

Shrink Rap Radio #422
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“Finding True Refuge in Mindfulness”

Dr. David Van Nuys Ph.D., aka ‘Dr. Dave’ interviews Tara Brach PhD
(Transcribed from <http://www.shrinkrapradio.com> by Gloria Oelman)

Introduction:

My guest today is Tara Brach PhD, a noted meditation teacher and author of two books: *Radical Acceptance* and *True Refuge*. For more information about Dr. Tara Brach, please see our show notes for this episode at www.shrinkrapradio.com

Now here’s the interview.

Dr. Dave: Dr. Tara Brach welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

Tara Brach: Oh, I'm delighted to be with you, David.

Dr. Dave: Well, I'm delighted to have you and to have the opportunity to speak with you. I'm doing a series on mindfulness and lots of people, both listeners and some of my guests said "well, you must speak to Tara Brach." So, I'm really happy to be able to finally bring that about. So we'll be talking about your latest book *True Refuge*, which of course *is* about mindfulness and because many of my listeners are either therapists or therapists in training I'm also very interested in the ways in which you incorporate mindfulness into your work as a therapist and one of the things that I really like about your book is that you have lots of stories both from your own life and references to different cases. So let's start with the title, *True Refuge*, which raises the question, refuge from what?

Tara Brach: It's a good one because in a way the classic interpretation would be that we're trying to get away from danger and find some cave somewhere and actually what we're taking refuge from is our own misunderstanding about who we are. We tend to live in a very limiting, constricting sense of our own being. We have a narrative that really basically says something's wrong with me, something's missing and I'm separate and I don't belong and that's when we're really in suffering. So refuge is really the realisation of our belonging, of the love and awareness that really is our essence and that we belong to.

Dr. Dave: Okay. Now a key theme in your book has to do with developing presence and a number of psychotherapies emphasise the importance of presence in the therapeutic dyad. It's a little bit of a different slant. I think you're getting at something that's just a little different here, so tell us what *you* mean by presence.

Tara Brach: I think they're really referring to the same thing in the sense that in psychotherapy there needs to be a quality of presence and attunement between the therapist and the client but what's sometime missing in psychotherapy is the training that allows us to generalise that, so that we can be present with our inner life as we

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move through our days. And so I think there's just perfect and wonderful synergy between therapy and meditation training because meditation trains the attention so that we really can be intimate with ourselves and therapy creates a safe container where we can cultivate that intimacy with some support from a therapist and actually have it be safe enough to explore what's difficult. And for many of us the tangles, the deepest wounding, it really makes it possible for us to begin the untangling when there is the safety and trust of another person keeping us company.

Dr. Dave: Okay. And so it's through mindfulness training, meditation, that one develops the sense of presence to bring into the therapeutic relationship, is that right?

Tara Brach: Yeah and we develop it in a therapeutic relationship but in order to integrate it, to have it be a skillset that's really strong in our nervous system, we need to practice. It's like anything, you know in the old days everybody, you know with these last decades, has recognised that physical exercise is necessary for health and now there's this kind of paradigm shift where we're really getting it that we need to exercise our mind. We need to train our attention and left to our own devices, the old patterns are really driven by fear and avoidance and grasping onto storylines. So it takes, I think, pretty much of a daily training to quiet the mind some, to realise that we don't have to believe our beliefs. Sometimes I find that people leave retreats, meditation retreats and the biggest insight they leave with is "oh, I don't have to believe my thoughts." And it's liberating because when we start realising that a huge percentage of our thoughts are keeping us in a very scary world, where around the corner something bad's going to happen and where we feel we're falling short. So meditation training teaches us to notice the thoughts, recognise that they're there, not try to vanquish them but to not believe them. And it frees us up to, really in a creative way, to begin to taste life and respond to life with a lot more spontaneity and freedom.

Dr. Dave: Well speaking of meditation training, you spent twelve years in an ashram in New England. To what extent did the ashram experience provide a refuge for you personally?

Tara Brach: The ashram experience provided a few flavours of refuge. I was part of a community of people that were really sincere and dedicated and wanting to wake up their hearts and minds, so it was being part of a community that's really inspiring and I think a part of refuge is feeling that belonging and that connection. And I learned some meditation technologies that helped me to come home to myself: yoga and some meditation practices. So it was helpful in a lot of ways.

Dr. Dave: One of the things that I love about your book is that you share so much of your own personal history and some of the things that you struggled with in your own life, instead of being the spiritual teacher on a pedestal, your self disclosures really help to level the playing field – that was my reaction. What led you to leave the ashram?

