

● THE BUDDHIST REVIEW

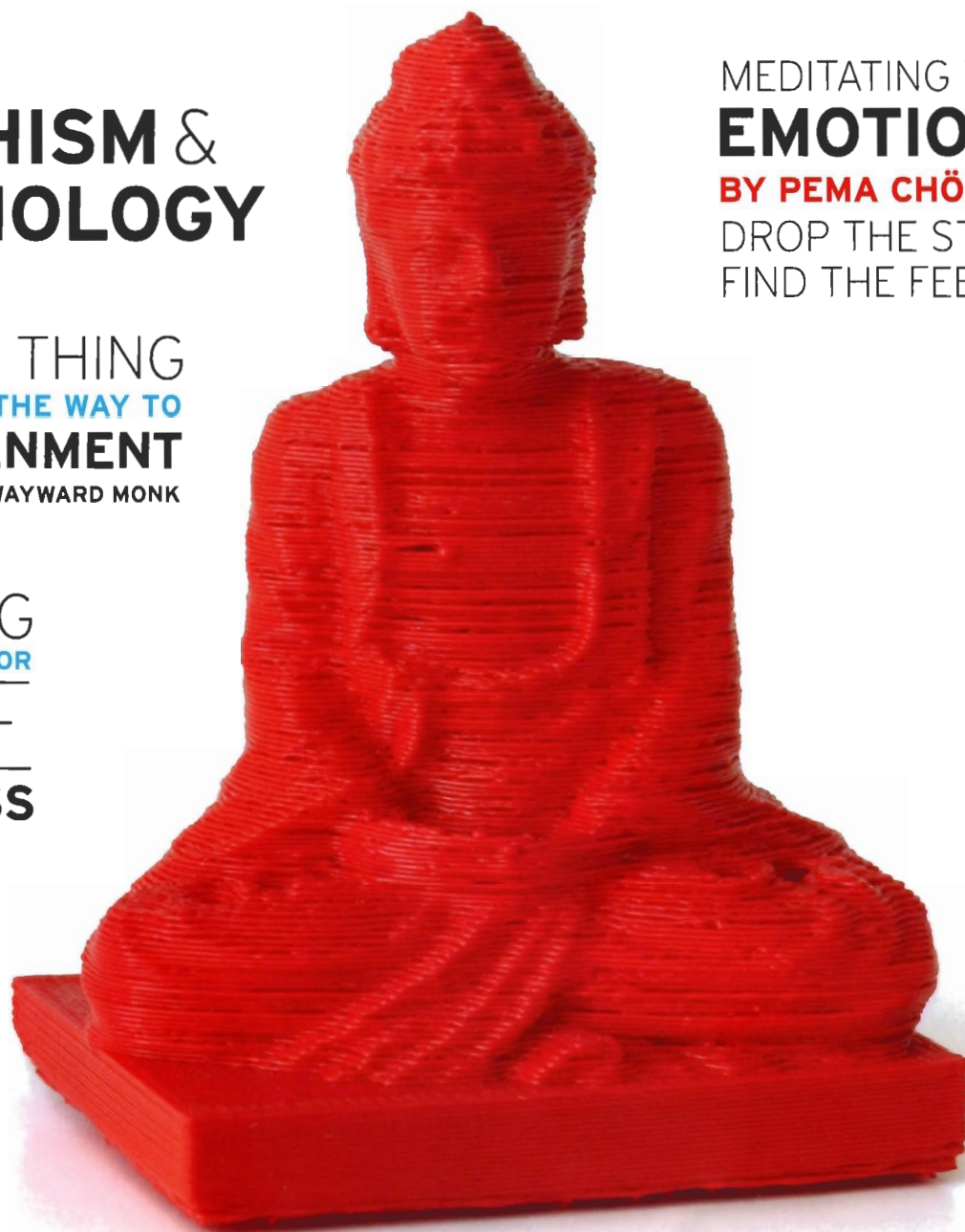
SUMMER 2013

# tricycle

## BUDDHISM & TECHNOLOGY

A FUNNY THING  
HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO  
ENLIGHTENMENT  
CONFESSIONS OF A WAYWARD MONK

CREATING  
THE CONDITIONS FOR  
TRUE  
HAPPINESS



MEDITATING WITH  
**EMOTIONS**  
BY PEMA CHÖDRÖN  
DROP THE STORY  
FIND THE FEELING



# MEDITATING WITH EMOTIONS

DROP THE STORY AND FIND THE FEELING.

