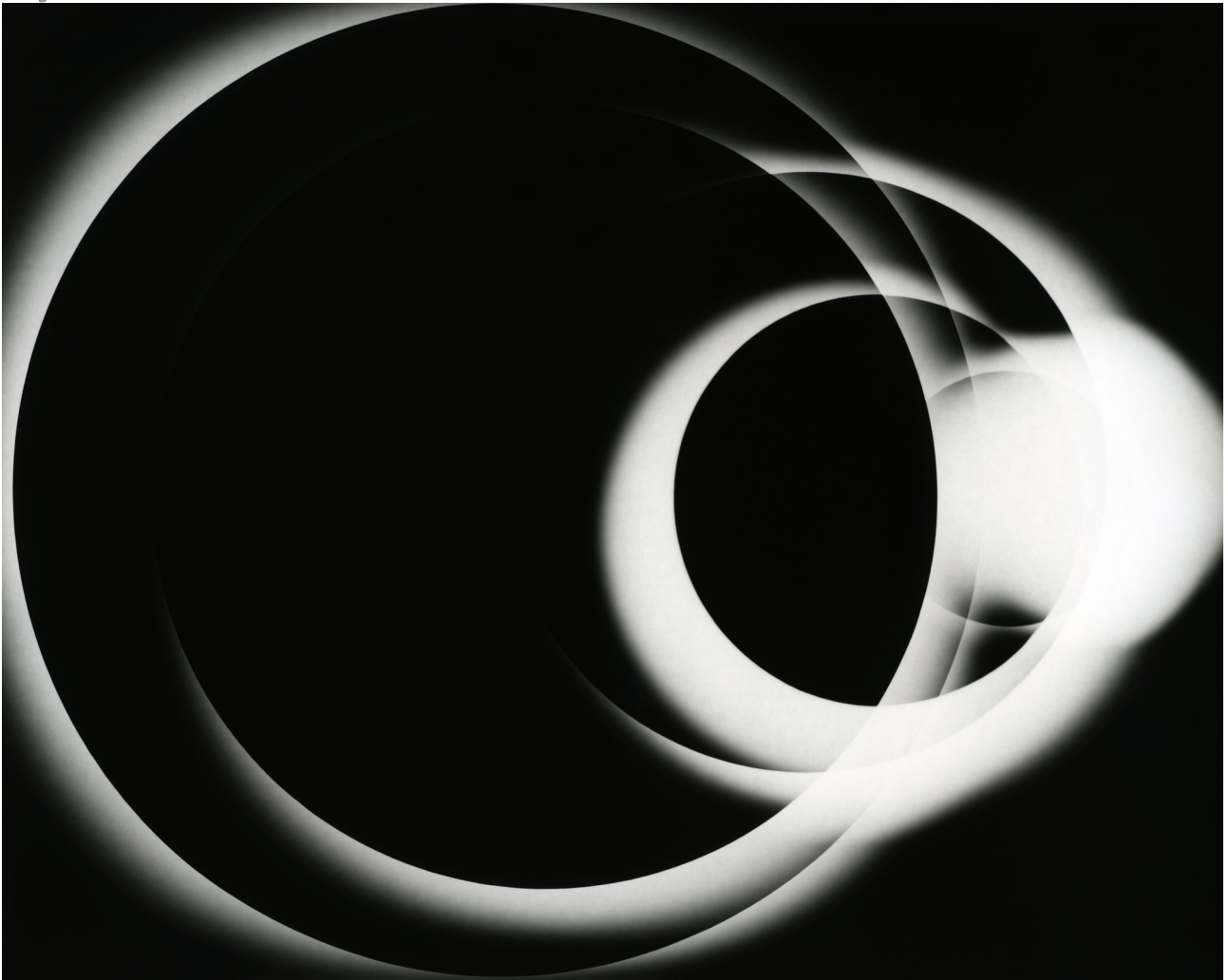


# A True Taste of Peace

We can learn to let go of our negative conceptions of ourselves when we realise that they're real but not true.

By Tara Brach



Artwork by Betsy Kenyon

One of the great blocks to realising the gold of who we are is our conviction that “something is wrong with me.” When I teach about the trance of unworthiness, I’m often asked, “Why do we hold on so tightly to our belief in our own deficiency? Why are we so loyal to our suffering, so addicted to our self-judgment?”

Our beliefs live not only in our minds but also in a constellation of feelings and emotions embedded in our bodies. They are deeply familiar. They feel like “me.” Most are rooted in interpretations of reality we formed in early childhood, and we rely on them for guidance and protection. They tell us who we are and what we can expect from ourselves, from others, and from the world. Our most potent negative self-beliefs arise from early experiences of fear and wounding. Because of a survival-driven negativity bias, we are inclined to remember painful events much more readily than pleasant ones. This fixation on what might be threatening is compounded by another tendency, called the confirmation bias, which leads us to focus on information that matches or reinforces our existing beliefs—particularly in the case of charged issues like our value as a person. The upshot: We make an airtight case for our belief in personal deficiency.

In my work with meditation students and clients over the last decades, I’ve seen how the belief that we are unlovable and/or unworthy has stopped people from having intimate relationships, generated ongoing anxiety and depression, fuelled addictive behaviour, and caused harm to their loved ones. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche writes, “The snake that cannot shed its skin

perishes.” To flourish, we need to release the belief that something is wrong with us.

Janice, a single mom, was a friend who had started coming to my weekly meditation class. In addition to having a demanding job, she felt caught between the needs of Bruce, her fifteen-year-old son, who was struggling with social anxiety, and the needs of her dad, who lived for her visits at his assisted living facility. He always lit up when she arrived, and then, when she got up to leave, he’d anxiously ask when she was coming back. She resented him for making her feel guilty, resented the time away from work and her son, and, most deeply, resented herself for not being more openhearted and gracious.