Tara Brach: The ashram had a lot to offer and just kind of as happens in our development, it also had things that limited me from continuing to evolve and so I found as much as I loved the community, there were rules and regulations and hierarchies that felt confining to me and I didn't feel a sense of real trust in the guiding teacher. As I wrote in my first book *Radical Acceptance*, I felt towards the end of my

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time, after about ten years, I had an experience with him that felt very emotionally abusive and it was both incredibly painful but also part of a wake-up, where I kind of came to that juncture where I was either going to live in that woundedness and believe something was wrong with me, or let that experience deepen my sense of trust and acceptance of my own being. So it led me to this question, you know, of really "what will it take to accept myself just as I am?" And the whole theme of *Radical Acceptance*, my first book, is really how much suffering we have with this trance of unworthiness, this kind of living in this belief that something is off with us.

Dr. Dave: Yes!

Tara Brach: I remember one of my students described being with her mother when she was dying and her mother kind of woke up from a coma and looked her in the eyes and said "you know, all my life I thought something was wrong with me" and then she closed her eyes and she died and those were...

Dr. Dave: Wow!

Tara Brach: ...that was it. And so for this woman it was like, it shined a light on the tragedy of buying into a sense of our own smallness, our own not enough-ness and it led her to a deeper commitment to really honouring her life. One palliative caregiver described it that after being with thousands of people on their deathbed, the biggest regret of the dying was "I didn't live true to myself." You know, "I lived according to the expectations of others, I lived according to my own programming of what I needed to do to be a better person but I didn't really honour and live true to who I was." And so I think of meditation as a practice of deepening our attention so we can cultivate a kind of intimacy with ourselves, that we can see where the trance of unworthiness is keeping us in prison and begin to free ourselves from that.

Dr. Dave: Yes, yes. Now early in the book you reveal that you're dealing with a chronic and incurable illness. What has that taught you?

Tara Brach: Well, first, just to not be keeping a big shadow over it, I have a connective tissue disorder that makes it so I can easily injure myself.

Dr. Dave: Oh.

Tara Brach: And for a number of years I was just injuring myself more and more so it got to the point that I couldn't... I mean, I'd been very athletic, I'm very physical and love being outside and moving around and it got to the point that I could barely walk up a slope at all. I couldn't walk in the sand and one of my favourite passions in life was to go boogie boarding in the ocean.

Dr. Dave: Oh, yeah, yeah.

Tara Brach: I couldn't do anything and I'm much better now. I've found ways to manage and actually kind of work with it but for a while I didn't know if I'd ever be able to go back to any activity level that had been very energising for me. And it got to the point when I really kind of cracked open and had to face I didn't know and how much loss was involved. I really opened to this tremendous sense of grieving and to

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this prayer which is really "may I love this life, no matter what."

Dr. Dave: Hm, hmm.

Tara Brach: So I was praying, "may I find that refuge, that loving presence that has room for whatever happens in this life, including the loss of that which is most precious, the loss of others – everything." And so it was a very powerful process to get so sick and have to accept that and open and say, "how do I find some peace in the midst of this?" And so as I deepened my own exploration of "how do I find that peace, that love, that freedom" the book came out of that inquiry and I found that as I was finding my way and finding that even when I couldn't do all the things I really loved doing, I could find this sense of inner aliveness and tenderness and humour and presence, I found other people started coming to me with the kind of incredibly difficult challenges they were encountering. So there were a whole number of people together finding their way to refuge in the midst of what we normally would consider "this is exactly the worst thing that could happen to me." And *that* gave me huge faith in our capacity as humans to really live true to ourselves no matter what happens.

Dr. Dave: Hm. Hmm. You know building on that the idea of moving through pain, you went through a painful divorce, how did your mindfulness practice help you with that?

Tara Brach: You know one of the things I found with getting divorced – and mine was as bitter as many others and as it's turned out, my ex husband is a very dear friend – but we went through, as many people do, all the kind of reactivity where we were making the other wrong. And I found myself more and more turning him into the bad other.

Dr. Dave: Hm, hmm.

