

Emotional Rescue with Dzogchen Ponlop: Interview Q&A

Answers here are excerpted from the new book, *Emotional Rescue: How to Work With Your Emotions to Transform Hurt and Confusion Into Energy That Empowers You*

What is an Emotion?

Q: Psychology, psychiatry, neuroscience—all seem to have a slightly different way of looking at “emotions.” How do you define “emotion”?

A: The basic dictionary definition, from the *Oxford English Dictionary* to *FreeDictionary.com*, tells us that an emotion is an intensified mental state that we experience as agitated, disturbed, or anxious, which comes with similar physical symptoms of distress—increased heartbeat, rapid breathing, possibly crying or shaking. Even the origin of the word “emotion” (from Old French and Latin) means to excite, to move, to stir up. And such feeling states are generally described as being beyond our conscious control or the power of reason.

You might ask, “But what about the emotions that make you feel happy? Aren’t love and joy emotions, too?” Yes. But states of mind like love, joy, and compassion don’t ruin your day. You feel better, more clear and peaceful, because of them. So they’re not regarded in quite the same way. When you’re “getting emotional,” you’re usually not feeling so great. So when we mention “working with your emotions,” it means unpacking and letting go of the heavy baggage of your pain and confusion.

Workability of Emotions

Q: The subtitle of your book, Emotional Rescue, is “How to work with emotions to transform hurt and confusion into energy that empowers you.” What is it about our emotions that makes them workable? They seem to be at the very center of our suffering. How can the energy of emotions empower you?

A: At heart, your emotional energies are a limitless source of creative power and intelligence that’s “on” all the time—like the electrical current we put to so many uses. When you finally see straight to the heart of your emotions, this power source is what you see. Before an emotion escalates to a fever pitch or you’ve managed to chill it out, there’s a basic energy that gives rise to it. This energy runs through all your emotions—good, bad, or neutral. It’s simply an upsurge that’s been stimulated by

something in your environment—like an upsurge in the voltage flowing through a power line. If it's just a slight increase, you may not notice it, but if it's a strong burst, it can give you quite a shock. That's why we have surge protectors for our sensitive equipment. It's too bad we can't wear surge protectors to modulate our temper tantrums.

It may be something internal and personal that stirs you up—a memory evoked by a familiar song. Or it could be something external, like your partner telling that same dumb joke he knows you can't stand. Think back to the last time you were really upset. Right before you got so heated up and the angry thoughts kicked in, there was a gap. Your mind's regular chatter stopped for a moment—one quiet moment without thought. That gap wasn't just empty space. It was the first flash of your emotion-to-be: the creative energy of your natural intelligence.

You might be thinking, *I like the sound of all this, but it doesn't apply to me. I'm not the creative type.* But you are creating all the time. You create your world all around you. You make choices, build relationships, and arrange the spaces you inhabit. You dream up goals, jobs, and ways to play, and generally envision the world you want. With a little help from the power of electricity, you can turn night into day. You can transform a cold apartment into a cozy home. In the same way, your emotions can brighten your world, warm you up, and wake you up with their vital, playful energy. When you feel lost, they can bring a fresh sense of direction and inspiration into your life.

So emotions don't have to be a problem for you. Any emotion can bring a welcome sense of positive energy or the opposite—a dose of gloom and doom. It just depends on how you work with it, how you respond to the upsurge of energy.

Emotional Reactivity and The Three-Step Emotional Rescue (ER) Plan

Q: Sometimes our emotions seem to take over before we even know what's happening, like when we have a sudden attack of anger. What do we do then?

A: This is the central question, isn't it? When you're feeling tormented by your emotions, what do you do? You probably look for an escape route. But you can't see your emotions the way you can see smoke or fire, so which way do you turn? You can't exactly decide, *My anger is hammering at the front door, so I'll go out the back.* If you react out of panic, without thinking it through, you might end up jumping from the frying pan into the fire. You never know what might be waiting for you in your backyard.

