

“Opening Our Heart in the Face of Fear”

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Radical Acceptance- Embracing Your Life with the Heart of a Buddha

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We have to face the pain we have been running from. In fact, we need to learn to rest in it and let its searing power transform us.

Charlotte Joko Beck

When Barbara came to me for therapy, meditation had become so unpleasant for her that she wondered if she should continue to practice. Frightening scenes from her childhood had begun to invade her morning sitting, leaving her shaken and distraught. Barbara had just returned from her first ten-day retreat, and although she had been meditating regularly for a little over a year, nothing this disturbing had happened before. Meditation had been a refuge for Barbara. She didn't want to let it go, but she just wasn't able to handle what was coming up.

As we talked in my office, Barbara sat perched on the edge of her chair, her petite frame rigid and upright. She had a pretty face but her appearance was stern: she wore a dark, tailored suit, her hair was pulled back in a tight bun and she rarely smiled. Yet in contrast to her austere look, Barbara's voice was soft and sweet. I could feel the gentleness of her spirit and immediately liked her.

She told me about one particular image that kept coming up in her meditation sittings. She and her mother had talked about the incident a number of times, and now whether the images arose now from her memory or her imagination wasn't important. They were triggering unbearable fear. Barbara was an infant and her mother was bathing her in a basin on the kitchen table. She could hear the splashing of water and her mom's gentle humming. The two were engrossed in their experience, in love with each other. Suddenly her father barged in, drunk and angry, yelling at her mom: "Is that all you can ever think of...the baby this, the baby that...Did you even consider that I might come home after working hard all day and be hungry?" Shoving her mother aside, he grabbed Barbara and dunked her head under water. She could feel the large hands pushing down on her shoulder and head, and the wild panic of drinking in water.

Barbara's mother had screamed "No!!" and lunged for her. She wrapped Barbara in a towel and, holding her tight, said in a low voice: "Dinner will be ready in a few minutes." Her hands trembled violently as she put clothes on her daughter. Barbara lay alone in her own world—whimpering, almost unmoving. Her peaceful existence had been shattered in an instant.

Throughout her childhood, whether her father's rage was directed at her mother or herself, Barbara would again and again feel paralyzed by the same feelings—the strangling grip of fear around her throat, the wild butterflies and sour feeling in her stomach. Even when her father wasn't home Barbara felt anxious and on edge.

Young children make sense of abusive experiences by thinking that they caused them to happen, that they were in some way to blame. Barbara grew up assuming that she brought on her father's unpredictable outbreaks. When he would suddenly start yelling at her, she would wonder "What have I done wrong now?" Beneath that always lay the belief: "I'm bad. I'm so bad...that's why he hates me." Long after the waves of terror subsided, Barbara could still feel a sinking sense of shame that made her want to climb into bed and curl up under the covers. By the time she was a teen, her most persistent sense of herself was that she was a misfit—powerless, frightened and absolutely alone.

As an adult Barbara did a good job of hiding her fears from the eyes of the world. She was regarded by anyone who knew her as a highly capable, responsible person. Even her friends didn't know that she lived in constant fear that she might unknowingly offend someone, that she might make a mistake, that she might do something to invoke someone's anger. They knew only that Barbara was a wonderful listener, and they felt nourished when they were with her. Encouraged by friends to build a career on these qualities, Barbara decided to get a master's degree in education and become a high school guidance counselor. Although she felt nervous with teens, Barbara hoped she might offer them a kind of support that was missing in her own adolescence.

Her first semester at the university she met Randy, a business major. Right off, Randy adored her. She was shy and sweet, and seemed to need care. As he watched her with her nieces or with a friend having a hard time, he knew he wanted to spend his life with her. For Barbara, Randy was the perfect

man. He was kind and gentle, not threatening. They moved in together while in school and married a few months after graduating.

Soon after Barbara was hired as a guidance counselor in a small suburban high school. It didn't take long for her to notice she wasn't as witty or easy going as the other counselors and that students rarely stopped by just to talk. When those assigned to her did come in, her fear that she might do something wrong made her stiff and distant. Meeting with parents was even worse. Her performance anxiety made everything they said sound like a comment on her own personal abilities. "I don't know what to do with her" from a parent translated in Barbara's mind into "Why haven't you been able to guide us better." Or "He has terrible study habits" meant "You could be directing him better in how he approaches his work." Her stomach would churn and the lump in her throat grow so big she could barely speak.

Barbara told me that trying to keep her fears at bay felt like locking a pack of wild dogs down in the cellar. The longer they were trapped there, the hungrier they got. Inevitably they would break down the door and invade the house. While this was now happening during meditation, it had been going on for years. Each time the fears took over, she'd feel as if the dogs were tearing apart every room, every closet, every nook and cranny, and there was nothing she could do to stop them.

Sometimes they broke loose just before dawn. As she lay in bed, the dark shape of the picture hanging on the wall across from her would slowly come into focus. With dread, she would realize she was awake. "Oh my God...in a few hours I'm going to have to face another day." How could she continue pretending she knew what she was doing at work. Other people managed to handle full-time jobs, to have dinner with their in-laws, or go to office parties without being flooded with apprehension. But for Barbara, everything felt like too much.

Sometimes the dogs would break through after she and Randy made love. They'd lie together and it would feel so nice to have him gently stroking her hair. Then suddenly the fear would be there—when something felt so wonderful, she was about to be blindsided. The fear would build as her mind started coming up with stories: "Maybe he'll get bored with me, tired of all my fears. Maybe he'll want to leave." Feeling frightened and alone, she'd curl up crying. Randy would wrap himself around her, trying to comfort her, not understanding what was wrong.

I regularly meet with clients and meditation students who struggle with fear. Some, like Barbara, feel overwhelmed and at times paralyzed by it. Others may not have been overtly traumatized, but as they become more aware, they realize how much fear controls their life. We all have dogs in the cellar. If we make a mistake, the dogs can tear down any sense of competency we may have. If someone gets angry at us, suddenly the dogs are there, threatening to dismantle our world. If we feel rejected or betrayed, the dogs convince us that no one will ever love us.

When fear takes over in this way, we are caught in what I call the trance of fear. As we tense in anticipation of what may go wrong, our heart and mind contract. We forget that there are people who care about us and we forget our own ability to feel spacious and openhearted. Trapped in the trance, we experience life through the filter of fear.