Tara Brach: And we'd both had such good intentions. We both were involved with the spiritual path and we were going to be respectful and do it wisely and then to get small minded and say things that I regretted and for both of us to end up being defensive and aggressive, I felt the disappointment. And so I started doing a practice where I would pause before I would say anything or call back or whatever it was and my basic practice was "okay, let me really get in touch with what's going on inside of me and then within that, can I find my deepest intention?" And then "can I look at him and try to see what he's going through?" I have a metaphor I really like David, whereby if you imagine you're walking in a woods and you see a dog by a tree and you go over to pat the dog and then the dog lurches at you with it's fangs bared and you sense its aggressiveness and then you go from being friendly to being really angry at this dog but then you see that the dog's paw's caught in the trap. And then you shift and then you go "oh, you poor thing."

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Tara Brach: Well, it's the same thing with each other, when we've made another into a bad other, if we can see past the mask and see how when a person's behaving in a way that we don't like, that's causing suffering, their leg's in the trap in some manner. When people are happy, when they're feeling at home, they behave in loving ways.

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So I began to just see "well, how's my leg in a trap?" when I was acting in ways I didn't like and I could see how his leg was in a trap and it helped to dissolve this kind of trance of 'bad other' and give me more compassion for both of us. And I think he in his own way was doing the same thing because we managed to navigate some rough spots and not sever our connection so badly that we couldn't parent together and now, as I say, really be there for each other, be helpful and be friends.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, that's really quite an achievement and so you're a psychotherapist and you work with couples in distress. How have you been able to translate what you learned from your own experience into therapeutic interventions in couples therapy?

Tara Brach: Much in the same way, I describe my own process. I'm a deep believer in the art of the sacred pause and there's a wonderful quote from Viktor Frankl that 'between the stimulus and the response, there is a space.'

Dr. Dave: Hm, hmm.

Tara Brach: The space is our power and our freedom and just to me that's so true, that if we can, instead of going right into our reaction, if we can just wait a little, in that space we start coming home to a deeper sense of our being. We can remember what really matters, that more than being right we want to feel a sense of love and that we want to understand. So we come to a deeper place in ourselves but it's a training, to pause. So when I work with couples – and this is not just in therapy now, just in meditation trainings, you know, just this whole practice of pausing and there's now some really good research. One couples therapist who's done a bunch of research had people – a couple – getting into their issues that were most difficult. They were hooked up to equipment monitoring their brains and he said, "oh, there's something going on with our equipment. We need to just take a break for a few minutes, we'll get right back to you." He put them in separate waiting rooms and fifteen minutes later, said "okay, we've got it fixed." We hooked them up and they started talking again and in fifteen minutes their brain chemistry had settled in a way that they were no longer in flight/fight/freeze and they were able to talk about the same content in a much more balanced way. They were able to dialogue and come to some agreement. We need to stop.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, in a way that's kind of the essence of mindfulness, right? Being in the midst of conflict and the midst of being totally reactive and having the, quotes, "mindfulness" to pause.

Tara Brach: Exactly right. And then we deepen the thoughts in mindfulness. We don't just stop, we stop and there's a purposeful attentiveness in that pause and that's where the training deepens and gets refined. Mindfulness is described as having two wings. One wing is when we pause, we say "so what's happening right now?" and that's the wing of understanding, where we begin to notice, "oh, my heart's pounding." "Oh, there's a real squeeze in my chest." "Oh, there's thoughts about this person couldn't love me, if they'd act this way." So we begin to ask that question: "what's happening?" But mostly we pay attention to our bodies. The second wing is, just to get the two wings out there, the second wing is, "can I be with this?" "Can I let this be?" So, in that pause we say, "what's happening?" Okay, heart's pounding, angry, hurt, whatever, "can I let this be, can I just simply be with this right now without

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doing something?" And in that recognising and letting be, we end up... our sense of who we are opens up some and we have a lot more choices available.

Dr. Dave: Now earlier you called that pause, you had a name for that pause, did you call it the sacred pause – what was that phrase?

Tara Brach: Yeah, the sacred art of pausing, yeah. Just because it gets us in touch with a much more awake sacred dimension of our being.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, well I really like that, I wanted to remember that. Now your book is organised around three gateways, what you call "the gateway of truth, the gateway of love and the gateway of awareness" and these concepts are derived from Buddhism. To what extent is it necessary for therapists, or their clients, or the general reader, to embrace Buddhism?

Tara Brach: Not at all. Actually, I'd say everything in the book, is what I would call the 'Perennial Philosophy,' which was Aldous Huxley's phrase, which is it's really spiritual principles that are pretty common to all the major faiths, their more experiential, mystical cores. And even the three gateways, I found the same three gateways when I look into Judaism, when I look into Hinduism and Christianity. You can find the same elemental expressions of who we are when we're awakened beings.