Instead of leaving your well-being to chance, it's a good idea to have a rescue plan for those times when you find yourself on shaky emotional ground, looking for a lifeline.

The **Three-Step Emotional Rescue Plan** introduced in the book can help you learn the skills you need so you can leave behind painful old habits in favor of new and more joyful ways of expressing yourself. The three steps are Mindful Gap, Clear Seeing, and Letting Go. They are progressive methods, each one building on the one before it, gradually empowering you to work with and transform even your most difficult emotions.

What Is Mindfulness?

Q: You have said that “mindfulness and continued awareness are exactly what we need to change our relationship with our emotions from a battlefield experience into a creative and joyful one.” These days so many people are promoting the benefits of mindfulness, that it isn’t always clear what it means. How do you define “mindfulness” and why is “continued awareness” important?

A: Being mindful simply means paying attention. It's the key to working skillfully with your emotions, and to guarding your peace of mind. To be mindful also means “to remember.” Even the best plan will be useless if you don't remember to do it. While mindfulness is a unique skill that can be practiced on its own, it's also a vital ingredient of all three steps in the ER Plan—Mindful Gap, Clear Seeing, and Letting Go.

So how do you go about paying attention? And what is it, exactly, that you're supposed to pay attention to? You simply bring your awareness to the present moment, to where you are right now. There's a sense of freshness and open space—a natural gap—between past and future moments. In this spot of nowness, you're aware of the thoughts and feelings that come and go, and the colors, sounds, and scents of the world around you.

You can be mindful anywhere—when you're out walking in a park or shopping at the mall, cooking dinner for your family or watching TV. You can be alone or in a crowd, happy or sad, arguing with your roommate or laughing with an old friend. You can be mindful whenever you have a thought or feeling—which is pretty much all the time.

Being mindful is not very difficult once you get used to doing it. It gradually becomes a habit that replaces the habit of mind/lessness—forgetfulness, or spacing out. In the beginning, it's helpful if you can spend a little time by yourself getting familiar with this

simple way of training your mind, also known as mindfulness practice.

Meditation

Q: Many people are writing and speaking about the benefits of meditation — not just to make ourselves calmer but also to improve our health and productivity. If you want to work with your emotions, do you need to meditate, too?

A: When you need to let go of emotional disturbances, the practice of meditation can be especially helpful. Although we tend to think of meditation as being only a mental practice, it's also physical. It works with both the breath and our physical posture. (Detailed instructions for meditation are included in the book, in a section called "Exercises and Pointers.")

Whether you're exercising, doing yoga, meditating, or simply remembering to pause a moment, breathe, and relax—it's important to continue to stay mindful and aware of your experiences of both your body and your mind. While releasing emotional energy tied up in the body, stay connected to your experience of mind. Otherwise, physical exercise just becomes another way of distracting yourself from your emotions. That's not letting go of your emotions; it's a way of avoiding them, keeping them at a distance. To let go of something, you first have to be close enough to get ahold of it.

The Emotional Rescue Plan

Step 1: Mindful Gap

Q: Step 1 of the three-step Emotional Rescue Plan is Mindful Gap. What is the "gap" exactly? And how can we make it "mindful"?

A: Briefly, Mindful Gap is the practice of creating a safe distance between you and your emotions, which then gives you the psychological space to work with their energy.

We know from recent research in neuroscience that simply practicing step one, Mindful Gap, for a few minutes can have a significant impact on your ability to make fewer errors, make better decisions, and let go of poor choices.

When you take time to feel your anger, everything naturally slows down. You turn your attention inward. Right away you notice there's space to breathe, so you're not overwhelmed. In this space, you discover a gap between yourself and the anger you're feeling. That little bit of distance shows you that you're separate from your emotions. You're not just that mad agitation. You're also the one who's observing it. If you and your anger were exactly the same, how could you be watching it?

That's the essence of Mindful Gap. It's like a safe driving habit. In driving school, the student drivers learn to keep a certain amount of distance between their car and the car in front of them. If you're following this rule and the car ahead of you stops or turns suddenly, you have time to step on the brake and avoid a collision. If you're driving too close, you're more likely to have a painful, costly accident.

