice all that is present.

When we notice we are making something known, like the child to us and his parents makes known the beauty of the flower, and its capacity to be both the one simple flower and

everything. The child is not creating something new, he is making us aware of something that is already there. Frequently we are more like the parent, operating from a pre-determined and familiar known place, pressing on and allowing the 'everything' that is already present to remain unseen.

Noticing is making available to perception that which is already present. The something can be an internal process, like our own thoughts, dreams, memories, fantasies, hopes, and fears. What we notice may also be something that comes to us through our senses. What we touch, smell, taste, feel, and see can all be a part of our noticing. What is important is that noticing is accompanied by attention.

The etymology of the word "notice" is from the Latin *gnoscere*, meaning "to come to know, to get to know, get acquainted (with)." As such the act of noticing is related to knowing and knowledge. It is a form of being in relationship to experience, not unlike with an acquaintance where there is ever-present the potential of developing a deeper bond. When we notice we are discriminating in a rapid and exquisitely efficient manner that cancels out millions of bits of sensory input to focus on the approximately ten we can hold in consciousness at any given time

Noticing is about progressively bringing our attention to more and more of the field without being overwhelmed by it. In this way, noticing may enable us to work more wisely with fields as they exist in working communities, society, and the world. It may enable us to tap into the collective wisdom in the field.

Single loop noticing

Below is an initial outline of the four steps of single loop noticing. Language on paper restricts us in writing it down in a way that seems hierarchical and a linear 4-point list. While in one sense it is that, in another sense, it is more a stance, a perspective from where to live and work in the field, much like the Buddhist perspective of being fully awake (Pema Chödrön, reference). So, with that caveat, here are the 4 steps.

sense – what is in us, what is flowing through us;

The first aspect of noticing starts with me. It is for me to sense, with my mind and with my body, what aspect of the work in the field is currently most present to me, what is it that I am thinking (and maybe not saying), what I am feeling (and maybe ignoring). As described here, sensing seems initially a single person activity. In a way it is that and it is not that at the same time. When sensing what is present in the field of work, the question is how I am in the field, and how the field is being manifested in and through me. When I can be awake to how I am in the field, I can become both aware of how I shape the field and how the field is moving, especially when what I sense is not immediately recognizable as mine.

notice – how the energy is expressed (by who, in what patterns, where, when);

Once I notice how I am in the field, it invites me to connect my own sensing to what is present around me; noticing is about registering, inquiring into relationships between my thoughts and my feelings, between my thoughts and feelings and those of others, and between all of these and what is visible in the field around me, in terms of objects, symbols, patterns of speaking and moving, synchronicities with data that seem to come from outside the group we work in (yet apparently still in the field) and so forth. This second aspect connects the 'me to the field, to a 'we'.

honor – it by experiencing and owning it fully as also ours;

After noticing comes what many of us find most difficult: honoring what we have noticed fully as *also ours*. This means not merely owning what we sensed on our own behalf, but/and also what we felt we sensed on behalf of others, and what we noticed in the patterns of thoughts and feelings, objects and coincidences etc. as also ours. Why is this? It is because as we form a field of work together, whatever emerges in that field is held by all of us. While some of us may be more available antennae for certain types of thoughts and feelings, the collective of thoughts and feelings, both consciously and unconsciously, belongs to the community. In our experience honoring is most difficult when we feel joy where another may feel pain, or where the pattern we notice is not immediately resonating in us. Honoring invites us to own beyond the us-them and the simple boundaries of our ego or territory.

Honoring also means that there may be a reason (even if we do not know what that is) that we noticed something, that I noticed something, that whatever needed noticing in the field attracted my eyes, my senses.

offer – what we notice as a gift to the community;

Often, simply owning something silently can then already enable the flow of what needs to be next to open. Yet when it is made available in the field, through verbalization or in some other way, then there is the possibility of the collective nature of the honoring to provide the portal to creation and action. This is what we call offering. Offering what we notice and own can enable the community to be attentive to what is present. As we each hold a different place in the field, sometimes it is only one person who can in fact offer something that he noticed, as something might be only available from one angle or through one particular pair of eyes. The capacity of the community to move from what is to what needs to be next, to flow from reflection to creation (and again) depends on its collective ability to notice and honor broadly, to use the richness of antennae available in its field.



