International bestselling author of

RADICAL ACCEPTANCE

TARA BRACH

Radical Compassion

Learning to Love Yourself and

Your World with the Practice of RAIN

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TARA BRACH

VIKING LIFE

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True Refuge: Finding Peace and Freedom in Your Own Awakened Heart

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

VIKING

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For Mia, and for all our children's children—

May your pure, bright hearts bring healing to our world

I live my life in widening circles

That reach out across the world.

I may not ever complete the last one,

But I give myself to it.

• RAINER MARIA RILKE

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PREFACE

LOVING OURSELVES INTO HEALING

Many years ago, I read a moving article by a hospice caregiver whohad accompanied thousands of people during their final weeks. One phrase in particular has stayed with me. After countless hours listening to the thoughts of the dying, the caregiver summed up their greatest regret with these words:

"I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself."

• • •

I started asking myself questions like these: What does it mean to live true to yourself? Do you feel that your life is aligned with what matters to your heart? Are you living true to yourself—today? Right now? A few months later, I began asking the same questions of my meditation students.

What I found is that this regret of the dying is also true for many of the rest of us. My students tell me that being true to themselves means being loving, present, and authentic. They speak of being honest, serving others, serving the world. They talk about expressing their creativity, believing in their own

worthiness, and working at what they love. And about having the strength to

grow beyond their insecurities and to reconcile troubled relationships.

They also say that almost daily they lose sight of these aspirations and intentions. Instead, they get caught up in reactivity—selfjudgment, blaming others, pettiness, selfishness, living on autopilot. As one student said, "Each day there's a big gap between what's possible and how I'm actually living my life. And with that comes an ever-lurking sense of personal failure."

I know that feeling of failure intimately. For many years, the "trance of unworthiness" kept me feeling deficient as friend and daughter, partner and parent. It fueled doubt about my capability as therapist and teacher. And when I faced severe physical illness, it initially triggered self-blame: "What did I do wrong to get so sick?"

• • •

Yet this very suffering—feeling deficient and disconnected—has also been my most fertile ground for waking up. It has led me to a spiritual path and practices that I cherish. And when I get stuck in painful emotions, it brings me to a repeating realization, an insight that has profoundly changed my life:

I have to love myself into healing. The only path that can carry me home is the path of self-compassion.

It doesn't matter if I'm caught in anger, fear of failing at something important, a sense of self-doubt, or loneliness. And it doesn't matter if I'm facing yet again challenges to physical mobility and well-being. The healing medicine always has some flavor of care, compassion, or forgiveness. On some level, I'm telling myself, "Please, be kind." This turning toward loving presence is the gateway to living true to ourselves.

"Radical compassion" means including the vulnerability of this life —all life —in our heart. It means having the courage to love ourselves, each other, and our world. Radical compassion is rooted in mindful, embodied presence, and it is expressed actively through caring that includes all beings.

• • •

There's an image I love that shows mindfulness and compassion as inseparable dimensions of awakening. It depicts awareness as a bird with two wings: When both wings are unfurled in their fullness and beauty, the bird can fly and be free.

I'm writing this book to share a practice of radical compassion that brings alive the wings of mindfulness and compassion when we most need them. It

helps heal and release the painful beliefs and emotions that keep us from living true to ourselves. This practice is called RAIN.

The name is an acronym that stands for the four steps of Recognize, Allow, Investigate, and Nurture. Working with these four steps has given me—and can give you—a reliable way to find healing and freedom right where you are in the midst of emotional pain.

As you'll see, these steps are easy to learn, and they can be a lifeline in moments when you feel stressed, fearful, reactive, and confused. These same steps, revisited again and again, build internal resilience and trust in your own wise, awakening heart. They will help you respond to life in a way that expresses the truth and depth and spirit of who you are. This is the gift of RAIN: living from your full potential.

