

**Everything Is A Gift**  
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**UU Congregation of the Outer Banks**  
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**Reading from *Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life with the Heart of a Buddha* by Tara Brach**

*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 . . . we all have Buddha nature. Spiritual awakening is the process of recognizing our essential goodness, our natural wisdom and compassion. . . . The Buddha nature that is our essence remains intact, no matter how lost we may be. The very nature of our awareness is to know what is happening. The very nature of our heart is to care.*

There's a stream of moral thought that runs through much of the Hebrew Bible teaching that if we are virtuous, righteous, and properly respectful of God, we will be rewarded. Prosperity, victory in battle, the blessings of family and community respect will be ours. When we are suffering, this doctrine tells us, it is because we have failed in our moral responsibilities in some way. When Moses fails to follow God's instructions, he is banned from ever entering the Promised Land. When the people worship other gods, they are attacked by enemies and afflicted by famine and plagues. When they fail in their responsibility to care for the poor and the helpless and to treat strangers justly, they are driven into exile in Babylon. Suffering is a punishment; the good will prosper.

For most of the history of Christianity, the idea of suffering as punishment continued, with a new interpretation added in: Suffering is not just punishment for wrongdoing, it's also the way to restore right relationship with God. In this interpretation, the Original Sin of Adam and Eve, disobeying God in the Garden of Eden, tainted all their human descendants and made us unworthy of God's care. Those who did not understand this story literally still saw it as a metaphoric description of human nature: innately flawed, inherently incapable of goodness on our own, and in need of some great sacrifice to redeem us in God's eyes. Only the suffering and death of Jesus, God himself in human form, was enough to make us acceptable to God again, and to save us from an eternity of punishment for our sinful nature.

For nearly two thousand years, Western culture has been shaped and dominated by this idea of a connection between suffering, unworthiness, punishment, and redemption.

Hundreds of years ago, our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors said "No." The idea that God would deliberately create human beings with a fundamental flaw that made us incapable of goodness was perverse, and disrespectful to God, they said. The idea that a loving God would demand an infinite punishment in Hell for sins that human beings couldn't help committing was contrary to all logic and justice, they said. The idea that punishment and suffering was the only way to restore relationship with God made God like an abusive parent magnified to cosmic proportions, they said.

No, those forebears of our faith said, suffering is not our just punishment, and it is not the path to salvation. We are saved from suffering by growing toward perfection and wholeness in our own lives, and by making the world in which we live a better, more compassionate, more just place. We are saved from suffering by knowing that we are good, by knowing that we are loved, and by knowing that we are part of a larger hope for the world.

There's a saying attributed to the great African American theologian Howard Thurman: Everything that happens in your life is a gift. Whatever comes our way can be seen as a chance to grow our insight, our understanding, our strength, our skill. And yet we still experience suffering. When a loved one dies, we ache with the loss. When our lives take a slow or sudden turn in a direction we don't want, we are struck by fear, by anger, by grief. When illness robs us of strength and capacity, when circumstances keep us from reaching our goals, when people refuse to act in ways we believe they should, we feel frustration and rancor. When we are witnesses to oppression, or when we are its victims, when we watch our planet's well-being decline as it's poisoned and pillaged, when we see humankind afflicted by war, poverty, hunger, and disease, our hearts break.

And as sure as we may be that we have left the idea of Original Sin behind in the Garden, in the broken moments the old voices come back: Suffering means that something is *wrong*. Something—or *someone*—needs to be fixed. Someone must be to blame; someone needs to be punished in order to make things right. Maybe it's those terrible people over there. Maybe it's you.

Maybe it's me. Probably it's me.

In contemporary Western culture, you don't have to believe in the old myth of Adam and Eve or an angry and punitive God to become convinced that the old connections between suffering, punishment, and redemption are still in operation. You can see it in our system of criminal justice, dealing out harsh retributions. You can see it in our approach to international affairs, dividing the world into allies and enemies. You can see it in food stamp and public housing programs that treat poor people with suspicion and condescension. You can see it in the way we blame people for their illnesses, measuring out or tempering our compassion according to whether a sick person smokes, or keeps a healthy diet, or lives with an addiction or dependency.