While all physical and emotional pain is unpleasant, the pain of fear can feel unbearable. When we are gripped by fear, nothing else exists. Our most contracted and painful sense of self is hitched to the feelings and stories of fear, to our ways of resisting fear. Yet this trance begins to lose its power over us as we meet the raw sensations of fear with Radical Acceptance. Such acceptance is profoundly freeing. As we learn to say Yes to fear, we reconnect with the fullness of Being—the heart and awareness that have been overshadowed by the contraction of fear.

What is Fear?

Who doesn't know the experience of fear? Fear is waking up in the night, like Barbara, terrified that we can't go on. Fear is the jittery feeling in our stomach, the soreness and pressure around our heart, the strangling tightness in our throat. Fear is the loud pounding of our heart, the racing of our pulse. Fear constricts our breathing, making it rapid and shallow. Fear tells us we are in danger, and then urgently drives our mind to make sense of what is happening and figure out what to do. Fear takes over our mind with stories about what will go wrong. Fear tells us we will lose our body, lose our mind, lose our friends, our family, the earth itself. *Fear is the anticipation of future pain.*

The basic function of fear is to assure survival. Life forms as primitive as the reptile experience fear. On a purely physiological level, fear is a chain of physical reactions that occur in an unvarying sequence. Western

psychologists call this biological response to experience an “affect.” It can unfold in an instant or endure for up to a few seconds. As the affect of fear arises, the chemistry of the body and the nervous system shift in ways that enable several distinct responses to threatening situations. For instance, increased blood flow to the extremities of the body readies the antelope to flee. Tensing of the muscles prepares a panther to fight. Freezing and remaining motionless is the protective stance my son’s gecko takes each time a human hand reaches into the aquarium. When our cats are afraid, the fur on their back bristles, making them appear larger and more dangerous in order to discourage predators. Our standard poodle crouches and appears diminutive. Similarly, a human might try to make himself smaller, protecting the places in the body that are most vulnerable—dropping the head forward, lifting the shoulders, rounding the back and contracting the chest. For each animal, as long as the danger persists, the one-pointed focus on self-preservation is maintained.

Only in mammals do cognition and memory interact with affect to create the emotion of fear. Also part of our survival equipment, the emotion of fear is shaped by the accumulated experiences of our personal history. The affect of fear that arises in response to our immediate experience combines with memories of associated past events and the affects they trigger. That’s why some of us are terrified of some things that hold no sense of danger for others. While the affect of fear itself lasts but a few seconds, the emotion of fear persists for as long as the affect continues to be stimulated by fearful thoughts and memories.

The emotion of fear alerts us to the possibility of negative feedback if we don’t put more time into a paper for class or a report we are preparing for work. The emotion of fear lets us know that if we don’t pay more attention to our marriage, we may end up divorced and alone. This more complex response to danger comes into play as we assess whether or not to seek medical attention for pain in our chest. The emotion of fear arises with any threat to our wellbeing, whether physical, emotional, mental or spiritual. It can guide us to respond in a healthy way or, as we each have experienced, entrap us in the trance of fear.

The real cause of our fear is not always evident. When I feel anxious, the anxiety attaches itself to whatever is going on most immediately in my life. I might be stuck in a long line at the supermarket check-out counter, afraid I’m not going to get everything else done because I’m wasting precious

time. I might have the early symptoms of a flu and worry that if it gets worse I'll have to cancel clients or miss teaching my weekly meditation class. I might be helping my son with a school project due the next day and fear that if he doesn't complete the assignment in a creative or thoughtful way his grade will go down and, with it, his options in choosing a college. Regardless of the external circumstances my mind grows tight. When I pause and ask what is really bothering me, I realize that in each situation I am anticipating loss—loss of something I think is essential to my life and happiness.

The ultimate loss—the one underlying all those smaller losses I'm afraid of—is loss of life itself. The root of all our fear is our basic craving for existence and aversion to deterioration and death. We are always facing death in some form or other. I know my parents are getting older, and one day the call will come to let me know the end is near. My son, the center of my universe, will graduate from high school and leave home. People in my life are losing their memory and physical capacities. My own body is noticeably aging, getting tired, achy. Life is fragile and loss is all around. This fear of separation from the life I love—the fear of death—lies beneath all other fears.

We would not be able to stay alive or to thrive without our innate capacity to feel and respond to fear. The problem is: The emotion of fear often works overtime. Even when there is no immediate threat, our body may remain tight and on guard, our mind narrowed to focus on what might go wrong. When this happens, fear is no longer functioning to secure our survival. We are caught in the trance of fear and our moment-to-moment experience becomes bound in reactivity. We spend our time and energy defending our life rather than living it fully.

Caught in the Trance of Fear

We are caught in the trance of fear when the emotion of fear becomes the core of our identity and constricts our capacity to live fully. The trance of fear usually begins in childhood when we experience fear in relating to our significant others. Perhaps as an infant our crying late at night may have frustrated our exhausted mother. When we saw her frowning face and heard her shrill tone, suddenly we felt unsafe with the person we most counted on for safety. Our arms and fists tightened, our throat contracted, our heartbeat raced. This physical reaction of fear in response to disapproval may have happened repeatedly through our early years. We might have tried out

something new—putting on our clothes all by ourselves and gotten them backwards. We might have poured a cup of grape juice—but spilled it on the living room carpet. When we took a family trip to Grandma’s, we may have wet the bed on the first night. Each time our mother’s disapproving look and tone of frustration were directed at us, we felt the same chain reaction of fear in our body.

While the bodies of young children are usually relaxed and flexible, if experiences of fear are continuous over the years, chronic tightening happens. Our shoulders may become permanently knotted and raised, our head thrust forward, our back hunched, our chest sunken. Rather than a temporary reaction to danger, we develop a permanent suit of armor. We become, as Chogyam Trungpa puts it, “a bundle of tense muscles defending our existence.” We often don’t even recognize this armor because it feels like such a familiar part of who we are. But we can see it in others. And when we are meditating, we can feel it in ourselves—the tightness, the areas where we feel nothing.

