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Thich Nhat Hanh

TARA BRACH

RADICAL ACCEPTANCE

Awakening the Love that Heals Fear and Shame

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RADICAL ACCEPTANCE

By Tara Brach

True Refuge
Radical Acceptance
Radical Compassion
Trusting the Gold

RADICAL ACCEPTANCE

Awakening the Love that Heals Fear and Shame

TARA BRACH

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To my parents, who have graced my life
with their generous, loving hearts

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase each other
doesn't make any sense.

—Rumi

Foreword

You hold in your hands a beautiful invitation: to remember that it is possible to live your life with the wise and tender heart of a Buddha. In *Radical Acceptance,* Tara Brach graciously offers both healing words and transformative understanding, the fruits of her many years as a beloved meditation teacher and psychotherapist. Because she has immersed herself in the day-to-day work of reclaiming human dignity with heartfelt compassion and forgiveness, Tara's teachings are immediate and tangible; they melt the barriers that keep us from being fully alive.

In a stressful and competitive modern society that has fostered unworthiness, self-judgment and loss of the sacred for so many, the principles of Radical Acceptance articulated here are essential for reclaiming a joyful and liberated life. Through her rich stories and accounts of students and clients, through Tara's own personal journey and through the clear, systematic practices she offers, *Radical Acceptance* shows us wise ways to nurture ourselves, transform our sorrows and reclaim our wholeness.

Most importantly, *Radical Acceptance* reawakens us to our Buddha nature, the fundamental happiness and freedom that are the birthright of every human being. Read these pages slowly. Take their words and practices to heart. Let them guide you and bless your path.

Jack Kornfield
Spirit Rock Center
February 2003

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Introduction: Where Does It Hurt?

Dear Friend,

One hot summer afternoon, I watched as my two young granddaughters splashed and played by the water's edge on the Cape Cod Bay. They had already spent an hour collecting treasures—scallop shells, crab claws, small colorful rocks—delighting in each new find. I had looked on with both joy and a real tinge of sorrow. They were loving life, loving this beautiful, mysterious world, a world that is now in such trouble. Just a month earlier they were among those who had to evacuate their homes in California due to wildfires. What would life be like for them and their family in four years? Ten years? What kind of world will we be leaving them, leaving their generation and the ones to follow?

These concerns were foremost in my mind when my publishers contacted me to suggest a new edition of *Radical Acceptance*. I eagerly agreed. My own understandings have deepened and the world has changed since the book first came out. And during these current times of multiple global crises and spiking collective anxiety, I've found the practices of radical acceptance to be ever more crucial for our well-being. They cultivate a non-judging, awake and caring presence that allows us to respond to our world with our full intelligence and compassion.

On the beach that day, it was this accepting presence that allowed me to hold and honor the tender mix of emotions—the joy that celebrates life's wonders, the sorrow over losing what we love. Both are a necessary and beautiful part of what energizes me to do what I can to make a difference for the world my granddaughters will share and inhabit.

The practices of radical acceptance remain central to all parts of my life. They help me hold our human imperfection with kindness. They enable me to let go into aging and make peace with the grief that has come with the passing of dear ones. They make it possible to face and respond to the suffering of racism, inequity and privilege. And in any given moment, the full, non-resisting presence of radical acceptance opens me to the beauty and goodness that is always here, within and around us; it reveals the loving awareness that is our shared essence.

Countless students and readers have shared how the blessings of radical acceptance have helped them spiritually awaken through challenges in parenting, divorce, loss of jobs, addictive behaviors and in facing serious illness or conflicts with others in their life. And in the past few years, these same practices have strengthened resilience amidst the fear and suffering of climate change, the pandemic, the undoing of democracy and the violence and wars around the globe.

