

### Opening The Injured Heart - Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche

*The way to live with joy in a painful world  
is not by shutting down or closing off  
—just the opposite.*

**Love is never the culprit. An open heart only  
provides joy, never suffering.**

A self-destructive story we may tell ourselves when we've been hurt is that our open heart itself was the cause of our suffering. This is a common scenario in romantic love, for example. In the beginning, our love is so innocent and trusting, but when things don't work out the way we had hoped, we can become bitter and jaded about love itself. We can blame love for our hurt and then have a hard time opening our heart toward others. But love is never the culprit. An open heart only provides joy, never suffering. If a few experiences of being disappointed make us give up on love altogether, our world will become dark and gloomy, even if everything else in our life works out the way we want. Therefore, to avoid this outcome, we have to investigate what has really happened, setting our story lines aside as much as possible. We need to look at cause and effect objectively, until we are able to blame whatever deserves blame—whether it's our unreasonable attachments, our expectations, or our lack of wisdom and skillful means. When we use our mind to prove love not guilty in this way, then our heart will once again be free to love—from one person, to many people, and eventually to all sentient beings.

A similar descent into jadedness can happen with children as they grow up. Young children who are brought up in good circumstances feel a lot of love for their parents, for the world, for their games and activities, and so on. They maintain this innocent openness until they get older and meet the complex reality of the world. Then the innocent phase comes

to an end, and they are faced with a challenge. At this point, they need to develop wisdom to keep that warm feeling flowing in the heart. Otherwise, they may interpret their loss of innocence as evidence that they have awakened from some kind of self-delusion: "Now it is time to wake up and accept the grim facts of life, the harsh reality of the world," they may think. With such thoughts, it is natural for them to feel foolish about their naiveté and gullibility, and they may blame their disappointment on their openness of heart. The world is indeed full of harsh realities, but that is no justification for shutting down into our small, bitter self. On the contrary, the painful nature of samsara is the most important reason for us to find ways to keep our hearts continually warm with tsewa.

To reopen our heart after a deep hurt or a painful disillusionment can take a long time, even if we understand how necessary it is to do so. Even when we apply the effective methods of the dharma, such as those mentioned earlier, we may find that our thoughts still return to whatever self-destructive story we were telling ourselves. Because we have given a lot of energy to perpetuating these stories, there will still be momentum for them to keep resurfacing and occasionally carry us away. We have to be patient with this process. In our mind, thoughts are continually arising and dissolving, arising and dissolving. The thoughts that make up the story behind our injured heart are no different. But if we just give these thoughts space to arise and dissolve, they will eventually wear themselves out. The story will lose its feeling of reality and it will no longer be able to convince us. The key here is to focus on our tender heart and not pay so much attention to the story. If we do so, our tsewa eventually will overcome our confused and limited way of looking at things. We will have more confidence in tsewa and thus more confidence in ourselves. This confidence will be invaluable in carrying us forward along our spiritual journey.

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Although they may take a long time to let go of completely, the most painful forms of grudge or disappointment can be the easiest for us to make progress with. The acute pain they cause gives us a lot of incentive to work with them. But in addition to these more blatant hurts, we can hold on to other forms of resentment that also block the flow of tsewa from our heart.

One of the most common causes of resentment is when we feel our love and tenderness are not reciprocated. It's as if our tsewa comes with an implied condition—we can continue to keep our heart open only if the other party meets this expectation. This is not to say that reciprocation isn't important. Gratitude, appreciation, and the willingness to reciprocate are signs of good character. Those who are strong in these qualities are well respected, and deservedly so. Also, mutual reciprocation gives people a greater sense of solidarity with each other.

But none of this should make reciprocation a condition for our expressing tsewa. Parents are able to love their young children, even before good character has formed. If parents always needed reciprocation, they couldn't even begin parenthood. After all, babies do not reciprocate. We hope that our children will eventually become mature enough to know the value of gratitude and become worthy of our respect in this way. But until then, we never even think of making reciprocation a requirement.

When it comes to expressing our tender heart, we should try to have the same openness and tolerance that parents have with small children. This openness is based on appreciating tsewa as the source of all happiness, including our own. As the great sage Shantideva said, "If you make yourself a delicious meal, will you expect gratitude from yourself?" If you apply your power of discernment to your experience, you will see how tsewa is its own reward and how keeping your heart filled with tenderness is itself the greatest joy. If others respond well to your warmth, that is a bonus, but the continued flow of your tsewa shouldn't be based on the response.

If we can't recognize the joy in tsewa, it's easy for us to get confused about why we are keeping our heart open. Are we doing it because we want to be

good, because we're "supposed to be" loving and compassionate? Are we doing it because of our ideas about karma, or because we've made some kind of commitment or vow? Are we doing it in response to some kind of pressure? If any of these become our primary motivation for expressing tsewa, then we may well overlook how joyful it is to have a tender heart. Our love will be based on concepts, not on our deep, heartfelt connection to the source of everything positive in the world.

