



October, 2006

## **SELF-BEFRIENDING**

**Sandra Kosse, LICSW**

At the risk of too much self-disclosure, I'd like to tell you about an experience I had in an encounter group about thirty years ago. If I say that this was during the hardest time of my life, perhaps you will understand how I found myself with a mirror in hand, shrieking at the face in that mirror, "I hate you! I HATE YOU!" If I thought I were the only person to have ever confronted such self-rejection, I'd probably keep my mouth shut about it. But I know that I'm not.

Many of us have heard the story about the Dalai Lama's reaction upon hearing about the American problem of low self-esteem. He is said to have looked bewildered as he requested an explanation of this problem - and pained when he heard the answer. I have trouble imagining a culture that doesn't have this issue, but I am certainly willing to visit (or move into) the mind of someone for whom continual self-referencing, self-evaluating and self-critiquing doesn't take up so much mental space.

Alas, in this lifetime at least, we will never have been raised in Tibet. This leaves us with the challenge of transforming our mental conditioning as it relates to our view of ourselves.

In this issue of *East West Connections*, we are taking a look at what it means to have compassion for self—and what are some means to this compassion. Cheri Desmond May provides us with a review of Tara Brach's book, *Radical Self-Acceptance: Embracing Your Life with the Heart of a Buddha*. Susan Bourgerie reports on Dr. Brach's workshop on this topic, which she recently attended. In our main article, Signe Nestingen explores connections between self-reflection and self-compassion.

As therapists and mindfulness practitioners we speak often of the power of compassionate self-witnessing but we don't often reference what, in the Jodo

Shinshu school of Buddhism, is called "Other Power." This refers to the multitudes of buddhas and bodhisattvas who are rooting for us. In her book, *Cultivating a Compassionate Heart*, Thubten Chodron suggests we visualize one of these bodhisattvas, Chenrezig (the Tibetan Bodhisattva of Compassion). She further invites us to visualize the "Great Compassionate One" as "our dearest friend who wants nothing more than to care for us ... as he accepts us totally without judgment, and is committed to helping us become enlightened."



Of her experience with this visualization, Chodron writes

*One day, after I'd been doing this practice for many years, I realized that I had never imagined Chenrezig looking at me with complete compassion and acceptance because I couldn't imagine anyone looking at me that way. At that point, I saw how much I judged myself...after that I started focusing in meditation on Chenrezig looking at me with compassion and acceptance. I tried to get used to the feeling of being looked at in that way.*

Wishing for you, too, that you "get used to it." ☺

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*These days, Sandy frequently smiles at the face in the mirror.*

**b o o k**

## **r e v i e w**

*Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life with the Heart of a Buddha. Tara Brach, Bantam Books, 2003.*

**Cheri Desmond May, MSW, LP**

Just how does one awaken to loving themselves when they find themselves in a “trance of unworthiness”? This is exactly the path outlined in *Radical Acceptance*. In writing this book, Brach, a clinical psychologist and senior teacher of Insight Meditation, has a powerful message to those of us who continue to doubt our own self worth and yearn to “say yes to our entire imperfect and messy life.” As one of Brach’s friends said to her, “Feeling that something is wrong with me is the invisible and toxic gas I am always breathing.” Healing from this trance of feeling flawed or not good enough has become Brach’s journey, and one she offers to us.

Tara Brach has taken her own life experience, some Buddhist stories, and experiences of her clients to illuminate her understanding of how a person can transform low self-esteem, self-blame, critical self-judgment, shame, and even self-hate into a more compassionate and unconditional acceptance of self (and others). In so doing, she embraces a fundamental insight of Carl Rogers: “The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change.”

Part of the beauty of Brach’s work is that she leads us from being caught in the very solitary, isolated experience of unworthiness into the much broader, more expansive spaciousness of compassion for all of human suffering, ours included. She shows us how to soften and open our heart-mind to our own brokenness, embracing “what is”, which, in turn, allows the essential goodness to shine through. Finding our own goodness opens one’s heart to having compassion for others, and a basic connection and interconnectedness appears.

Brach quotes Indian master Bapuji to describe this opening.

*My Beloved child,  
Break your heart no longer. Each time you judge  
yourself you break your own heart.*

*You stop feeding on the love which is the wellspring  
of your vitality.*

*The time has come, your time*

*To live, to celebrate and to see the goodness that you  
are...*

*Let no one, no thing, no idea or ideal obstruct you  
If it comes, even in the name of “Truth,” forgive it  
for its unknowing*

*Do not fight.*

*Let go.*

*And breathe—into the goodness that you are.*

The numerous meditations and spiritual practices she so clearly describes are very accessible and easy to try on. In fact, her book is a step-by-step guide to self-healing, based on Buddhist tenets. In the process she gives many practical exercises on softening and opening to one’s pain, fears, desires, mistakes, feelings and bodily sensations. In addition, Brach offers meditations on forgiveness, loving kindness, and compassion for self and others.