The trance of fear not only creates habitual contraction in our body. Our mind too becomes trapped in rigid patterns. The one-pointedness that served us in responding to real threats becomes obsession. Our mind, making associations with past experiences, produces endless stories reminding us of what bad things might happen and strategizing how to avoid them. Through I-ing and My-ing, the self takes center stage in these stories: Something terrible is about to happen to me; I am powerless; I am alone; I need to do something to save myself. Our mind urgently seeks to control the situation by finding the cause of the problem. We either point the finger at others or at ourselves. As Barbara experienced, the fear of her father’s rage was compounded by feeling that her own badness made him so mean to her. We might tell ourselves that inevitably we’ll always ruin things for ourselves or others, or trapped in the powerlessness of victimhood, that others will always ruin things for us. Either way, our stories tell us we are broken and need to be on guard.

Feelings and stories of unworthiness and shame are perhaps the most binding element in the trance of fear. *When as we believe something is wrong with us, we are convinced we are in danger.* Our shame fuels ongoing fear, and our fear fuels more shame. The very fact that we feel fear seems to prove that we are broken or incapable. When we are trapped in trance, being fearful and bad seem to define who we are. The anxiety in our body, the

stories, the ways we make excuses, withdraw or lash out—these become to us the self that is most real.

The trance of fear is sustained by our strategies to avoid feeling fear. We might learn to lie if it will shield us from someone's anger, to lash out if it gives us a temporary surge of power and safety, to try harder to be good if it will protect us from rejection. Barbara's primary strategy as an adult was to stay away from uncomfortable social situations, such as the lunchroom at work. If she was with the other teachers and counselors at a meeting, rather than participating in the casual banter, she would freeze. She was a mouse—agreeable, silent, nearly invisible—in order to stay safe.

The same was true outside of work. Randy would encourage her to join him at potlucks with friends, to go dancing or to church with him, but she usually refused. Often he stayed home with her, but occasionally when he went out on his own, fear took a different form. Something unexpected was bound to happen: Fed up with her, Randy would come home and tell her he didn't love her any more, or he'd be killed in an accident. When Randy did come home, faithfully and on time, and try to hug her, Barbara would stiffen, an inner voice telling her, "He's just pretending to care." She couldn't let him in on how vulnerable and afraid she was—it was safer to protect herself by keeping quiet.

When we are in the trance of fear, the rest of the world fades into the background. Like the lens on a camera, our attention narrows to focus exclusively on the foreground of our fearful stories and our efforts to feel more secure. We might be having lunch with a friend or talking with a colleague at work, but their concerns and successes are outside the field of what really matters to us. Rather, we relate to them in terms of how they affect our level of fear. Is there something they have to offer—reassurance, comfort, company—that might relieve us? Do they make us feel worse about ourselves? Do they see we are afraid? Are we safe with them? We live in our own little endangered world.

Because we are responding to an accumulation of past pain, our reactions are out of proportion to what is happening in the moment. When someone criticizes us or disapproves of us, we get thrown back in time and have no access to our adult understandings. We feel as if we were a child who is powerless, alone and terrified. We lose our wallet, for instance, or are late for an appointment, and we feel as if the world is ending. Our overreaction is

a further humiliation. The last thing we want is for others to know how much our life is overrun by the dogs from the cellar. If others see we are afraid, we fear we will be unappealing in their eyes—someone they pity but don't respect or want to befriend. Yet as we pretend to be okay, we sink even more deeply into feeling separate, alone and threatened.

Because the trance of fear arises from feeling cut off in relationship, we continue to feel fundamentally unsafe until we begin to experience with others some of the love and understanding we needed as children. The first step in finding a basic sense of safety is to discover our connectedness with others. As we begin to trust the reality of belonging, the strangle hold of fear loosens its grip.

The Safety of Belonging with Others

During one of our first sessions, Barbara told me how she used to sing when Randy was around and how much he'd loved it. In the car they often turned on a classic rock station and sang together. But something recently happened that had left her choked up around him. One morning Randy was at the breakfast table doing their taxes while Barbara was cleaning up the kitchen. She had put on a CD and was singing along. Maybe she was a bit loud, but suddenly, over the music, she heard Randy calling out, "Barbara! Would you turn down the music so I can concentrate?" It felt like a knife had stabbed her in the chest. She flipped off the CD player and left the room. Randy followed, asking, "What did I do wrong now?" but Barbara headed into the bedroom and closed the door without answering.

After telling me this Barbara started sobbing. Randy asking her to turn down the music shouldn't have scared her, but it did. It reminded her of something that happened in her childhood. For her twelfth birthday, her mother had signed her up for jazz dance lessons. Barbara would put music on in the living room and practice dancing for hours. On one Saturday afternoon the music suddenly stopped, and her father's belligerent voice jarred her out of her reverie. Didn't she realize she was disturbing his peace? She should either learn some consideration or get out of the house. She'd stood there, frozen, then went to her room. When this happened a second time, she quit dancing. Randy wasn't at all like her father, but she felt shut down in the same way. Maybe she'd stop singing, like she stopped dancing.

I asked Barbara if she could let herself feel in her body the fear she felt that morning with Randy. She reported that her throat felt tight and her heart was pounding loudly. “What does that fear want or need from you, Barbara?” She closed her eyes and after a moment responded “My fear wants to know it’s okay for it to be here.” I asked her gently, “So...is it okay with you that the fear is here right now?” When she nodded, I suggested she communicate that to her fear.

Barbara was quiet for a few moments. She took a few slow, deep breaths, and I could see her shoulders relaxing with the exhales. “As soon as I sent the message saying, ‘I accept you,’ the fear deflated a bit...like a balloon.” “Okay, stay with that. Could you ask the fear what it’s afraid of?” Barbara paused and then responded in a flat voice: “That I don’t deserve Randy. That he’s too good for me.” I encouraged her to note this as a thought, and remember that thoughts are not the truth.

Barbara and I were still exploring how she could best use meditation as a tool in facing her fear rather than feeling overwhelmed by it. I asked her if she would be comfortable doing some mindfulness practice together. As she noticed her experience, she could name out loud what she was aware of, and from time to time I might ask questions to guide her in deepening her attention. Barbara was enthusiastic about the idea, and over the next several weeks we interspersed our “talking” therapy with this mindfulness practice.