Sometimes we don't open our heart to others because we feel they are unworthy of our tender feelings. We are full of love and warmth, we think, but not everyone deserves our tsewa. Some people aren't pure enough vessels to merit our outpouring of love and affection. They lack this or that qualification. If we are not careful, our critical mind will come up with a long list of requirements. Then our tsewa, which has the potential to flow limitlessly, will be walled in by our biases. That is not intelligence; it is ignorance. When we let the natural expression of our tender heart be handcuffed to a set of qualifications, we are putting our small, confused self in charge. We are forgetting that all beings are equally in need of tsewa because all beings—ourselves included—are constantly longing to be happy and free from suffering.

We are also forgetting the equality of all beings when we allow prejudices to tighten our heart. We may block our tsewa because of religion, gender, nationality, cultural differences, political differences, race, species, and so on. These prejudices can be very subtle, manifesting as a slight contraction or a feeling of indifference. They may not stand out as anything worth noticing, much less remedying. But these subtle blockages hinder our tsewa, and thus hinder our own happiness and our path to enlightenment. Therefore, we need to apply continual mindfulness and vigilant introspection to make sure we don't come under the sway of any form of prejudice.

We need to be wary of closing our heart not only with people we know or encounter, but even with those we have never met or seen in person. It seems natural to withhold tsewa from a corrupt politician or ruthless war criminal that we read about in the news. But by doing so, we reverse

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our progress toward realizing the full capacity of our tender heart. Even if all our friends, or all of society, supports our closing down toward certain “evil” people, we have to put things in proper perspective, remembering the law of karma and choosing to have a bigger view of things. Otherwise, we won’t be able to arouse genuine bodhicitta, the aspiration to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all beings without exception.

The great Tibetan teacher Dromtonpa was once circumambulating a temple with a few of his disciples. Circumambulation is a traditional practice of showing respect to an object of veneration. At the outer edge of the circumambulation path, a stray dog was lying on the ground. Instead of walking down the middle of the path, Dromtonpa purposely went around the dog so as to include it in the circle of veneration. When one of his disciples asked him why he was paying such respect to a stray dog, Dromtonpa said, “I’m not paying respect to a dog. I’m paying respect to a being whose nature is enlightened.” This is how a sage sees other beings. However they may temporarily appear or behave, all sentient beings have the seed of enlightenment in their tender heart. Their innate tsewa may be thickly obscured, but it is still there. If we look at things from a wider perspective, we will know that there is something to venerate in everyone.

Our biases can come up not only in giving tsewa, but in receiving it as well. Sometimes we only want to receive tenderness and support from special people, an exclusive group that is worthy of giving that to us. But we are not like flowers that can only blossom if they receive rays of light from the sun. That is too limited a view. We can blossom by receiving tsewa from anyone, from the highest to the lowest. If we are too picky about whom we receive warmth from, then we may even lose the affection of those we do admit to our heart. For it will become harder and harder for the latter to meet our standards and expectations.

Sometimes we turn away from others’ tsewa because we are suspicious. Why is this person being so nice to me? What’s behind his friendly expressions? This person doesn’t even know me. What could he want? Is he planning to take advantage of me? So much paranoia can manifest when someone spontaneously and genuinely tries

to be friendly with us. Of course, people can have ulterior motives, but 99 percent of the time, they are simply expressing the natural human desire to connect with one another. Why turn that into something else, something from which we need to protect ourselves?

If we let the 1 percent spoil the other 99 percent, we are letting our suspiciousness color all our relations. On one hand, we always long for love in our lives. We know we can’t be happy if we isolate ourselves. But on the other hand, we feel that we’re taking a big risk by opening up to receive tsewa. We have to recognize that this risk—which is usually tiny—is a risk well worth taking. What do we think we have to lose? Whatever it could be, that loss is nothing compared to the pain of keeping our heart closed in fear and paranoia.

At other times, we may feel that we just don’t deserve love. Somehow we’re fake, and when our true colors are exposed, we’ll be rejected. Inside we may feel shaky and weak. In this state, it’s very hard to open up to receiving warmth from anybody. This is when we have to remember that no one is undeserving. We are no worse than the dog that Dromtonpa circumambulated. We are also no better—everyone has the same precious tsewa. There is nothing fake about what lies at the core of all our hearts. We may have a lot of negative habits and shameful thoughts, but they are not our true colors.

As you remove impediments to giving and receiving tsewa, your mind and your life will be transformed. As you let go of small-minded stories and biases, you will be more and more amazed at how much warmth there is in this world. You will find so many beings to whom you can reach out and so many who can touch you as well. Wherever you stay or go, you will be able to make a difference in many others’ lives, and many others will be able to make a difference in your life. When you orient yourself to tsewa, what you can give and receive is boundless.



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