

# How to Work with Emotions

INTRODUCTION BY POLLY YOUNG-EISENDRATH

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Many of us were originally attracted to the dharma, perhaps initially to meditation, because we had problems with our emotions or emotional problems. After practicing Buddhism over time, however, some of us feel that we still have emotional difficulties—sudden outbursts, emotional withdrawal, or a critical judgment of our emotionality—that we hadn't expected would continue after some skill in practice. A number of books have been written to address these issues. Among them are Harvey Aronson's *Buddhist Practice on Western Ground* (Shambhala, 2004) and Dan Goleman's *Destructive Emotions* (Bantam, 2004). Still, much confusion remains about the relationship between the dharma and our emotional lives.

In this forum, *Buddhadharma's* Barry Boyce speaks with Sharon Salzberg, Judith Simmer-Brown, John Tarrant, and the Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche about their views on skillful and unskillful involvement with our emotions. Their descriptions of Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana practices open new perspectives on how to think about and engage with our emotional lives.

In the past couple of decades, as we have studied human emotions through the lenses of neuroscience, psychology, and psychotherapy, we have clarified more fully how and why our emotions present special challenges in our relationships with others and ourselves. The early founders of psychoanalysis, especially Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, witnessed the fact that emotional dynamics from our early lives shaped habit patterns in our minds and hearts with strong

staying power. Freud dubbed this power a “repetition compulsion,” and Jung called it an “autonomous complex.” Both described how certain fundamental emotional patterns, when triggered in adults or children, can set the stage for an entire drama played out within or between people (with ready-made scripts).

Contemporary neuroscience now recognizes that the limbic brain (the mid-brain, between the frontal cortex and the brain stem) is the seat of fight-flight reactivity and many aspects of unconscious emotional memory. This part of our brain contains powerful motivators to perceive and to act, driving us to react in certain ways that may fall outside of our awareness until we have acted them out. For example, brain researcher Joseph LeDoux, in his book *The Emotional Brain*, explains that memories triggering the flight-fight response “are rigidly coupled to specific kinds of responses... wired so as to preempt the need for thinking about what to do.” In our families, close relationships, and work environments, this kind of triggering can cause impulsive discharges of emotional reactions or non-communicative walling off of our reactions. Neither of these is a mindful response. In the lively discussion that follows, the participants give clear and detailed examples of their own emotional development through applying the wisdom of the dharma.

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**BUDDHADHARMA:** Many of us think of emotion as the most important part of life, the thing that makes us human. Whether it's love or beauty or pleasure, much of life is a search for particular emotional experiences. When people hear about things like nonattachment and mindfulness, they may fear they'll have to give up their emotional life. Yet they also want to be free from the painful grip of emotion. What happens to our emotional life when we fully take up the Buddhist path?

**THE DZOGCHEN PONLOP RINPOCHE:** I wouldn't say that losing our emotions or thoughts is something we need to worry about. When we meditate, they're still there. They don't go away. We couldn't lose them, even if we wanted to [laughter].

**SHARON SALZBERG:** I'm reminded of something that Ajahn Chah, the Thai meditation master, said: "As you meditate, your mind will get quieter and quieter, like a still forest pool. Many wonderful and rare animals will come to drink at the pool, but you will be still. This is the happiness of the Buddha."

I love the image of the wonderful and rare animals. The stillness is not a constraint; it's not holding down or repressing any experience. Everything still arrives, but what makes the

difference is how all of those wonderful and rare animals are greeted.

I know that people have a fear that meditation will lead to a kind of barrenness. I hear it often. People think that if they were to practice meditation ardently and get proficient at it, everything would morph into a gray blob and they wouldn't feel anything anymore. Of course, that's not what it's all about. Intention and motivation are what's vital. Why do we act the way we do and how do we relate to those emotions? Are we subsumed by them? Are we overcome? Are we propelled into actions that we later regret? Do we try to hide emotions or do we denigrate ourselves for our emotions?

So can we find a place in the middle, where one is neither overcome by emotion, which often leads to negative actions and consequences, nor repressing and avoiding our emotional states? That place in the middle, which is mindfulness, is a place of discovery, exploration, and enrichment.

**BUDDHADHARMA:** Would you say the full range of emotion, from rage to passion, is included? Do all the animals in the zoo arrive?