Above all, you can see it in the way we treat ourselves when we're hurting. As the Buddhist teacher Tara Brach writes, "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."

When pain comes, when sorrow visits, when hope fades; when our heart aches and our will breaks on some burden we find ourselves carrying, how can we hold on to that precious assurance of our faith that we are good, that we are loved, that we are part of a larger hope?

One path is the Buddhist idea of Radical Acceptance. In Brach's words, this means "accepting absolutely everything about ourselves and our lives, by embracing with wakefulness and care our moment-to-moment experience." She goes on to say: "It means feeling sorrow and pain without

resisting. It means feeling desire or dislike for someone or something without judging ourselves for the feeling or being driven to act on it.”

In Buddhist practice, Radical Acceptance has two components: First, mindfulness that allows us to become fully aware of what is happening around us and within us in any given moment; second, compassion that holds the present-moment experience in a tender and caring embrace.

The beginning of this practice is inward. The promise of it is that it frees us to act—whether in our own life or on the larger stage of the world—in a way that is not driven by anger, bitterness, or the desire to punish, but rather by compassion, by insight, and from our wisest self.

It can be a challenging thought for a practically-minded people. What does radical acceptance look like when you’re lying in bed next to the cold empty space where your beloved lay before the illness took her? What does it look like when there’s suddenly no job to go to, or when the storm has flooded your house? What does it mean to radically accept that I may not be able to live as I choose much longer, as my health or the changes that come with age rob me of the strength to care for myself independently? What does radical acceptance look like when I or someone I love has sustained some catastrophic hurt? What about when someone has harmed me—or when I have hurt someone I love? What does radical acceptance look like when I turn to the wider world and I’m confronted by the immense injustices of racism, of homophobia, of massive inequalities of wealth? What good does it do?

These everyday situations of suffering test the idea that simply “accepting what is” will somehow bring an end to the suffering that seems so real and present. We want something powerful, something practical, something that will *change* the situation. Yet outrage and rejection are not empowering; refusing to accept that things are what they are tends to induce paralysis—or lead to actions that make the situation worse. When we remain in the experience of the situation just as it is, Tara Brach says, “something begins to happen—we feel freer, options open before us, we see with more clarity how we want to proceed. Radical Acceptance helps us to heal and move on. . . . [It] acknowledges our own experience in this moment as the first step in wise action.”

What would it be like, then, in any moment of struggle, to accept this moment as it is? It would mean taking a deeper look: What is really going on, right now? What chain of circumstance and choices led to this moment? What desire, or pain, or fear, or longing is driving my own feelings? What desire or pain, fear or longing is driving others in this situation? What part have I played in bringing this moment about? Where is my true agency, my capacity to affect this situation? Can I hold all of this with loving care?

And now, only now. . . what might I do next?

It’s useful at this point to remind ourselves that Radical Acceptance is a *practice*, not a tool that can be picked up and used successfully in any situation without effort or experience. A therapeutic tool rooted in radical acceptance that I’ve used for several years recommends that you try out the practice on some modest, relatively neutral situations before turning to some traumatic, life-altering event.

In a timely coincidence, I reread that advice just last Monday, before spending a couple of hours in the car listening to exhaustive news coverage from the Iowa caucuses before they happened in the evening. What a perfect opportunity that provided for trying to bring an accepting, non-judgmental awareness to a difficult present moment! Unclench the jaw; notice the inner voice responding in outrage to the candidates' words; embrace my hope and my fear for the future of the country; unclench the jaw; accept that the people being interviewed in cafes and parking lots have reasons for believing what they believe; notice how my hands tighten on the wheel when that candidate speaks; unclench the jaw. . . .

It was an excellent chance to practice. And it pointed me to a few actions that I hope will be wise.

What might your practice moments be? Whatever they are, may we each and all grow in our capacity to hold ourselves and our world in compassionate awareness, as we seek the loving actions that will bring healing and joy to ourselves and to our world.

Everything that happens in your life is a gift. Some of them, we might prefer to give back—yet this is our one and precious life, every single moment of it, in joy and in sorrow, in hope and in loss, in celebration and in mourning.

May we be filled with loving kindness; may we be peaceful and at ease; may we be whole.