Even for those less directly impacted by global crises, it's natural to encounter our world with a heavy heart. None of us can avoid experiencing how divided our society is, how radically unaccepting, hostile and mistrusting we are of those deemed "other." Projecting badness onto others—turning others into the enemy—increases when humans are gripped by fear. We see this when people view immigrants and refugees as enemies, when they attack those holding opposing political views or feel threatened by those of certain races or religions, gender or sexual identities. The hatred and contempt of enemies is the root of human violence, and seems hypercharged in our traumatized world.

Although we may be more conscious of feeling aversion toward others, we also tend to direct it inward, making parts of ourselves the enemy. Many of us move through our days condemning ourselves for our insecurity, our addictions, our bodies, our uncontrolled emotions, our self-centeredness. The underlying pain of

feeling unlovable and flawed has fueled the highest rates in depression and anxiety ever recorded, resulting in a global epidemic of loneliness and an alarming increase of suicide, especially in young adults.

We are now living in a collective spiritual crisis: We have forgotten our belonging to each other and to our living earth. This disease of separation desperately calls for the medicine of radical acceptance—a clear and openhearted presence that reconnects us with life. With radical acceptance we love ourselves and each other into healing and spiritual awakening.

Some of the iconic artwork of Tibetan Buddhism illustrates how this awakening occurs. In mandalas and temples, fierce deities guard the entry to sacred space. With blazing eyes and wrathful expressions, they portray the universal energies of fear, anger, hatred, greed, delusion we carry within us. If we fail to wisely engage with these shadow deities, they easily possess us, imprisoning us in suffering and dividing us from ourselves and each other. Ignoring our fear or greed, or condemning ourselves for feeling anger and hatred, only strengthens these deities. If we are able to open to these primal energies with a mindful presence, acknowledging them and, without fighting or resistance, allowing them to move through us, a transformation begins to occur. As we offer our sustained and tender presence, we open to fully inhabit and become that awake, loving presence. We are home in sacred space.

Not long ago I had a vivid experience of how the shadow deities can be transformed. I live twenty-five minutes from the Washington, D.C., Capitol, and as news of the insurrection on January 6, 2021, unfolded, shock and alarm flooded my nervous system. The shock then morphed into anger at the perpetrators; a deep sense of aversion and blame. It was when I realized I was creating an "enemy" that I paused and mindfully opened to the anger—feeling the pressure and heat in my chest, the tightness in my throat, the clenching of my jaw—allowing myself to fully experience the rawness of that

energy. As the blaming thoughts quieted, the anger turned to fear. Would this unfold into civil war? What does this mean for the future of democracy? Not resisting or denying the fear gave rise to a surge of helplessness and despair for our country and the world. As I continued to allow and attend to what was unfolding, I found that embedded in the despair was caring and sorrow. The grief now emerging was not only for the very real suffering the attack had caused but also for the suffering that had generated the attack, and the future suffering it might portend for us all. The attention and energy that had been possessed by the shadow deities was now present and tender. Radical acceptance of the unfolding emotions had carried me home to sacred space, and it was now possible to respond to this violent event with words and actions that would come from a place of clarity and care, not anger.

The need to pause and deepen my attention continues to arise whenever those fierce deities of anger and blame appear. This happens most often when I'm reading or listening to the news and am struck by the fact that it is those who are most vulnerable who are most often violated. With each round of practicing radical acceptance, the pathway home gets stronger. Each round brings me back to remembering what I most care about and energizes my activism in response to our threatened democracy, the devastation of increasing climate change and social and racial injustice.

My own ongoing experience has shown me how easy it is to consider others as bad, as the enemy. I've also seen how this fear-based perception cuts us off from our heart and full intelligence. We are unable to see others' human vulnerability and our shared humanity. Instead of moving our society toward healing, we contribute to the spiral of dividedness and aggression gripping our society. As Buddhist scriptures expressed it centuries ago: *Hatred never ceases by hatred, but by love alone is healed. This is the ancient and eternal law.*

* * *

Ruby Sales, a Civil Rights icon and spiritual leader, roots her activism in that wisdom. When she encounters people who are violating themselves or others, instead of judging or condemning, she inwardly (and sometimes outwardly) asks, "*Where does it hurt?*" This allows her to see behind the harmful behaviors to the pain and suffering driving them, and awakens the presence and compassion at the heart of radical acceptance.