• • •

I was not the first to use the acronym RAIN. As some readers may already know, it was originally introduced as a meditation guide by the senior Buddhist teacher Michele McDonald in the 1980s, and since then it has been adopted and adapted in various ways by mindfulness teachers. Over the past fifteen years, I've evolved my own approach to RAIN, adding a step (N-

Nurture) that directly awakens selfcompassion. With this crucial emphasis, RAIN cultivates the synchronistic power of mindfulness and heartfulness—both wings of awareness. I've now shared this version with hundreds of thousands of people. The response has been tremendous, with people from around the world reporting how RAIN has brought a mindful, caring presence directly to the tangles of their daily lives, increasing their capacity for intimacy, releasing them from addictive behavior, empowering them in their work in the world, and supporting them in times of crisis. They tell me they can finally hold themselves with compassion and bring this same compassion to others. And they talk about the gift of inner freedom, of realizing who they are, beyond any story of self.

• • •

This book will develop your capacity for radical compassion. You'll learn to work with RAIN through a weave of stories and direct teaching, guided meditations, and many opportunities for selfreflection. You'll see how insights from modern neuroscience help explain the profound and enduring impact of RAIN. You'll also hear responses to the questions my students ask, and the many creative ways they've found to customize their practice. As we begin our journey together, here's a brief look ahead.

Part 1 is an overview of each step of RAIN. I'll offer examples that can help you to begin working with the steps right away. Even a few minutes with RAIN can interrupt the cutoff state I call "living in trance" and enable us to be more present with ourselves and others. Using RAIN, we can also begin to break through the various ways we say no to life, and to glimpse the true potential of our awakened heart. **Part 2 guides you in bringing RAIN to your inner life.** Drawing on situations my students and I have worked on together, it describes how to refine and apply the four steps to a wide range of challenging circumstances, from shame and disabling fears to discovering your deepest longing. It also offers specific techniques for recruiting and cultivating your inner strengths.

Part 3 takes our journey into the field of relationships. These chapters include practices that awaken your capacity for forgiveness, help you to see past the mask of "unreal others" and wisely navigate conflict, unseen bias, and difference. In time, your deepening mindfulness and kindness will include all those you reflect on, all those whose lives you touch. You will discover the blessing of radical compassion, of loving without holding back.

• • •

I’ve had the privilege of witnessing countless people heal with the radical compassion that is nourished by RAIN. What strikes me again and again is how RAIN cultivates a trust in our own basic goodness and by extension helps us recognize and trust that same light shining through all beings. Seeing so many students, friends, and family discover this openhearted awareness, this reverence for life, nourishes my faith in our potential.

It also gives me hope for our world. From an evolutionary perspective, our species’ brain development correlates with a growing capacity for self-awareness, rational thinking, empathy, compassion, and mindfulness. No question, our very human fears and grasping, combined with our cognitive ability, also make us the greatest danger on earth to ourselves and all other species. But we are not at the end of our evolutionary story. We have the tools that can awaken mindfulness and compassion in ourselves and guide us in relating wisely and lovingly with others.

Your dedication to awakening your heart is an essential part of the healing of our precious world. The global expressions of suffering— violence, the oppression of nondominant populations, the unsustainable and addictive consuming that threatens this earth—all arise out of fear and are rooted in

feelings of separation and otherness. Radical compassion expresses the truth

of our interdependence and mutual belonging. Living true to ourselves

becomes, in its fullness, living true to our collective path of healing and

freedom, our shared yearning for a peaceful, loving world.

Please remember and trust we're on this journey of awakening together. May

you find true happiness and freedom on the path.

With loving blessings, Tara

PART I

How Attention Heals

ONE

RAIN Creates a Clearing

Do not try to save the whole world or do anything grandiose. Instead, create a clearing in the dense forest of your life.

• MARTHA POSTLEWAITE

W e all get lost in the dense forest of our lives, entangled in incessantworry and planning, in judgments of others, and in our busy striving to meet demands and solve problems. When we're caught in that thicket, it's easy to lose sight of what matters most. We forget how much we long to be kind and openhearted. We forget our ties to this sacred earth and to all living beings. And in a deep way, we forget who we are.