BY PEMA CHÖDRÖN | PHOTOGRAPHS BY BILL ARMSTRONG

We all have emotional experiences that feel terrifying, and in order to experience our natural state, we have to be willing to experience these emotions—to actually experience our ego and our ego clinging. This may feel disturbing and negative, or even insane. Most of us, consciously or unconsciously, would like meditation to be a chill-out session where we don't have to relate to unpleasantness. Actually, a lot of people have the misunderstanding that this is what meditation is about. They believe meditation includes everything except that which feels bad. And if something does feel bad, you're supposed to label it "thinking" and shove it away or hit it on the head with a mallet. When you feel even the slightest hint of panic that you're about to feel or experience something unpleasant, you use the label "thinking" as a way to repress it, and you rush back to the object of meditation, hoping that you never have to go into this uncomfortable place.

Ponlop Rinpoche said, "In the process of uncovering buddhanature, in the process of uncovering our open, unfixated quality of our mind, we have to be willing to get our hands dirty." In other words, he was saying that we need to be willing to work with our disturbing emotions, the ones that feel entirely dark. But Ponlop Rinpoche added something really important to this statement. He said that without having a direct experience of our emotions, we can never touch the heart of buddhanature. We can never actually hear the message of awakening. The only way out, so to speak, is through. But what does this word "experiencing" mean? And how can we experience emotions? How can we experience this negative, disturbing, unsettling stuff that we generally avoid? How do we get our hands dirty with them?

Ponlop Rinpoche says, "It's only by really tasting your experience of emotions that you get a taste of enlightenment." Buddhanature and the natural state are not just made up of happy, sweet emotions; buddhanature includes everything. It's the calm, and the disturbed, and the roiled up, and the still; it's the bitter and the sweet, the comfortable and the uncomfortable. Buddhanature includes opening to all of these things, and it's found in the midst of all of them.

Because we perceive dualistically and have this black-or-white thinking where we label things either "good" or "bad," we shut down when strong energy arises. We associate this strong energy

with different thoughts—memories of the past or fantasies about the future—and then this somewhat indescribable thing happens, which we call "feeling an emotion." Emotions, in essence, are just pure energy, but because of dualistic perception we identify the emotion as "me," and it gets very locked in.

The energy gets frozen. Trungpa Rinpoche once said, "Emotions are composed of energy, which can be likened to water, and a dualistic thought process, which could be likened to pigment or paint. When energy and thought are mixed together, they become vivid and colorful emotions. Concept gives the energy a particular location, a sense of relationship, which makes the emotions vivid and strong. Fundamentally, the reason emotions are discomforting, painful, frustrating is that our relationship to the emotions is not quite clear."

This is to say that energy itself is not a problem. We always associate our emotions with thoughts—we're scared of something, or we're angry at somebody, or we're feeling lonely or ashamed or lustful in relationship with either ourselves or somebody else. Our emotions have a lot of mental conversation—and, in my experience, it is often hard to discern between what is the thought and what is the emotion. In any given sitting period, in any given half hour of our lives, there are a lot of things that come and go. But we don't need to try so hard to sort it all out. We don't have to attach so much meaning to what arises, and we also don't have to identify with our emotions so strongly. All we need to do is allow ourselves to experience the energy—and in time it will move through you. It will. But we need to experience the emotion—not think about the emotion. It's the same thing that I've been talking about with the breath: experiencing the breath going in and out, trying to find a way to breathe in and out without thinking about the breath or conceptualizing the breath or watching the breath.

I often describe this as having a "felt sense" of our emotions. This term "felt sense" may not really be the right term for you. For instance, you could have an experience of dread; you likely carry a story line about being afraid of something that's about to happen. But if there is a way that you can interrupt the conversation through your meditation training, even for a few moments, then you can have an actual experience of dread—a nonverbal



experience. You can allow yourself to become physically aware of dread. Feel it; feel the clenching and tightness. It can even go deeper than that: you might have a textural experience of dread as tingling or hot, a coldness or sharpness in your chest.

One of my first experiences of really feeling an emotion was very interesting. I was in a period of a lot of distress that I couldn't get away from. This happens in our life, frequently. The person who was triggering me wasn't going away. It was at Gampo Abbey, where I live. And we had to live with each other and in pretty close quarters, and what was being triggered were old memories and conditioning. This is often the case with strong emotions. There's a lot locked in us. It can be quite irrational. It's like we're dogs who hear certain sounds and freak out. We see a certain facial expression, or someone treats us in a certain way, or there's just the right tone of voice, or someone reminds us of something, and out of the blue there's this whole felt sense of dread or anger or deep sadness. Usually we're not even aware of it; we're simply reacting the way we always have.