Radical acceptance, however, doesn't mean we allow others to harm us. Buddhist teacher Roshi Joan Halifax talks about the importance of having a "Strong Back and a Soft Front." We need a Strong Back—clarity, boundaries, courage, empowerment and the willingness to protect ourselves and others from injury. We need the capacity to be fierce, to speak truth and fight injustice. And we need a Soft Front—acceptance, tenderness and caring that includes all beings, even when their behavior is hurtful. By developing this mix of strength and openness, our lives become an active expression of love.

Many evolutionary psychologists believe that violence between humans has diminished over the centuries, that prosocial emotions like love, forgiveness, empathy and compassion have increased. And yet, that evolutionary trajectory doesn't proceed in a straight line. Like me, you might feel that contrary to becoming more collaborative and altruistic, our species seems to be descending into a painfully dark era. While the force of primal aggression has been with us through human history, it is clear now that unless we can engage the better angels of our nature, we pose a clear and immediate threat to all species on earth.

Friends, this makes it ever more crucial that we dedicate ourselves to facing and transforming the shadow deities of fear and hatred that divide us. This happens as we train our own heart and awareness and as we practice radical acceptance with each other. Each time we ask ourselves or each other, "Where does it hurt?" and then listen and attend with care, we are planting seeds of true

healing. We are moving from division to connection; from "us and them" to "we." We can do this whether we are face-to-face with another, or simply reflecting in our own minds and hearts about someone we may or may not know. You might try this for a moment with someone in your life who you feel separate from or at odds with. In your imagination, see them close in. What do you notice? What is the expression on their face? How might life be difficult for them? Now ask, "Where does it hurt?" and attune receptively with your whole body, heart and spirit. Sense into the quality of compassion and connection that arises.

Especially during challenging times in the world and in our lives, walking the path of radical acceptance together is what nourishes our spirit. I've seen the power of meditating together in the intimacy of silence, and the connection that comes when we share honestly about our despair and grief for our hurting earth. I've seen how in the face of racial wounds, the courageous practices of presence allow us to deepen sensitivity and understanding, open to caring and move toward reconciliation. I've seen how those in conflicted, divided families reconnect by remembering that what matters is love, and by learning to hold their own and each other's pain with kindness. And I've seen how those who come together to serve our world, whether in small or large ways, find fresh meaning and deep gratification.

It deepens our trust to know how many people truly care about awakening their hearts and helping our hurting world. Walking the path of radical acceptance together fills our life with the hope, courage and love that comes from knowing our belonging.

In this new edition of *Radical Acceptance,* I am delighted to introduce the RAIN practice, an applied radical acceptance meditation that has become integral to my own practice and that many have found life-changing. RAIN, the acronym for Recognize-Allow-Investigate-Nurture, systematically arouses the mindfulness and compassion that brings healing to difficult emotions. It will guide

you in the deep and liberating work of transforming the shadow deities that you encounter. RAIN, along with the guided meditations, stories and teachings in this book, can guide you home to the love and awareness that is your true essence.

Through this inner awakening, our lives become increasingly aligned with our heart. We see and know not only our shared human vulnerability but also the mystery, goodness and light that dwells within every being. The love that blossoms in our personal life appears collectively as justice, compassion, equity and peace. This conscious and caring society is our shared potential; it is the hope for my grandchildren and for all our children, for all species, for our precious Earth.

Dearest Reader, whether you are new to this book or are beginning to read it again, may these teachings and practices serve to free your heart. And together may we create the world we long for—a more joyful and loving world, a world that cherishes the sacredness in all living beings.