A senior leader at the world bank visited an education project in Nepal and was moved by how schools started with 20 seconds of silence each day. Sensing this movement inside herself, she noticed how the silence connected her with the children she shared this moment with. Honoring this desire for silence and calm inside herself, she decided to start the next meeting of her team at the bank with a similar 20 seconds. She felt this enabled her to own her emotional connection to the work she did, and by doing so, she was able to offer her team a tangible way to connect to the field of work they were responsible for. She then asked her team how they could honor what that experience represented in their work of developing education programs in the country. Subsequently she noticed a shift of the quality of planning in that meeting, compared to earlier ones. When reflecting, she felt it was her recognizing that she was part of the same field as the children she worked for, and being able to own her own desire for calm, albeit in very different circumstances (and as opposed to only copying to empathize with the children's need for it only), that enabled her to invite her team to work differently.

3 – Flow and interruption

When we wrote this chapter, we found we were seeking to differentiate noticing from intervening. The discussion arose because we tried to give words to the sense that how we find ourselves working now is different from how we have often worked in the past. It became a difficult discussion. We sought to understand whether what we experienced as profoundly different, was merely a desire of our ego's to have coined a new thing, or something else. We felt strongly that noticing is something other than interrupting, or intervening in the sense of accompanying a process and then, as a (semi-)outsider, making a reflection or suggestion for another course, or even drawing people's attention to what may also, covertly, be going on in the group. Yet, in a sense, regardless of intention, what is intended as an offering of noticing can be experienced as an interruption, until a point when it can be integrated in such a way that the field of what is being noticed is broadened.

While talking about this in a small conference room at the university, one of the students of the class on Love and Leadership that we had taught a week earlier walked past the room. He had not intended to be in the building that day, but happened to spot a parking place right in front and decided to walk in as it seemed an invitation. We had a conversation with him about how in class a week earlier his ability to be open to the affection of the other students had taught all of us the importance of being able to receive. If it had not been for his readiness to do so, the class might have missed that important lesson. He had sensed in himself a desire to feel the affection, had noticed how this moved him to take the open space in the middle of the class, honor his sensation of both his own sentiments and the hidden ones of others (in a class that was mainly about befriending your shadow, or letting go of shadow that no longer served a purpose). In this conversation one week later we in turn noticed how the ability to receive was called forth in us by his action then and his appearance now, (which for two people who tend to dwell on the darker side was important), and honoring that in ourselves and the field, we offered him that reflection. It brought us, us as field, a conversation about noticing being different from intervening in that it is about being met where you already are. The empty parking space, walking into the building, us happening to both be in the room at the time, writing about a question that troubled us and being able to talk about receiving, and in fact receive his insights, him feeling he deepened his understanding of what he did and why by being given the opportunity to voice his experience – all these things felt like expressions of the field we were moving in.

Drawing from this experience, at this point we believe noticing is different from intervening in two main ways: in how we look at our own position in a field, and in our intention with it. At least in our old stance, we sometimes held the position that it was possible to stand outside, or on the edge, of a process and do interventions from that space, and that it was possible to notice things (thoughts, feelings, sensations) that were not ours, even when similar feelings may have been mobilized in us by what was going on in a group. Now we are becoming aware that this may be an illusion, that we cannot be apart from the field, and in the noticing (or not noticing, or choosing not to notice), we are always co-creating – if we notice one thing and not the other thing we are co-creating the field. Therefore whatever

happens in the field is also ours, and it is only by sensing, noticing and honoring it as also ours, that we can offer what we notice.

That brings us to the second main difference – that of intention. The intention of offering noticing is not forcibly change the course of the process. That would presume us (whether we feel we are guides, leaders, participants or co-creators of some conversation) as having the ability to bend the field to our will. The intention of offering noticing is to make available to the collective awareness of the field what is already present, so that what needs to be next can emerge from that collective awareness. By bringing together the patterns of noticing that flow from each of us, we can be more present to the whole that is in the field. In that sense two things seem to be happening at the same time: “I through we notice” and “we through I notice”.

Regardless of intention and our own sense of place in the field, it is possible that any single offering could be experienced by one as consistent with the flow of the field – a being met where you already are - while by another an interruption. There is a need to move beyond this being seen as a duality. As it moves to the collective level, it raises the question how the movements in a field can be a link to each others energies, a part of one fabric, not separate one from another. The energetic element of how the noticing is understood and intended influences the flow. In this respect there is a fundamental difference in how noticing becomes *felt* differently than intervention.

Maybe, to use an old school methodology, noticing relates to intervening as observing the flow of the river around the island you stand on relates to putting a dam in the river and diverting the flow. Sometimes that is helpful, sometimes it is not.

4 – Double loop noticing

When working on this text, we had both written up slightly different versions of the cycle of noticing. When putting both on top of each other it became clear we had, by creating two

cycles, unconsciously tried to avoid writing about what we both find most difficult about this process. It is the process of invitation.