Supported by my presence, Barbara began witnessing the raw fear that was controlling her life. When she felt fear in her body, she noticed how her throat tightened and her voice became high and thin. She became aware of the thoughts that made non-stop predictions of what could go wrong. Barbara noticed that along with these thoughts she a sinking feeling in her body and mood of defeat and hopelessness. Sometimes images or thoughts would come up that were so frightening we’d stop the mindfulness practice and just talk. I noticed at these times that Barbara’s gaze would fix on the floor. When I mentioned this to her, she acknowledged it was hard to look into my eyes when she was feeling so afraid.

After a month of working together in this way Barbara told me that something was changing for her: “When I’m here with you, Tara, the hungry dogs haven’t gone away, but they don’t seem so dangerous. I guess with someone backing me up, I feel safe enough to open the door a crack and take a look at the fear.” I let her know I understood how she felt—it is easier to

face the out-of-control rawness of fear when we don't feel alone. In fact, what perpetuates fear is the horrible pain of isolation. Because Barbara had another mind to help recognize the trance of fear, she could be mindful and not feel so at risk of being overpowered.

When we are feeling isolated and terrified, we can prepare the ground for practicing Radical Acceptance by first seeking out the basic safety of relationship. Barbara had wisely reached out for support when she was overwhelmed by fear. Most of us find ourselves stuck in fear from time to time, and we can greatly benefit from seeking help. In facing intense fear, *we need to be reminded that we are part of something larger than our own frightened self*. In the safe haven of belonging to others we can begin to discover the sanctuary of peace that dwells within our own being.

“Taking Refuge”: Finding the Inner Source of Safety and Belonging

In our sessions together Barbara had found safety and refuge, but it was a safety that depended upon a situation external to herself. While our connectedness with others is essential on the spiritual path, genuine freedom arises as our experience of belonging finds its roots deep within us. The Buddhist practice of “Taking Refuge” awakens and cultivates that inner experience of safety and belonging.

In Buddhism, the three fundamental refuges are the Buddha (our awakened nature,) the dharma (the path or the way) and the sangha (the community of spiritual aspirants.) In these refuges we find genuine safety and peace. We discover a place to rest our human vulnerability, and a sanctuary for our awakening heart and mind. In their shelter we can face and awaken from the trance of fear.

In the formal practice of Taking Refuge we recite three times: “I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the dharma, I take refuge in the sangha.” Even though there is a formula, this is not an empty or mechanical ritual. With each repetition we allow ourselves to open ever more deeply to the living experience behind the words. As we do so the practice leads to a profound deepening of our faith: The more fully we open to and inhabit each refuge, the more we trust our own heart and awareness. By taking refuge we learn to trust the unfolding of our lives.

Taking refuge in the Buddha may be approached on various levels, and we can choose the way most meaningful to our particular temperament. We might take refuge in the historical Buddha, the human being who attained enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree 2500 years ago. When the Buddha encountered Mara, he felt fear—the same painfully constricted throat, chest and belly, the same racing heart that we each experience when fear strikes our heart. By willingly meeting fear with his full attention, the Buddha discovered fearlessness—the open, clear awareness that recognizes the arising and passing of fear without contracting nor identifying with it. Taking refuge in the truth of his awakening can inspire us on our own path toward fearlessness.

Those who are devotional by nature, might seek safety and refuge in the living spirit of the Buddha's awakened heart and mind. Much like praying to Christ or the Divine Mother, we can take refuge in a Being or presence that cares about our suffering. In taking this first refuge, I sometimes say, "I take refuge in the Beloved" and surrender into what I experience as the boundlessness of compassion. When I am feeling fear, I surrender it to the Beloved. By this, I am not trying to get rid of fear, but rather letting go into a refuge that is vast enough to hold my fear with love.

In the most fundamental way, taking refuge in the Buddha means taking refuge in our own potential for liberation. In order to embark on a spiritual path *we need faith that our own heart and mind have the potential to awaken*. The true power of Buddha's story, the power that has kept it alive for all these centuries, rests in the fact that it demonstrates what is possible for each of us. We so easily believe limiting stories about ourselves and forget that our very nature—our Buddha nature—is aware and loving. When we take refuge in the Buddha, we are taking refuge in the same capacity of awareness that awakened Siddhartha under the Bodhi Tree. We too can realize the blessing of freedom. We too can become fearless.

After taking refuge in the Beloved, I turn my attention inward, saying "I take refuge in this awakening heart mind." Letting go of any notion that Buddha nature is something beyond or outside my awareness, I look towards the innate wakefulness of my being, the tender openness of my heart. Minutes earlier I might have been taking myself to be the rush of emotions and thoughts moving through my mind. But by intentionally taking refuge in awareness, that small identity dissolves, and with it, the trance of fear. By directing our attention towards our deepest nature, by honoring the essence

of our being, our own Buddha nature becomes to us more of a living reality. We are taking refuge in the truth of who we are.

The second refuge, the dharma, is also richly layered in significance. A Sanskrit word, *Dharma* means the truth, the way of things, the law of nature. Taking refuge in the dharma is taking refuge in the truth that everything within and around us is subject to change; the truth that if we try to hold onto or resist the stream of experience, we deepen the trance of fear. Dharma also refers to the body of teachings and practices that reveal the truth. We take refuge in the “skillful means” that awaken us to our Buddha nature and to our natural wisdom and compassion.

For Barbara finding the dharma was, at first, like finding a life-raft in a stormy sea. Resting in mindfulness of the breath and noting her experience offered a reliable way to steady herself and touch a little peace. But when the practice seemed to be leading to torment, not peace, Barbara didn't know what to do. As our practice deepens, inevitably layers of buried fear are uncovered. When this happens it is important to find a refuge that can provide safety and balance. Sometimes the wise course is to seek help, as Barbara did. Sometimes it is best to set aside the practice of vipassana and instead cultivate lovingkindness for ourselves and others (see chapter 10). As Barbara came to understand, the dharma is not a rigid set of rules or practices: When we take refuge in the dharma, we take refuge in whatever ways of paying attention help us awaken from the trance of fear and realize our true nature.

Because dharma is the law of nature, communing with the natural world is also a way of taking refuge in the dharma. When I sit by the Potomac River and watch the swirling currents, when I lean against a great sycamore tree and sense how its life will continue beyond my own, I intuitively grasp how my existence is vivid, changing, empty of any solid self. As we feel our belonging to the natural rhythms of life, the illusion of being separate and threatened begins to dissolve.