My only wish is that Brach’s work was written in a way to be more easily accessed by a wider audience. As a Buddhist psychologist, she has written for readers who are already on, or open to, their own Eastern or meditative journey. Her teaching may not be as well received by others, even though the message is universal. It is up to those of us who do healing work to make it accessible.

Tara Brach is a wise and tender teacher, offering us a path of transformation. She urges us to slow down, pause, and be present with our bodies, our pain, and our immediate experience, so that we can cultivate seeing with new eyes – the eyes of compassion and a loving heart. ☺

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Day by day, Cheri dedicates herself to seeing with the eyes of compassion, both towards herself and all beings.

from *radical acceptance* -  
a guided reflection and meditation

Below you will find two excerpts from *Radical Acceptance* by Tara Brach. The first, *The Sacred Pause*, can be readily used as an introduction to the meditative process in general. The second, *Becoming the Holder of Suffering*, would be helpful for those individuals wanting to explore their inner life in more depth. These excerpts can be adapted to individuals and circumstances with minor shifts in language or phrasing.

**Guided Reflection:  
The Sacred Pause**

The sacred pause helps us reconnect with the present moment. Especially when we are caught up in striving and obsession and leaning into the future, pausing enables us to reenter the mystery and vitality only found here and now.

Choose a time when you are involved in a goal-oriented activity—reading, working on the computer, cleaning, eating—and explore pausing for a moment or two. Begin by discontinuing what you are doing, sitting comfortably and allowing your eyes to close. Take a few deep breaths and with each exhale let go of any worries or thoughts about what you are going to do next; let go of any tightness in the body.

Now, notice what you are experiencing as you inhabit the pause. What sensations are you aware of in your body? Do you feel anxious or restless as you try to step out of your mental stories? Do you feel pulled to resume your activity? Can you simply allow, for this moment, whatever is happening inside you?

You can weave the sacred pause into your daily life by pausing for a few moments each hour or as you begin and end activities. You can pause while sitting, standing or lying down. Even in motion – going for a walk or driving – you can pause internally, eyes open and senses awake. Whenever you find you are stuck or disconnected, you can begin your life fresh in that moment by pausing, relaxing and paying attention to your immediate experience.

Experiment by choosing one thing you do daily and make a weeklong commitment to pause before beginning this activity. It might be brushing your teeth, making a phone call, getting out of the car, taking a sip of tea, turning on your computer. Each time, take a few moments to pause, relax and bring awareness to what is happening within you. After you have completed the pause, notice if anything has changed when you return to doing.

**Guided Meditation:  
Becoming the Holder of Suffering**

Compassion begins with the capacity to hold your own life with a loving heart. Whenever you're aware that you are suffering, if you offer yourself care – through attention, words and touch – compassion will naturally awaken. This meditation is especially useful when you are feeling emotional pain. Even if you do not immediately feel compassion for yourself, your willingness alone can reconnect you to your loving heart. Because compassion is intrinsic to your nature, it inevitably flowers.

Find a comfortable position and take a few moments to breathe naturally and relax. Turn your attention to the hurt or grief, shame or fear you may be feeling. You might use your breath to deepen your attention to this suffering – breathing in and directly touching the feelings of vulnerability; breathing out and sensing the space of awareness that holds your experience. Invite the painful feelings to express their fullness, allowing them to swell and intensify through your body and mind.

Begin offering words of care to the place within you that feels most vulnerable. You might silently say, “May I be free from suffering,” or as Thich Nhat Hanh suggests, say to yourself, “Darling, I care about this suffering.” Your prayer might be more specific: “May I be free from fear,” or “May I feel safe and at peace.”

Be aware of how your heart feels as you offer care to your suffering. Do you feel sincere, open, or tender? Or do you feel mechanical, blocked, or numb? If you feel distant and disconnected, without any judgment simply affirm your intention to be present and kind and continue offering these gestures of care.

As you extend care to yourself, notice how the sensations and feelings of emotional pain change... You may find that embracing yourself with kindness brings up a deep sadness. Whatever you are feeling, hold your pain with the same presence and tenderness you would offer to a beloved and frightened child.