With loving blessings,
Tara
November 2023

PROLOGUE

"SOMETHING IS WRONG WITH ME"

When I was in college, I went off to the mountains for a weekend of hiking with an older, wiser friend of twenty-two. After we set up our tent, we sat by a stream, watching the water swirl around rocks and talking about our lives. At one point she described how she was learning to be "her own best friend." A huge wave of sadness came over me, and I broke down sobbing. I was the furthest thing from my own best friend. I was continually harassed by an inner judge who was merciless, relentless, nit-picking, driving, often invisible but always on the job. I knew I would never treat a friend the way I treated myself, without mercy or kindness.

My guiding assumption was "Something is fundamentally wrong with me," and I struggled to control and fix what felt like a basically flawed self. I drove myself in academics, was a fervent political activist and devoted myself to a very full social life. I avoided pain (and created more) with an addiction to food and a preoccupation with achievement. My pursuit of pleasure was sometimes wholesome—in nature, with friends—but it also included an impulsive kind of thrill-seeking through recreational drugs, sex and other adventures. In the eyes of the world, I was highly functional. Internally, I was anxious, driven and often depressed. I didn't feel at peace with any part of my life.

Feeling not okay went hand in hand with deep loneliness. In my early teens I sometimes imagined that I was living inside a transpar-

ent orb that separated me from the people and life around me. When I felt good about myself and at ease with others, the bubble thinned until it was like an invisible wisp of gas. When I felt bad about myself, the walls got so thick it seemed others must be able to see them. Imprisoned within, I felt hollow and achingly alone. The fantasy faded somewhat as I got older, but I lived with the fear of letting someone down or being rejected myself.

With my college friend it was different—I trusted her enough to be completely open. Over the next two days of hiking on high mountain ridges, sometimes talking with her, sometimes sitting in silence, I began to realize that beneath all my mood swings, depression, loneliness and addictive behavior lurked that feeling of deep personal deficiency. I was getting my first clear glimpse into a core of suffering that I would revisit again and again in my life. While I felt exposed and raw, I intuitively knew that by facing this pain I was entering a path of healing.

As we drove down from the mountains that Sunday night, my heart was lighter but still aching. I longed to be kinder to myself. I longed to befriend my inner experience and to feel more intimacy and ease with the people in my life.

When some years later these longings drew me to the Buddhist path, I found there the teachings and practices that enabled me to directly face my feelings of unworthiness and insecurity. They gave me a way of seeing clearly what I was experiencing and showed me how to relate to my life with compassion. The teachings of the Buddha also helped undo my painful and mistaken notion that I was alone in my suffering, that it was a personal problem and somehow my fault.

Over the past twenty years, as a psychologist and Buddhist teacher, I've worked with thousands of clients and students who have revealed how painfully burdened they feel by a sense of not being good enough. Whether our conversation takes place in the middle of a ten-day meditation retreat or during a weekly therapy

session, the suffering—the fear of being flawed and unworthy—is basically the same.

For so many of us, feelings of deficiency are right around the corner. It doesn't take much—just hearing of someone else's accomplishments, being criticized, getting into an argument, making a mistake at work—to make us feel that we are not okay.

As a friend of mine put it, "Feeling that something is wrong with me is the invisible and toxic gas I am always breathing." When we experience our lives through this lens of personal insufficiency, we are imprisoned in what I call the *trance of unworthiness*. Trapped in this trance, we are unable to perceive the truth of who we really are.

A meditation student at a retreat I was teaching told me about an experience that brought home to her the tragedy of living in a trance. Marilyn had spent many hours sitting at the bedside of her dying mother—reading to her, meditating next to her late at night, holding her hand and telling her over and over that she loved her. Most of the time Marilyn's mother remained unconscious, her breath labored and erratic. One morning before dawn, she suddenly opened her eyes and looked clearly and intently at her daughter. "You know," she whispered softly, "all my life I thought something was wrong with me." Shaking her head slightly, as if to say, "What a waste," she closed her eyes and drifted back into a coma. Several hours later she passed away.

