

# Creating Peace by Letting Go of Blame

By Tara Brach



We've all been hurt, disappointed, betrayed, maybe even abused. Sometimes the perpetrator is someone we love; at other times it may be an institution such as our employer or our government; still other times, we mistreat ourselves. But regardless of the source of our pain, we instinctively react with aversion—both as individuals and as communities. Our anger and blame help us to feel in control and motivate us to eliminate the threat. We yell at our spouse or our coworker. We punish ourselves. As a nation, we declare war on the enemy.

The Buddha taught that although such reactions are natural, at best they provide only temporary relief, and inevitable they fuel further reaction. As with all other phenomena, the Buddha suggested that we meet violence with an accepting, compassionate presence. But for many of us the question immediately arises: Does this mean we should buckle under and accept the person who has betrayed us, accept those who make war or destroy the environment in our name, accept our own addictive behaviors? Such acceptance might even seem unethical—as if we're supposed to simply stand back and watch harmful behaviors unfold with a detached eye.

In a magazine interview on my book [Radical Acceptance](#) I was asked, "As a peace activist, how do you reconcile acceptance with a world that is violent and filled with suffering?" That's a good question, because it points out a misunderstanding about what radical acceptance means. Radical acceptance does not mean allowing someone to harm us or to injure themselves. It does not mean that we endorse war. Rather, radical acceptance is the capacity to see clearly what is happening inside us in the present moment, and to meet what we see with kindness. We accept our own experience of the hurt or fear or anger that arises in reaction to an external circumstance. Only when we do so can our decisions and actions be guided by a wise heart.

This past year, reading the a regular source of dismay, outraged at individuals in power that I believed directly caused for deception, for not caring consequences of their remembered to practice radical experience was very different. I myself what was happening

I'd note the swelling pressure body and just allow it to be Deepening my attention, I would the grip of fear—fear for our world, fear of how violence and misunderstanding are proliferating, fear about how we are devastating our natural habitat. As I continued to offer a gentle presence, fear gradually gave way to a tender caring about life. Now I could resume reading and, instead of reacting with anger, I was more likely to respond to the headlines with compassion.

Practicing in this way allows us to see more clearly what we have been reacting to. We see that when we blame, we're caught up in a narrative that necessarily includes a villain. Yet there is no single person or group of people responsible for causing suffering. Harmful behaviors are driven by ignorance—by fear, greed or hatred. When we realize this, instead of casting blame we are freer to respond with understanding and forgiveness.

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But, releasing blame and accepting our experience does not mean we become passive observers. When we allow ourselves to feel suffering, a deep caring arises. Last spring, this caring led a group of us to form the Washington Buddhist Peace Fellowship. Caring, not anger, was the spirit that propelled our interfaith peace walk. Caring, not blame, inspired some of us to get arrested as an expression of our concern over the war in Iraq.

Many of us reserve our deepest blame for ourselves. Here, too, it is ignorance—the perception of being a defective, unworthy self—that gives rise to our most troubled behaviors. If we binge on food or alcohol, and the next day punish ourselves with thoughts and feelings of self-hatred, this just fuels another round of addictive behavior. But if we can accept our experience with kindness, we begin to break the inner cycle of violence. This doesn't mean we give ourselves permission to act in harmful ways. But we don't condemn ourselves either. Instead, we identify what we're feeling in the moment—physical discomfort, shame, remorse—and meet our experience with kind attention. As we do so, our sense of identity grows beyond a flawed self, and we begin to trust our essence as compassionate awareness. We become responsible—more able to respond wisely to our circumstances.

Our most direct way of promoting healing and peace is to become mindful of our habits of judging and blaming. It is a brave activity because to do this we must let go of our most familiar, comfortable reference points. In the moment of releasing blame, we step out of the story of self and other, and discover the spaciousness and tenderness of being alive. When we let go of blame, we open to the compassion that can genuinely transform ourselves and our world.

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