# Persephone Above Ground: A Choice for Compassion

*Persephone is captured by Hades, God of the Underworld, and forced to live with him in his world. He tells her nothing to alleviate her fear or suffering. For many months Persephone lives in the Underworld – immobilized – unable to act on her own behalf and improve her condition. Above ground, Persephone's mother, Demeter, filled with rage because she has lost her daughter, refuses to keep the world fertile and bountiful, as is her practice. Six months later, Demeter and Hermes, Zeus' messenger, discover Persephone underground. Elated, they tell her she can return to her life above ground on the condition that she has eaten nothing. Persephone is horrified, as she has just eaten six pomegranate seeds. This prevents her from returning home. Demeter remains filled with rage, keeping the earth cold and barren. Zeus intervenes, persuading Hades to send Persephone back to her mother. Hades agrees to Zeus's request with one condition – that because Persephone ate six pomegranate seeds, she must return to the Underworld for six months every year.*

*Each year, for the six months that Persephone is above ground, Demeter fills the world with great beauty and a fertile bounty.*

*Each year, for the six months that Persephone returns to the Underworld, Demeter weeps, and Persephone and the earth suffer in the barrenness and cold.*

## Signe Nestingen, PsyD, LP

It is safe to say that none of us reading this will be captured by an underworld god and doomed to spend six months away from all we know and love. However, all of us reading this have experienced pain and suffering. While we may have shared some distressing thoughts or painful feelings with others, some of our suffering we do not share. We may have private, self-critical thoughts such as *I am unlovable*, or *I can't do anything right*, that are too painful to share. Many of us have probably experienced deeply painful feelings such as *shame*, *self-loathing*, or *disgust* that we have not discussed with anyone else.

Sometimes the presence of painful thoughts and feelings so overwhelms us that we seek protection and drift into a mindless state similar to Persephone's; frozen in pain, we cannot act on our own behalf. Waking up and moving through our own underworld of suffering is a complex journey. This article introduces four distinct and interconnected aspects of the process of moving toward self-compassion.

The first part of the journey is **recognizing behaviors or actions** that signal we are in pain. The

second step is **developing self-awareness**, becoming aware of thoughts and feelings surrounding the pain. The third part of the process is **self-reflection**, listening and reflecting on the meaning of those thoughts and feelings. Finally, having slowed down enough, and listened keenly enough, we have enough presence of self to **make a choice**, a choice for self-compassion.

### Recognition of Suffering

You may remember the first time you were captured (like Persephone) by a painful experience. You yourself may have been hurt, you may have hurt someone else, or you may have experienced powerful emotions such as rage, shame, or fear.

Because it is not always possible to know how to live with, and through, distressing experiences, we can get trapped in mindless behaviors. For instance, we might try to push away painful experiences with mind-numbing activities such as over-drinking, over-shopping, or over-eating. Too much television can also foster mindlessness. Avoiding pain by focusing on others (with prejudices or judgments) is another way to deny personal suffering.

Noticing what we do allows us to see our pain. *Sleeping or working too much, crying all the time, yelling at the kids, shunning friends or family:* all of these are behaviors that can be used to cover up pain. The journey out of suffering begins as we recognize our escaping behaviors and continues as we develop awareness of our underlying thoughts.

### **Self-Awareness**

Unlike Persephone, we have no Hermes to wake us up; we must be the instruments of our own awakening, nurturing self-awareness. How can we do this? Begin by slowing down, sit quietly, and ask yourself one of these questions: *What is happening right now? What am I feeling in my body?* Write down what you discover in a portable journal or on a piece of paper you can add to your journal.

Self-awareness is an easily learned skill. As you develop self-awareness here are some examples of inner conversations you might find: *I notice my words and I realize I am shouting. I begin to pay attention to my actions and I find I am racing madly around. As I wake up to my mindlessness I notice that sometimes my thoughts are about what I cannot do: I am not good enough, I can't handle this.* Listening, really listening to yourself is fertile ground for nurturing self-awareness. Openness to ourselves fosters self-reflection.

### **Self-Reflection**

Self-reflection brings us into more intimate contact with ourselves. Self-reflection can be described as second order thinking, or providing additional information about yourself to yourself. Second order thinking is thinking about what you think and feel about what you notice about yourself.

Here is an example of self-awareness leading to self-reflection. In this example you ask your boss for a raise. After the conversation you jot this in your notebook: *When I asked my boss for a raise, I noticed that my voice quavered.* Moving into reflective mode you ask yourself: *What does it mean to me that my voice quavered during the conversation with my boss?* This answer follows: *I think I must have looked stupid, and I feel guilty and shameful for asking for a raise.*

This is a good solid question to use as you begin to develop self-reflective skills: *What does it mean to me that I responded to X in Y manner?* Self-reflective skills can be developed in short writing exercises or through daily meditation or prayer. Like physical exercise, developing self-reflection

requires time, energy, thoughtfulness, and practice. Regular activity brings the most gain.

