

The Zone

The Zone Demystified

The following is a written interview with noted stress and performance researcher Doc Childre, founder of the Institute of HeartMath, Chairman and co-CEO of Quantum Intech and author of *The HeartMath Solution*, *Overcoming Emotional Chaos*, *Transforming Anger*, and *Transforming Stress*.

Doc is interviewed by Deborah Rozman, Ph.D. psychologist, CEO of HeartMath LLC, author of numerous books and editor of the *Managing Emotions: Golf's Next Frontier*.

Debbie: *HeartMath research is studying the levels of the “Zone” and its relationship to increased performance. It’s getting respect and attention from doctors, executives, sports and golf professionals. Doc, can you talk about how you see the Zone?*

Doc: People have talked about “getting in the zone” for years and the zone has become a popular buzz word with dozens of books written on it. But what the “zone” actually is has been hard to pin down, leaving it mysterious and almost unapproachable. Our research suggests that people have within them a place of higher consciousness where life and all kinds of experiences can be processed from another level of intelligence, which we term *heart intelligence*. It’s a state of heart/brain synchronization that’s within all people. There have been many different disciplines to approach it - spiritual and yoga disciplines, breathing, visualization, physical training, etc. These approaches are all akin to each other, yet describe different slices of the pie. They all lead to a higher intelligence potential that is within the human capacity to unfold. The zone is not a place - *it’s a state of consciousness where your higher motor faculties and intuition merge in liquid coordination*. You don’t just push a button to get there. Entering the zone is an internal developmental process, though people have random heightened experiences of the zone giving confirmation that there is such a state.

Many have experienced times while writing, giving talks, playing music, playing sports, etc., when they felt an intuitive connection with what they were doing and everything flowed. Or days that they moved through their stresses in a liquid way with minimum resistance and energy drain. Or days that flowed with positive synchronicities. These are all aspects of connecting with your heart intelligence which unfolds zone awareness. As people understand the zone as a progressive state of connecting with heart intelligence rather than a one-shot place of magical peak experience, then zone achievement becomes more hopeful and the process more simple.

Debbie: *How do you start to unfold zone awareness?*

Doc: There is a graduated and practical process for increasing zone awareness potential. It starts with the understanding and management of your emotions. Without stepping up the management and balance of your emotional system in day-to-day life, you won’t have enough internal power to shift to upgraded levels of zone consciousness.



A Change of Heart Changes Everything

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“Feeling has a direct correlation to ease of play or as I call it “instinctive golf.” Insecurity and self doubt can immediately skew your motor skills. The fact is that mental and golf swing training is often not enough to maintain a consistent emotional balance. You have to address emotions directly. HeartMath techniques show how you can take control of your emotions, enabling you to make dramatic improvements in your game. I put my students from top level professionals and collegians to amateurs on the launch monitor before and after their HeartMath practice, and most see their club head speed increase and ball flight control improve. We also use the emWave Pro software outdoors before hitting real time golf shots. Again distance and ball flight control improve with remarkable consistency. But it wasn’t until I used HeartMath with my family and friends and saw the emotional benefits outside of golf did it sink in for me that something incredible was happening.”

—Joe Thiel
PGA Master Professional,
Golf Magazine Top 100 Teacher,
Golf Driving Range Magazine
top 50 teacher,
director of The PGA Golf and
Learning Center in Olympia, WA
and certified HeartMath
golf instructor.

It’s important to understand there’s a big difference between what people call the float zone (airy, mushy) and the high performance zone, which is relaxed yet instantly supplies the appropriate energy for the situation at hand. It’s a cued up bio-response state, a heart intelligence activation where your mental, emotional and physical systems are working energetically in sync, like a well-oiled machine. This state is often discovered by people in sports because of keyed-up emotional commitment. But sports offers just one of the potentials of zone consciousness. If you take it out of the sports context, and practice creating balance and flow in your emotional interactions with yourself, other people, and your work, you build a bottom-line level for advancing your performance in sports or any endeavor. This is what HeartMath research is about. HeartMath’s clinically proven techniques like Quick Coherence® and Heart Lock-In® are designed to help you connect more with your heart intelligence to manage your emotions and unfold zone awareness potential.