**SHARON SALZBERG:** [Laughs] By practicing mindfulness, we are also changing the conditions that will affect what might arise. But I don't think it would be realistic to say that we assume control over what will arise in our experience. Control per se would not even be desirable, because in the space of tremendous rage or passion we can be free nonetheless, and perhaps utilize the energy within those emotions for something more positive in our lives.

**JOHN TARRANT:** Freedom is just freedom, and it's either there or not. It doesn't matter what you're feeling. In the long arc of a practice, most people do find that they have less intense aversions and so forth. They have less of what you

would call disturbing emotions. But it's also true that when it comes to so-called disturbing emotions, we can ask, who is it disturbing and why is it disturbing? The disturbance is measured against a framework that is illusory. Your disturbing emotions have buddhanature—just as much as your nice calm ones do—and they may actually be more likely to lead to a deeper level of awakening than your nice calm ones.

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** When you enter the Buddhist path, the point is not to get rid of emotions or thoughts. The important thing is to be mindful of the emotions arising—whether they're good or bad, or however you might choose to define them. As we progress along the path of meditation, as Sharon and John have expressed, the key point becomes developing a stillness in which we find freedom from the disturbing elements of emotions.

**BUDDHADHARMA:** In evolutionary terms, biologists talk about emotions as necessary and adaptive, and many psychologists regard emotions as central to who we are. Yet emotions in Buddhism seem to be regarded as a problem. Why is that?

**JOHN TARRANT:** It's true that when people talk about emotion in the Buddhist context, usually they're talking about something that creates a problem. But what's wrong with emotion, anyway? An emotion is something that arises because we have a body, an incarnation, and in that realm everything is a little bit imperfect. We can't get anything quite the way we want it to be, and emotion is the indicator of that. There's also the lizard-brain level of emotions, a reflex. But having an emotion is different from having an emotional problem, which is usually caused by fighting with the emotion, not exploring or having curiosity about it.

**JUDITH SIMMER-BROWN:** It's important to note that we're looking at this question through the lens of a Western psychological word, which is something we often do as modern

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PHOTOS (L-R): RYSZARD FRACKIEWICZ; LIZA MATTHEWS; MICHAEL SIERCHIO; ALICIA BROWN



Having an emotion is different from having an emotional problem, which is usually caused by fighting with the emotion, not exploring or having curiosity about it. —John Tarrant



Buddhists. Yet until recently, there's been very little work done in Western psychology on what emotions actually are.

From a Buddhist perspective, emotions are experiences that are not just thoughts; they have some kind of color and texture, which we try to work with directly when they're painful. There's an enormous science in Buddhism devoted to recognizing the experience of emotion. This is quite different from Western psychology, which has tended to be heavily interpersonal and management-oriented. However, some psychologists are beginning to appreciate that we can work with the direct experience of our state of mind. That's a very fruitful way to appreciate that what we call emotion is, at its heart, an energetic experience that doesn't have to be painful.

**SHARON SALZBERG:** Emotion is an element of relationship. It is how our awareness relates to an object—to a circumstance, a person, mortality, anything that presents itself internally or externally. As a manifestation of relationship, emotion can be quite distorted, based in ignorance, so we misconstrue what we're actually encountering. On the other hand, it can be based in something more truthful and wise and clear, and therein lies the tremendous variety of emotions we experience.

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** When we look at the term “emotion” as it's used in the West, it is problematic. I've talked with psychologists and psychotherapists about it, but I can't find one definition of emotion in the Western context. For that matter, from a classical Buddhist point of view, there's not really a separate topic we would call emotions. Emotions would appear to be part of the wider topic of *kleshas*, the

mental states or experiences that cause torment or discomfort for body and mind and that make the mind unsettled. *Kleshas* are also said to be subtle and proliferating, a latent tendency, an affliction of the mind.

Emotions can be disturbing and destructive when not experienced with mindfulness and compassion. But if we are able to see clearly what the true nature of the experience is, emotions can have tremendously powerful wisdom and compassion.

**BUDDHADHARMA:** According to many religions, and in the popular mind as well, there are good emotions and bad emotions. Does Buddhism make this distinction?

**JUDITH SIMMER-BROWN:** A lot of moral judgments are made about emotions. From my own study of abhidharma and from relating to my teachers, I find that there is a much more pragmatic approach toward emotions in the buddhadharma. Emotions have qualities that can lead us to create pain for ourselves and others. What we might label in the language of morality as “good” or “bad,” we would consider instead as more or less conducive to awakening or to compassionate relationship with the world. It is not so much about an external moral judgment of the kind we encounter so much in the West.

