

Radical Acceptance Summary

By Tara Brach

Psychologist Carl Rogers once said, 'It wasn't until I accepted myself just as I was, that I was free to change.'

Radical Acceptance is a treatise on how the integration of Buddhist spirituality and meditative practices can partner with western psychotherapy, to assist us in healing and personal development.

How often do you wish that you could change aspects of your personality, or be more like the people that you admire? Many of us are caught up in a web of deficiency, and beat ourselves up for our so-called failures. While many of us wish that we could celebrate the accomplishments of others, sometimes we feel envious or have a heightened sense of our own inability to achieve our goals. Other times we may feel vulnerable when criticized or don't perform at our best. If you look at the people around you, most of them experience these exact feelings of unworthiness. The good news is that we can shift our mindset and learn, not only to accept ourselves, but to *radically* accept who we are.

Radical acceptance is a way to embrace positive and negative experiences. Through meditative practice, we can learn to welcome a range of experiences, while being fully present in the moment. Instead of shelving how we feel, and swiftly moving on to the next experience, we can learn how to live more mindfully.

Author Tara Brach is a clinical psychologist, and leading western teacher

of Buddhist meditation. She's the founder of the Insight Meditation Community in Washington, DC, and has practiced and taught meditation for over forty years – with an emphasis on vipassana (insight meditation). Brach teaches us how to develop compassion, and cultivate a mindful presence to emotionally heal and spiritually awaken.

This Briefer summary examines how we get trapped in the trance of unworthiness, how western culture is in part to blame for feelings of inadequacy, and how radical acceptance can bring us out of this trance. Alongside this, we'll also learn about the power of the "sacred pause," how to be a kind and constant friend to our painful experiences, and how to realize the goodness that lies within us all. Finally, we'll look at why Adam and Eve isn't a story that serves us, what we have in common with a tiger called Mohini, and what we can learn from a muddy statue.

Are You Trapped in the Trance of Unworthiness?

Have you ever had that dream when you are trying to run from something, and no matter how hard you try, you just can't? Many interpret this dream as a sign that the dreamer feels inadequate.

Feelings of inadequacy and not being "good enough" are commonplace. We've all heard the saying that the harshest critic is often ourselves, and this couldn't be more true. We've been led to believe that perfection is a standard that we can all achieve, and we have ideas about our ideal selves. Wouldn't it be liberating to shed all of this pressure and just live in the moment?

One of the most common regrets experienced by people on their deathbeds is that they didn't live a life that was true to themselves. The

core of our suffering often comes down to not feeling like we're "enough." Brach terms this the "trance of unworthiness." The trance of unworthiness leads to shame and a 'tendency towards self-aversion, the feeling of being at war with oneself.' Being at war with oneself is a constant argument about what's wrong with us. If we believe that we have an abundance of flaws, we can't ever truly express ourselves or have the confidence to lead creative, spontaneous, rich, and abundant lives. What's more, have you ever tried to relax when you're anxious? It's impossible, right?

The trance of unworthiness is a prison that leads to self-destructive behaviors such as drinking too much, over-eating, smoking, losing our tempers, withdrawing, or whatever other so-called coping mechanisms we think will help. The fact is that the inability to accept ourselves is what leads us to spiral into patterns of self-destructive behaviors.

Is The West to Blame?

Western culture typically entrenches fears of inadequacy, and feelings of belonging don't come naturally. Although we have family and community bonds, many of us feel like we can't make mistakes freely, and that we're alone in dealing with things. Standards dictate that we need to compete, and if we fall short of an expectation, then we're failures. While high standards aren't always bad, the message that we're inferior if we fall short is incredibly damaging.

But where do these messages come from? According to Brach, this message is prevalent in many western teachings. If we go back to the story of Adam and Eve, the fundamental message is that humans are inherently flawed, and need to repent to enter paradise. From our earliest years, we're taught that there's something wrong with us and that we're

sinners by virtue of being human. It's this message of original sin that perpetuates the mindset that we need to seek redemption. Stories such as this are central to many "origin of man" stories in western culture, and they shape how many people see themselves.

Western culture is also typically highly competitive and goal-driven. This ethos is instilled from a young age, and if we aren't naturally competitive, we're made to believe that there's something wrong with us. And once we achieve one goal, we aren't given time to enjoy it. We're asked, 'What's next?'

