

"ALLOW LIFE TO  
BE JUST AS IT IS"

—Tara Brach

Clinical psychologist and mindfulness coach Tara Brach has known hardships: a mother who struggled with addiction, a miscarriage and a painful chronic illness. These difficulties, however, led her to find mindfulness, which has changed her life and helps her to help others.

She shares her insights in her book *True Refuge*.



"My earliest memories of being happy are playing in the ocean," writes clinical psychologist and internationally recognized mindfulness teacher Tara Brach at the beginning of *True Refuge: Finding Peace and Freedom in Your Own Awakened Heart*. "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."

That heaven became tainted for Brach later in her life, when a chronic genetic illness seriously damaged her motor skills so that she was no longer able to walk on sand or swim in the ocean. One morning, she recalls with heartbreaking

clarity, "two carloads of friends and family members took off for the beach without me... I felt ripped apart by grief and loneliness."

Brach writes that she had had to learn how to live her life again—and even to *love* her life, "no matter what."

That was the moment that she began her search for a philosophy of living or, as she puts it, "for a place of peace, connectedness and inner freedom, even in the face of life's greatest challenges." She calls that place "true refuge," and she discovered that, through mindfulness practices and meditation, she was able to find it. Now, she writes, even when she has encountered major loss—the death of her father or the decline of other loved ones, for example—she can find this true refuge within her heart and mind.

Journalist Clementine van Wijngaarden met with Tara

when she was in Amsterdam and spoke with her about her early life, her influences and her hopes for the future.

Tara Brach was born in New Jersey, the oldest in a family of four children. Her father was a lawyer and her mother stayed home with the kids. She was brought up as a Unitarian, a Christian theological movement that is quite open-minded and accommodates a wide range of understandings of God.

"One of my first memories was being with my family when I was about eight years old," says Tara. "It was Easter, and we were camping in the Blue Ridge Mountains. My parents hid eggs outside and my two sisters and my brother and I were hunting for them. At one point, I walked off a little and I had a view of the mountain. I remember it was one of my first consciously meditative moments. I was thinking: 'I love beauty.' ➔"



It was the first experience where I felt there was something larger that I belonged to.”

Tara’s mother suffered from depression, and though she was a loving, respectful and kind mother, as Tara remembers, she drank a lot, perhaps to escape her emotional troubles. “She wasn’t the kind of alcoholic who got drop-down drunk, but she drank steadily and she was cheerless and anxious, and she struggled with her emotions,” recalls Tara. “My father didn’t necessarily realize it, though he got irritated when she had a second or third drink at dinner. I was always aware of the tension that came up around her drinking. She was what they would call a ‘high-functioning alcoholic;’ people from the outside would have seen a pretty normal family.”

When Tara was 17, her mother did a twelve-step program and after that she

went to work for the National Council of Alcoholism; it became her life’s work. “For me, her alcoholism has been very defining,” says Tara. “Some part of me felt the need to save my mother, and the fact that I wasn’t able to made me feel guilty. So that was probably what led me toward becoming a psychologist. I was very tuned in to people and their emotions. Especially when a woman was in trouble. At first I wanted to fix them. I had to outgrow that as a therapist.”

When she left home to go to college, Tara experienced her own feelings of inadequacy; she didn’t feel she was a good enough daughter or friend. She struggled with her weight, and always had the lingering feeling “something is wrong with me.” She went on self-improvement kicks, but they’d only help for a little while and then she’d fall back into her old self-consciousness.

“One day, I started to do yoga,” she says. “Down the street, they taught a vigorous form of yoga, Kundalini. It put me in touch with something I was looking for. After a short while I went to a big yoga gathering out in Mexico in the desert for ten days. I was doing yoga every day and by the end I felt so good, so

high and happy that I decided I wanted to make this a lifestyle and see how far it could go.”

