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Radical Acceptance

Tara Brach

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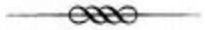

About the Book

OUR HEARTS ARE NATURALLY LOVING

In the West, most of us have suffered the fear of not being ‘good enough’, feeling insecure about our appearance, our sexuality, our intelligence, our spiritual progress or – often most importantly – being worthy of love. Whe these feelings of insufficiency or self-aversion are strong, we fear abandonment and rejection.

Radical Acceptance is the first book to explore in depth how Buddhist teachings can transform our fear and shame. Through meditation, mindfulness practices and fully understanding the healing power of compassion, we can discover the very real possibility of meeting imperfection in ourselves and others with courage and love – and so transform our lives.

About the Author

TARA BRACH, PH.D., is a clinical psychologist, lecturer and workshop leader, as well as the founder and senior teacher of the Insight Meditation Community of Washington. She has been practising meditation since 1975 and leads Buddhist meditation retreats at centres throughout North America. She is also co-founder of the Washington Buddhist Peace Fellowship. Tara lives in Maryland with her son, Narayan, their standard poodle, and two cats.

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Radical Acceptance

Awakening the Love that Heals Fear and Shame Within Us

Tara Brach

RIDER
LONDON • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND • JOHANNESBURG

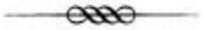
To my parents, who have graced my life
with their generous, loving hearts.

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



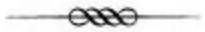
You hold in your hands a beautiful invitation: to remember that it is possible to live your life with the wise and tender heart of a Buddha. In *Radical Acceptance*, Tara Brach graciously offers both healing words and transformative understanding, the fruits of her many years as a beloved meditation 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

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 transparent 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 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 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 it is. 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.

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 open-heartedness, 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 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 a lifetime of working with the poor and the sick, Mother Teresa's surprising insight was: "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, e-mailing, 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 in 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 worthless.” But even in less extreme situations, most of us learn that our desires, fears and views don’t carry much weight, and that we need to be different and better if we are to belong.

At a meditation retreat, one of my students, Jeff, told me about a memory that had suddenly arisen during his last sitting. When he was about seven years old he got hurt while playing with his big brother. Crying, Jeff ran to his mother, who was working in the kitchen. Following her around, he pleaded with her to set his brother straight. Suddenly she stopped and turned, hands on her hips, a look of irritation and disdain written all over her face. Jeff didn’t remember what she actually said, but her whole expression told him, “Don’t be so needy.”

As an adult, Jeff came to understand that because his mother had grown up in a large and chaotic family, she had been taught that kids need to fend for themselves. When Jeff whined or acted clingy, she felt irritated by his “weakness.” Our culture, with its emphasis on self-reliance and independence—qualities deemed especially important for men—had reinforced the message. Despite his understanding, Jeff still felt that having needs made him unappealing, undesirable, even bad. As is the case for so many of us, any feeling of need brought up shame. Even the word *needy* made him cringe.

By teaching us that something is fundamentally wrong with us, our parents and culture carry forth the message of Eden. As we internalize this view of our nature, we become ensnared in the trance of unworthiness. We can spend years and decades of our life trying to be who they wanted us to be, trying to be good enough to reenter the garden.

STRATEGIES TO MANAGE THE PAIN OF INADEQUACY

We do whatever we can to avoid the raw pain of feeling unworthy. Each time our deficiencies are exposed—to ourselves or others—we react, anxiously trying to cover our nakedness, like Adam and Eve after the fall. Over the years we each develop a particular blend of strategies designed to hide our flaws and compensate for what we believe is wrong with us.

We embark on one self-improvement project after another. We strive to meet the media standards for the perfect body and looks by coloring out the gray, lifting our face, being on a perpetual diet. We push ourselves to get a better position at work. We exercise, take enriching courses of study, meditate, make lists, volunteer, take workshops. Certainly any of these activities can be undertaken in a wholesome way, but so often they are driven by anxious undercurrents of "not good enough." Rather than relaxing and enjoying who we are and what we're doing, we are comparing ourselves with an ideal and trying to make up for the difference.

We hold back and play it safe rather than risking failure. When my son, Narayan, was around ten he went through a stage of being very reluctant to try new things. He wanted to be instantly good at everything, and if he sensed that an activity would take practice he felt intimidated. I would try talking about how all the most wonderful parts of living involve some risk and that mistakes are inevitable. My suggestions that he expand his horizons with tennis lessons or by participating in a music recital were always met with resistance. After one of my futile attempts to get him engaged in something new, Narayan's response was to quote Homer (Homer Simpson, that is): "Trying is the first step to failure."

Playing it safe requires that we avoid risky situations—which covers pretty much all of life. We might not take on leadership or responsibility at work, we might not risk being really intimate with others, we might hold back from

expressing our creativity, from saying what we really mean, from being playful or affectionate.

We withdraw from our experience of the present moment. We pull away from the raw feelings of fear and shame by incessantly telling ourselves stories about what is happening in our life. We keep certain key themes going: what we have to do, what has not worked out, what trouble might lie ahead, how others are viewing us, how others are (or are not) meeting our needs, how others are interfering or letting us down. There's an old joke about a Jewish mother who sends a telegram to her son: "Start worrying, details to follow." Because we live in a free-floating state of anxiety, we don't even need a problem to set off a stream of disaster scenarios. Living in the future creates the illusion that we are managing our life and steels us against personal failure.