Acting on our own behalf (being our own Hermes), moving into our suffering through self-awareness, and understanding meaning with self-reflection is a revelatory process. As this is both rewarding and difficult, cultivating patience, gentleness, and persistence is essential and allows us to greet painful self-realizations with compassion.

### **The Choice for Compassion**

Compassion is the opportunity to fully inhabit each experience we have with a gentle and radical acceptance, and to do this without judgment, accepting the entire experience as it is. What does this mean? It means that when we have painful or difficult thoughts or feelings we make a choice to respond to ourselves with compassion. We stop, notice our thoughts and feelings, and listen to what those thoughts and feelings tell us about ourselves and our experiences. We allow ourselves to feel any distress or pain, acting with compassion for ourselves as we allow those distressing thoughts or painful feelings be a part of our experience. What might this look like?

In the example above, the self-reflective process yielded this: *I think I must have looked stupid. I feel guilty and shameful, for asking for a raise.* A compassionate dialogue with yourself might be: *Stop. It isn't helpful to think about myself as stupid. I wish I did not feel guilt and shame, but I do. When I hear myself say mean things to myself, I will stop. Guilt and shame are human feelings. If I continue to feel bad I will ask for help, talking with someone about how I might treat myself with compassion.*

The tricky part of this is the choice. Getting wrapped up in our pain sometimes seems easier than choosing to act on our own behalf. In the example above, a constant retelling of the conversation with the boss and critical thoughts about the thoughts and feelings that arose would be acts of mindless suffering. Becoming aware of our pain, making a choice through self-awareness and self-reflection to act with compassion to ourselves and others, is a life long journey.

Welcome. The journey is easier when our mind is open and curious and our heart is receptive and fearless. It is a bit of a trick to live this way – but it is worth it. ☺

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*These days Signe is living the trick.*

## practice

# opening to self with compassion

*Radical Acceptance: Buddhist Practices for Healing Shame and Fear*  
a workshop retreat for psychotherapists led by Vipassana teacher and  
psychologist Tara Brach, Ph.D. - July, 2006, Cape Cod, Massachusetts

**Susan Bourgerie, MA, LP**

It's the last place I might have expected to have a deep and powerful learning experience – a typical chain hotel, surrounded by asphalt parking lots. Though the beaches of Cape Cod were only minutes away, I might have been anywhere in the megasprawl of the USA, as I gathered with 60 other psychotherapists from across the country to spend a week with Dr. Tara Brach, psychologist, senior Vipassana teacher, and author of *Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life With the Heart of a Buddha*. One of Brach's amazing feats this week was her ability to turn this standard conference room – narrow tables, covered with white linen table cloths and pitchers of ice water – into an intimate space in which we experienced the healing power of the “two wings” of Buddhist practice – mindful awareness and acceptance, as applied to the work of psychotherapy.

Over a period of five days, Brach led us progressively through core Buddhist views on the causes of and cures for emotional suffering. From the perspective of the Buddha's teachings, suffering arises from our sense of separateness, of “me in here” vs. “them out there.” We can become caught up in what Brach terms a “selfing trance” in which we experience everything based on our own unmet needs and a sense of “there's something wrong with me.” To avoid the painful emotions of this state of mind – fear, longing, and self-rejection – we resort to a variety of strategies. We over-consume, over-work, seek endless distractions, or become lost in anxiety or depression.

So what is the antidote for this suffering? “The medicine,” she said, “is the training of attention, the development of unconditional presence.” In a variety of guided meditations, we focused on doing just this, applying Buddhist meditative practice to the work of transforming and healing emotional suffering.

The first dose of the medicine is *recognizing* and developing an *embodied awareness* of our own experience; through grounding in breath, sensation, or sound we become awake in the body. We focus

not on the stories we so perpetually tell ourselves, but on the actual body sensations arising in each moment. A simple question she poses as a focus in this process is “What's happening right now in my experience?” This mindful awareness alone can be healing, reconnecting us with aspects of body, heart, and mind from which we've been separated.

The second dose of the medicine is to learn *to stay with whatever is arising*, rather than resorting to the mindless strategies that intensify our suffering. The question now is “Can I be with this experience with full acceptance?” “Can I embrace it all with kindness, with compassion?” This is no quick fix, but a gradual process of returning, time and again, to attend to ourselves with open-heartedness, letting be, and relaxing into what is. The promise is that such acceptance ultimately transforms and heals, restoring us to a sense of being enough, or, in a quote Brach borrows from Zen master Dogen, “being without anxiety about our imperfection.”