Janice had begun to practice RAIN (Recognize-Allow-Investigate-Nurture), but so far this tangle of resentment hadn’t budged. Then, during one of our walks, she asked for my help. So I put on my meditation-teacher hat and asked her what she was believing about herself. She responded immediately, “I’m falling short on the most important fronts.” Then, shaking her head with resignation, she went on: “You know, Tara, I’m failing them and . . . this is awful to say . . . but I’m just not a loving person.”

I then asked Janice something she didn’t expect, a question the author Byron Katie uses in her work: “Is it true? Is it true that you’re failing and that you’re not a loving person?”

She responded impatiently, “All the evidence points that way.”

I asked again, “Are you certain that you’re failing, that you’re not a loving enough person. Is it really true?” This time she slowed down before replying. “OK, it really *feels* true, Tara. I’m not liking myself very much these days . . . but no . . . I guess I’m not certain.” We walked in silence for a bit, and when I glanced at her, Janice looked thoughtful and sad but not so grim.

Then I shared a phrase I’d learned from Tsoknyi Rinpoche, one of my teachers: “Real but not true.” Yes, our beliefs are real because we experience them mentally, emotionally, and physically. And they have real impact on our lives! As Gandhi put it, they lead to action, create our character, and shape our destiny. But these beliefs—even the ones that feel most true—are only mental representations or symbols of our experience. We need to deepen our presence and ask ourselves: Do they match the actual, living, changing stuff of our experience in the world? In other words, are they true?

**Any story you have about yourself is not the same as the reality of what you are.**

One of the most life-changing realisations you can have is, “I don’t have to believe my thoughts...they are just thoughts!” Any story you have about yourself is not the same as the unfolding reality of what you are: the ongoing life of your senses, the tenderness of your heart, the consciousness that right now is seeing or hearing these words. Yet because our beliefs are continuously

filtering and interpreting reality, we mistake our stories about ourselves and the world for reality itself.

In the weeks that followed, reflecting on these teachings about beliefs created a tiny but important opening for Janice. She became more hopeful, more willing to deepen her attention. I've seen this over and over. When we have enough perspective to realise "I'm not my thoughts," or "This is just a belief," we are unhooking from the inner dialogue. This enables us to wake up to a larger awareness.

The RAIN meditation is a crucial help at this point, because it offers us a systematic way to loosen the grip of fear-based beliefs. I reviewed the steps of RAIN with Janice, and after practicing for several weeks, she shared an experience with me.

One afternoon, after she'd parked her car at her father's nursing home, she decided to do RAIN before going inside to visit. She reclined her seat and closed her eyes. As she brought her father to mind, she felt dutiful, resentful, guilty, tight.

Janice was making the U-turn, turning her attention inward, and this was her starting place: She **Recognized** that cluster of feelings, and instead of judging herself for them, she simply **Allowed** herself to feel how painful they were without pushing them away. Then, after a few breaths, she leaned in, beginning to **Investigate** with interest, trying to get a better sense of what was going on. She gently asked herself, "What is the worst part about this?" and her attention went right to her chest. She felt heat, tightness, and pressure. "Ah," she said to herself, "I'm angry." And as she let the anger be there, it

began to change shape. It morphed into a sense of powerlessness. There was no way she could live up to what was expected of her—with her father, with her son, at work. She was falling short, she would always fail. And now, along with that feeling of helplessness came self-condemnation: “I just don’t like who I am. I don’t like this grim, angry, closed-hearted, helpless self.”

Investigating had connected her with what she had been running away from: the deep belief that she was failing and was an unloving person. She then recalled the question we had explored together: “Is it possible these beliefs are real but not true?” Asking this gave her enough space to stay present with what was unfolding. She then asked, “When I’m believing this, what is my experience inside?” Her heart felt raw, tightly bound, and filled with a very young sense of helplessness and shame. As she contacted this deep emotional pain in her body, she realised that these feelings had been buried within her for as long as she could remember. A natural response of sorrow and self-compassion arose.

Janice had reached the *N* of RAIN, Nurture, and with tears and with tenderness, she began to whisper to herself, just as she would to a young child: “This is really difficult, and you’re doing your best. You love Dad, you love Bruce. Now that you’re here, you can relax. It’s enough just to be with Dad now, love him now. It’s OK.” She did relax, as if letting go into the arms of a wise, kind parent. She sat still for another five minutes or so, letting in and resting in the warmth and openness of this new space before she went inside. And when she peeked into her father’s room, he was just waking from a nap.

He beamed at her and said, “I just had a dream about you as a little girl trying to ride Rosie.” They laughed and began to share memories of Rosie, a much-loved dog, which led to more memories of good times. As she was leaving, Janice promised that for her next visit, she’d bring some childhood pictures she had digitised. And when she got to her car, she realised that her father hadn’t asked when she was coming back. She *was* back, and he wasn’t so lonely.

RAIN had enabled Janice to reconnect with a very natural, openhearted sense of herself, but this didn’t mean that her resentments, guilt, and negative beliefs magically disappeared. RAIN is rarely a one-shot experience; well-grooved beliefs and feelings continue to arise. The difference was, after weeks of practicing RAIN Janice could see clearly that her beliefs weren’t reality; they didn’t have to confine her life experience and her sense of her own being.

Before Janice drifted off to sleep on the night of that visit, she reflected on how long she’d been hounded by a sense of her own deficiency. Then she asked herself one of the questions we’d discussed: “Who would I be if I didn’t believe this about myself?” The response was a spontaneous feeling of spaciousness, buoyancy, and warmth. Her spirit, she realised, was beyond any thought or belief. Trusting this gave Janice a true taste of peace.

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