#### LIFE ON THE ASHRAM

After college, she joined an ashram led by Yogi Bhajan—or Harbhajan Singh Khalsa, a Pakistani spiritual leader and entrepreneur—which was part of the 3HO (Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization) Foundation, with over 300 centers in 35 countries. Tara joined the community, first in Massachusetts and then in Virginia, and remained there for ten years, practicing Kundalini yoga and meditation, and observing the Sikh religion. She took a vow of celibacy and entered into an arranged marriage, as was the required practice. She wore all-white garb and a turban.

She threw herself completely into the experience, waking up each morning at 3:30 a.m. to pray and chant for hours.

“I had the idea that if I kept practicing yoga and meditation I’d be liberated in six years or so,” she says. “I would be totally free. I was so driven to be a good yogi. But I was striving. I was what they call a Type A yogi.”

There were moments of transcendence in this way of life, she says, and she developed a therapeutic practice while she

was in the community, too. But she often felt that something wasn’t quite right for her about the lifestyle. “It wasn’t really a balanced or integrated state,” she says. “As soon as I was outside the ashram or in the company of strangers, I felt as stressed and ill-at-ease as I had done before.”

But she tried to continue to find her way in the ashram, hoping to spend her whole life there. Then, she fell pregnant. “My husband and I decided to go with our teacher to a month-long yoga gathering, which was held in the desert,” she told *Inquiring Mind* magazine in 2003. “While I was there, I ended up having a miscarriage. I sent a message to my teacher telling him what had happened and wondering if the hot sun and exercise may have contributed. I didn’t hear from him until three days later when I went to the daily gathering—hundreds of us under a big tent. He asked me to stand up and then he angrily berated me, telling me I had never wanted to be a mother, I was too ambitious in my work as a therapist and that it was my fault I had miscarried. It was the most humiliating and painful experience I’d ever had. Somebody that I really wanted to appreciate me and

love me had turned on me with such rage.”

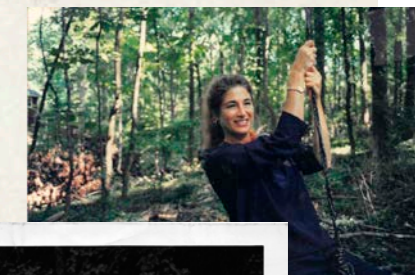
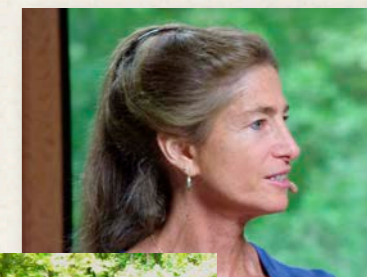
That was the turning point for Tara. “At that point, my eyes finally opened,” she says. She and her husband left and moved to Washington D.C. There, she completed a doctorate in psychology, taught yoga and established a clinical practice in psychology.

#### FINDING BUDDHISM

That’s also when she started to read a lot about Buddhism. “I went to a Buddhist retreat, and on the second day I remember thinking: ‘Wow, this can carry me for the rest of my life,’” she says. “These teachings are so deep, this meditation practice is so powerful. What it did for me: it shifted me from striving to accomplish something to really resting in awareness that simply notices and holds in great kindness the life of the moment.”

This was the beginning of her real education in Insight Meditation, another word for mindfulness, which she started to explore more avidly. Then her teaching took a whole new direction.

“One night I told my yoga group: ‘Instead of yoga, we’re going to do some Buddhist meditation; whoever wants to stay can,’” she says. ➔





## Excerpts from Tara Brach's "True Refuge: Finding Peace and Freedom in Your Own Awakened Heart"

### RAIN: CULTIVATING MINDFULNESS IN DIFFICULT TIMES

"Imagine that you just found out that your child was suspended from school.

Imagine that your boss just told you to start over on a report you'd worked on for a month.

Imagine you just realized you'd been on Facebook for three hours and have finished off a pound of trail mix in the process.