Emotions themselves become problematic for us because of what we do with them. They can develop into karmic thought patterns that cause greater pain for us or lead us into negative speech or harmful bodily actions. The activity of the emotions has the potential to cause greater confusion, turbulence, lack of clarity, and suffering—or not. Good and bad are clunky words to describe what the traditional

# THE EMOTIONS GAME

It starts out innocently enough, says Chögyam Trungpa, but before long we're trapped by the very emotions we created for our amusement.

**T**his mind is our working basis for the practice of meditation and the development of awareness. But mind is something more than the process of confirming self by the dualistic lingering on the other. Mind also includes what are known as *emotions*, which are the highlights of mental states. Mind cannot exist without emotions. Daydreaming and discursive thoughts are not enough. Those alone would be too boring. The dualistic trick would wear too thin. So we tend to create waves of emotion that go up and down: passion, aggression, ignorance, pride—all kinds of emotions. In the beginning we create them deliberately, as a game of trying to prove to ourselves that we exist. But eventually the game becomes a hassle; it becomes more than a game and forces us to challenge ourselves more than we intended. It is like a hunter who, for the sport of practicing his shooting, decides to shoot one leg of a deer at a time. But the deer runs very fast, and it appears it might get away altogether. This becomes a total challenge to the hunter, who rushes after the deer, now trying to kill it completely, to shoot it in the heart. So the hunter has been challenged and feels defeated by his own game.

Emotions are like that. They are not a requirement for

survival; they are a game we developed that went wrong at some point—it went sour. In the face of this predicament we feel terribly frustrated and absolutely helpless. Such frustration causes some people to fortify their relationship to the “other” by creating a god or other projections, such as saviors, gurus, and mahatmas. We create all kinds of projections as henchmen, hit men, to enable us to redominate our territory. The implicit sense is that if we pay homage to such great beings, they will function as our helpers, as the guarantors of our ground.

So we have created a world that is bittersweet. Things are amusing but, at the same time, not so amusing. Sometimes things seem terribly funny but, on the other hand, terribly sad. Life has the quality of a game of ours that has trapped us. The setup of mind has created the whole thing. We might complain about the government or the economy of the country or the prime rate of interest, but those factors are secondary. The original process at the root of the problems is the competitiveness of seeing oneself only as a reflection of the other. Problematic situations arise automatically as expression of that. They are our own production, our own neat work. And that is what is called mind.

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From *The Sanity We Are Born With: A Buddhist Approach to Psychology*, by Chögyam Trungpa. Published by Shambhala Publications.

teaching and our meditation experience tell us about emotion. The moral judgment doesn't fit.

**SHARON SALZBERG:** I agree. In Buddhism, we tend to think more in terms of what is skillful and unskillful. Skillful refers to those states that, when cultivated, lead to the *end* of suffering. Unskillful refers to those states that, when enhanced and nurtured, lead to *more* suffering.

That's a powerful shift for people to make. Instead of falling into the old, conditioned habit of regarding anger or fear as bad, wrong, weak, or terrible—or considering ourselves bad, wrong, weak, or terrible people for having such emotions—we see them as states of suffering. This is a profound transition. It elicits the possibility of responding to ourselves, and to others in the grip of emotions, with compassion rather than rejection or hatred.

**JOHN TARRANT:** Western psychology has made a partial contribution to our methods of working with emotions. Psychology intended to become a science, and everybody thought it would be. But it turned out that it wasn't. In large part, it is a normative agent of the culture and the society, and that runs counter to the genuine practice of inquiry. Psychology

takes the approach of fixing an emotional problem in order to make a person function again. That may be the goal of a society or a culture, but that is not necessarily the goal of a wisdom tradition. Anybody who has been in any tradition of depth has noticed that people who have what look like pathological emotions might be taking a positive step toward disassembling their old way of being, so that a new, greater possibility can come through. If you're always fussing at and fixing your mind, you don't get that journey.

There's also a kind of voluptuousness about what's given by the psyche, which at some level is what's given us by the universe. We can take a housekeeping attitude toward the emotion or we can take the ride and see what discovery is happening. Not a thrill ride, but more a quest. The problem is not the emotion; the problem is being at war with the emotion or acting out the emotion.

