

Radical Acceptance

© 2003 Tara Brach (excerpted from [Radical Acceptance](#))

The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change. – Carl Rogers

Mohini was a regal white tiger who lived for many years at the Washington, DC. National Zoo. For most of those years her home was in the old lion house—a typical twelve-by-twelve-foot cage with iron bars and a cement floor. Mohini spent her days pacing restlessly back and forth in her cramped quarters. Eventually, biologists and staff worked together to create a natural habitat for her. Covering several acres, it had hills, trees, a pond and a variety of vegetation. With excitement and anticipation they released Mohini into her new and expansive environment. But it was too late. The tiger immediately sought refuge in a corner of the compound, where she lived for the remainder of her life. Mohini paced and paced in that corner until an area twelve by twelve feet was worn bare of grass.

Perhaps the biggest tragedy in our lives is that freedom is possible, yet we can pass our years trapped in the same old patterns. Entangled in the trance of unworthiness, we grow accustomed to caging ourselves in with self-judgment and anxiety, with restlessness and dissatisfaction. Like Mohini, we grow incapable of accessing the freedom and peace that are our birthright. We may want to love other people without holding back, to feel authentic, to breathe in the beauty around us, to dance and sing. Yet each day we listen to inner voices that keep our life small. Even if we were to win millions of dollars in the lottery or marry the perfect person, as long as we feel not good enough, we won't be able to enjoy the possibilities before us. Unlike Mohini, however, we can learn to recognize when we are keeping ourselves trapped by our own beliefs and fears. We can see how we are wasting our precious lives.

The way out of our cage begins with accepting absolutely everything about ourselves and our lives, by embracing with wakefulness and care our moment-to-moment experience. By accepting absolutely everything, what I mean is that we are aware of what is happening within our body and mind in any given moment, without trying to control or judge or pull away. I do not mean that we are putting up with harmful behavior—our own or another's. This is an inner process of accepting our actual, present-moment experience. It means feeling sorrow and pain without resisting. It means feeling desire or dislike

for someone or something without judging ourselves for the feeling or being driven to act on it.

Clearly recognizing what is happening inside us, and regarding what we see with an open, kind and loving heart, is what I call Radical Acceptance. If we are holding back from any part of our experience, if our heart shuts out any part of who we are and what we feel, we are fueling the fears and feelings of separation that sustain the trance of unworthiness. Radical Acceptance directly dismantles the very foundations of this trance.

Radical Acceptance flies in the face of our conditioned reactions. When physical or emotional pain arises, our reflex is to resist it not only by stiffening our body and contracting our muscles, but also by contracting our mind. We lose ourselves in thoughts about what is wrong, how long it will last, what we should do about it and how the pain reflects our unworthiness. A physical pain, such as a backache or a migraine, might turn into a commentary on how we don't know how to take care of ourselves, how we don't eat well or exercise enough. The pain might make us feel like a victim; it might tell us we can't count on our body, that things will always go wrong. In the same way, we amplify emotional pain with our judgments and stories. Feeling fear or anger or jealousy means something is wrong with us, that we are weak or bad...

The wing of clear seeing is often described... as mindfulness. This is the quality of awareness that recognizes exactly what is happening in our moment-to-moment experience. When we are mindful of fear, for instance, we are aware that our thoughts are racing, that our body feels tight and shaky, that we feel compelled to flee—and we recognize all this without trying to manage our experience in any way, without pulling away. Our attentive presence is unconditional and open—we are willing to be with whatever arises, even if we wish the pain would end or that we could be doing something else. That wish and that thought become part of what we are accepting. Because we are not tampering with our experience, mindfulness allows us to see life "as it is." This recognition of the truth of our experience is intrinsic to Radical Acceptance: We can't honestly

accept an experience unless we see clearly what we are accepting.

The second wing of Radical Acceptance, compassion, is our capacity to relate in a tender and sympathetic way to what we perceive. Instead of resisting our feelings of fear or grief, we embrace our pain with the kindness of a mother holding her child. Rather than judging or indulging our desire for attention or chocolate or sex, we regard our grasping with gentleness and care. Compassion honors our experience; it allows us to be intimate with the life of this moment as it is. Compassion makes our acceptance whole-hearted and complete.

The two wings of clear seeing and compassion are inseparable; both are essential in liberating us from the trance. They work together, mutually reinforcing each other. If we are rejected by someone we love, the trance of unworthiness may ensnare us in obsessive thinking, blaming the one who hurt us and at the same time believing that we were jilted because we are defective. We may feel caught in a relentless swing between explosive anger and wrenching grief and shame. The two wings of Radical Acceptance free us from this swirling vortex of reaction. They help us find the balance and clarity that can guide us in choosing what we say or do...

We might wonder how, when we feel most stuck, we take the first step toward Radical Acceptance. It can give us confidence to remember that... our essence remains intact, no matter how lost we may be. The very nature of our awareness is to know what is happening. The very nature of our heart is to care. Like a boundless sea, we have the capacity to

embrace the waves of life as they move through us. Even when the sea is stirred up by the winds of self-doubt, we can find our way home. We can discover, in the midst of the waves, our spacious and wakeful awareness.

We lay the foundations of Radical Acceptance by recognizing when we are caught in the habit of judging, resisting and grasping, and how we constantly try to control our levels of pain and pleasure. We lay the foundations of Radical Acceptance by seeing how we create suffering when we turn harshly against ourselves, and by remembering our intention to love life. As we let go of our stories of what is wrong with us, we begin to touch what is actually happening with a clear and kind attention. We release our plans or fantasies and arrive openhanded in the experience of this moment. Whether we feel pleasure or pain, the wings of acceptance allow us to honor and cherish this ever-changing life, as it is.



Tara Brach is the senior teacher and founder of the Insight Meditation Community of Washington. Tara is the author of *Radical Acceptance* and *True Refuge*.