

A RANDOMIZED CONTROLLED TRIAL OF TONG LEN MEDITATION PRACTICE IN CANCER PATIENTS: EVALUATION OF A DISTANT PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALING EFFECT

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Context: Tong Len meditation is an important therapeutic tool in the Tibetan medicine, and it can be used for self-healing and/or to heal others. Currently, in the West, there is no scientific study concerning the efficacy of a Tong Len distant healing effect on psychological disorders in cancer patients.

Objectives: To evaluate a distant healing effect of Tong Len meditation on stress, anxiety, depression, fatigue, and self-perceived quality of life in cancer patients. These psychological objectives were chosen as a consequence of the limited scientific literature of present day.

Design: We performed a double-blind randomized controlled trial on 103 cancer patients with tumors. Overall, 12 meditators used Tong Len in aid of 52 patients randomly selected as experimental group, while the remaining 51 patients constituted the control group. Patients and meditators did not know each other. All patients completed profile of mood states (POMS) and European Quality of Life—5 dimensions (EQ-5D) questionnaires before treatment (T0), after two (T1) and three months of treatment (T2), and one month after treatment cessation (T3).

Results: With regard to the parameters related to depression, a statistically significant improvement ($P = .003$) was

observed in the treatment group compared to controls. On the other hand, the vigor/activity parameter saw significant improvements in the control group ($P = .009$). Both groups exhibited significant improvements in the other factors assessed in the POMS and EQ-5D questionnaires.

Conclusions: This study did not provide sufficient evidence supporting an efficacy of Tong Len meditation in distant psychological healing as compared to a control condition. The research highlighted some psychological improvements through Tong Len distant meditation in a group of patients unknown to meditators. Therefore, the enhancement detected in most parameters in both treatment and control groups raises interest on in-depth analysis and evaluation of distant meditation on cancer patients to mitigate psychological problems caused by the disease.

Key words: Tong Len, Distance meditation, Distant psychological healing effect, Compassion, Nonlocal phenomena, Quantum physics

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INTRODUCTION

Distant healing intentions are compassionate mental acts that improve the well-being of another person at a distance.¹ This definition includes different methods and interventions, characterized by the application of one person's intention towards someone else's health. There are techniques and practices from various approaches describing distant healing intention interventions from various approaches, such as intercessory prayer, spiritual healing, nondirected prayer, intentionality, energy healing, shamanic healing, nonlocal healing, noncontact therapeutic touch, and Reiki.² Distant healing intention is a healing modality, which is usually applied in complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) and nonlocal medicine, based on the concept that one

person's consciousness can affect another person's physical substratum.³

The conception of a nonlocal mind allows the understanding of the outcomes that reliably demonstrate the existence of interactions between distant living beings. Schrödinger⁴ was one of the first authors that gave a contribution to the elaboration of a model of consciousness that unifies the distant healing-related phenomena with science traditions, adopting a unitary vision of human consciousness, which is omnipresent, unbounded, infinite, collective, and eternal.⁵

Distant healing intentions are commonly applied and the research in this field is growing. Many studies observed small but significant effects for distant healing intentions as intercessory prayer⁶; some researches explored the variables that modulate the effects of distant healing intentions, suggesting the development of further studies to explain this phenomenon.⁷

The main publications involved the effects of intentions on inanimate objects (as sophisticated random number generators), plants, cells, animals (growth of tumors in animals, microbial growth, germination of seeds and growth of plants, kinetics of biochemical reactions, etc.) and humans' health, in particular on organic diseases and surgical wounds.⁸⁻¹⁰ However, most of researches about religious behaviors and health were observational studies, without randomization and control. Furthermore, nearly all of them showed an efficacy of distant healing intentions when there was a strong and empathic connection between the healer and a distant individual who had received the healer's efforts (recipient), even when the recipient was unaware about the sending condition.^{11,12} These studies suggested that compassionate healing intentions could exert measurable physical effects on a distant recipient; they also observed that a bonded connection between the healer and the recipient might be the core part of the healing process, because most of these nonlocal phenomena are based on empathy, a feature of close and compassionate relationships.^{13,14}

A recent review of noncontact healing studies showed that subjects in the active condition exhibit a significant improvement in well-being relative to control subjects under circumstances that do not seem to be susceptible to placebo and expectancy effects.¹⁵

Other clinical trials showed a significant effect even when the one who sent distant healing intentions and the one who received them (recipient patient) did not know each other.² Researches on distant healing and intercessory prayer revealed that nonlocal mind had a solid connection with love, compassion, and deep care¹⁶: the nonlocal mind vision may change the core feature of medicine and switch the paradigm, equal to the passage from classical to quantum physics.

The present study addresses the effects of Tong Len, a Tibetan meditation practice, which literally means, "sending and receiving." It is believed to be highly effective at alleviating suffering and favoring healing. Tong Len is based on the Buddhist concept of compassion: the meditator receives the suffering of other beings with the aim of neutralizing his own egoism—which is considered the origin of our troubles and various forms of disease in the Buddhist philosophy. Through the development of compassion and kindness, positive energy is generated towards other beings and ourselves. Tibetan Lamas believe that

the practice of Tong Len contributes towards the reduction and elimination of suffering and it can aid the curing of diseases.^{17,18}

Research evidence demonstrated a link between self-compassion and healing: self-compassion was related to psychological flourishing and reduced psychopathology in a mindful self-compassion (MSC) program.¹⁶ A number of scientific reports investigated the effects of compassion meditation upon the behavioral and neuroendocrine responses to psychosocial stressors in those who meditate.^{19,20} Furthermore, neuroimaging studies showed that compassion meditation was leading the activation of brain areas involved in emotional processing and empathy²¹; data supported the potential use of this form of meditation as a technique for coping with a number of psychological disorders related to a long-term illness, such as social anxiety, depression, and anger. To date, studies have not examined the distance effects of Tong Len performed by a group of meditators upon a group of patients affected by cancer-related anxiety, depression, and stress specifically triggered by their cancer diagnosis, although some studies suggested a positive effect of intercessory prayer upon some diseases.²²

The primary research focus was supporting the hypothesis that Tong Len meditation used by meditators can produce a significant distant healing effect on psychological well-being of cancer patients that were randomly assigned to receive their efforts.

Moreover, this research is important because it investigated the presence of a distant psychological healing effect without any empathic bond between meditators and patients. Until now, the majority of scientific literature revealed the existence of distant healing effects when there are empathic connection and deep acquaintanceship between healers and recipients.

METHODS

The Ethics Committee of the Bologna Health Authority approved the study.

It consisted of a double-blind randomized controlled trial that aims to assess the capacity of Tong Len meditation to reduce stress, anxiety, depression, and fatigue in cancer patients, and to assess its effects upon patient perceived quality of life. The study started in April 2013 and finished in October 2013, with a final follow-up assessment.

Selection and Description of Participants

Overall, 103 cancer patients (seven males and 96 females) receiving treatment at the "U.O.C. Oncologia of Ospedale Bellaria" (Oncology Department of Bellaria Hospital, Bologna) were enrolled onto the study; all patients were at least 18 years old, resident in the district of Bologna and, according to the oncologist's judgments, were not deemed to require psychological treatment. The study involved a prevalence of women because the Oncology Department of Bellaria Hospital treats mainly breast cancers.

Patients diagnosed with psychiatric disorders and receiving treatment from Mental Health Services, patients in the terminal phase of cancer (admitted to a Hospice or receiving palliative care), and those with advanced-stage neoplasms were excluded from the study.

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