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** I agree completely that how skillfully or unskillfully we work with emotions determines whether the experience of that emotion is what we call bad or good. It is not about emotions, but about how you experience them and handle them. Emotions often come to us as a surprise.



There's an enormous science in Buddhism devoted to recognizing the experience of emotion. This is quite different from Western psychology, which has tended to be heavily interpersonal and management-oriented. —Judith Simmer-Brown



When you experience the emotion without skillful means or wisdom, the emotion can be destructive.

In response, the Buddhist teachings present three basic ways of working with emotions. The first approach is mindfulness, which can prevent the destructiveness of the emotions and make them beneficial and useful. The second approach is to bring the emotions to the path of wisdom, by transforming them into something that helps bring benefit to ourselves and others. The third approach, the Vajrayana approach, is to look straight into the essence of the experience of emotion, where we will find tremendous energy and the power of awakening wisdom.

**JUDITH SIMMER-BROWN:** One of the things I've found most valuable about Buddhist practice and teaching has been discovering that we don't really feel our emotions all that often. When there's an emotional impulse that arises—and I'm talking particularly about the painful ones, the *kleshas*—we tend to either indulge in it, acting out some kind of catharsis or building an intense storyline around it, or we suppress and bury the emotion. We're afraid of it. One of the tremendous benefits of Buddhist meditation for me has been to be able to sit with an emotion, to experience it, rather than to feel I have to do something with it immediately or get rid of it.

One of the great contributions of meditation practice to Western society has been to point out the difference between a managerial approach and an experiential approach. It has brought so much more attention and richness to the description of what emotional life actually is.

**BUDDHADHARMA:** Many people feel that inspiration and artistry come out of the richness of emotion. How does meditation practice affect the creative aspect of the emotions?

**JOHN TARRANT:** Spiritual practice is either plumbing, in which case you've got a fixed goal and you're tinkering with the

pipes. Or it's an art, in which case your goal is not predetermined, because you're in a discovery process. All arts are like that. But while you're on the journey, you don't need to be messed up. I don't think our wisdom tradition necessarily holds to the nineteenth-century idea of the messed-up genius. Although if you're a messed-up genius, that's fine too. It's not wise to go around rejecting the material that life has given you, including the experiences that people think you shouldn't have. On the surface, you might sometimes disturb others, but ultimately, if you are not disturbing to yourself, that will mean other people aren't disturbing to you either. There will be much greater compassion, in fact I would say much greater *empathy*, because there's not even the level of distance implied by the term compassion. You really are the other in some sense, and that's the source of your creative imagination.

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** Emotions have very powerful creative energy. Many visual artists and poets are inspired by emotions. We create beautiful products from some of our emotions. So it's good to see and appreciate the beauty of such emotions, even when they're seemingly destructive, like strong passion or aggression. When you transform that into a piece of art, it becomes so beautiful. You not only find peace and creativity through such expression, but many other people also find peace and enjoyment through looking at your creation. Within the world of creativity, there's a strong element of releasing your emotion or finding the wisdom of emotion, and we can find peace or relief through the artful expression of emotions.

**BUDDHADHARMA:** What's the difference between the feeling of relief from releasing one's emotion creatively and finding relief by getting something off your chest?

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** The act of just releasing and expressing is very temporary. It gives brief relief and a sense of freedom,



Instead of falling into the old, conditioned habit of regarding anger or fear as bad, we see them as states of suffering. This allows us to respond with compassion rather than rejection or hatred. —Sharon Salzberg



but the root of your emotions is still there. With meditation, one can get to the root of all the emotions and see the true wisdom within them.

**JUDITH SIMMER-BROWN:** Our tendency to act on emotions comes from the fact that we're afraid to feel them. Mindfulness cultivates the ability to fully experience emotions. Like most of us, I've only ever learned things the hard way. I've learned that emotions are painful when I feel them, that kleshas are genuinely painful. But when we truly feel the intensity of the painful, obsessive, destructive emotions, we deepen our capacity to understand how painful habitual patterns work in our lives. We get to see how our acting out of anger has caused incredible pain for us and for many others. Being able to experience my anger fully, and feel the pain before I act, gives me the opportunity to let go, without repeating the habit of releasing the emotions in some kind of fit. The real relief is in letting go.

When we act on our anger, we are actually practicing anger, training in anger. We are deepening and reinforcing the patterns and tendencies by impulsively acting. With mindfulness, we can see the chain we're caught in, and we can also see the purity at the root of the emotion. To see the alternative is a fantastic relief, not at all like the temporary relief of getting your emotion out.