We don't have to wait until we are on our deathbed to realize what a waste of our precious lives it is to carry the belief that something is wrong with us. Yet because our habits of feeling insufficient are so strong, awakening from the trance involves not only inner resolve, but also an active training of the heart and mind. Through Buddhist awareness practices, we free ourselves from the suffering of the trance by learning to recognize what is true in the present moment, and by embracing whatever we see with an open heart. This cultivation of mindfulness and compassion is what I call *Radical Acceptance.*

Radical Acceptance reverses our habit of living at war with experiences that are unfamiliar, frightening or intense. It is the necessary antidote to years of neglecting ourselves, years of judging and treating ourselves harshly, years of rejecting this moment's experience. Radical Acceptance is the willingness to experience ourselves and our life as they are. A moment of Radical Acceptance is a moment of genuine freedom.

The twentieth-century Indian meditation master Sri Nisargadatta encourages us to wholeheartedly enter this path of freedom: ". . . all I plead with you is this: *make love of your self perfect.*" For Marilyn, the final words of her dying mother awakened her to this possibility. As she put it, "It was her parting gift. I realized I didn't have to lose my life in that same way that she did. Out of love—for my mother, for life—I resolved to hold myself with more acceptance and kindness." We can each choose the same.

When we practice Radical Acceptance, we begin with the fears and wounds of our own life and discover that our heart of compassion widens endlessly. In holding ourselves with compassion, we become free to love this living world. This is the blessing of Radical Acceptance: As we free ourselves from the suffering of "something is wrong with me," we trust and express the fullness of who we are.

My prayer is that the teachings offered in this book may serve us as we awaken together. May we each discover the pure awareness and love that are our deepest nature. May our loving awareness embrace all beings everywhere.

RADICAL ACCEPTANCE

ONE

THE TRANCE OF UNWORTHINESS

You will be walking some night . . .
It will be clear to you suddenly
that you were about to escape,
and that you are guilty: you misread
the complex instructions, you are not
a member, you lost your card
or never had one . . .
Wendell Berry

For years I've had a recurring dream in which I am caught in a futile struggle to get somewhere. Sometimes I'm running up a hill; sometimes I am climbing over boulders or swimming against a current. Often a loved one is in trouble or something bad is about to happen. My mind is speeding frantically, but my body feels heavy and exhausted; I move as if through molasses. I know I should be able to handle the problem, but no matter how hard I try, I can't get where I need to go. Completely alone and shadowed by the fear of failure, I am trapped in my dilemma. Nothing else in the world exists but that.

This dream captures the essence of the trance of unworthiness. In our dreams we often seem to be the protagonist in a pre-scripted drama, fated to react to our circumstances in a given way. We seem

unaware that choices and options might exist. When we are in the trance and caught up in our stories and fears about how we might fail, we are in much the same state. We are living in a waking dream that completely defines and delimits our experience of life. The rest of the world is merely a backdrop as we struggle to get somewhere, to be a better person, to accomplish, to avoid making mistakes. As in a dream, we take our stories to be the truth—a compelling reality—and they consume most of our attention. While we eat lunch or drive home from work, while we talk to our partners or read to our children at night, we continue to replay our worries and plans. Inherent in the trance is the belief that no matter how hard we try, we are always, in some way, falling short.

Feeling unworthy goes hand in hand with feeling separate from others, separate from life. If we are defective, how can we possibly belong? It's a vicious cycle: The more deficient we feel, the more separate and vulnerable we feel. Underneath our fear of being flawed is a more primal fear that something is wrong with life, that something bad is going to happen. Our reaction to this fear is to feel blame, even hatred, toward whatever we consider the source of the problem: ourselves, others, life itself. But even when we have directed our aversion outward, deep down we still feel vulnerable.