Dr. Dave: Hm. Hmm. Well, perhaps you can take us through each of those three gateways in some depth, one at a time. So let's start with the gateway of truth – tell us about that.

Tara Brach: The gateway of truth, if you go back to the two wings, is really seeing clearly what's happening right now and just to say the gateways are absolutely interdependent. You can't see the truth of the present moment unless there's a quality of open heartedness, which is the gateway of love because otherwise there'll be too much defence against it. And you can't fully love another person, let's say, unless you see the truth of who they are, so these are very interconnected. But in the gateway of truth, in that segment of the book I teach an acronym that people find incredibly helpful and maybe I'll talk about the gateway of truth through the acronym which is RAIN: R-A-I-N. Rain is another way of when you get lost, when you're in reactivity and those are the times it's hardest to pause and be mindful, R.A.I.N is an easy to remember way back home. The 'R' means 'Recognise.' It's like saying "okay, what's going on right now?" "Oh, I'm angry." The 'A' is 'allow' which means just allow the experience to be here. This is the pause part – we recognise and just allow the feelings of heat and pressure and whatever, the anger, has that goes with it, to be there. The 'I' of R.A.I.N is investigate but it's not just investigate, it's investigate with an intimate attention. Which means that you have to look for the truth but with a kindness, a care. And so, okay, there's anger, well, we start investigating what else is there. Well, under the anger, some hurt and some fear of being pushed away. So you start investigating and you feel it in your body as fully as you can and the intimate attention is... you might just offer some kindness to that place of hurt. The 'N' of R.A.I.N – there's nothing to do. The 'N' is the fruit of deepening presence, which might be considered not identified, that you're no longer identified as the angry person. But another way of thinking of the 'N' is you're back to your natural wholeness, rather than kind of angry, reactive, small self, you're back to resting in a

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quality of compassion and open heartedness and you're just more in a place of wholeness, you're back to your natural being.

Dr. Dave: Yeah and in the book you elaborate on the not identifying with the word 'kindly' as I recall. To kind of treat yourself kindly, rather than beat up yourself.

Tara Brach: That's actually right in the 'I' where you investigate with intimate attention. In other words, you investigate and see the hurt place and then you offer it some kindness. You know, I've found that that gesture of kindness – and this is getting us into the love section – changes entirely our relationship with our own being. It's what really enables us to then not be so identified and come from a wiser place. The 'N' is we're resting in truth – we're back to our wholeness again.

Dr. Dave: You know, when I was reading through the R.A.I.N section, the psychotherapist in me noted that it struck me as being very much like cognitive behavioural therapy in some ways. Does that make sense to you?

Tara Brach: It does. It's got an element of that in being able to very clearly see the thoughts and the beliefs that are keeping us in a trap. It's said that our emotions last for about 1.5 minutes, if they run their natural course, they arise and they fall, our embodied felt sense of emotion. But it takes thoughts to keep the emotions going and so to be able to catch the thoughts, to be able to say: "well, what am I believing right now?" "Oh, that that person doesn't really like me." "I'm believing that I'm failing." If you can see the belief, you're not as hooked by it. Anything that is out of our awareness actually controls us. So R.A.I.N helps us to investigate and notice, what are the forces that are keeping us stuck and trapped and with mindfulness and compassion it helps to loosen the bind.

Dr. Dave: You know on the face of it meditation seems to be a very mental activity, in one way it's about mind control but you have a section about awakening to the body. So where does the body come in?

Tara Brach: Well the body has to actually be throughout and although the word is mindfulness in the Asian script it's really mind and heart have the same root and the only way to really be mindful is to be embodied. So when we're being mindful of anger we're being mindful of the sense of pressure or heat, or squeeze in our body. When we're mindful of fear, we're feeling the tightness, the constriction, perhaps in the throat or the chest. When we're mindful of shame, we're feeling that hollowness, or ache, or the sense of being pulled down and wanting to hide. So when I work with people one of the things I really emphasise is if you want to be free from the tangle or bind of painful emotions you have to be willing – and this takes some courage – to feel how they live in the body. It's the only way through but if there's trauma and in *True Refuge* there's a lot on how to work with trauma 'cause we don't go straight at it with mindfulness and embodied presence – that can cause retraumatisation. We need some supports in order to be able to ease into where the trauma lives in the body but eventually, in the long run, we have to be able to feel our experience in an embodied way in order to unpack it and unwind it.

