

# TRUE REFUGE

*Finding Peace and Freedom  
in Your Own Awakened Heart*



TARA BRACH  
*Author of Radical Acceptance*

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in Your Own Awakened Heart*



TARA BRACH, Ph.D.



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The names, identifying characteristics, and other details of the clients, students, and other case studies presented in this book have been changed to protect the privacy and preserve the confidences of those individuals and their families.

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## PROLOGUE



# LOVING LIFE NO MATTER WHAT

My earliest memories of being happy are of playing in the ocean. When our family began going to Cape Cod in the summer, the low piney woods, high dunes, and wide sweep of white sand felt like a true home. We spent hours at the beach, diving into the waves, bodysurfing, practicing somersaults underwater. Summer after summer, our house filled with friends and family—and later, with spouses and new children. It was a shared heaven. The smell of the air, the open sky, the ever-inviting sea made room for everything in my life—including whatever difficulties I was carrying in my heart.

Then came the morning not so long ago when two carloads of friends and family members took off for the beach without me. From the girl who had to be pulled from the water at supertime, I'd become a woman who was no longer able to walk on sand or swim in the ocean. After two decades of mysteriously declining health, I'd finally gotten a diagnosis: I had a genetic disease with no cure, and the primary treatment was painkillers. As I sat on the deck of our summer house and watched the cars pull out of the driveway, I felt ripped apart by grief and loneliness. In the midst of my tears, I was aware of a single longing. "Please, please, may I find a way to peace, *may I love life no matter what.*"

This book came out of my own search for a place of peace, connectedness, and inner freedom, even in the face of life's greatest challenges. I call this place "true refuge" because it does not depend on anything outside ourselves—a certain situation, a person, a cure, even a particular

mood or emotion. The yearning for such refuge is universal. It is what lies beneath all our wants and fears. We long to know we can handle what's coming. We want to trust ourselves, to trust this life. We want to live from the fullness of who we are.

My search for refuge led me deeper into the spiritual teachings and Buddhist meditation practices that were so central to my life. I am a clinical psychologist and had been teaching meditation for over thirty years. I am also the founder and senior teacher at the Insight Meditation Center in Washington, D.C. My inner work and work with others gave rise to my first book, *Radical Acceptance*, and I also started training psychologists and laypeople on how to bring meditation into emotional healing. At the time of my diagnosis, as the insecurity of this existence shook my inner world, the teachings that had always guided me became more embodied and alive.

In the Buddhist tradition in which I teach, the Pali word “*dukkha*” is used to describe the emotional pain that runs through our lives. While it is often translated as “suffering,” *dukkha* encompasses all our experiences of stress, dissatisfaction, anxiety, sorrow, frustration, and basic unease in living. The word “*dukkha*” originally referred to a cart with a damaged wheel. When we are suffering, we are out of balance, jolting uncomfortably along the road of our life. We feel broken or “off,” disconnected from a sense of belonging. Sometimes this shows up as mild restlessness or discontent; at other times, as the acute pain of grief or grip of fear. But if we listen deeply, we will detect beneath the surface of all that troubles us an underlying sense that we are alone and unsafe, that something is wrong with our life.

In *Radical Acceptance*, I wrote about the deep and pervasive suffering of shame, the pain of believing that “something is wrong *with me*.” I am now addressing *dukkha* in a broader sense. Since that book was published, I've encountered major loss—the death of my father, the physical and mental decline of dear ones, and the challenges of my own chronic illness. Many of my students have also had their lives overturned. Some have been uprooted from their jobs; they worry about having enough to live on, and are hungry for meaningful work. Others are estranged from family and friends and long for connection. Many more are grappling with aging, sickness, and the inevitability of death. For them, “some-

thing is wrong with me” has become entangled with the pain of struggling against life itself.