This is different from pushing away your anger impulsively with the intention of cutting all ties to it. Here, you're staying in touch with the energy. You're willing to feel whatever comes up, from life's petty annoyances to the trials of loss, fear, and grief.

The Emotional Rescue Plan

Step 2: Clear Seeing

Q: In the Rescue Plan, Step 2 is Clear Seeing. You say that we need to do Step 1, have a Mindful Gap moment, and then we're able to do Step 2: Clear Seeing. What does it mean to see an emotion clearly?

A: Step Two in the ER Plan, Clear Seeing, is the natural result of practicing Mindful Gap, again and again, in moments of strong emotion. If you can "mind the gap" (Feel, Hold, Look) when you're so upset you feel like jumping out of your skin, right away you've given yourself more breathing room. There's a sense of greater space, and in that greater space you see a more complete picture.

Say you feel a sudden onset of insecurity and self-doubt. What's in the big picture? When you become aware of the different elements in your environment, you begin to see relationships. Seeing how you feel inside, on the one hand, what's going on outside, on the other, and what it feels like when those two meet—that's seeing a more complete and brilliant picture.

The more clearly you see the relationship of your outer and inner worlds, the more likely you are to see patterns in those relationships. And when you look mindfully at those patterns, you begin to see the causes, or triggers, that can initiate a chain reaction of negative—or positive—events. When you see things this precisely, you're not so easily fooled. You can respond more skillfully to what's happening. You're not necessarily led astray by the jealous, proud, or stupid voices of the emotions buzzing in your head. You might even be more likely to listen to the voices of others and not cling so stubbornly to your own ideas.

As you explore your feelings, eventually you'll get to know all of them quite well. Then you'll be able to see what each emotion is like for you personally— how it tends to come up, where you feel it in your body, where it goes when you chase after it with your thoughts, and so on. Without this kind of knowledge, it's impossible to free yourself from repeating the painful things you think, say, and do—criticizing yourself or others, or shutting out those who care about you—when you get upset.

The Emotional Rescue Plan

Step 3: Letting Go

Q: Is it really possible to just “let go” of an emotion, especially a really strong one, like jealousy or anger?

A: Letting Go is the third step of the Emotional Rescue Plan. It's the next logical step, the result of all the work you've done once you've practiced steps one and two. By this point you've already accomplished quite a lot through the Mindful Gap and Clear Seeing practices.

You're truly moving on, breathing easier, getting some real relief. But what are you “letting go” of—and how is this letting go different from rejecting or trying to get rid of your feelings?

On the one hand, you're letting go of your negative emotions—the feelings that cause you so much anxiety and grief. On the other, you're letting go of your habitual reactions to these intense feelings—trying to stop them, hide them, or change them. Once you're ready and willing to recognize your emotions as creative energy, Letting Go becomes merely a process of loosening the knots that your energy gets tied up in. An upsurge of

energy gets tangled up when your habitual patterns get hold of it, hang on to it, and try to manipulate it in some way.

When you get angry, for example, you have a choice: you can try to control it in the usual ways, or you can simply let the energy come and go. The tighter you hold on to energy that would otherwise move freely, the more you twist it this way and that, the tighter the knot, and the more anxiety and stress pervades your body and mind.

So Letting Go turns out to be the opposite of rejecting your emotions. It's actually the beginning of welcoming them into your life just as they are—original, fresh, creative energy that, if left to itself, moves on of its own accord. There's a burst of intensity when everything is wide open and full of possibility. Then you take your next breath.

Q: Where are we going with this kind of practice — what are we free of, what can we expect?

A: When you're free of the handicap of your habitual tendencies (and the burden of negative emotions), you're free to develop who you are. The energy that once inhibited you can now carry you forward. Whatever you choose to do, you can do it with less suffering, less fear, and less confusion about why things happen the way they do.