During the Buddha's lifetime he taught that the sangha—the community of monks and nuns—was an essential support on the path of spiritual awakening. Traditionally, sangha has meant all those walking the path of dharma, the path of spiritual freedom. They too woke up in the middle of the night feeling frightened and alone. They too felt the quaking fear of loss and the terrifying certainty of death. When we know that others before us

have broken the painful patterns of fear, our faith that we too can awaken deepens. When we attend a meditation retreat, our fellow practitioners and teachers are the sangha that holds out that same possibility and offers safety and support as we face our fear.

As Buddhism has been integrated into the West, the meaning of sangha has come to include all our contemporaries who in various ways are consciously pursuing a path of awakening. We are held by sangha when we work individually with a therapist or healer, or when a close friend lets us be vulnerable and real. Taking refuge in the sangha reminds us that we are in good company: we belong with all those who long to awaken, with all those who seek the teachings and practices that lead to genuine peace.

A minister I know who lives in Washington D.C. told me that ever since the terrorist attacks of September 11th, she has been fearful of leaving behind her six-year-old daughter when she travels. She fears that while they are apart one of them might be killed. Distraught before leaving for a weeklong meditation retreat, she found refuge in a sangha big enough to hold her fears: “When I imagine all the other mothers around the world who cherish their children and right now are fearing for their lives, my heart feels different,” she wrote to me. “The fear is still there, but even more profound is a feeling of shared grief...and compassion. We are facing together the possibility of immeasurable loss.” While her own fear had isolated her and made her feel vulnerable, when it became *our* fear she no longer felt alone. The compassion that arose in her heart was far greater than her fear. By taking refuge in the sangha of mothers who so love their children, she awakened what the Taoists call “the invincible shield of caring,” the safety of abiding in the heart.

I like to take refuge in the sangha by remembering the people I love, allowing feelings of warmth and tenderness to fill my body, heart and mind. These visceral feelings of togetherness infuse my further reflections, as I bring to mind those I’m not so personally close to, and then all living beings everywhere. When I’m feeling anxious, isolated or hardhearted, taking refuge in the sangha in this way softens the edges and diminishes the power of the trance. When I’m feeling most cut off, I might even think of my dog, and as my heart feels comforted by our bond, open gradually to feel belonging with others.

Because we are all so different in the ways our fears and needs take shape, one of the Three Refuges might be more accessible and nourishing than another. We can begin with whichever one we most easily sense a natural affinity for. As feelings of safety and connection arise, we can then more easily open to the others. The Buddha, the dharma and the sangha are interconnected—they are mutually supportive and each naturally involves and unfolds into the others.

As with any spiritual practice, developing a genuine sense of refuge can take time. Over the years, Taking Refuge nourishes a profound and liberating faith in our belonging. The Buddha taught that *our fear is great, but greater still is the truth of our connectedness*. Taking Refuge transforms our relationship with fear. When we feel the safety of belonging, we can begin to meet fear with Radical Acceptance.

Safety through Medication

I was confident that Barbara, desperate as she was, would in time release the painful grip of fear through her work in psychotherapy and meditation. But for some people, no matter how hard they try, something else is needed to engender safety and bring fear to a manageable level. Whether the cause is life trauma or genetic predisposition, the brain chemistry and nervous system of some people lead to intolerably high levels of fear. For them prescribed medication for depression and anxiety may provide additional, and possibly critical, aid in finding the safety that enables them to trust others and to pursue spiritual practices.

The use of anti-depressants by those involved in meditation practice is a hot topic. Students have asked me “If I take Prozac, isn’t that as good as giving up? Aren’t I admitting that meditation doesn’t work?” Those who have been advised by a doctor to consider medication come to me distraught, afraid of becoming dependent on it, afraid they’ll never function again without it. Some wonder if taking medication doesn’t directly undercut the process of spiritual awakening: “Don’t medications numb the very experiences we are trying to unconditionally accept?” One student even asked me “Wouldn’t liberation be impossible if we were on medication? It’s hard to imagine the Buddha reaching for Prozac while under the Bodhi Tree.”

It is true that some of the most widely used anti-depressants can create a sense of distance from acute fear, a degree of emotional numbing. It is also

possible to become at least psychologically dependant on any substance that provides relief. But when fear is too overwhelming, medical intervention, at least for a period of time, may be the most compassionate response. Like insulin for a diabetic, medications shift an imbalanced chemistry towards normalcy. For some this can be a critical and wise step on the spiritual path. I've seen students who were utterly incapacitated by fear finally able to face it with mindfulness and lovingkindness once they started on medications. As a psychiatrist friend says, medications make it possible for some people to "stop anxiously doing, and just sit there."

Medication and meditation can work together. As medications shift the biological experience of fear, mindfulness practice can help undo the complex of reactive thoughts and feelings that sustain the trance of fear. One of my meditation students, Seth, a composer and pianist, took anti-depressants after struggling unsuccessfully for years with debilitating anxiety, shame and depression. Seth dreaded performances and the expectation of perfection that surrounded them. He told me "Knowing how to write and play music is my life. When I feel like I am blowing it, I lose it completely. I feel totally worthless." When Seth began taking anti-depressants his fear level dropped significantly. The familiar stories and self-judgments would still arise, but because the fear was less intense, he was able to see that his thoughts were just thoughts, not the truth about how things were. Gradually, as Seth deepened his meditation practice, he became familiar with a new and different sense of himself. Rather than rejecting himself as sick and broken, he began wanting to care for and comfort himself.

After two years, Seth decided to stop taking anti-depressants. While his fear had decreased, he had also lost a certain degree of his natural sensitivity and empathy, and his libido was diminished. Within a few months of discontinuing the medication, Seth began to experience once again waves of acute fear and, at times, oppressive depression. But now when the old stories made their appearance, he could note them mindfully rather than getting lost in them. Taking medication had driven a wedge into the trance of fear, and it no longer was so engulfing. While his emotions were still intense, his fear wasn't fueled by overwhelming self-judgment and shame. He no longer identified himself as a broken person. Perhaps from time to time he might seek relief again from medications, but Seth now had a strength to his spiritual practice and a faith in himself that gave him a genuine sense of inner freedom.