So it is that life becomes a series of chases. We chase the next big thing and never appreciate our achievements in their entirety. Sadly our achievements often feel hollow because they don't give us the satisfaction of feeling worthy, accepted, and as if we belong. So how can we learn to accept ourselves and to strive towards a more affirmative, healing stance on what it means to be human?

What Can We Learn From Buddhism?

'Imperfection is not our personal problem - it is a natural part of existing.'

Welcome to reality. There's no such thing as perfection. Buddhism invites us to let go of perfection, to let go of being so future-focused, and instead just to embrace the goodness of who we really are. If we rid ourselves of the belief that we're flawed and "bad," then we can start focusing on what makes us good and worthy.

By looking towards Buddhism, we can reframe our feelings of being naturally sinful and flawed, and embrace being naturally loving and wise.

Buddhism teaches that imperfection is an inescapable part of existence. It's much better just to accept ourselves as we are, rather than to chase some impossible dream of how we should be. We can also apply this to the expectations we place on others, and on how we believe life should be.

When we overly focus on ourselves, chase what we think we want, and worry about the future, we cut ourselves off from the things that keep us most connected to ourselves and others. After all, life is our ability to be fully present in each moment, and to gracefully accept and revel in the beauty and pain of life as it unfolds moment to moment.

Radical Acceptance is About Mindfulness and Compassion

'Deep unconditional tenderness towards ourselves is the prerequisite to change.'

You may think that all of this positive thinking and self-love means that we don't have to do any kind of self-reflection. Radical acceptance isn't about passively going along on life's journey or believing that we're all perfect. Instead, it's about empowering us to inspire change within ourselves. When our fear and shame don't encumber us, we can live more positively and embrace life and all of our relationships.

Do you ever feel caged in or stuck in a rut? If so, you might have something in common with a white tiger named Mohini. Mohini lived in the National Zoo in Washington, DC, in the 1970s. Mohini was kept in a small cage for many years, after which she was transferred to a bigger enclosure. The zookeepers were sure she'd love her spacious new home,

but they were mistaken. Mohini lived the rest of her life in just one corner of her new enclosure, pacing an area the size of her old cage until the grass wore away beneath her paws. Sadly, despite the “freedom” on offer, Mohini's mind kept her trapped in old patterns of behavior. As with Mohini, many of us remain stuck in our habits, even though greater freedom is possible.

However, have we ever interrogated the things that keep us caged in? Perhaps instead of iron and concrete, it's self-judgment and feelings of inadequacy. The voice of our inner critic is quick to tell us that whatever we do, we'll never be good enough. This negativity keeps us trapped in lives that are small and narrow. Luckily, unlike poor Mohini, we can free ourselves. By pursuing the mindset of radical acceptance, we can set ourselves free. We need to be very clear about our feelings and to engage with our experiences with compassion and enlightenment. Once we recognize how we're feeling, we can act compassionately and ask ourselves whether we're caught in a rut or thought or behavior that isn't serving us well.

The two aspects of radical acceptance are recognition and compassion. We can't accept the experience until we can clearly see what it is that we're experiencing. Buddhists call this mindful awareness, and it's the process of seeing things as they are. This includes patterns that emerge in our lives and broader consequences of our thoughts and actions. The second part is the ability to respond with care and tenderness, in other words, compassion.

We can't have one without the other. Recognition without compassion means that we'll be left noticing what's happening, but without the tools to cope with it. And, if we just see everything through the lens of compassion, rather than self-reproach, we might tip too far into self-pity.

Let's explore how we can embrace the two wings of radical acceptance, recognition, and compassion.

Practice the Sacred Pause – The Wing of Recognition

Have you ever had someone tell you, 'Just take a moment, pause, breathe?'

When we get stuck on something, we need to learn how to pause. This allows us to critically analyze what's going on when we're feeling angry, irritable, or triggered. Once we can name or recognize how we're feeling, we call this the wing of recognition.

So the first step of radical acceptance is to practice the sacred art of pausing. This allows us to fully access our intelligence and heart. We tend to get caught up in familiar narratives or judge ourselves in familiar ways. So, if we can simply tune into what's happening in our bodies, we can recognize particular feelings.

