



Courageous Conversation Circle: Facilitator Guide

This Circle Conversation is an opportunity to engage your community in compassion practice and truthful political conversation to uncover the ways we are like-hearted, even when we are not like-minded. It is designed for groups of 6-12 people, to be shared over 1.5 - 2 hours.

CONVERSATION FLOW

1. Arrive
2. Tonglen practice
3. Weave
4. Narrative
5. Inquiry
6. Breakouts
7. Discussion and integration
8. Call to action

FACILITATOR NOTES

You are going to do an amazing job holding space for others and initiating a much-needed conversation in your community. We are so glad you are with us.

In convening this Circle, you are representing a movement and network of leaders taking action all across the country. Please read the [7 Principles of voteWELL](#) to orient yourself to the shared values of this campaign and aspire with us to embody them well.

Remember your role in holding space for this process. If a desire to fix, judge, change, or convince comes up, notice that within yourself and take a deep breath to release it. For the purpose of this Circle, it is very important that you hold a safe and neutral container for people to truly wrestle with this practice and allow themselves to be changed by their own volition. Our purpose is to create the space, not to change people or to advocate our own political views while in the facilitator seat.

[Downloadable audio of the Tonglen practice](#) (13 min) - Listen to this before your Circle. You may choose to either use this audio recording during your Circle, or to learn it and use the [written guide for leading Tonglen practice](#) to lead the practice yourself.

Courageous Conversation Circle

ARRIVE 10 minutes

As the facilitator, share that the goal of this circle is to engage with the value of our ability to stay open hearted and present in the face of discomfort. Facing the unknown—particularly profound differences between ourselves and others—with an open heart and a sense of loving curiosity is a necessary foundation for transformation.

We are here to cultivate practices that support us in staying present in the face of discomfort. During this incredibly divisive presidential election cycle, we need practices that support us in having hard conversations and concrete tools to help us remain present, stay in relationship, and seek out connection.

Introductions: Ask participants to go around the circle and share their name and also how open their heart feels (on a scale of 1 to 10, or on a scale from hard to soft, or from guarded to vulnerable). Start the circle by going first, as facilitator, and modeling sharing without getting into the “why” of how open your heart is.

TONGLLEN PRACTICE 15 minutes

Introduce this practice by sharing that Tonglen practice resources us in our own suffering and allows us to reach out to others, making connections across lines of suffering in ways that are healing and that break down isolation—regardless of whether we are directly impacted by systemic inequality and injustice or benefit from systems of oppression.

Practice: Leader facilitates a Tonglen meditation using the written or audio guide.

WEAVE 10 minutes

Offer context (using these words or your own words) that Tonglen is a fierce and tender practice that is designed to break the heart wide open and intentionally melt the armor around our hearts. When we have a practice of nurturing heartbreak, it allows us to stay in the deep discomfort of the suffering we see and/or experience.

When we aren't resourced in an open-hearted way, we either check out (via avoidance, bypass, or numbing) or we engage in frantic activity that is unaccountable and often leads to argumentation and a focus on “winning” instead of connection. We see this on social media

all the time: either people are posting pictures of kittens or they are getting into knock-down drag-out fights, neither of which moves us further along.

It can be heartbreaking or even terrifying to sit with our discomfort around the suffering of those who bear the weight of injustice and/or the ways we might be complicit in that suffering. It can also be deeply uncomfortable to engage with those we politically disagree with. So when we can tap into an un-armored heart and build our capacity to sit with heartbreak and discomfort, we have more resources at our disposal to stay present, to engage thoughtfully, and to seek out connection rather than shutting down.

Weaving: Go around the circle (or if there are more than six participants, break into small groups of 3-4 people) and briefly share: Where and with whom do I want to cultivate my heart to be more tender and present?

The current political context calls on us to work hard to allow our full selves to show up, our hearts to be on the line, and our actions to move us toward deeper relationship, deeper connectedness, and deeper places of service. We are called to approach this election cycle more curious, more tender, more present, and actively engaged in communal practice so that we're not alone. It's not just about staying present and engaged ourselves; it's also about fostering collective care and working toward a world of equity and nonviolence.

NARRATIVE 10-15 minutes

This Circle is part of a national campaign called voteWELL that is mobilizing communities of wellbeing to vote and change the game in how we show up politically for the wellbeing of all. voteWELL holds central that political engagement is not only about what we do, but also how we do it—how we engage in conversation and action in a way that honors the humanity of all parties and is oriented toward the goal of collective care. When we orient toward politics and social change work as a critical way that we can take care of one another, the conversation becomes not only possible but necessary in our families, places of practice and wellness, and everywhere we are. The cost of avoidance is too high.

When we are only in touch with our own pain/suffering/trauma, empathy is not available to us, and when we are only in touch with the pain/suffering/trauma of others, it is pity not empathy that flows. Compassion practice cultivates a bridge of connection between our own suffering and the suffering of others—actively reaching outward to bear witness to the suffering of others and fostering empathy, kindheartedness, and wise/accountable action, so that it is impossible for us to pass by another human being without seeing them as “one of our own.”