There are no absolute recipes for the process of waking up from the trance of fear. In making choices on our path, it is important to ask ourselves whether or not they will serve awakening and freedom. Our best answers are found by honestly looking into our intentions. What is our intention in doing therapy, in taking medication or doing a particular style of meditation? Are we using meditation as a way of escaping from painful relationships or unwanted responsibilities? Do we truly intend to face and accept fear? Are our choices helping us relax and become more kind? As we seek pathways to safety, we ask these questions and then experiment to see what works.

Widening the Lens of Attention: Making Room for Fear

With the help of our sessions, Barbara was able to meditate alone at home again. She had learned that when strong fear came up, she could Take Refuge or practice Lovingkindness. Gradually, as her sense of safety deepened, Barbara would begin to open more directly to the arising of fear. In the meantime, we continued to face her fear together in our sessions.

Barbara had arrived in my office one day, looking pale and tired. She'd been having a hard time sleeping, she told me. One of the students she worked with, Marty, had gotten involved with drugs and was on the verge of being kicked out of school. Barbara had begun to dread their twice a week meetings. Marty was sullen and hard to reach, and Barbara didn't know how to help her climb out of her hole. Each meeting was making Barbara feel more and more inadequate.

Barbara's voice was strained, her hands clenched. Anxiety had so narrowed her focus that she didn't have access to the natural intuition and warmth that would enable her to be present and open with Marty. I knew if Barbara could widen the lens of her attention, her enlarged perspective would make all the difference. She'd be able to hold both her anxiety *and* Marty's suffering with compassion.

I asked Barbara to close her eyes and imagine her next meeting with Marty. Immediately she tightened. "Try visualizing yourself sitting on a park bench," I suggested softly. "Simply name whatever experience arises, say a friendly 'hello' and invite it to sit beside you." Barbara nodded her agreement: "There's a squeezing pressure in my chest. My stomach feels tied up in knots...Okay, they're sitting next to me." After a pause she

added, “A voice is telling me ‘You’ll blow it...you’re hopeless.’ ” I reminded her, “Just say hello to that too, and invite it to sit down.

After an extended silence I asked Barbara what was happening. With a little laugh she answered, “The fear’s lined up next to me on the bench, but at least it’s not on top of me. I have room to breathe!” I encouraged her to go ahead and breathe more fully, to relax her hands and release whatever other tension she felt. “Now, sitting there on the park bench, can you open your attention to include the sounds around you? Notice the vastness of the sky extending out in all directions and continue listening to sounds as they arise and disappear in that openness. With the fear still right there next to you, can your mind become one with this great space of sky?”

Barbara’s face softened, and she took a deep breath. Nodding slowly she told me, “The fear is still here, but now it seems so much smaller.” I encouraged Barbara to let go into that soft, wakeful space surrounding and holding her fear. “*Just allow the fear to float in awareness.*” By the end of our session, Barbara was able to imagine having a conversation with Marty, feel the anxiety well up in her chest, and just let it untangle and begin to dissolve in awareness.

Being mindful of fear requires being both open and awake. As Barbara experienced, opening her mind allowed her to be present without constriction. Being awake enabled her to recognize and fully experience whatever was arising. Both of these aspects of mindfulness are essential in widening the lens. If we don’t remain awake, spaciousness can become spacing out. We can seek openness as a way of avoiding fear rather than meeting it with mindfulness.

When we relate *to* fear rather than *from* fear, our sense of who we are begins to shift. Instead of being a tense and embattled self, we reconnect with our naturally spacious awareness. Instead of being trapped in and defined by our experiences, we recognize them as a changing stream of thoughts and feelings. Because our mind is so habitually contracted, widening the lens requires regular practice. While we cultivate this wakeful openness through mindfulness meditation, we can also use the tool of widening the lens, as Barbara would discover, right in the midst of challenging circumstances.

Marty showed up late for her next counseling session, sat down across from Barbara and said, “This is a waste of time. No one cares about me anyway,

here or anywhere.” Wildly searching for something “right” to say, Barbara just looked at Marty, aware of the rising tide of panic in her own body. Suddenly she noticed that in her mind she had noted “panic,” said hello to it and placed it on a park bench next to her. Then, spontaneously, she imagined Marty on the park bench, too. Taking a full breath she glanced out the window behind Marty, and in seeing the sky remembered that vast space of awareness. It was holding her fear, the sounds of the ticking clock and the swirling colors of the Van Gogh poster on her office wall. It could hold Marty too. In those few short moments Barbara’s mind had been released from her gripping fear of failing. When she turned her attention back to Marty, she saw a confused and hurting person sitting across from her. Barbara’s heart filled with tenderness. With an openness that surprised both of them, she asked, “Marty please tell me, what’s happening?”

Marty began crying, her words coming out between sobs, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m just ruining everything... for everyone.” Barbara moved closer and even though she felt a bit awkward, she placed her hand gently on the girl’s shoulder. “It’s okay, Hon” she murmured in a comforting tone. “*You’re* okay. Things will work out.” By opening the lens of awareness wide enough to relate to her own fear, Barbara had made room for Marty’s as well. In cultivating Radical Acceptance of fear, we see again and again how the wings of mindfulness and compassion are interrelated. For Barbara, widening the lens and establishing a mindful presence gave rise to her natural caring.

Widening the lens makes a full and accepting presence possible. Imagine the difference between a herd of wild stallions enclosed in a small corral and those same horses galloping through wide open plains. This is the difference between seeing life with a narrow focus and widening the lens to a more spacious view. When our field of awareness is open and vast, there is plenty of room for the stallions of fear to kick up dust as they stampede through.

Leaning Into Fear

In a popular teaching story a man being chased by a tiger leaps off a cliff in his attempt to get away. Fortunately, a tree growing on the side of the cliff breaks his fall. Dangling from it by one arm—tiger pacing above, jutting rocks hundreds of feet below—he yells out in desperation, “Help! Somebody help me!!” A voice responds, “Yes?” The man screams, “God, God, is that you?” Again, “Yes.” Terrified, the man says, “God, I’ll do anything, just

please, please, help me.” God responds, “Okay then, just let go.” The man pauses for a moment, then calls out, “Is anyone else there?”

In the face of fear, letting go of what seems to be our lifeline is the last thing we want to do. We try to avoid the tiger’s mouth and the jutting rocks by accumulating possessions, by getting lost in our mental stories, by drinking three glasses of wine each evening. But to free ourselves from the trance of fear we must let go of the tree limb and fall into the fear, opening to the sensations and the wild play of feelings in our body. We must agree to feel what our mind tells us is “too much.” We must agree to the pain of dying, to the inevitable loss of all that we hold dear.