Debbie: *Most golf training focuses on the mechanics of the game and the mental game. You talk about managing the emotions as though they are separate from the mind. Why are the emotions different?*

Doc: Since it takes mental, emotional and physical synchronization to increase zone potential, we have to look at the wholeness of the game - not just the mental game (focus, visualization, memory recall) or the physical game (mechanics, clubs, nutrition, exercise). Too much emphasis has been put on mind focus and will power, when understanding and upgrading feelings and emotions is the key to increasing zone capacity. In the chase for quick fixes, people tend to want an easy way out that avoids emotional responsibility. Our research approach has been to consider the ramifications and accumulative effects of unresolved emotions in sports and all areas of your life. When you’re teeing off, your mind can be thinking positive thoughts or directing your breathing, while your emotions are still processing that needed business deal which didn’t happen or that looping negative emotional drain from unsettled relationship undercurrents. How you deal with frustrations at work, anxieties that have accumulated with family, or fears about health issues will affect how you perform in your game over six months or a year period, though in some isolated games it may not.

Sure, there are types of people who use their mind or will power to shut off emotional disturbances that come up in their personal worlds from family, work, or their game. Shutting off emotions gives a false feeling that you are detached from your emotions and that they don’t have any affect on your game. But these unsettled emotional currents don’t just vaporize. They can play out in your subconscious and create undercurrents in your heart rhythms that cause unwanted effects in your game (off timing, bad swing shots, the yips), and loss of emotional rhythm that’s needed to sustain your confidence pitch.

As your confidence pitch is diminished, then increasing zone awareness can become much harder or impossible to achieve. Your game and life will improve as you learn to take out the accumulative effects of subconscious emotional processing. Clearing emotional undercurrents takes connecting more with your heart intelligence. Our books *Overcoming Emotional Chaos*, *Transforming Anger* and *Transforming Stress* can help with this process. As you practice the tools in these books, you will save and accumulate the energy you need to increase development of zone awareness. Internal energy economy, particularly emotional energy economy, will be a hallmark of the next round of great players and golf scholars of the future.

“What initially drew us to HeartMath was the idea of the heart as a source of power for emotional management and intuitive intelligence that we can bring to our golf games and to those we coach. We found that practice of the HeartMath tools will shift you out of a downward spiral into an upward spiral fast. You will also learn how to slow down your emotional responses so the old stored patterns and reflexes stop controlling you, and you’ll start being your own best “emotion coach.” Practice visualizing and feeling your good shots while you use Quick Coherence with the emWave Pro heart rhythm feedback software. See which feelings get you into the highest coherence and help you stay in the zone which the emWave Pro measures. You will build a new internal reference of emotional balance and an intuitive feel that you can reconnect to while you’re on the golf course.”

—Lynn Marriott and Pia Nilsson, Golf Digest Top 50 teachers, Directors of Vision 54/Coaching for the Future, and certified HeartMath golf instructors

Debbie: How did you go about researching the Zone?

Doc: Well, I started the Institute of HeartMath in the early ‘90s to research the physiology of stress and optimal performance. Over the years, our research in electrophysiology led to new understandings on the interactions between the heart, brain and nervous system and how these interactions impact reaction times and performance. We identified a measurable physiological state that underlies optimal performance and emotional stability called *psychophysiological coherence*—a state of synchronization between the heart, brain and nervous system. This measurable physiological state is an entry into unfolding levels of zone awareness. Here’s how it works.

Nerve impulses from the heart are received first at the base of the brain, and then move into the brain’s higher centers, affecting how you feel, perceive, think and perform. These nerve signals from the heart *are sensitive to emotional state*. Disordered heart signals generated by emotional disturbances send out-of-sync messages throughout the brain, draining energy and confidence, impairing coordination and reaction times. On the other hand, ordered heart signals generated by positive attitudes and feelings send synchronized messages throughout the brain which release neurotransmitters that increase mental clarity, energy and confidence, and improve coordination and reaction times. Our approach to zone training is to show you how to increase your capacity to draw in *psychophysiological coherence* right in the present moment -- when you need it most.

Debbie: Based on your research, you developed HeartMath® techniques and emWave Pro® software to help people achieve this. How do these tools work?

Doc: The techniques and software are designed to help you increase effective coordinated action in the *now*, whether in your golf game or in the game of life. They help you get into alignment with the intuitive intelligence of your heart. It’s important to understand that the heart is not just a blood pump. Neurocardiologists know that the heart has its own intrinsic nervous system or “little brain” that intuits, senses, feels, and remembers, and sends this information to the big brain. Yes, the heart is involved in “the feel of the game.” Sayings like, “put more heart into your game” and “play with your heart” have a solid physiological basis. That’s why Bobby Jones said by focusing on slowing down his heart and breathing, he was able to get to an emotional level where he could putt better. You can learn more about how to do this in our booklet *Managing Emotions: Golf’s Next Frontier*.