Often, somewhere in the process of working with or in a working community, we encounter our own shadow. It is the parts of ourselves we find difficult to own up to, the pain that is too hard to carry, the rejoicing we do not quite know how to do, or the bits that are not so pretty. These can close our capacity to notice fully. As noticing is about being available to both the pain and the joy in the field, this may hinder the work. Sometimes the field notices.

During a group relations conference with students at Teachers College, Columbia University, one of the authors was working with a small group. The members of the group had been working hard on getting beyond surface level connections and were starting to uncover how they felt about each other, and growing their capacity to do so. Given most people in the group knew each other relatively well, this was no easy task (unlike in some other conferences where the depth reached in a small group can sometimes be enhanced by the belief that you can walk away from all these people after the event). At a point when the conversation touched the difficulty in talking about what really moves you, a member of the group who sat next to me started to cry silently. Most others in the group did not notice, nor did I. When someone who did see drew attention to it, he got up and ran out of the room. I felt awful. What was it about his sorrow that I had not been able to notice, to honor and own sufficiently for him to stay? At the same time, the group through some people had grown its capacity to notice, and through others found a way to express its wonder and worry about what to do next. This continued the next session when the young man had come back, explained how he had gone to the toilet on a remote floor so he would not be found by those who might go looking. He shared a moving life story and the group explored the meaning of the story and the events for themselves without wallowing in pity or staying stuck in a self-congratulatory sense of having saved him. They sensed, noticed and honored their sense of recognition, shame and pride. So did I. And it helped me see how much I was, of course, part of the fabric of the field.

Inviting then is about consciously inviting what else may need to be sensed. While I might have been in touch with some of what happened in the group, in that particular field, maybe I missed the opportunity to consciously invite what else there was, maybe I rested in a content sense of achievement, or I was afraid of what I might also need to feel. Inviting required readiness to own and honor the sadness also present as also mine. This is not all that dissimilar to what Pema Chödrön suggests in the 4th step of the compassion-practice of Tonglen: breathe in the pain of an other, of the world, and then breathe out the relief you wish to send¹. She talks about the courage it takes to do this, to genuinely be prepared to feel someone else's pain and sit with the energy of it, even if briefly. Inviting is about opening up to what else may be in the field that is also present and that you cannot yet feel.

The five steps of double loop noticing then become:



sense what is in us, what is flowing through us;
notice how the energy is expressed (by who, in what patterns, where, when);

honor it by experiencing and owning it fully as also ours;
invite what else may need to be sensed (and then flow back to sensing)
offer what we notice as a gift to the community.

We have started to wonder whether what this evolves into is an exploration of developed (or developing) consciousness – something we imagine like a looping spiral that turns until something breaks through to a different level, a little like a whirlpool turned upside down, spiraling from below the surface slowly to the surface. An association emerges with the story of *A Descent into the Maelstrom* by Edgar Allan Poe. In order to reach great fishing grounds two brothers have to cross an area of water where at particular tides a dangerous maelstrom, a whirlpool emerges. One day, they have timed it wrongly and end up being caught by the stream. One brother ties himself to the mast of the boat in an attempt to survive and dies. The other brother, noticing how everything that has cylinder-like shape doesn't descend, grabs a barrel and jumps overboard. He is moved with the field and lives to tell the tale. Developing consciousness, or double loop noticing, may be about discerning the barrels, and other objects that enable us to whirl to the surface of the stream

5 – Practicing the cycle of noticing

One thing we have noticed about our own developing practice of noticing, is how deeply it is indeed a practice. It is the practice of being present, of breathing in and tuning all our senses and be aware of what touches us, whether we like what that is or not. It is not about going hunting for signals, spotting the patterns. The line between noticing that serves the field and noticing that meets our ego needs, between noticing that we may need to invite ourselves to be touched by something else and seeking omniscience is quite thin. When noticing becomes a drive to know everything, we have stopped listening to what the field tells us, and we missed the chance to work from the belief that sometimes enough is enough. The paradox of this practice is that it becomes 'honoring' when it is approached with an attitude of non-striving. In other words, noticing is owned, not as a possession to hold but a flow to experience

As a practice, it involves a deliberate deep breath that clears the field of its blurred perception and brings direct focus on what is literally before our eyes. In engaging our senses, we create the opportunity to see and feel and hear and smell and even taste what is already present. Just as it is said if one really wants to know the taste of a fresh, ripe strawberry, ask a child; so it is that our practice of noticing involves bringing a childlike wonder to our basic sensing of the world.