This forgetting is a part of being in trance—a partially unconscious state that, like a dream, is disconnected from the whole of reality. When we're in trance, our minds are narrowed, fixated, and usually immersed in thought. Our hearts are often defended, anxious, or numb. Once you recognize the signs of trance, you will begin to see it everywhere, in yourself and others. You are in trance when you are living on autopilot, when you feel walled off and separate from those around you, when you are caught up in feeling fearful, angry, victimized, or deficient.

The good news is that we all have the capacity to free ourselves. When we

are lost in the forest, we can create a clearing simply by pausing and turning from our clamoring thoughts to become aware of our moment-to-moment experience. I call this wakeful and immediate awareness "presence." It is also referred to as consciousness, spirit, Buddha nature, true nature, the awakened heartmind, and many other names. When we've reconnected fully to presence, we can open to what is going on inside us—the changing flow of sensations, feelings, and thoughts—without any resistance. This allows us to live our life moments with clarity and compassion. The shift from being lost in unconscious mental and emotional reactivity to inhabiting our full presence is an awakening from trance.

As we begin our journey together, the four steps of RAIN— Recognize, Allow, Investigate, Nurture—will be our tool for arriving in presence. *Simply put, RAIN awakens mindfulness and compassion, applies them to the places where we are stuck, and untangles emotional suffering.* It is easy to learn the basics, and you can begin to use the steps right away. RAIN creates a clearing in the dense forest, and in this clearing you can recover your full heart and spirit.

In this chapter, I'll walk you briefly through each step of RAIN and offer a

simple form of the practice—a warm-up—that you can apply in everyday situations. But first, the story of an afternoon when I needed RAIN.

"NOT ENOUGH TIME"

My dense forest hums with a background mantra: *There's not enough time*. I know I'm not alone; many of us speed through the day, anxiously crossing tasks off the list. This often comes hand in hand with feeling beleaguered, annoyed at interruptions, and worried about what's around the corner.

My anxiety escalates when I'm preparing for an upcoming teaching event. I remember an afternoon some years ago when I was in lastminute mode. I was

madly searching through my very disorganized electronic files, trying to find material for a talk I'd be giving that evening on loving kindness. Much like the files, my mind was stirred up and muddy. At one point, my eighty-three-year-old mother, who had come to live with my husband, Jonathan, and me, popped into my office. She started to tell me about an article she liked from *The New Yorker*. But seeing me glued to the computer screen (and probably frowning), she quietly placed the magazine on my desk and left. As I turned to watch her retreat, something in me just stopped. She often came by for a casual chat, and now I was struck by the reality that she

wouldn't always be around for these companionable moments. And then I was struck again: Here I was, ignoring my mom and mentally scurrying

around to compose a talk on love!

This wasn't the first time I was jarred by forgetting what mattered. During that first year my mom lived with us, I repeatedly felt squeezed by the additional demands on my time. Often when we had dinner together, I'd be looking for the break in the conversation when I could excuse myself and get back to work. Or we'd be on errands or going to one of her doctor's appointments, and rather than enjoying her company, I'd be fixated on how quickly we could get everything done. Our time together often felt obligatory: She was lonely, and I was the main person around. While she didn't guilt-trip me—she was grateful for whatever time I offered—I felt guilty. And then when I'd slow down some, I also felt deep sadness.

That afternoon in my office, I decided to take a time-out and call on RAIN to help me deal with my anxiety about being prepared. I left my desk, went to a comfortable chair, and took a few moments to settle myself before beginning.

The first step was simply to Recognize (*R*) what was going on inside me—the

circling of anxious thoughts and guilty feelings.

The second step was to Allow (*A*) what was happening by breathing and letting be. Even though I didn't like what I was feeling, my intention was *not* to fix or change anything and, just as important, *not* to judge myself for