Our feelings of unworthiness and alienation from others give rise to various forms of suffering. For some, the most glaring expression is addiction. It may be to alcohol, food or drugs. Others feel addicted to a relationship, dependent on a particular person or people in order to feel they are complete and that life is worth living. Some try to feel important through long hours of grueling work—an addiction that our culture often applauds. Some create outer enemies and are always at war with the world.

The belief that we are deficient and unworthy makes it difficult to trust that we are truly loved. Many of us live with an undercurrent of depression or hopelessness about ever feeling close to other people. We fear that if they realize we are boring or stupid,

selfish or insecure, they'll reject us. If we're not attractive enough, we may never be loved in an intimate, romantic way. We yearn for an unquestioned experience of belonging, to feel at home with ourselves and others, at ease and fully accepted. But the trance of unworthiness keeps the sweetness of belonging out of reach.

The trance of unworthiness intensifies when our lives feel painful and out of control. We may assume that our physical sickness or emotional depression is our own fault—the result of our bad genes or our lack of discipline and willpower. We may feel that the loss of a job or a painful divorce is a reflection of our personal flaws. If we had only done better, if we were somehow different, things would have gone right. While we might place the blame on someone else, we still tacitly blame ourselves for getting into the situation in the first place.

Even if we ourselves are not suffering or in pain, if someone close to us—a partner or a child—is, we can take this as further proof of our inadequacy. One of my psychotherapy clients has a thirteen-year-old son who was diagnosed with attention deficit disorder. She has tried everything she can to help—doctors, diet, acupuncture, drugs, love. Yet still he suffers from academic setbacks and feels socially isolated. He is convinced that he is a "loser" and, out of pain and frustration, frequently lashes out in rage. Regardless of her loving efforts, she lives in anguish, feeling that she is failing her son and should be doing more.

The trance of unworthiness doesn't always show up as overt feelings of shame and deficiency. When I told a good friend that I was writing about unworthiness and how pervasive it is, she took issue. "My main challenge isn't shame, it's pride," she insisted. This woman, a successful writer and teacher, told me how easily she gets caught up in feeling superior to others. She finds many people mentally slow and boring. Because so many people admire her, she often rides surges of feeling special and important. "I'm embarrassed to admit it," she said, "and maybe *this* is where shame fits in. But I like having

people look up to me . . . that's when I feel good about myself." My friend is playing out the flip side of the trance. She went on to acknowledge that during dry periods, times when she isn't feeling productive or useful or admired, she does slip into feeling unworthy. Rather than simply recognizing her talents and enjoying her strengths, she needs the reassurance of feeling special or superior.

Convinced that we are not good enough, we can never relax. We stay on guard, monitoring ourselves for shortcomings. When we inevitably find them, we feel even more insecure and undeserving. We have to try even harder. The irony of all of this is . . . where do we think we are going anyway? One meditation student told me that he felt as if he were steamrolling through his days, driven by the feeling that he needed to do more. In a wistful tone he added, "I'm skimming over life and racing to the finish line—death."

When I talk about the suffering of unworthiness in my meditation classes, I frequently notice students nodding their heads, some of them in tears. They may be realizing for the first time that the shame they feel is not their own personal burden, that it is felt by many. Afterward some of them stay to talk. They confide that feeling undeserving has made it impossible for them to ask for help or to let themselves feel held by another's love. Some recognize that their sense of unworthiness and insecurity has kept them from realizing their dreams. Often students tell me that their habit of feeling chronically deficient has made them continually doubt that they are meditating correctly and mistrust that they are growing spiritually.

A number of them have told me that, in their early days on the spiritual path, they assumed their feelings of inadequacy would be transcended through a dedicated practice of meditation. Yet even though meditation has helped them in important ways, they find that deep pockets of shame and insecurity have a stubborn way of persisting—sometimes despite decades of practice. Perhaps they have pursued a style of meditation that wasn't well suited for their emotional temperament, or perhaps they needed the additional

support of psychotherapy to uncover and heal deep wounds. Whatever the reasons, the failure to relieve this suffering through spiritual practice can bring up a basic doubt about whether we can ever be truly happy and free.