The shift from sensing to noticing is the critical one for us. It is in that moment that we become slowly aware of how the history of what we believe the world is presenting to us takes sway over what is really there. We may need to breathe once more and blink to be able to allow a different range of the possible to come into consciousness. What may be required in early practice is to notice and then notice again in order that whatever else is available can be made known.

Learning the hard way, we have found a few mindsets to be critical to practicing noticing:

- accept that we can not, consciously, know all there is to know;
- trust that we know what we need to know and be with not knowing what we do not;
- believe that what I sense and notice, can honor and offer matters, as some of these things can only emerge to awareness through me, yet that it is never ever all that matters or the only truth – often there is a *both white, and black and also grey*.

The purpose of noticing is to bring to the awareness of the working collective in a field, what is already present, so that what needs to be a next step in the development of the field can happen. Sometimes this may mean one person brings to the attention what can only be felt or experienced through him. Sometimes it means a guide invites a slowing down to notice what else is present yet unspoken, consciously inviting another loop, to enable movement in what may otherwise remain stuck.

A few years ago a project leader from a global engineering company was tasked with designing one global graduate recruitment process, in order to enable the organization to recruit the one thousand plus graduates they needed each year. She formed a team with members from countries like China, India and Brazil, as well as

the US and some European countries. During the first meeting of the team four things emerged: a hesitation to commit to something new on behalf of one's own country, excitement about being involved in this project, a fear to design something for the entire company, and an inkling that there was something more to this than merely designing a process. The project leader had expected the first two, and noticed in herself, as the project progressed both a growing fear for the expected struggle of 'rolling-out' the new process and an repeated awareness that there was something more to this team. First she attributed the more to her own desire to work in an inspired environment. Gradually she came to notice the moments in which members of the team had deep and unexpected encounters with each other where they discovered something touching in the simple reality of what happened in someone else's life on the other side of the world. She also noticed that it was often after these moments that some progress was made in the difficult process of harmonizing many different approaches. However, every time she pointed this out, it was like that 'spirit went back into hiding. It was during the final meeting of the team, that she felt able to own the deep longing for these meaningful meetings as part of the work (in the team and in this company), her own longing and that of the members of her team. She realized she could own the longing without needing to fulfill it, or carry responsibility for the nature of meetings outside this team. During the check out at the end of the final session, one team member offered a picture that described how this longing spirit had been hiding and decided to now come out of its room, in order to fuel the implementation of the project. For her her drawing expressed how the global recruitment project was not only about creating an effective process, but also about discovering what the team members wished for the graduates who may join: to genuinely meet people from around the world and do meaningful work together. With this insight, subsequent implementation of the new process was nearly without problems.¹

6 – Leadership, shadow, self

¹ This may sound too good to be true. It is however, a true story.

The example of Paolo helps us understand how noticing is not always a shadow-free process. Paolo is a manager in a large organization. In his work he noticed a readiness in many different parties to contribute to the clean up of a geographical area of natural beauty and of significant national and global importance, both financially and physically. Noticing this field, and being in touch with his own desire to make an impact, he was able to mobilize a project and organize multisource funding, including from some major global financial institutions. Yet alongside his acute ability to notice the field, he is also perceived as violent to his staff, and his exacting standards scare the same people whose readiness he notices to do backbreaking work in contribution to the clean up. He notices the field, yet also gets in its way.

It appears that our invitation is not only to notice, but also to pay attention to what we notice (as already stated by Chris Argyris in his work on the ladder of inference). When we notice what is ready to emerge in a field, we are reminded to pay attention to the extent to which that emergence may also serve the needs of our own ego. In the case of Paolo, he acutely noticed the readiness of many parties come together to at this one moment to clean up an important area, yet he also moved in that field in a way that served his needs of power and importance. At a, maybe smaller, scale, this happens to many of us. The paradoxical task seems to be as empty as possible – so that which needs to become available through me can without my ‘I’ getting in the way – and at the same time be as available as possible – so that that which can only be triggered in me, the soft spots for which I am needed in this field, can be available, like Paolo’s readiness to see the field or the project manager’s readiness to feel the longing for meaningful meetings). What may seem our shadow is also the source from where stems our capacity to be and stay with difficult situations, to notice some things that would go otherwise unnoticed.

This is true for every member of any working community or field at any given time. Yet for those of us who at certain moments hold roles of leadership or act as guides, this is even more important. A guide’s role in particular is to use noticing and offering of noticing with the intention of progressively broadening the collective’s capacity to notice what is already present in the field. In order for us to do that, we have to be both prepared to be totally in the field, and do the work the field is calling, and to get out of the way.