Letting go into fear, accepting it, may seem counter-intuitive. Yet because fear is an intrinsic part of being alive, resisting it means resisting life. The habit of avoidance seeps into every aspect of our life: it prevents us from loving well, from cherishing beauty within and around us, from being present to the moment. This is why Radical Acceptance of fear is right at the center of our spiritual awakening.

About midway into a ten-day retreat I was leading, one of the students, Eric, met a fear he couldn’t avoid. He told me that during a meditation the day before he’d had a life changing experience. It started with a lot of agitation and anxiety he was feeling about his mother and his wife, Julie. His mother recently had a stroke and might never again be able to walk or talk. Julie was struggling with chronic depression. Eric felt powerless to help—and powerless before the rising tide of anxiety that threatened to overtake him.

Remembering the teaching I had given the night before about relating to fear, Eric decided to inquire into what he was feeling. Remaining aware of the sensations of anxiety in his body, he asked himself, “What is really asking for attention?” Suddenly, a traumatic scene from his childhood arose in his mind. Eric was about six years old, and he and his baby brother were playing on a dock at the lake by their summer house. His brother went too near the edge and fell off into the water. Eric screamed for help, not knowing what to do. But help came too late. All his life Eric had always believed that his brother drowned because he hadn’t been able to save him. Now, in meditation, all those feelings were rising to the surface, and Eric felt as if he would explode. His mind was racing a million miles an hour: His guilt. His fears about his wife. How things could get worse. He urgently

wanted to do something but didn't know what. Suddenly Eric's body went numb.

The numbness was familiar. Eric frequently found himself feeling distant and detached when Julie would tell him how she had nothing to look forward to, nothing to give her any hope. He cared but, as he put it, "I wasn't able to be in the trenches with her. I couldn't really relate." At those times, when his body felt lifeless and his heart hard, his mind would struggle to come up with how to make things better. Now during the sitting Eric knew that beneath this numbness was a huge well of pain. If he went near it, he feared he would drown. But Eric had asked what wanted attention, and this was his answer. He was ready to meet the fear he had been pushing away for so long.

This willingness to engage actively with fear is what I call leaning into fear. Leaning in does not mean losing our balance and getting lost in fear. Because our usual stance in relating to fear is leaning away from it, to turn and face fear directly serves as a correction. As we lean in, we are inviting, moving towards what we habitually resist. Leaning in allows us to touch directly the quivering, the shakiness, the gripping tightness that is fear.

Whether it is a familiar but vague feeling of anxiety or a strong surge of fear, leaning in can help us become aware and free in the midst of our experience. We might wake up after a disturbing dream, we might have just gotten a call from our doctor's office about a suspicious mammogram, we might hear rumor of our company downsizing, we might have read a new warning about a potential terrorist strike. In any of these circumstances, a good way to begin the process is to pause and ask ourselves "What is happening right now?" Like Eric, we can ask, "What is asking for attention?" or "What is asking for acceptance?" It is especially important to address this inquiry to the sensations we feel in our throat, heart and stomach. These are the areas in our body where fear expresses itself most distinctly.

When we begin to face fear by focusing on sensations, what often happens is our mind immediately produces a story. We might get lost in our plans on how to respond to a frightening situation. Or we might fixate on fearful beliefs and assumptions: "I'm afraid I am a failure," "I'm afraid I'll never find love and intimacy," or "I'm afraid so-and-so will see how stupid and uninteresting I am and push me away." We might remember a recent conversation where our insecurity seemed obvious and embarrassing. Or we

might, as Eric experienced, plunge into a past memory in which we came face to face with a feeling of powerlessness.

The key to awakening from the bonds of fear is to move from our mental stories into immediate contact with the sensations of fear—the squeezing, pressing, burning, trembling, quaking, jittering life in our body. In fact, the story—so long as we remain awake and don't get stuck in it—can become a useful gateway to the raw fear itself. While the mind will continue to generate stories about what we fear, we can recognize the thoughts for what they are and drop under them again and again to connect with the feelings in our body.

The stories that fed Eric's anxiety and powerlessness had led him to the deeper level of fear he had been trying to numb out all these years. Now he opened to the fear and asked, "How big are you?" Instantly his feelings of apprehension intensified, and the swelling pressure of fear exploded through his chest. His terror felt as if it could fill the entire meditation hall. Rather than pulling back, Eric silently said, "Yes." His heart was pounding loudly, and in his stomach he felt cramping and a strong feeling of nausea. An excruciating tension was building in his chest, as if a wall of muscle was trying to push the fear back, trying to surround and contain it. He again asked the question, "How big are you?" As if released by his question, the feeling of terror broke all bounds; it could fill the universe. Like the utter horror that seizes us if our child runs out into a busy street, the urgency of fear strangling Eric felt as if it would never subside, never be released. "If I open to this," Eric thought, "I'll be annihilated. This fear will kill me."

Eric was saying Yes and yet fighting at the same time, and the battle was itself compounding the intensity. Fear was ripping through his heart. In an instant he realized the fear would kill him if he didn't allow it to exist in its fullness. Something deep inside him knew he had to let go. As Eric put it, "I finally just wanted to surrender into something bigger than fear. I wanted to give up trying to control what was going on in me." That basic longing finally won out, and Eric let go into the fear. "It felt like my body and mind were breaking apart, that I was lost in a storm of burning winds, and my ashes were being dispersed in all directions."

Leaning into fear can be as terrifying as Eric found it to be. Even when the process is not so intense, it's never comfortable. In fact, letting go into fear may feel, as Joko Beck puts it, like "lying down on an icy couch." It can be

extraordinarily difficult to let ourselves relax in that situation. We want to hold back because it feels as if we might die of the pain. Nevertheless, if we can let the hard edges of fear press into us, the sharpness stab us, the violence pull us apart, something amazing happens. Eric told me, “When the chaos subsided, my mind was absolutely still. It was as if a screaming, thundering cacophony of sound had suddenly stopped, and I was resting in deep silence. It was vast and completely empty...yet it felt indescribably tender.”