The Buddha taught that this experience of insecurity, isolation, and basic “wrongness” is unavoidable. We humans, he said, are conditioned to feel separate and at odds with our changing and out-of-control life. And from this core feeling unfolds the whole array of our disruptive emotions—fear, anger, shame, grief, jealousy—all of our limiting stories, and the reactive behaviors that add to our pain.

But the Buddha also offered a radical promise, one that Buddhism shares with many wisdom traditions: We can find true refuge within our own hearts and minds—right here, right now, in the midst of our moment-to-moment lives. We find true refuge whenever we recognize the silent space of awareness behind all our busy doing and striving. We find refuge whenever our hearts open with tenderness and love. We find refuge whenever we connect with the innate clarity and intelligence of our true nature.

In *True Refuge*, I use the word “presence” to try to capture the immediacy and aliveness of this intrinsic awareness. Presence is hard to describe, because it’s an embodied experience, not a concept. For me, when I sense the silent, inner wakefulness that is here, I come home to a sense of wholeness. I’m at home in my body and heart, at home in the earth and with all beings. Presence creates a boundless sanctuary where there’s room for everything in my life—even the illness that keeps me from surfing the waves.

This book is filled with stories of people discovering presence in the midst of crisis and confusion. It also explores some of the greatest challenges I myself have faced over these past decades. I hope some of these stories connect to the heart of your own situation. Through them, we’ll explore the forces that draw us away from presence, and why we so often pursue false refuges. I also suggest many different practices—some ancient, some new, some specifically supported by modern neuroscience—that have reliably opened me and many others to presence. These include one of the most practical, in-the-trenches mindfulness meditations I’ve worked with in years. Called RAIN (an acronym for the four steps of the process), it helps you address many difficult emotions on the spot and can be personalized to almost any situation.

*True Refuge* is organized around three fundamental gateways to refuge that are found in every stream of Buddhism as well as within many other traditions: truth (of the present moment), love, and awareness. As you will see, each of these gateways opens us directly to healing and spiritual freedom. They are the keys to overcoming very common difficulties such as obsessive thinking, limiting beliefs, and traumatic fear, and to tapping into self-compassion and intimacy in relationships. They are also the key to finding peace and happiness, to being at home in our lives.

That day on Cape Cod I didn't know if I could ever be happy living with a future of pain and physical limitation. While I was crying, Cheylah, one of our standard poodles, sat down beside me and began nudging me with concern. Her presence was comforting; it reconnected me to the here and now. After I'd stroked her for a while, we got up for a walk. She took the lead as we meandered along an easy path overlooking the bay. In the aftermath of grieving, I was silent and open. My heart held everything—the soreness of my knees, the expanse of sparkling water, Cheylah, my unknown future, the sound of gulls. Nothing was missing, nothing was wrong. These moments of true refuge foreshadowed one of the great gifts of the Buddhist path—that we can be “happy for no reason.” We can love life just as it is.

If you are drawn to this book, you are already awakening on a path of true refuge. Perhaps you've been at war with yourself and want to be more kind. You may be struggling with an addiction and long to free your life from compulsion and shame. You may be facing loss—of a job, of someone you love, of your health in body and mind—and wonder if your heart will ever be whole again. You may be grieving the enormity of suffering in our world and searching for a way to be part of the healing. *No matter how challenging the situation, there is always a way to take refuge in a healing and liberating presence.*

Writing this book has been a journey of discovery, as I learned every day from my own experiences and from those around me. My prayer is that these teachings and practices will offer you company and confidence as we walk the spiritual path together.