Group agreements: Facilitate a group brainstorm around practices and skills of being with one another here and in other spaces, both in terms of what will help this circle go deeper and what gets in the way of being with each other and going deeper:

- What will help this circle go deeper—how can we cultivate and practice with one another what we need out in the world? Start with these practices/skills and then ask for 2-3 others:
 - Center care for each other and constantly ask, “how can I extend care in this situation?”
 - Allow for disagreement and the speaking of truth without breaking relationships. (Note: For some of us, severing relationships is evidence of privilege, and for others of us it’s necessary for survival—the key is being mindful of what’s true for us in any given moment.)
 - Listen from an open heart and welcome differences of perspective and life journeys that led there.

- What would get in the way of being present with each other and going deeper? Start with these things to avoid and then ask for 2-3 others:
 - Judgment
 - Competitiveness or a need to be right
 - Deflecting or opting out of the heavy lifting

INQUIRY 5 minutes

We often think about issues (e.g., “climate change”) instead of thinking about people (e.g., people who live in areas that are being submerged by rising ocean levels). It serves a particular purpose to depersonalize systemic injustices. For example, it’s easier to intellectually talk about corporations and money in politics in impersonal terms instead of engaging with the issue of who can’t vote and the way disenfranchisement is personal.

Journal: Journal for 3-5 minutes about a major issue at stake in this election that it’s difficult for you to make a human connection around. Consider:

- In what ways is this issue depersonalized?
- Whose suffering are you protecting your heart from with regards to this issue?
- What discomfort comes up for you when you think about the people who suffer the greatest because of this issue?

BREAKOUTS 10 minutes

Talk in pairs: With one other person, discuss what you journaled about in the previous exercise. Help each other brainstorm even more human impacts of the issues each of you

journalled about, and talk about the discomfort/heartbreak—what happens in your body and what happens to your heart when you start to name these human impacts?

- As a practice, when listening to your partner share, pay attention to what comes up as your partner says something that doesn't resonate with you - where does discomfort come up in your body, do you experience an impulse to jump in, correct, or argue? What changes for you if you take a hot, deep breath in that melts your heart and breath out connection?
- When sharing, pay attention to when your sharing feels more connected versus when your sharing feels disconnected or as though you are trying to be convincing. Are there impulses to fix or to check out in ways that taking a breath to touch on the interconnectedness of suffering and communal care can help settle?

DISCUSSION + INTEGRATION *10 minutes*

Full group discussion: Bring the group back together and ask for people to report out from their breakout groups. What struck them? How were they changed by the conversation?

Ask the group to name ways that they are willing to apply practices like Tonglen in order to stay in discomfort. Individually and collectively, how could this practice and the value of discomfort and a tender heart change the way we engage?

CALL TO ACTION *10 minutes*

Some people may resist the idea of engaging in political conversation within yoga studios, for example. Because of the way that politics play out—particularly in the United States—it can sometimes feel like talking about politics taints or somehow clouds our spiritual spaces. But as people of conscience, people whose spiritual practices inform our values, we have a responsibility to engage in the moral dimensions of politics. Furthermore, many communities, particularly communities of color, have a long tradition of understanding spirituality as a key component of struggles for civil rights and political engagement. Yoga's roots are in such communities of color.

In this country, our systems of governance, economics, and policies negatively impact far too many people's dignity and ability to live and thrive. Leaders from communities that are most impacted by repressive political forces are calling for all of us to show up and put love into action in service of justice. At this moment in time, in this particular election cycle, that's what's at stake and that's what's needed. So as people of conscience and as people who believe in interconnectedness, we have a responsibility to show up and be a part of the solution.

I invite you to join me in mobilizing communities of wellbeing to vote this election:

- 1) **Take the pledge:** Join me in pledging to voteWELL by contemplating how our votes impact the wellbeing of people and planet. Let's cast our votes WELL on November 8. Please take out your phone now and let's all take 2 minutes to pledge!
Text VOTE to (305) 694-2456 to pledge to #voteWELL
- 2) **Post a photo:** Take a group photo and post to social media, sharing something powerful you experienced in Circle together. Make sure to tag @CTZNWELL on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, and hashtag #voteWELL #CourageousConversation so we can celebrate you and share your pic!
- 3) **Commit to coming together again.** As we get closer to the election, it is important that we come together again to practice and actually look over our local ballots and prepare to cast our votes. Each of us can commit to hosting a Circle like this one in October to bring more people into the conversation and prepare our community to take our practice to the polls on election day. Visit ctznwell.org/votewell to learn more.

CLOSING 10 minutes

Thank you for showing up for this conversation. It is so important that we come together in this way—we need each other. As we wrap up, I invite you to take a few more deep breaths, this time inhaling the heat of the needs and suffering of our world, and exhaling our faith in community, knowing that as we take action we do not do so alone.

As we part ways, I invite each of us to share one commitment we will take with us as we move forward into the world. Perhaps a new practice you'll return to, a new perspective you'll remind yourself of, a commitment to action moving forward. I invite each person to share your commitment aloud to the group. (*people share*)

May we grow in our commitment to ourselves and one another. Thank you.

Facilitator guide created by Teo Drake + Alex Kapitan in collaboration with CTZNWELL.