Dr. Dave: Okay. You know another thing that you write about, you write about compulsive thinking and core beliefs and so on and I'm wondering from a clinical Shrink Rap Radio #422

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perspective, if you have someone who say is really troubled by compulsive thoughts, how you would deal with that in a clinical situation?

Tara Brach: It's a really good question because we're all addictive thinkers. Most of us, if we're honest and we look at "what was today like?" we'll see that most of the day we're living in a virtual reality. Most of the day we're planning what's next, or remembering, or commenting, so for all of us it's a training to be able to say, "oh, what's really happening right *here*, right *now*?" and feel into the senses. That's really what meditation, in a radical way, gives us, is it takes us from a virtual reality to this mystery that's right here. The challenge with obsessive thinking clinically is that it's very, very much fear driven, so in a way it's a question about how to work with the fears that are underneath the thinking. And that takes a tremendous amount of self compassion. So I often, when I'm working with people that are obsessive thinkers, we'll slow down and we'll go to the *theme* of the obsessive thinking, you know; how I might embarrass myself, or fail at work, or embarrass myself in a relationship, or whatever it is. And then go under it to sense what is it really, what's the worst thing, what am I afraid of, what could happen? Then to begin to, very gently, feel where that fear lives in the body that since – and I ask this a lot David – when we start feeling what's difficult in the body, the rawness of the emotion, I'll ask the question "how does that part want you to be with it?" "What does that fear really need?"

Dr. Dave: Hm, hmm.

Tara Brach: And we'll find often that the fear needs some safety, it needs some support, it needs love, it needs understanding. So I spend a lot of time with people building the resources that will help them to be with the difficult emotions. So for an obsessive thinker that means building a sense of safety, or understanding, or acceptance, or self compassion that enables them to then be with the rawness of the emotions that are driving the thoughts.

Dr. Dave: Okay. Wonderful. What can you tell us about that second gateway, the gateway of love?

Tara Brach: The gateway of love, like the two wings – what's going on and can I be with this? – is that capacity to open to and with tenderness be with whatever arises in our life. What I've found in therapy is the key juncture where a person actually moves towards healing, is when they start to open to what's difficult and feel a sense of the 'ouch!' of their own pain and feel compassion for themselves. And it's in that moment of self compassion, that real change begins to be possible. Maybe I'll read you just a brief section from *True Refuge* where one woman, who it seemed very much like it would be hard for her to find that, touched into this. Is that okay?

Dr. Dave: Yeah, that would be wonderful.

Tara Brach: So, this is a woman named Vanessa who attended a meditation course taught by one of my friends and she was in prison; in a maximum security prison.

Standing over six feet tall, Vanessa was a powerful sinewy woman with hair dyed bright red and tattoos all over body, known in her ward as a bully, she protected some women and relentlessly insulted and intimidated others.

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During meditation classes while other participants joined for discussion she just sat there silent and scowling but she never missed a session during the eight week course. At the final class my friend asked for feedback. After others spoke she turned to Vanessa, "well," she began uncertainly; "I couldn't follow some of those Buddhist words" and she looked around, almost shyly. "What was that one, bodhis...?" The instructor said, "oh, you mean Bodhisattva, an awakening being, one with compassion?" "Yeah," said Vanessa, "that one, I like that and the poem about the pirate." She was referring to a poem by Thich Nhat Hanh. I'll read you a verse:

"I'm the 12 year old girl, refugee on a small boat, who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate and I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving."

"Well that got me thinking, that made me know something," Vanessa said and she spoke so softly that everyone had to strain to hear her. "I always thought I was bad, the problem one, the one that made others suffer. Now I know I am suffering too." Vanessa had tears in her eyes but most everyone was looking at the floor just respecting her words. After that group graduated, my friend continued to teach at the prison and she heard by word of mouth that Vanessa had changed in a deep way. She was no longer a bully. She was a sadder and much quieter person, slowly coming to terms with the reality of her suffering.

When I heard Vanessa's story I remembered a line from an African American spiritual (teacher) who's always moved me: "God looks beyond our faults and sees our needs." What if we could recognise our faults and look to see what is beyond them? What if we could see with great tenderness the painful unmet needs that have shaped our behaviours? For many of us this process is the work of a lifetime, one that requires the active support of loved ones, therapists, spiritual teachers, or healers. Yet it begins the moment we are willing to look at ourselves through the eyes of compassion.

Dr. Dave: Thank you for sharing that with us. Now as you were reading, I think maybe by Thich Nhat Hanh, Skype cut out. Perhaps you could read that poem again.