As Eric experienced, when we are no longer trying to control fear and cling to life, our armor drops away and we experience a deep and pure freedom. The other side of resisting fear *is* freedom. *When we stop tensing against life, we open to an awareness that is immeasurably large and suffused with love.*

A few weeks later Eric came to my weekly meditation group. He looked different—I noticed his shoulders weren’t slumped, he was standing straight, and his chest seemed more open. He told me that he’d returned from the retreat to find his wife sunk into a bout of depression and hopelessness. He could feel the anxiety rising and automatically tensed. But rather than armoring against the fear and shutting down, Eric felt his heart open. “I was struck by how sad it makes me to see Julie miserable,” he told me, “and how much she matters to me. So I just let her know that and held her...for a while.” With a slightly embarrassed smile, he added, “You know, Tara, it’s taken me a long time to realize that I can just hold her without trying to fix her.” Rather than pulling away, Eric was now able to remain accepting and kind in the face of anxiety.

When the trance of fear arises, instead of getting caught up in worrying or looking for something to eat, instead of getting busy and trying to fix things, we can choose to lean in. Naturally there are times when fear is too strong and we don’t feel safe enough to engage with it. But in those moments when we courageously lie down on the icy couch of fear and allow ourselves to experience its sharp edges, we are carried into the love and awareness that is beyond the reach of fear.

The Gift of Fear

Barbara arrived at one of our final sessions smiling brightly and eager to tell me something that had just happened. That morning she had been meditating

at home and that terrifying memory had surfaced of being shoved under water by her drunk father. As the fear began to swell, she remembered to pause and breathe deeply. She'd faced her fears many times over the past months, both in therapy and meditation. She could handle this one now. As her throat tightened, she called on the fearless heart of the Buddha and imagined his compassionate presence holding the fear. When the childhood images threatened to carry her away, she came fully into the present and, listening to the sounds of the crickets and birds outside her window, felt as if the natural world was helping to hold the fear as well. When her mind felt spacious enough, she let herself lean into the sharp, clutching pain in her chest. By the end of the sitting, she actually felt the "calm after a storm." She could still see the images, but they didn't seem to trigger the feelings in her body. "The memory might come back, but somehow I don't think the pain of it is going to take me over again—ever."

Just as I was about to celebrate her breakthrough, Barbara went on. "As I was driving over here, I passed by the church in my neighborhood. There's always a message up on the announcement board. Today it read: *What happens under water? The Holy Spirit enters.*" We both sat quietly for a few moments, fully letting in the power of that message. Then Barbara continued: "You know, I can see now that my father was the first to baptize me. Strange as it seems, he was the one who set in motion my whole spiritual unfolding." I told her it didn't seem strange at all: "The pain of that experience—and all the times he hurt you—*have* been baptisms. They awoke in you a deep yearning for peace, for love...a yearning that's guided you powerfully on the spiritual path." She nodded slowly, her eyes soft and moist. "It's true. Maybe this longing is the voice of the Holy Spirit...and I'm finally learning to listen more carefully."

Before Barbara left I let her know how much I honored her devotion to spiritual practice. "It takes courage to listen deeply...and that's what you've done. Instead of giving up on meditation—or on life—you were willing to keep paying attention." As we sat quietly for a few moments I realized what made me most happy for Barbara. "By facing fear," I told her, "you've opened to a love great enough to hold the fearful one inside you."

When we come face to face with the fear and pain in our psyche, we stand at the gateway to tremendous renewal and freedom. Our deepest nature is awareness, and when we fully inhabit that, we love freely and are whole.

This is the power of Radical Acceptance: When we stop fighting the energy that has been bound in fear, it naturally releases into the boundless sea of awareness. The more we awaken from the grip of fear, the more radiant and free becomes our heart.

Several months after we ended therapy I saw Barbara at a daylong meditation workshop I was teaching. During our lunch break, she came to show me something. It was a brochure from “The Dance Place.” Barbara had registered for a ten-week jazz series, and she and Randy had already started taking swing-dancing classes together. The weekend before, she told me, they’d had a “great time” when they visited her parents. I knew Barbara had gotten closer to her father since he’d joined AA, and her mother “was like a new person.” Besides, Randy’s presence there always made her feel safe. But this time a “real breakthrough” had occurred. After the four finished dinner, Barbara went into the living room and put on a tape of music from their dance class. Accompanied by a loud and cheerful band, she and Randy gave a lively demonstration of the steps they had just been taught. Her parents clapped and then insisted on trying the moves themselves! At one point her father had turned to her and said, “Barb, you used to dance when you were little. You were good. Why did you stop?” She smiled without answering. Inside she felt a pang of sadness, the hurt of not having been known. But her old fears were no longer stopping her from dancing, and that filled her with the light of hope. “It’s not only dancing, Tara,” Barbara said, “It’s everything. I feel like my life is in front of me, and I’m free to live it.”

Our Ultimate Refuge

As long as we are alive, we feel fear. It is an intrinsic part of our make-up, as natural as a bitter cold winter day or the winds that rip branches off trees. If we resist it or push it aside, we miss a powerful opportunity for awakening. Rilke writes,

... you nights of anguish. Why didn't I kneel more deeply to accept you,
 Inconsolable sisters, and, surrendering, lose myself
 in your loosened hair. How we squander our hours of pain.
 How we gaze beyond them into the bitter duration
 To see if they have an end. Though they are really
 Seasons of us, our winter...

If we are waiting only for our fear to end, we will not discover the pure and loving presence that unfolds as we surrender into the darkest of nights. Only by letting go into the stream of life and loss and death do we come into this freedom.

Facing fear is a life-long training in letting go of all we cling to—it is a training in how to die. We practice as we face our many daily fears—anxiety about performing well, insecurity around certain people, worries about our children, about our finances, about letting down people we love. Our capacity to meet the ongoing losses in life with Radical Acceptance grows with practice. In time we find that we can indeed handle fear, including that deepest fear of losing life itself.

Our willingness to face our fear frees us from trance and bestows on us the blessings of awareness. We let go of deeper and subtler layers of resistance until there is nothing left to resist at all, there is only awake and open awareness. This is the refuge that has room for both living and dying. In this radiant and changeless awareness we can, as Rilke puts it, “contain death, the whole of death...can hold it in one’s heart gentle, and not...refuse to go on living.” Radical Acceptance of fear carries us to this source of all freedom, to the ultimate refuge that is our true home.