To read more of this book, please purchase at <http://www.tarabrach.com/products.html>

TRUE  
REFUGE





HEART MEDICINE FOR  
TRAUMATIC FEAR

*How  
Did the rose  
Ever open its heart  
And give to this world  
All its  
Beauty?  
It felt the encouragement of light  
Against its  
Being.  
Otherwise,  
We all remain  
Too  
Frightened*

HAFIZ

When Ram Dass suffered a massive cerebral hemorrhage in 1997, he had more than four decades of spiritual training to help guide him. One of the American pioneers in bringing Eastern spirituality to the West, he had explored meditation practices from Hindu, Buddhist, Advaita, and other traditions and introduced several generations to meditation and the path of devoted service. Nonetheless, in the hours after his devastating stroke, he lay on a gurney staring at the pipes on the hospital ceiling, feeling utterly helpless and alone. No uplifting thoughts came to rescue him, and he was unable to regard what was happening with mind-

fulness or self-compassion. In that crucial moment, as he put it bluntly, “I flunked the test.”

I sometimes tell Ram Dass’s story to students who worry that they too have “flunked the test.” They have practiced meeting difficulties with RAIN, but then they encounter a situation where the fear or distress or pain is so great that they just cannot arouse mindful presence. They are often left with feelings of deep discouragement and self-doubt, as if the door of refuge had been closed to them.

I start by trying to help them judge themselves less harshly. When we’re in an emotional or physical crisis, we are often in trance, gripped by fear and confusion. At such times, our first step toward true refuge—often the only one available to us—is to discover some sense of caring connection with the life around and within us. We need to enter refuge through the gateway of love.

Ram Dass passed through this gateway by calling on Maharajji (Neem Karoli Baba), the Indian guru who had given him his Hindu name, and who had died twenty-four years earlier. In the midst of his physical anguish, powerlessness, and despair, Ram Dass began to pray to Maharajji, who to him had always been a pure emanation of love. As he later wrote, “I talked to my guru’s picture and he spoke to me, he was all around me.” That Maharajji should be immediately “there,” as fully available as ever, was to Ram Dass pure grace. At home again in loving presence, he was able to be at peace with the intensity of the moment-to-moment challenge he was facing.

The gateway of love is a felt sense of care and relatedness—with a loved one, with the earth, with a spiritual figure, and ultimately, with awareness itself. Just as a rose needs the encouragement of light, we need love. Otherwise, as poet Hafiz says, “We all remain too frightened.”

## THE LEGACY OF TRAUMA

Dana had been coming to our weekly meditation group for four months when she approached me one evening after class. She told me that she needed more help in dealing with her fear. “Trust doesn’t come easy for me,” she said, “but listening to you calms me down . . . I get the sense that you’d understand, that I’d feel safe working with you.”

Dana did not appear insecure or easily intimidated. A tall, robust African American woman in her late twenties, she had a tough job as a parole officer for a state prison facility. She also had an easy smile and lively eyes, but her words told a different story. “I can be just fine, Tara,” she told me, “and then if I get tripped off . . . I’m a totally dysfunctional person.” Especially when a strong male got angry with her, she said, she’d get “tongue-tied.” “It’s like I’m a scared little girl, a basket case.”

I asked Dana to tell me about some recent times when she’d been tongue-tied with fear. She sat back in her chair, crossed her legs, and began nervously tapping the floor with one foot. When she spoke, it was in a rush of words. “One place it happens is with my boyfriend. He drinks—too much—and sometimes he’ll start yelling, accusing me of things that aren’t true . . . like that I’m flirting with other men or talking about him behind his back.” She stopped for a moment and then continued. “When he gets on my case, you know, threatening me,” she said, “my insides just huddle up into a tight little ball, and it’s like the real me disappears.” At these times she was unable to think or talk. All she was aware of was the pounding of her heart and a choking feeling in her throat.

Her boyfriend was not the first man to violate her. It soon emerged that Dana had disappeared into that tight ball over and over again, ever since she was eleven years old and her uncle began to molest her. For four years, until he moved out of state, Dana had lived in fear that he would drop by when her mother was at work. After each assault, he would swear her to secrecy and threaten to punish her if she told. He often accused her of “asking for it”—if she had dressed or acted differently, he said, it never would have happened. Even then, a part of her knew this wasn’t true, but something else in her believed him. “It still does,” she said. “It’s like there’s some badness in me that is always waiting to come out.”