7 – The field revisited, or noticing the field

Our being shifts when we notice. What was an instant ago also just another *potential in the field* becomes a part of who we are. Should the moment cross a certain threshold of consciousness, it becomes memory and is held, to be recalled or recanted on another day. By becoming a part of what is noticed, we then have an opportunity to give it meaning—to name it and interact with it. The noticed inquires of us as well, asking us to reveal our history of experience. We review all of our other moments of noticing in a nanosecond to name it. In the rare instances when there is nothing there to match what we find before our minds eye, the noticed invites us to be with it long enough to create it, making the it available for reflection and ease of perception in some yet seen future.

This evolving practice of working with fields asks us to cultivate the ability to simultaneously hold the knowing and the not knowing – the collective wisdom and the collective ignorance, to act from what we know and are aware of, yet at the same time access our accountable innocence, approaching whatever we meet as fresh, new.

As we have been working this chapter, and other related papers we have become aware we cannot write the book without simultaneously being it. People we wrote about synchronously showed up in our mail or on the phone, synchronicities that we had pretended not to notice (because they confronted us with things that seemed too hard to swallow) became inescapable, the visible field grew through connections with people who we had not spoken to for a while and who were developing similar work. It feels like part of the momentum building in our collective capacity to be with this, the field, a more and our inevitable, unbreakable connectedness to it. While we write, many things become clearer in our minds, because of writing and the parallel need to practice. Many new questions rise too.

We have noticed in our work as guides that often it is only when three perspectives come together, three sensations of what is happening in the field, that the awareness can shift and

what needs to be next can emerge. These three points need not be three individuals holding locations, but three perspectives, which can be experienced contemporaneously within one person, between two people and some perceptual space within the field, or more basically between three points of consciousness. The meeting of these perspectives requires an intimacy that can be scary at times, because we have so been conditioned to mistake that depth of intimacy for lust, a desire to mate, or a harmful losing of one's self. Yet it seems that precisely in that losing of the self, that the field makes itself known most powerfully, and offers us a path forward.

Often we use the phrase 'paying attention', meaning that we need to draw our attention to that which needs it, to, in a sense, notice. During one writing session we wondered what would happen if we started to think about paying differently. If we paid (paid in some currency, paid homage to) attention, then what would that payment look like? Maybe accepting noticing is a practice, and writing about it while practicing it, is a way for us to honor the enormous field of awareness that is always present and from which we can learn, through which we can be moved to act, if only we paid attention.

The task may be to notice the future as it is emerging. A single drop of water holds the light of the sun. Maybe noticing, in a for-now summary, is about re-discovering our collective capacity to see what is unhidden.

This is one of a series of working papers we are currently offering as work-in-progress through the Group Relations International website, www.grouprelations.org . Your thoughts or reflections are very welcome.

¹ From *The wisdom of no escape*, by Pema Chödrön, p. 61 and further. "The first step is called "flashing absolute bodhichitta," which basically means just opening up. The second step is working with the abstract quality of pain by visualising it as black, heavy and hot, and breathing that in, and working with the abstract quality of pleasure by visualising it as white, light and cool, and breathing that out Then you get to the third stage, which is actually the heart of the practice. Here you visualise a specific life situation and connect with the pain of it. You breath that in, feeling it completely. It's the opposite of avoidance. You are completely willing to feel pain -- your own pain, the pain of a dear friend or the pain of a total stranger. -- and on the out-breath, you let the sense of ventilating and opening, the sense of spaciousness, go out.

In other words, suppose there is someone in your life that you cannot stand, the very thought of whom brings up all kinds of negative feelings. You decide to do tonglen with feeling more open and brave and gentle in that particular situation. So you think of that person and up come all those awful feelings, and when you are breathing in, you connect with them -- their quality and texture and just how they grab your heart. It is not that you try to figure them out; you just feel the pain.

Then on the out-breath you relax, let go, open up, ventilate the whole thing. But you don't luxuriate in that for very long because when you breathe in again, it's back to the painful feeling. You don't get completely trapped in that, because next you breath out -- you open and relax and share some sense of space again. [. . .]

After you have worked with the specific object for a while and you are genuinely connected with the pain and your ability to open and let go, then you take the practice a step further -- you do it **for all sentient beings**. This is a key point about tonglen: your own experience of pleasure and pain becomes the way that you recognize your kinship with all sentient beings, the way you can share in the joy and the sorrow of everyone

So again, the first step is flashing some sense of openness and spaciousness, the second step is working with [black in and white out,] the third step is contacting something very real to us, and the fourth step is extending it out and being willing to do it for all sentient beings"