Tara Brach: It would be my pleasure.

"I'm the 12 year old girl, refugee on a small boat, who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate and I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving."

Dr. Dave: Okay. Good, yeah. We had missed some of that and you have some wonderful references and his teachings in the book. Another section under the discussion of the gateway of love, is you talk about the importance of forgiveness. Maybe you can tell us a bit about that?

Tara Brach: Yeah, well, in a way, David, I'm thinking back to when you asked me about my ex-husband and how I had to be able to look at him and really see past his

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behaviours to how he was hurting, how he was feeling insecure about his future and feeling hurt by what was happening and in the same way with anybody that has hurt us, that person has their leg in a trap but if we try too quickly to forgive them, the forgiveness will not actually be authentic and full. So when I teach about forgiveness what I found is that the first step in forgiving is to realise that we have an intention to forgive, we want to forgive. And there is some wisdom in us that realises that when we're not forgiving, our heart is armoured and it really stops us from being free. We are unable to love without holding back and it's not like we can be blaming and angry in one direction and then turn to another person and all of a sudden our heart's wide open and we can be loving and free. We get into a habit of resentment and blame and pushing others away. So we forgive for the freedom of our own hearts and because this world is all interconnected, it had a positive effect on others. But forgiveness has to start with being compassionate towards where we're feeling wounded. I'll give you an example of the process of forgiveness with one man who was kind of at war with his father. He'd grown up as a very sensitive young boy who was more like his mother, a writer and into the arts. His father was much more of a man's man and in some way felt like his young son was too sensitive and his father was pretty judgmental and even when he was an adult and had children of his own, when his father would be with his grandchildren, there was still some tension and distance between the two of them. His father had a heart attack and he still was very distant and unforgiving towards his father and his sister kept saying "why can't you just forgive him, he's older now, he's not doing anything to you." But he kept saying, "if I forgive him, he'll never know the pain he's caused me. He'll never know what he's done to me." So, he came to a retreat with us and he was meditating and having a lot of thoughts of his father and I led a guided practice where I invited to experience where they were blaming somebody and if you're listening right now you can even try it out, for our listeners, where you're holding resentment or blame and then just to ask yourself "if I have to let go of the idea of this other person being bad or wrong. If I had to let go of the blame, what is it that's difficult that I have to feel underneath that?" In other words, "if I let go of my resentment or blame, what's there that I have to let myself feel that's not easy?" Well for this man, when I asked that and if he had to let go of blaming his father, then he'd have to feel a tremendous sense of hurt that his father didn't love him for who he was and a feeling of grief, that he'd never have the kind of father that really cared about him. And so that was the place – before he could forgive his father he needed to hold with great compassion that place of hurt and that place of grief. And I often teach people when they're practicing self compassion just to simply put their hand on their heart because by touching our own heart, in a tender way, we actually deepen the communication with ourself of care. And I also invite sending words into our own heart. When I do it, I say sometimes, "it's okay, sweetheart."

Dr. Dave: Hm, hmm.

Tara Brach: And those words inwardly, it's amazing how just that gesture calms and soothers and opens me. And he did his own language. There's one healer from Hawaii that uses the words "I'm sorry and I love you." So he used those words over and over. For the whole week I saw him sitting there with his hand on his heart, just offering kindness to his own place of woundedness. Interestingly when he got out of retreat, there was a lot loosened up with his father. He was able to spend time with his father and there was more jokes and more small kindnesses and then his father had

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a second heart attack and during his recovery, this man spent some time and he could start to see through that bootstrap mask of his father's, you know a much more vulnerable person and hold his father more in his heart. Well he was reading a newspaper to his father one day when his father kind of stopped him and said the words this man never thought he'd hear, which were; "you probably never knew how much I love you."

Dr. Dave: Hmm.

Tara Brach: And he said to me "you know Tara, I don't think he would have ever been able to say that if I hadn't forgiven him. I think it made it safe enough.

Dr. Dave: Yes, yes. That's a wonderful story.

Tara Brach: And I don't share, David... It's not like everybody that forgives the hurtful parent, or hurtful spouse, or whatever it is, that it turns out that way. It's really the freedom of our own hearts but it can ripple out in ways we don't expect, so it's something just to know about, that this is.... It starts by holding ourselves with compassion but then looking to see how the other has their leg in a trap and having the intention to let go of our armouring and to let them. There's one teacher that says to not push *anyone* out of our hearts.