We keep busy. Staying occupied is a socially sanctioned way of remaining distant from our pain. How often do we hear that someone who has just lost a dear one is "doing a good job at keeping busy"? If we stop we run the risk of plunging into the unbearable feeling that we are alone and utterly worthless. So we scramble to fill ourselves—our time, our body, our mind. We might buy something new or lose ourselves in mindless small talk. As soon as we have a gap, we go on-line to check our e-mail, we turn on music, we get a snack, watch television—anything to help us bury the feelings of vulnerability and deficiency lurking in our psyche.

We become our own worst critics. The running commentary in our mind reminds us over and over that we always screw up, that others are managing their lives so much more efficiently and successfully. Often we take over where our parents left off, pointedly reminding ourselves of our flaws. As cartoonist Jules Feiffer puts it: "I grew up to have my father's looks, my father's speech patterns, my father's posture, my father's walk, my father's opinions and my mother's contempt for my father." Staying on top of what is wrong with us gives us the sense that we are

controlling our impulses, disguising our weaknesses and possibly improving our character.

We focus on other people's faults. There is a saying that the world is divided into people who think they are right. The more inadequate we feel, the more uncomfortable it is to admit our faults. Blaming others temporarily relieves us from the weight of failure.

The painful truth is that all of these strategies simply reinforce the very insecurities that sustain the trance of unworthiness. The more we anxiously tell ourselves stories about how we might fail or what is wrong with us or with others, the more we deepen the grooves—the neural pathways—that generate feelings of deficiency. Every time we hide a defeat we reinforce the fear that we are insufficient. When we strive to impress or outdo others, we strengthen the underlying belief that we are not good enough as we are. This doesn't mean that we can't compete in a healthy way, put wholehearted effort into work or acknowledge and take pleasure in our own competence. But when our efforts are driven by the fear that we are flawed, we deepen the trance of unworthiness.

TURNING OTHERS INTO THE ENEMY

In most of this chapter we've focused on how, out of fear, we turn on ourselves and make ourselves the enemy, the source of the problem. We also project these feelings outward and make others the enemy. The greater the fear, the more intense our hostility. Our enemy becomes the parent who never really respected us, the boss who is preventing us from being successful, a political group that is taking away our power or a nation that threatens our lives. In this "us versus them" world, the unworthiness, the evil, is "out there."

Whether it is a family schism or a generations-long war between ethnic groups, creating an enemy imparts a sense

of control—we feel superior, we feel right, we believe we are doing something about the problem. Directing anger at an enemy temporarily reduces our feelings of fear and vulnerability.

This is not to say that real threats don't exist. We can be a danger to ourselves; others can harm us. Yet if we lash out with hatred and violence, if we make war on ourselves or each other, we generate more fear, reactivity and suffering. Freeing ourselves from this trance of fear and alienation becomes possible only as we respond to our vulnerability with a wise heart.

THE ROOTS OF TRANCE—TAKING OURSELVES TO BE A SEPARATE SELF

More than twenty-five hundred years ago in northern India, the Buddha became fully enlightened after meditating through the night under the now-famous bodhi tree. He knew he had found the "Great Way" because his heart was open and free. Several days later, in his first sermon, he gave the teachings that were to set in motion a new era of human spiritual unfolding. At this pivotal moment in history, the Buddha taught that going to the root of our suffering and seeing it clearly was the beginning of freedom. This was his first noble truth: Suffering or discontent is universal, and fully recognizing its existence is the first step on the path of awakening.

During his all-night vigil, the Buddha looked deeply into his own suffering. His amazing insight was that *all suffering or dissatisfaction arises from a mistaken understanding that we are a separate and distinct self*. This perception of "selfness" imprisons us in endless rounds of craving and aversion. When our sense of being is confined in this way, we have forgotten the loving awareness that is our essence and that connects us with all of life.

What we experience as the “self” is an aggregate of familiar thoughts, emotions and patterns of behavior. The mind binds these together, creating a story about a personal, individual entity that has continuity through time. Everything we experience is subsumed into this story of self and becomes *my* experience. *I* am afraid. This is *my* desire. The contemporary Thai Buddhist meditation master and writer Ajahn Buddhadasa refers to this habit of attaching a sense of self to our experience as “I-ing” and “my-ing.” We interpret everything we think and feel, and everything that happens to us, as in some way belonging to or caused by a self.

Our most habitual and compelling feelings and thoughts define the core of who we think we are. If we are caught in the trance of unworthiness, we experience that core as flawed. When we take life personally by I-ing and my-ing, the universal sense that “something is wrong” easily solidifies into “something is wrong with me.”

When I look into my own feelings of unworthiness, sometimes I can’t point to any significant way I’m actually falling short. Yet just this feeling of being a self, separate from others, brings up a fundamental assumption that I am not okay. This might be a background whisper that keeps me anxious and on the move. Or it might be a deep loneliness, as if being an “I” tears me away from belonging and wholeness.

Believing that we are separate, incomplete and at risk is not some malfunction of nature. Rather, this perception is an intrinsic part of our human experience—indeed of all life. Zen biologist and writer David Darling points out that even the earliest single-celled creatures “had established barriers, definite, sustainable boundaries, between themselves and the outside world . . . Thus, the foundations for dualism—the belief in the separation of self and the rest of the world—were laid.” This existential sense of separation is the theme song of our amazingly diverse and mysterious