Dana was clear about the source of her fears, but that clarity didn’t protect her from feeling anxious, guilty, and powerless. The next time I saw her, Dana told me that after our first session, the old terrors of her uncle’s threats had resurfaced. Had she betrayed her boyfriend? Would she be punished for “telling”? Now, just sitting down in my office plunged her into an old and familiar spiral of fear. She stopped talking,



her face froze, and her eyes became fixed on the floor. I could see that she was trembling and her breathing had become shallow. “Are you disappearing inside?” I asked. She nodded without looking up.

I was fairly sure that Dana was having a post-traumatic stress reaction. She seemed to have tumbled back into the past, as defenseless and endangered as when her uncle was standing over her. In that moment, I knew it was unlikely that Dana could access a sense of mindful presence. The fear contraction was too strong.

I’ve found that what a person usually needs when fear is intense is to “be accompanied”—an experience of another person’s caring, accepting presence. If a child is hurt or frightened, showing that we understand and care about her feelings is more important than looking for a Band-Aid or explaining why everything will be all right. The core of vulnerability is feeling alone in one’s pain; connection with another person eases fear and increases the sense of safety. However, when a person has been traumatized, it is also important that he or she control the degree of contact. Otherwise, contact itself could be associated with the traumatizing situation.

“Dana,” I said gently, “would you like me to sit next to you?” She nodded, and patted the cushion right next to her on the couch. When I moved to her side, I asked her if it was okay for me to sit so close, and she whispered, “Sure . . . thanks.” I suggested that she make herself as comfortable as possible. Then she could focus on feeling how her body was being supported by the sofa, and how her feet were contacting the floor. When she nodded again, I encouraged her to notice the felt sense of what it was like for us to be sitting together.

Over the next few minutes, I checked in several times, letting her know I was there with her and asking her if she was okay. She nodded and remained silent, but gradually she stopped trembling and her breathing became deeper and more regular. When I asked again how she was doing, she turned her head enough to catch my eye and gave me a small smile. “I’m settling down, Tara. It’s better now.” I could tell by the way she was engaging—with her eyes and smile—that she no longer felt so trapped inside her fear.

I returned to my chair facing her so we could talk about what had happened. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” she began. “I should be

able to get it together on my own, but when I get stuck like that, it's embarrassing. I just feel so broken." Dana realized that she had been traumatized, and yet she still considered her "episodes," as she called them, to be a sign of weakness and cowardice. Worse, they were evidence that she was spiritually bereft. As she put it, "I have no spiritual center, it's just darkness there . . . no soul."

One of the most painful and lasting legacies of trauma is self-blame. Students and clients often tell me that they feel broken, flawed, like "damaged goods." They may understand the impact of trauma rationally, but they still feel self-revulsion and shame when they feel or act out of control. Their underlying belief seems to be that no matter how awful our experience, we should be able to subdue its terror, quiet our catastrophic thinking, and avoid false refuges like addictive behavior or withdrawing from intimacy. In other words, the self, no matter how distressed, should always be in control.

Inevitably, the small self "flunks the test." When we're inside the trance of a separate, traumatized self, we are trapped in a loop of suffering: Our brains and bodies continuously regenerate the physiology of fear, reinforcing our sense of danger and powerlessness. The healing of trauma, and of the shame that surrounds trauma, requires waking from the trance of separation. Dana needed to discover that she could take refuge in belonging even while the raw feelings of trauma were arising. Our close, personal contact during those disturbing moments in my office was an important first step.

## UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA

Trauma is the experience of extreme stress—physical or psychological—that overwhelms our normal capacities to process and cope. When we're in a traumatized state, we are gripped by primitive survival strategies, and cut off from our own inner wisdom and from the potential resources of the world around us. Our entire reality is confined to the self-sense of being isolated, helpless, and afraid. This profound state of disconnection is the core characteristic of trauma, and to some degree, of all difficult emotions.