In this particular instance, what was being triggered for me was a feeling of helplessness, because this woman disliked me intensely and wouldn't talk to me about it. The situation was bringing up feelings of powerlessness, of not being able to get things under control, of not being able to make everything all right. I couldn't get her to like me, and I couldn't even get her to talk about it. There was no way that my usual strategies were going to work, so I was just naked with this recurring dread. I met her in

the halls constantly; she'd walk by coldly, and boy, it would bring up what felt like centuries of conditioning and perceived hurts.

I thought to myself, "This is my big chance. Maybe if I really go into this, I won't ever have this issue come up again in this lifetime or any other lifetime." So one night I went to the meditation hall. I sat all night long because I was in so much pain and I didn't know what else to do. I didn't think much at all, because I was in so much pain. Sometimes pain completely knocks thoughts out; you're sitting in the pain, and it's like you're speechless at all levels.

As I sat, I began to have this quality of experiencing what I was going through with this woman. I had a body memory of being a very little child, but it wasn't like I was remembering a traumatic experience or anything. I just realized—at a cellular level—that my entire ego structure, my entire personality, was designed never to go to this particular feeling. I began to experience a deep feeling of inadequacy, like I wasn't OK. I realized that what I was experiencing was a complete death to ego.

From that felt experience, I began to realize the power of getting sidetracked with words, of getting sidetracked with thoughts about our emotions. We get completely sidetracked with our strategies, which are always designed to move away from the felt experience. So whether it's a humdinger of an emotion, a kind of core pain to our ego structure such as mine was, or whether it's any strong emotion or even a milder emotion, it's so easy for us to get stuck and wrapped up in the story and

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thoughts around the emotion. From there, the emotions escalate and enslave us.

You have to get dirty with your emotions. Meditation allows us to feel them, live them, and taste them completely. It gives us a lot of insight into why we do the things we do and why other people do the things they do. Out of this insight, compassion is born. This insight also begins to open the doorway to buddhanature and the complete, open spaciousness that's available when we're not blocking our feelings. Once I was able to allow myself to have a felt sense of my emotions, it was completely liberating.


As Ponlop Rinpoche said, "Until you begin to really relate with the unfavorable or the unpleasant things as part of your meditation—they're not the whole thing—but until you start working with them, you don't really have the quality of being on a path of awakening."

One of the things that causes us to get so lost in our emotions is that we attach our stories to them. I discovered quite a while back that the escalation of emotions—where you're really in the river, swept away, losing all your perspective, totally carried away by loneliness and anger and despair—is fueled by the story line. Our emotions are like the stone thrown into the water, without the rings. An emotion, without the story, is immediate, sharp, and raw. The direct experience of the emotion creates no ripples. But with the story line, the ripples get bigger and bigger and go out farther and farther, and actually turn into waves and hurricane-velocity winds. The story line really churns things up. You know how you might put on music in order to make yourself cry? You play a particular song, and you just milk the sadness. Our

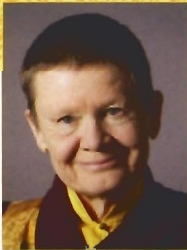
story lines are like that, except we don't need music. We have our mind and our thoughts, and they can rev up the emotions. But if we use our emotions as the object of meditation, as our friend and support, it's like standing on the bank of the river and observing.

At Gampo Abbey, there are flagpoles on the cliffs above the ocean. We keep experimenting with putting flags out there, because that's the point of flagpoles. Sometimes the weather is very calm, and we experience these lovely flags in the stillness of slight wind. Other times there are incredibly high winds, and the flags get shredded in a very short time. The image of the flagpole and the flag is a great one for working with thoughts and emotions, because the flagpole is steady and holds, and then the winds are whipping the flags all over the place, tearing them to shreds—that's usually our predicament. We are the flags, and the wind is just whipping us around. We're just whipped here and there and all over the place. And our emotions are escalating, our thoughts are all over the place. But using thoughts or emotions themselves as the object of meditation is experiencing life from the perspective of the flagpole. At Gampo Abbey, we never have to get new flagpoles. Even with hurricane-velocity winds, the flagpoles stay up on the cliffs. ▼

Pema Chödrön is an ordained nun, author, and teacher in the Shambhala Buddhist lineage. She is resident and teacher at Gampo Abbey, a monastery on Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia, Canada. This article was excerpted from *How to Meditate: A Practical Guide to Making Friends with Your Mind* by Pema Chödrön © 2013. Reprinted with permission of Sounds True.



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in honor of  
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