**JOHN TARRANT:** I don't experience expressing emotion as relief. Paying attention is what leads to a transformation. Paying attention is actually the best form of love we have to bring to our lives. If we pay attention, we find freedom, rather than relief. Relief is erecting an alternative fantasy world to live in, until it breaks down too.

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** And it will [laughs].

**JOHN TARRANT:** Freedom is freedom. Full stop. Freedom can be edgy and scary and

surprising and wonderful and all that, but it's freedom, which is ultimately a more loving and interesting thing than just unloading an emotion.

**BUDDHADHARMA:** But it's still freedom *from* something, isn't it?

**JOHN TARRANT:** I completely disagree. Vajrayana people talk about spaciousness. Shunyata is on your side, you might say.

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** Are you talking about what we call self-liberation?

**JOHN TARRANT:** Yes, a little taste of it anyway. If you're looking to release your emotion, you're trying to make your universe and yourself small. You're accepting a cheap prize, when something much larger might be available.

**BUDDHADHARMA:** And the world is currently driven by...

**SHARON SALZBERG:** Getting big prizes.

**JOHN TARRANT:** You could have a genuine plastic toy!

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** Freedom made in China.

**BUDDHADHARMA:** We've talked about trying to find relief through releasing emotions. What about feeling bad and guilty about our emotions, and keeping them bottled up for fear of the negative consequences? Isn't that just as problematic?

**SHARON SALZBERG:** As we've been talking, I've been recalling myself at eighteen, going to India to learn meditation with S.N. Goenka. I did an intensive ten-day retreat, then another one, and then another one, and somewhere in there I was experiencing tremendous anger, which I was very uncomfortable with. I was not very psychologically sophisticated. I knew I was very unhappy, but I really didn't know the constituents of my internal world, so finding this anger shocked me. I marched up to Goenka at one point and, looking him in the eye, I said, "I never used to be an angry person before I



started to meditate.” I laid the blame on him, exactly where I felt it belonged. When I got through the distress of facing this newly discovered wealth of anger, I found out that the actual freedom was in recognizing it without shame, without falling into it, without identifying with it.

That’s what real kindness is. We can get caught in thinking that kindness means that we can only smile and acquiesce or be complacent and passive. We’re confusing action and motivation. We cultivate kindness as the basis of our intention, so that our motives are increasingly about connection rather than fear and alienation. To find what we feel is the best response in a particular situation demands mindfulness in a bigger context. Such larger mindfulness means it’s possible that we could come from a genuinely kind place and also have an intensity or fierceness in our actions if the context invites it.

**BUDDHADHARMA:** So you would make a sharp distinction between mindfulness and hypervigilant management of emotion?

**SHARON SALZBERG:** Yes, very much so.

**BUDDHADHARMA:** Mindfulness allows for mistakes, does it not? One might end up expressing anger, as you did with Goenka, and some kind of discovery could result. If you’re in an intense relationship, like raising a teenager, you can’t go off and find a cushion every time an emotion arises. Trying hard to be skillful with every emotion at every moment...

**JOHN TARRANT:** That would be the real mistake.

**BUDDHADHARMA:** Often our strongest emotions come up with the people we’re closest to. If you’re raising children, for example, you have plenty of opportunities to see your emotional framework writ large, to see how often your emotions are a way to lay your worldview down on others.

**JOHN TARRANT:** Yes, we seem to like to interfere with other people’s business. There’s an interesting way in which spiritual people, not just Buddhists, can be sneaky about their emotions, validating them by reprimanding other people, which is usually not a path to wisdom. Families make it hard to get away with that, and it seems you can’t raise a child without making an idiot of yourself. For that matter, you can’t love without making an idiot of yourself. It’s a perfect joining of things. It’s not a mistake.

**JUDITH SIMMER-BROWN:** I was in a Buddhist-Christian dialogue about ten years ago, and one of the longtime Trappist monks said with great pride that he couldn’t remember the last time he was angry. I muttered under my breath that he obviously didn’t have a family. If you create a bubble around yourself and think that having or expressing emotions is a problem, that’s a sad life. Our emotions carry our very best features, and as Ponlop Rinpoche was saying earlier, they are fundamentally wisdom. Chögyam Trungpa once said that emotions are like a game we started because

we just enjoyed them so much, and then they got out of hand. We became afraid of them. But at bottom they are a vivid display of our fundamental wisdom and brilliance. We forget that we created them in the first place, because of all the extra baggage they carry.