Imagine your partner just confessed to an affair.

It's hard to hang out with the truth of what we're feeling. We may sincerely intend to pause and be mindful whenever a crisis arises, or whenever we feel stuck and confused, but our conditioning to react, escape or become possessed by emotion is very strong.

Yes, there are times when being present feels out of reach or too much to bear. There are times when false refuges can relieve stress, give us a breather, help lift our mood. But when we're not connected to the clarity and kindness of presence, we're all too likely to fall into more misunderstanding, more conflict and more distance from others and our own heart.

About twelve years ago, a number of Buddhist teachers began to share a new mindfulness tool that offers in-the-trenches support for working with intense and difficult emotions. Called RAIN (an acronym for the four steps in the process) it can be accessed in almost any place or situation.

It directs our attention in a clear, systematic way that cuts through confusion and stress. The steps give us somewhere to turn in a painful moment, and as we call on them more regularly, they strengthen our capacity to come home to our deepest truth...

Here are the four steps of RAIN presented in the way I've found most helpful.

- R:** Recognize what is happening
- A:** Allow life to be just as it is
- I:** Investigate inner experience with kindness
- N:** Non-identification

### GETTING HOLD OF YOUR WORRIES

Cultivating an alert and friendly relationship with your "Top-Ten Hits"—the issues and themes that regularly take over your mind—is the beginning of awakening from their grip.

For several days keep a journal where you identify and record your primary areas of obsessive thinking. This might include obsessing about:

- How someone (people) are treating you
- Mistakes you are making; ways you are falling short
- What you need to get done
- What others are doing wrong
- Your worries about another person
- How you look
- Symptoms of being sick; what your symptoms mean
- What you can do about a relationship problem
- How you want someone (people) to change
- What is going to go wrong
- What has already gone wrong
- How you need to change
- Something you are craving
- Something you really want to happen
- Something you really wish were different"

Once you have your list, select three to five obsessions that you know regularly take over your mind and trap you in anxiety, shame, anger or discontent. Find a name that describes each of these obsessions—several words that are simple, easy to remember and not derogatory—and write them down on page 59.



"They all did, and this group of 15–20 people has grown to become a big community."

That community was the basis of the Insight Meditation Community of Washington, an organization that now has about 50 teachers and thousands of participants. Tara continues to teach her classes, which are now attended by approximately 300 people each week.

"When I began with the Buddhist meditation, I started to see the trance of unworthiness more clearly," she says, "and I started to recognize that the stories I had been telling myself—that I was believing—were not true. This form of meditation also taught me to contact what was going on in my body and really open to it and to stay present in a way, rather than getting lost in the storyline. I could begin to be at home with the actual changing experience of the moment."

Through her readings, she discovered a Buddhist prayer that has become a mantra for her: "May whatever arise serve the awakening of wisdom and compassion." That prayer has served to get her through some very difficult times. "If you have that as your wish, whatever is going on in your life right

now—even if it's a conflict with a partner or a worry about one of your children, no matter what it is—this wish puts a bigger space around it."

Tara and her first husband, from the ashram, had a child named Narayan, when she was 32. When he was five years old, the couple separated and Tara was a single mother for 12 years. "That's a long stretch of time," she says. "Sometimes I was dating or in a relationship, but most of the time I was not. There was a part of me that was always thinking: life would be better in a relationship, but a part of me said: I'm living life and it's good, it's just the way it is."

She didn't meet "the love of her life," current husband, Jonathan, until just after her 50th birthday: "We met six months after my father died. One of my great sorrows is that my father and my husband never got to meet, because they

would have adored each other. They share the same quick sense of humor."

And then came a terrible jolt: Tara learned that she had a genetic disease of her connective tissue that would make her less and less mobile over time.