BRINGING AN UNWORTHY SELF INTO SPIRITUAL LIFE

In their comments, I hear echoes of my own story. After graduating from college, I moved into an ashram, a spiritual community, and enthusiastically devoted myself to the lifestyle for almost twelve years. I felt I had found a path through which I could purify myself and transcend the imperfections of my ego—the self and its strategies. We were required to awaken every day at 3:30 A.M., take a cold shower, and then from four until six-thirty do a *sadhana* (spiritual discipline) of yoga, meditation, chanting and prayer. By breakfast time I often felt as if I were floating in a glowing, loving, blissful state. I was at one with the loving awareness I call the *Beloved* and experienced this to be my own deepest essence. I didn't feel bad or good *about* myself, I just felt good.

By the end of breakfast, or a bit later in the morning, my habitual thoughts and behaviors would start creeping in again. Just as they had in college, those ever-recurring feelings of insecurity and selfishness would let me know I was falling short. Unless I found the time for more yoga and meditation, I would often find myself feeling once again like my familiar small-minded, not-okay self. Then I'd go to bed, wake up and start over again.

While I touched genuine peace and openheartedness, my inner critic continued to assess my level of purity. I mistrusted myself for the ways I would pretend to be positive when underneath I felt lonely or afraid. While I loved the yoga and meditation practices, I was embarrassed by my need to impress others with the strength of

my practice. I wanted others to see me as a deep meditator and devoted yogi, a person who served her world with care and generosity. Meanwhile, I judged other people for being slack in their discipline, and judged myself for being so judgmental. Even in the midst of community, I often felt lonely and alone.

I had the idea that if I really applied myself, it would take eight to ten years to release all my self-absorption and be wise and free. Periodically I would consult teachers I admired from various other spiritual traditions: "So, how am I doing? What else can I do?" Invariably, they would respond, "Just relax." I wasn't exactly sure what they meant, but I certainly didn't think it could be "just relax." How could they mean that? I wasn't "there" yet.

Chögyam Trungpa, a contemporary Tibetan Buddhist teacher, writes, "The problem is that ego can convert anything to its own use, even spirituality." What I brought to my spiritual path included all my needs to be admired, all my insecurities about not being good enough, all my tendencies to judge my inner and outer world. The playing field was larger than in my earlier pursuits, but the game was still the same: striving to be a different and better person.

In retrospect, it is no surprise that my self-doubts were transferred intact into my spiritual life. Those who feel plagued by not being good enough are often drawn to idealistic worldviews that offer the possibility of purifying and transcending a flawed nature. This quest for perfection is based in the assumption that we must change ourselves to belong. We may listen longingly to the message that wholeness and goodness have always been our essence, yet still feel like outsiders, uninvited guests at the feast of life.

A CULTURE THAT BREEDS SEPARATION AND SHAME

Several years ago a small group of Buddhist teachers and psychologists from the United States and Europe invited the Dalai Lama to

join them in a dialogue about emotions and health. During one of their sessions, an American vipassana teacher asked him to talk about the suffering of self-hatred. A look of confusion came over the Dalai Lama's face. "What is self-hatred?" he asked. As the therapists and teachers in the room tried to explain, he looked increasingly bewildered. Was this mental state a nervous disorder? he asked them. When those gathered confirmed that self-hatred was not unusual but rather a common experience for their students and clients, the Dalai Lama was astonished. How could they feel that way about themselves, he wondered, when "everybody has Buddha nature."

While all humans feel ashamed of weakness and afraid of rejection, our Western culture is a breeding ground for the kind of shame and self-hatred the Dalai Lama couldn't comprehend. Because so many of us grew up without a cohesive and nourishing sense of family, neighborhood, community or "tribe," it is not surprising that we feel like outsiders, on our own and disconnected. We learn early in life that any affiliation—with family and friends, at school or in the workplace—requires proving that we are worthy. We are under pressure to compete with each other, to get ahead, to stand out as intelligent, attractive, capable, powerful, wealthy. Someone is always keeping score.