It’s a blessing to be in situations that drive you crazy, because it helps you develop a deeper heart. Being a wife and mother has forced me to take greater responsibility for the games I started. These people in my life who push my buttons are my greatest teachers and dearest friends. I’m grateful that I can remember vividly the last time I was angry.

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** Not all monks are angry-free, by the way. In my experience, the Vajrayana masters are always angry [laughter]. Ever since Tilopa, they’ve been shouting. I’m just kidding, of course.

**JOHN TARRANT:** The Vajrayana tradition and the koan tradition seem to me to have some similarities. You meet the surprise and wonder of life as it arises, finding out what instructions life has for you rather than what instructions you have for managing life.

**BUDDHADHARMA:** We’ve talked about mindfulness and attention to emotions. There is also an aspect of Buddhist practice that has to do with cultivating certain emotions. Is it necessary to practice mindfulness effectively before cultivating loving-kindness?

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** I’ve been teaching three steps in working with emotions, inspired by the Buddhist teachings. The first step is to have a mindful gap. Usually when we experience any emotions, we just embrace them and become that emotion. There’s no gap between you and the emotion. It’s very helpful to notice, “Oh! I am experiencing an emotion here.” It slows down the speed and gives you room.

Even in the moment when you experience the most destructive emotion, such as rage, if you can penetrate to its essence you find tremendous space and energy, luminosity. —Ponlop Rinpoche



One of the benefits of Buddhist meditation is that it allows you to just sit with an emotion, to experience it, rather than feel you have to do something with it or get rid of it. —Judith Simmer-Brown



Once you have this gap, you can see the emotion clearly. That's the second step: seeing clearly. This allows you to see what kind of skillful means you might apply, what kind of wisdom might make the emotion useful and beneficial. The third step is letting go. You let go of your fear, your anger, your jealousy. You don't need to keep them.

**SHARON SALZBERG:** It is helpful to address whether it's necessary to do mindfulness practice before cultivating positive emotions. I've seen so many people for whom the process is done in reverse. Mindfulness and loving-kindness are so clearly reciprocal and mutually supportive. There are many people whose mindfulness is challenged by a corrosive habit of self-judgment, criticism, and self-hatred. Therefore, it is quite hard to come to a space of being mindful of very difficult and challenging emotions. For people like that, which is many of us, loving-kindness or compassion practice actually creates the ground out of which they're more able to do mindfulness genuinely.

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** That's very true.

**JOHN TARRANT:** In koan practice you find mindfulness practice at times, but also kindness. In the beginning, when somebody starts hanging out with a standard koan like, "The whole world is medicine. What is the self?" they will go through all the usual concentration phenomena, but then they might have some sort of transformation, which is prajna emerging. At the same time, they may also just find themselves kinder. It's based on prajna, but sometimes the transformation can start happening in the darkness in a nonrational way. It's a kind of creative move by the universe that happens when you expose yourself to it. What I like about koans is that they have an unpredictable nonlinear effect, like poems or music do.

The truth is that, as you keep going deeper into the meditation path, the categories—mindfulness, awareness, loving-kindness—just slide around. There are fewer boundary lines and categories. Your feet find a path, and the path rises to meet your feet.

**JUDITH SIMMER-BROWN:** These various elements are mutually supportive. The clear-seeing that Rinpoche was talking about gives us a kind of *aha!* experience that reveals the

contrast between habitual patterns and a fresh emotional life, and that allows us to act with loving-kindness in our relations with others, rather than obsess about the people who have insulted us or attracted us, or whatever. Kindness and attention work so closely together it becomes hard to separate them.

**JOHN TARRANT:** Yes. Loving-kindness is a practice, but at the same time if you really pay attention you might find, as I do with koan work, that kindness starts coming up from below. You suddenly find you have a loving attitude toward life. That happens because kindness is not something added to awareness. It's fundamental to the nature of awareness.

**BUDDHADHARMA:** That suggests that our traditional ideas about emotions being kind of goeey and awareness being dry in fact fall apart.

**JOHN TARRANT:** The opposition between paying attention and cultivating loving-kindness ultimately falls away.

**JUDITH SIMMER-BROWN:** The distortion of our clear-seeing is part of the painfulness of emotion. We are removed from the direct experience of the way things are. The painful way we experience emotions and our distorted view of reality are completely intermingled.