Brach's words of counsel to psychotherapists using this approach in working with clients were simple. “You can only take others as far as you have gone yourself,” she said, recommending we commit to regular meditation, retreats, and working with a teacher to deepen our own experience. She also cautioned us to be certain that there is a container of safety and support, particularly when working with someone who has experienced abuse or trauma.

Working all week with the meditative practices of loving kindness, taking refuge, and forgiveness, the words I had read in *Radical Acceptance* came alive. Once again I was struck with the critical difference between *reading about something* and *experiencing that same something!* I vowed to remember that lesson and bring it alive in my life and work. ☺

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*Susan is grateful for these teachings, and will share them in her October 14th workshop “Compassionate Awareness”, and a women's therapy group beginning in November. Contact her at 612.874.8608, or by email at [susan@loringspsychotherapy.com](mailto:susan@loringspsychotherapy.com)*

# reflections and resources on self-acceptance

## *Sea Grapes*

*The time will come  
When, with elation,  
You will greet yourself, arriving  
At your own door, in your own mirror,  
And each will smile at the other's welcome.*

*And say, sit here. Eat.  
You will love again the stranger who was  
yourself.  
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart  
To itself, to the stranger who has loved you*

*All your life, whom you ignored  
For another, who knows you by heart.  
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,  
The photographs, the desperate notes.  
Peel your own image from the mirror.  
Sit. Feast on your life.*

-Derek Walcott

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## *from Eat, Pray, Love*

*So I've started being vigilant about watching my thoughts all day, and monitoring them. I repeat this vow about 700 times a day: "I will not harbor unhealthy thoughts anymore."...The first time I heard myself say this, my inner ear perked up at the word "harbor," which is a noun as well as a verb. A harbor, of course, is a place of refuge - a*

*port of entry. I pictured the harbor of my mind - a little beat-up, perhaps, a little storm-worn, but well situated and with a nice depth. The harbor of my mind is an open bay, the only access to the island of my Self (which is a young and volcanic island, yes, but fertile and promising). This island has been through some wars, it is true, but it is now committed to peace, under a new leader (me) who has instituted new policies to protect the place. And now - let the word go out across the seven seas - there are much, much stricter laws on the books about who may enter this harbor.*

*You may not come here any more with your hard and abusive thoughts, with your plague ships of thoughts, with your slave ships of thoughts, with your warships of thoughts - all these will be turned away. Likewise, any thoughts that are filled with angry or starving exiles, with malcontents and pamphleteers, mutineers and violent assassins, desperate prostitutes, pimps, and seditious stowaways - you may not come here anymore, either. Cannibalistic thoughts, for obvious reasons, will no longer be received. Even missionaries will be screened carefully, for sincerity. This is a peaceful harbor, the entryway to a fine and proud island that is only now beginning to cultivate tranquility. If you can abide by these new laws, my dear thoughts, then you are welcome in my mind - otherwise, I shall turn you all back toward the sea from whence you came.*

*That is my mission, and it will never end.*

-Elizabeth Gilbert

### **Books:**

Chodron, P. (2005). *The Compassion Box (Book, CD, Card Deck with Cards and CD)*. Boston: Shambala.

Chodron, T. (2006). *Cultivating a Compassionate Heart: The Yoga Method of Chenrezig*. Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion.

Huber, C. (2002). *Suffering Is Optional: Three Keys to Freedom and Joy*. Murphys, CA: Keep It Simple Books.

Huber, C. (2001). *There is Nothing Wrong with You: Going beyond Self Hate, Revised Edition*. Murphys, CA: Keep It Simple Books.

Ingram, C. (2003). *Passionate Presence: Experience the Seven Qualities of Awakened Awareness*. New York: Penguin Group.

### **Tapes/CDs:**

Chodron, P. (1996). *The Four Limitless Ones: Developing Trust in One's Own*. Louisville, CO: Sounds True.

Huber, C. (2005). *Unconditional Self-Acceptance*. Louisville, CO: Sounds True.



**East West Connections** is a joint effort of Loring Psychotherapy & Mindfulness Center and Great River Therapy and Consultation. We publish information of interest to our colleagues, clients, and others on the integration of Eastern wisdom and practices with Western approaches to psychotherapy. Please contact any one of us if you have comments, or wish to have your name added to or removed from this list.

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**KUDOS**

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**Thanks to Jil Leverone for her very capable coordination of layout and production for all 2006 issues of East-West Connections.**

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