"This has been a loss of something really important to me," she says. "At the time, I felt like I was worthless, especially in my relationship with Jonathan. We'd only just met... It was a really big thing, and the prayer ('May whatever arise serve the awakening of wisdom and compassion') didn't kick in right away. First, I tried all the false refuges: How can I fix this, what am I doing wrong? I want to get rid of this; I don't want this."

In *True Refuge*, Tara defines a process of cultivating mindfulness in difficult times. She learned it from several teachers, and it's known as RAIN: an acronym for the four steps ➔



one has to take to be at peace with life's hardships. R: recognize what is happening. A: allow life to be just as it is. I: investigate with kindness (or "direct a more focused attention to your present experience"), and N: non-identification: rest in natural awareness, or realize that your sense of who you are "is not fused with or defined by any limited sense of emotions, sensations or stories."

Part memoir and part self-help book, *True Refuge* is her own interpretation of the three classic Buddhist paths to freedom: truth, love and awareness. As well as walking readers through the process of using Insight Meditation, or mindfulness, to get through difficult times, she also shares some of her own experiences, which is something she does in live talks and meditation workshops, too.

"I'll talk about my mother's alcoholism, the miscarriage and my own illness because I hope it will help people see

the 'normalness' of struggle," says Tara. "In my teaching, I use examples from my own life and I don't try to hide anything. But in fact, I'm less interested in the story of the personal drama, and more interested in what we can learn from it."

Tara is also quite candid about what it was like to be a single mother to her son Narayan, and some of the struggles she had raising him mostly alone. "I think bringing him up was an amazing and humbling training in mindfulness and heartfulness," she says. (Heartfulness is a form of compassionate mindfulness, where you pay attention to your body's sensations). "It was much easier to be helpful with students and clients because of that experience."

Tara says she's become a much different teacher and clinical psychologist over the years, too. Originally, she says, she had the idea that she wanted to "fix" people, or help change them for the

better. These days, she says, "I've learned to help them to find their own inner healer."

She continues, "The power of mirroring goodness has become a central theme in my life and teachings. For parents, for all of us, the greatest gift we can give to another person is to remind them of what is loveable and trustworthy and pure about who they are. When we start to see that goodness—the sacred essence in each human—it allows compassion to flow freely."

For her own life, bringing these principles to bear and accepting her own physical limitations has become a key to opening up to others. Coming to find that "true refuge" she so desperately craved when her family went off to the beach without her was a long process, but one that ended in a joyful life.

"I had to open to the grief, tell myself: 'OK, this is loss,'" Tara says. "That was the moment I finally started to accept it. It opened me up and softened me, brought me more presence and allowed me to be better able to serve others. The thing is: although I practiced meditation for years, I couldn't use the prayer prematurely. I first had to live it. Thankfully, it's going much better now." ●

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### Things I sometimes (or often) worry about:

#### My Top 5:

1. ....
2. ....
3. ....
4. ....
5. ....

For the next week or two as you move through the day, try to notice when you are caught in one of these pre-identified obsessions. When you become aware that you are circling in this obsession, mentally whisper its name and pause. In the moment of identifying an obsessive thought, the most important thing to do is offer a non-judgmental, friendly quality of attention to your experience. In fact, the friendlier the better! Gently remind yourself that the thought is "real but not true." Honor that this is a moment of awakening, of stepping out of virtual reality and into the actuality of what is here. In that spirit, take a real interest in what is happening inside you. You might feel the inflow and outflow of breath as you check

into your body and ask what it is feeling. Is there tension in your chest? Knots in your stomach? Numbness? Pressure? Are you aware of fear? Anger? Anxiety? Craving? Breathe with whatever sensations or emotions are there, sensing the energy that underlies obsessive thinking. Do not try to change the feelings you encounter in any way. Rather, just offer them a respectful, wallowing presence. Depending on your situation, this step of attending to your feelings might take thirty seconds to a minute. Then, take a few full breaths, relaxing with each out-breath, and resume your daily activity. Notice the difference between being inside the virtual reality of an obsession and being awake, being here and now.