Dr. Dave: Hm, hmmm. You know another topic you take up in this section of the book is the pain of separation. What recommendations do you have for dealing with the pain of separation?

Tara Brach: I think of the pain of separation as the fundamental suffering that we are all living with. In any moment that we're feeling angry, or hurt, or shame, or whatever, underneath that, there's a feeling of being separate. It's kind of our universal predicament that we incarnate and all organisms feel like in some way there's me and there's the world out there. So part of our whole evolutionary process is to live through that sense of separateness and then rediscover, really come back home to the love and presence and awareness that unites us. So pain and separation I think of as the huge generic undercurrent of all suffering.

Dr. Dave: Hm, hmm. What about more specific instances of it though, for example the death of someone who's loved, or the divorce, or other kinds of ways that we get separated from another person?

Tara Brach: Yeah, I think that in our culture in particular, we don't know how to mourn well. We don't really allow ourselves the grief. We put it on a timetable and we can often distract ourselves, or often think we shouldn't be feeling what we're feeling. So the movement from that kind of separation with death or loss into kind of a healing, is to feel the grief so fully that we discover right in the very centre of the grief, what we're loving. I know for myself because I just lost my mom last spring and I still the pain of that, separate from her earthly form, when I let myself feel that and feel the depth of the sorrow right inside it, right in the space of that sorrow, is how much I love her and it's a her that's beyond that earthly form. I can feel the love and I can feel that which is beyond her personhood that's always and already here, so we come to some timeless place of loving ,if we'll be willing to open to the grief.

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Dr. Dave: Okay. Then what about the third gateway – the gateway of awareness. In what way does awareness provide a refuge?

Tara Brach: Awareness is the formless. It's who and what we are when we get outside of our narrative and often we have to move through the truth of the present moment, feeling what's happening in the present moment and opening our hearts in a tender way, to start sensing that dimension of, what you might, call pure awareness. I can give you an example, 'cause that's probably the simplest way, maybe through another story. One man who was really caught up in a lot of anger in his reactivity to others and he was a business executive and he was asked to either take an anger management course, or learn to meditate. He decided he wanted to meditate, so he took a meditation course and he ended up at one point at a supermarket at the end of the day, trying to get all his shopping done and in front of him in line, the store was just about to close, was a woman who only had one item but she'd brought her daughter and she handed the daughter over the counter to the clerk and they're oohing and aahing over this little girl and this man, he got triggered. You know, "I'm a busy guy, I've got a lot to do, I want to get this stuff home, it's closing time. What are they doing?" So then he went "oh, yeah, meditation, pausing." And he paused and he asked these two questions "what's happening inside me?" He feels the anger and underneath his anger, fear – fear that I'll not get everything done and then fear that life will fall apart if I don't get everything done. You know that feeling of not enough time?

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Tara Brach: Yeah, and then some compassion towards that and then when he felt that compassion, that just relaxed him back into awareness. He just was resting in awareness and from that awareness he could look at the little girl and go "oh, she's cute." So when it was his turn he said to the clerk "you know that was an adorable little girl." And the clerk beamed and she said, "well, you know, that's my daughter. My husband was killed in Afghanistan, so my mom watches her and she brings her over a couple of times a day. She just brought her so I could say goodnight to her while I was working late.

Dr. Dave: Wow! That's another great story and it reminds me of the dog with its leg in the trap.

Tara Brach: Yeah, exactly and what gives us the eyes to see is when we're resting in awareness. When we're no longer entangled in the thoughts of "here's what I want and here's what I need. Here's what you should do, here's where you should be." When there's a quietness, when there's a stillness, when we're resting in something, when we're open and spacious, that awareness then allows us to respond to the world with more compassion and more wisdom. So we can take refuge in awareness by, as I just described it, coming into presence and going to the refuge of truth, "what's happening, in love, let me be with this" but you can also, if you're somewhat quiet, turn directly to awareness and this will may be as kind of we begin to wind up, it's a deeper practice and a deeper training in meditation and it can be confusing if the mind's very busy. But we have times that the mind's not so busy; times that we might be going for a walk and we begin to listen to the sounds of the wind in the trees, or we

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might be sitting on a rock and we can hear the currents of a stream, or times perhaps before we're going to sleep and we're just beginning just to relax and our head's settling back and it's quiet and we can begin to sense that there's awareness here. There's not just the sounds, or the sensations, or the feelings of our breath but there's also that which is aware. There's a kind of sentience, a quality of awakesness and space that we can sense in the background and when we just turn our attention to awareness itself, there's a real dissolution of any sense of separateness, of any story of a self and there's a vast quality of presence we enter into that's really our true home. So when I train people, I train them mostly in paying attention to the present moment and to the refuge of love, that at times we are quiet we can open to that mysterious, empty vastness that is awareness itself.