With the wing of recognition, we can identify, 'Okay, what I'm feeling is anxiety,' or 'This feels a lot like anger.' Once we recognize feelings, we can make space for them, and each time we do this, we're able to give

our feelings more room. This is how the practice of radical acceptance evolves.

Recognizing our own feelings also has a knock-on effect. If we are aware of how we feel, we are more patient and understanding towards those around us. So often we miss cues from other people because we're too wrapped up in ourselves. We may miss moments of connection where we can act with compassion and empathy. Human contact is precious, and we should never let our own emotions stand in the way of forging relationships with those around us.

Radical Acceptance doesn't mean we have to agree or approve of the things outside of our control, but can we be willing to allow them to come and go naturally at their own pace? A way to practice and build radical acceptance is to work on getting better at *feeling*, rather than trying to feel better.

Practice Being a Kind and Constant Friend to Yourself – The Wing of Compassion

'Can we allow ourselves to open to the realness of suffering, and then offer it into a boundless heartspace?'

The wing of compassion is when we make space for our pain. Imagine yourself talking to a friend in distress. Most of the time, we're not looking to pass judgment or make any change; we're simply curious, looking for insight, and trying to show compassion.

Can we extend this friendly curiosity towards ourselves? The moments when we feel hurt, angry or afraid, are often the moments we most need

to be kind towards ourselves. However, often the times when we need radical acceptance the most, are the times it might seem impossible to practice it.

All of us receive visits from difficult emotions throughout our lives. When we get visited by these emotions, we need to acknowledge them, and then react with compassion. When we invite our hardships in and name them, we rob our difficulties of their power. This allows us to respond with a spirit of curiosity and compassion. Through doing this, we can ask ourselves what's behind our suffering, and when we learn to see, and welcome our difficult experiences, that's when their power over us dissolves.

Radical acceptance is about reminding ourselves that we are inherently good, and worthy of love. Buddha's core teaching is that we suffer because we forget who we really are – our true essence. We become caught in an identity that's less than who we are, and he likens this to a kind of "homesickness," where we don't feel at home in our bodies, and our world.

The story of the golden buddha illustrates this. Years ago in Thailand, there was a temple that housed a massive golden buddha. It was the pride of the whole village, and so when the villagers received word that an invading army was approaching, they rushed to protect the sacred statue. The villagers covered the golden buddha with mud and concrete so that they could mask its value. As anticipated, when the army arrived, they overlooked the statue. For many years, the army occupied the village. As time passed, people forgot about the golden buddha beneath the mud and concrete. Then one day, a young monk was meditating at the base of the buddha, and a piece of gold chipped off. The monk excitedly told the other monks, and they started hammering at the

statue, realizing it was the golden buddha.

The wisdom in this story is that each of us is golden by nature; sometimes, we just need help chipping away at the mud and concrete. To discover our "Buddha nature," we need to distinguish between "doing bad things" and being a "bad person."

Reconnecting with the essential goodness in ourselves and others is one of the primary goals of radical acceptance. What if we could not take pain so personally and accept that we all feel pain, and wish to be free of it? What if we could recognize and have compassion for others?

In Conclusion

It's easy to get trapped in the stories we tell ourselves. We get caught in a trance.

Radical acceptance is how we step out of that trance, and it's powerful because it allows us to take heed of all our emotions, connect with them, and react with a greater sense of agency. Brach offers us a treatise on how eastern Buddhist practices can partner with western psychotherapy and assist us with healing and personal development. She invites us to acknowledge what we're experiencing, and welcome it rather than pushing it aside. All too often we get trapped in the stories we tell ourselves, but Brach gives us the tools to step out of the trances we so easily fall into.

It starts by learning how to pause, stepping back, and becoming fully aware of everything that's going on within and around us without immediate judgment. And, if the concept of loving-kindness feels foreign

to you, this book comes to the rescue. By weaving together personal stories, case histories, Buddhist teachings, and meditative practices, Brach helps us to not only practice radical acceptance, but radical compassion.

So if you want an intellectual but lightweight read on how to avoid getting stuck in your head, and step into the present more fully, then this book is the perfect companion.