**BUDDHADHARMA:** So if you lose the distortion, you wouldn't necessarily lose the intensity of emotion, but you would experience it differently?

**JUDITH SIMMER-BROWN:** The energy is completely different without the distortion. Practice helps you see just how much you are caught in your own little house of mirrors, how totally you distort your perspective in the midst of intense emotion.

**BUDDHADHARMA:** How do we find the wisdom in emotion, as several of you have been hinting is possible?

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** From the Vajrayana point of view, it's a little bit like what John said about koan practice. We work mostly from the prajna side of things, but at the same time we employ special skillful means to see the true energy of emotions. Even in the moment when you experience the most destructive emotion, such as rage, if you can penetrate to its essence you find tremendous space and energy, luminosity.

Many of the Vajrayana practices suggest that we not abandon the emotions but rather work with their pure energy. The pure energy will lead us to a complete state of awakening, because emotions are primordially free. The intensity of emotions has a quality of sudden awakening, right here within the very moment of samsaric experience. From the Vajrayana point of view, all the practices are directed toward seeing the essence of emotion rather than working with the conceptual or judgmental aspect of mind. We can go beyond that and see the power of the raw and naked state of emotions.

**BUDDHADHARMA:** When a surge of emotion comes up, then, it always presents the possibility of awakening?

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** It's already in the state of awakening. We just have to discover that. From the Mahayana perspective, we would think in terms of transforming, whereas in Vajrayana we don't need to transform anything. In Mahayana, you work with emotions in a more conceptual way. In Vajrayana, you go straight to the naked state of the emotions, within which we find tremendous space, emptiness, clarity, luminosity, and vividness—what we call the clear light mind.

**JOHN TARRANT:** I would say that koans are more on that Vajrayana side of things too.

**BUDDHADHARMA:** Where you're breaking down concepts utterly.

**JOHN TARRANT:** Well, you recognize something that was already there that you hadn't noticed.

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** Exactly.

**JUDITH SIMMER-BROWN:** Doesn't the recognition also carry with it a kind of enjoyment?

**JOHN TARRANT:** Yes, but I don't know if at that point you would call it emotion. There's delight, a large sense of life. It's not a checked-out kind of bliss. It's more appreciation and relish.

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** The naked and raw state of emotions has the quality of bliss and emptiness inseparable, which is beyond joy versus agony. It's self-liberation, self-freeing.

Emotions free themselves. We don't need to free them.

**BUDDHADHARMA:** We're back to not being able to get rid of the emotions.

**JUDITH SIMMER-BROWN:** You don't want to.

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** You don't need to.

**JUDITH SIMMER-BROWN:** So there's nothing to be done?

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** The problem is, you're trying too hard. Just relax and enjoy the wild ride [laughter].

**BUDDHADHARMA:** That's sublime, but I know that some of us are also in need of a first-aid kit for those times when we have a volcanic upsurge of emotion and feel inadequate in the face of it. Are there one or two things we ought to remember at those moments to recall the clarity and creativity, the wisdom you've all been talking about?

**SHARON SALZBERG:** I would say that one of the first things to do is to notice the add-ons. There's the arising of the emotion, which is its own state, but on top of that we add a future, we add a certain kind of reaction, like shame or exaggeration. Or perhaps we add comparison, by holding ourselves up to an ideal we're not attaining. We certainly add a sense of self—I'm such an angry person. We just add and add. So probably the first thing to try to do is to release some of those add-ons, so we can come back to the original experience. Then we can maybe let ourselves be with the basic emotion in as mindful a way as possible. That will open up a little space, and in that space, we see can options.

That reminds me of an article I saw in the *New York Times* about mindfulness in the classroom. One of the fifth graders was asked, "What is mindfulness?" And he said, "Mindfulness means not hitting someone in the mouth." I thought that was a fantastic answer. It implies knowing what you're feeling when you're feeling it, not fifteen consequential actions later. It implies having a relationship to that feeling, so you're not completely lost in it and identified with it. It implies being able to make some choices. Mindfulness is not hitting someone in the mouth. That's my new working definition of mindfulness.

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** That's a great koan. 

It's important to notice what we add on to the emotion—a future, reactions like shame, a sense of self. If we can release some of those add-ons, that will open up a little space. —Sharon Salzberg