After many decades of working with the poor and the sick, Mother Teresa shared a compelling insight: "The biggest disease today is not leprosy or tuberculosis but rather the feeling of not belonging." In our own society, this disease has reached epidemic proportions. We long to belong and feel as if we don't deserve to.

Buddhism offers a basic challenge to this cultural worldview. The Buddha taught that this human birth is a precious gift because it gives us the opportunity to realize the love and awareness that are our true nature. As the Dalai Lama pointed out so poignantly, *We all have Buddha nature.* Spiritual awakening is the process of recognizing our essential goodness, our natural wisdom and compassion.

In stark contrast to this trust in our inherent worth, our culture's guiding myth is the story of Adam and Eve's exile from the Garden of Eden. We may forget its power because it seems so worn and familiar, but this story shapes and reflects the deep psyche of the West. The message of "original sin" is unequivocal: Because of our basically flawed nature, we do not deserve to be happy, loved by others, at ease with life. We are outcasts, and if we are to reenter the garden, we must redeem our sinful selves. We must overcome our flaws by controlling our bodies, controlling our emotions, controlling our natural surroundings, controlling other people. And we must strive tirelessly—working, acquiring, consuming, achieving, emailing, overcommitting and rushing—in a never-ending quest to prove ourselves once and for all.

GROWING UP UNWORTHY

In their book *Stories of the Spirit,* Jack Kornfield and Christina Feldman tell this story: A family went out to a restaurant for dinner. When the waitress arrived, the parents gave their orders. Immediately, their five-year-old daughter piped up with her own: "I'll have a hot dog, french fries and a Coke." "Oh no you won't," interjected the dad, and turning to the waitress he said, "She'll have meat loaf, mashed potatoes, milk." Looking at the child with a smile, the waitress said, "So, hon, what do you want on that hot dog?" When she left, the family sat stunned and silent. A few moments later the little girl, eyes shining, said, "She thinks I'm real."

My own mother was visiting when I told this story at my weekly meditation group in Washington, D.C. As we drove home from the class together, she turned to me and with a teary voice said, "That little girl in the restaurant was me." She had never felt real in the eyes of her parents, she went on. Being an only child, she felt as if

she was on the planet to be the person her parents wanted her to be. Her value rested solely on how well she represented them, and whether or not she made them proud. She was their object to manage and control, to show off or reprimand. Her opinions and feelings didn't matter because, as she said, they didn't see her as "her own person." Her identity was based on pleasing others and the fear of not being liked if she didn't. In her experience, she was not a real person who deserved respect and who, without any fabrication or effort, was lovable.

Most of the clients that come to see me are very aware of the qualities of an ideal parent. They know that when parents are genuinely present and loving, they offer their child a mirror for his or her goodness. Through this clear mirroring a child develops a sense of security and trust early in life, as well as the capacity for spontaneity and intimacy with others. When my clients examine their wounds, they recognize how, as children, they did not receive the love and understanding they yearned for. Furthermore, they are able to see in their relationships with their own children the ways they too fall short of the ideal—how they can be inattentive, judgmental, angry and self-centered.

Our imperfect parents had imperfect parents of their own. Fears, insecurities and desires get passed along for generations. Parents want to see their offspring make it in ways that are important to them. Or they want their children to be special, which in our competitive culture means more intelligent, accomplished and attractive than other people. They see their children through filters of fear (they might not get into a good college and be successful) and filters of desire (will they reflect well on us?).

As messengers of our culture, parents usually convey to their children that anger and fear are bad, that their natural ways of expressing their wants and frustrations are unacceptable. In abusive situations the message is "You are bad, you are in the way, you are