Debbie: How does the emWave Pro software give you objective feedback of when you’re in the Zone?

Doc: The emWave Pro is an interactive learning system with a pulse sensor that monitors and provides real time feedback of your heart rate variability (HRV) or heart rhythm pattern. HRV is used by doctors as an important indicator of stress levels as well as mental and emotional fitness levels. *Heart rhythm is different from heart rate*. Your heart rate changes with every beat and the emWave Pro plots the beat-to-beat variations to reveal your heart rhythm pattern. The heart rhythm pattern reflects activity in your sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system, which together regulate and control 90% of your body’s involuntary functions—hormonal and immune response, digestion, and so forth. When you feel tension, anger, anxiety, stress, your heart rhythm pattern becomes jagged and disordered. When you manage and shift your emotional state to a positive attitude or

“We have to realize that when golfers play this game they are standing on a tee and often all they see is trouble, i.e. trees, OB, water, rough, bunkers. They are emotionally distracted, if not by the course then by the shot they need to play or the swing or the people with whom they are playing. The emWave Pro gives clear helpful techniques to help golfers get control of their emotions and helps to re-channel their energy positively. It will allow your best golf to come out more often and stay longer. I think you will get more joy out of the game with the help of the emWave Pro and that is why we play this great game. Conquering the emotions is just as important as fixing your swing and maybe more.

—Lsaird Small
2003 PGA Teacher of the Year,
Golf Magazine Top 100 teacher
and Director of the Pebble
Beach Golf Academy.

feeling, your heart rhythm pattern becomes more ordered and coherent.

The *emWave Pro* software teaches you the Quick Coherence technique to shift your emotional state and heart rhythm pattern. As you practice, you can watch on the computer screen as your heart rhythm pattern goes into the *psychophysiological coherence* mode (flow state or first level of the zone), which amplifies your clarity, intuitive flow and performance effectiveness. It also has three fun software games with different challenge levels to help you increase and sustain coherence. With practice, you’ll learn the feel of coherence and flow so you can shift back into that state when you need to at work, with family and friends, as well as on the golf course. This develops confidence that encourages you through the unfolding aspects of the zone. The *emWave Pro* can be used as a preparation before your golf game, similar to stretching and other exercises. It will help prevent choking by adding rhythm to your brain-muscle coordination and provide quicker energy recoup when under pressure.

Debbie: *Where do you see Zone training going to in the future?*

Doc: In the future, people will pursue the zone to access the power of their heart and spirit to increase intuition in daily decision-making, more so than just for sports. Sports is just one isolated aspect of zone possibilities. In a world with increasing stress factors, learning to clear more of the old and recent emotional undercurrents will increase self-security which translates into personal power and zone awareness potential. The mystery of the zone lies in the fact that people want to live and perform from a higher dimension of their consciousness without having done the bottom-line ground work: *increasing the alignment between their heart, mind and emotions and the art of flow in their personal lives, on and off the golf course or playing field.*

The skill of golf involves increased sensitivity. Sensitivity is the refined management of feelings. Your feelings can make or break your performance in life or any game. This is why I put so much emphasis on day-to-day emotional management, not just on the day of the game. It’s hard to get around it while trying to increase your zone awareness.

People often defer the realization that the stressors in their personal lives, workplaces, relationships make up the mental and emotional blocks between their present and desired state of performance. When this is realized, more will consider the management of emotions from their heart’s intelligence rather than from their mind. This is the difference *that makes the difference*. Most people try to manage emotions from the mind rather than from the heart, ending up with frustrated results, such as anxiety, anger, depression and low esteem. Your heart intelligence produces intuitive resolution to clear emotions, while the mind often represses and defers emotions, creating problems in other areas. Learning the difference is a most serious aspect of zone training.

By learning how to clear conscious or unconscious emotional drains, this clears your energetic system, increasing access and eligibility to that consciousness state referred to as the zone. As you increase your capacity to do this, then levels of zone experience will become less random and mysterious, and more subject to intentional development. If you want zone mastery, emotional energy economy in the game of life has to be included.