Realizing the potential of your 'rescued' creative energy means that you can appreciate, explore, and find new expressions for your own unique experiences and talents. You're free to discover your pure passions, and your own heartfelt vision for a meaningful and productive life. This doesn't mean that suddenly 'we are all artists' and thus sweeping the floor and doing the laundry instantly become works of art. These ordinary tasks can be done artfully and with mindfulness, of course. But it's more about having a mind that's bright and clear, with positive qualities of attention that give you better vision, that help you see those sparks of beauty and richness throughout your life and all around you. No part of this picture is insignificant. Every aspect is a meaningful part of the whole."

Q: What is the role of compassion in the three-step ER plan?

A: Paying attention to the impact of your actions is a way to begin developing sympathy for others. Compassion isn't a mild, generalized feeling of, Gosh, isn't that a shame? It's

a powerful and compelling response to the suffering of others that wants to ease that suffering. It's passionate and unselfish, and it comes with a sense of commitment to act, not just feel. It carries you out of emotional seclusion into the messy, joyful world of relationship.

But to develop that kind of pure love toward others, you need to have the same love and compassionate concern for yourself and your own well-being. So, whether you're talking about yourself or others, kindness always applies. It can help defuse explosive emotions and strengthen positive ones. It helps you feel happier, safer, and in greater control of your life. And that helps you develop peace of mind as well as peace on the streets of your neighborhood.

Social Action vs. Personal Growth

Q: With all that is going on in the world today—abuse, exploitation, poverty, and violence—can working with our emotions really help? Isn't it more urgent to take social action to right these wrongs?

A: It can be difficult for us to allow ourselves to be touched by the fierce suffering we see in the world. To help even a little bit, we have to be able to work with our own emotions.

If we have an opportunity to help even one person who is facing such suffering, that is a great benefit. If we can do more, that's wonderful. If we cannot help directly, we may be able to help indirectly by supporting those on the ground offering food, medicine, and consolation. Doctors Without Borders and similar organizations go wherever there is great suffering, great need, and few resources. They are our modern-day saints or bodhisattvas. If we cannot go to these places ourselves, we can offer monetary gifts and also use social media to bring attention to their work in areas of critical need, actions that will inspire others to help as well. There are many ways we can help directly or indirectly; we just have to find the opportunities that make sense for our lives.

“Righteous Anger”

Q: If I see someone engaged in reckless actions that harm others and I get angry about it, isn't that a good kind of anger? There's that bumper sticker that says, “If

you're not outraged then you're not paying attention." Even though it's upsetting when we "get emotional," can those same emotions motivate us to make the world a better place?

A: Like many people today, Buddhists share a vision of a peaceful world, free of war and aggression. But even if we are waving NO NUKES banners (and the like) on the streets, or metaphorically in our lectures, blogs, and tweets, we haven't fully disarmed ourselves. We haven't set aside our own aggression.

Too often, we do the opposite of what we say. In the microcosm of our own world, we wage our private wars on one another. How often do we respond to someone's anger at us with anger, impatience, and defensiveness? When our spouse blames us for one thing, we try to find some other blame to pin on him or her. And on it goes, as if none of this counted as "war" or aggression or a fundamental disturbance of the peace.

Our basic principles of peace and harmony and nonviolence can all go down the drain when it comes to our own individual ways of relating with each other. If we act in this way, our noble view and our actual practice have become two separate things. We can have a high view, but our practice doesn't usually line up with that view.

When it comes to the views of political parties, the liberals accuse the conservatives and the conservatives accuse the liberals of wrong views and flip-flopping back and forth. It's easy to claim you hold the high moral ground, but it's our actions that reveal what is in our hearts and minds. When the rhetoric of animosity, harsh language, and blame are praised far and wide, and the intention behind this rhetoric is clearly to harm, then there is no moral ground to stand on. There is no vision to uplift, to benefit, or to protect anyone.

In whatever way we can, it's important for us to think about peace, what it really means to us. Can we see ourselves establishing our vision of a perfect foreign policy in our domestic relationships? Can we bring our most idealistic vision of world peace into our very own lives?