Dr. Dave: Wonderful. That's a great reminder. Now speaking of the training that you do, I'm under the impression that you do training workshops for therapists, is that right?

Tara Brach: That's right. I've done a CEU, one that can be done online or done through CDs that anybody that wants to learn how to bring mindfulness practices and compassion practices into psychotherapy and that's done through Sounds True right now. http://www.soundstrue.com/shop/authors/Tara_Brach

Dr. Dave: Okay, well I wonder if you have any sense of what sorts of questions therapists tend to ask.

Tara Brach: Yeah. A lot of therapists ask, "well, how do I know whether mindfulness is the right practice or strategy? What'll I do if my client is experiencing trauma? What are the ways when there's trauma, what kind of meditation do we do then?" I'm very careful to make sure it's understood that mindfulness is not always the response. These two questions, "what's happening? Can I be with it?" are not always the wisest response. As we talked about earlier David, very often the first thing in working with meditation with somebody who's had trauma, is perhaps just the meditation's on loving presence, where we're just learning to do what's called the loving kindness meditation – send phrases of kindness to ourselves, just to begin to soothe and comfort. I also teach therapists how to help their clients access love when they don't feel it themselves, how to access it from the outside. For example one woman that I worked with was very traumatised and if I asked her "well can you hold yourself with love, can you put your hand on your heart and offer yourself love," she wouldn't be able to 'cause she was too regressed. She was feeling herself like she was a young and terrified child and powerless, so she couldn't offer that to herself. So I taught her, I basically said "well, who do you feel could offer you that love and safety?" Her response was "well I feel safe with you and I feel safe with my sister and my best friend." So I taught her to call on us and imagine us, visualise us kind of around her and she put her hand on her heart and feel that it was our energy, our love, our care, moving through her hand right into her heart until she got that sense of, she described as being in a warm bath, that she was really held in care from the outside. And gradually she began to sense that it was her own heart holding her but it wasn't possible at first. So those are the kind of questions and strategies I work with with therapists that help them to make use of the meditations.

Dr. Dave: Are there any sort of resistances, or barriers to this kind of work that therapists tend to have?

Tara Brach: Well one question, which you asked, is "do I have to call this meditation? Do I have to refer to Buddhism?" The answers are "no" and "no." We can language whatever way is most gonna serve people. Really, meditation is a form of training our attention and we unconsciously keep on practicing paying attention in ways that cause suffering. You know the phrase "neurons the fire together, wire together." We have all sorts of habits that we've created pathways in our brain that keep us feeling either depressed, or anxious, or filled with self aversion and so you can think of meditation as rewiring, where we're training our mind in a different way, so as to have more access to peace and happiness and love. So I work with people on that, the kind of thing of how to language in a way that's really gonna make it accessible and an invitation to their clients. The other thing that therapists have to really be careful of, is if their excited about meditation, clients might have a feeling like they have to do it because it's what the therapist believes in and not only that but they have to do it well, or right. So a key thing in being able to share meditation as part of psychotherapy is to remove from it any sense of what you need to do to progress, or be good meditator and make it really, really a domain of curiosity and exploration, really without judgement.

Dr. Dave: That is a great last point, so in fact we are winding down, and is there anything more that you'd like our listeners to know?

Tara Brach: Well, one of the things that, as we talk about therapists and clients, that most strikes me, is that the greatest gift that we give each other is to be a mirror of each other's goodness. That therapists, more than teaching the strategies of meditation, if a therapist sees beyond the mask and sees the goodness of the other person, not just how their leg's in a trap but sees really that being's, what we call in the Buddhist tradition, Buddha nature or true nature. Thomas Merton says the divine, or sacred, that's shining through every being. If we see that in each other it calls it out of them and it's the greatest gift we can give, not only to our clients but to our partners and our children and to ourselves, is to reflect on this essential goodness and the more we do it, we're again rewiring our brains and awakening our hearts because then we begin to trust that and live from that.

Dr. Dave: Well again, that's such a wonderful reminder. Well, Dr. Tara Brach, I really want to thank you for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

Tara Brach: Ah, you've been a dream to talk with. I feel like you're so inviting and so there. Thank you very much, David for having me.