

The Seekers Forum Transcript

Love's Shadows: An Interview with Tara Brach

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The Seekers Forum
Awaken To Your Life

Welcome to The Seekers Forum Guest Interview series. Today, Mark speaks with Tara Brach. Tara Brach, PhD, is a clinical psychologist, lecturer and popular teacher of Buddhist mindfulness meditation. She is the author of “Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life with the Heart of a Buddha,” and “True Refuge: Finding Peace and Freedom in Your Own Awakened Heart.” Today, Mark talked to her about self-acceptance, love and awakening.

MM: Welcome, Tara. It’s great to talk to you. I wanted to discuss love’s shadows and the beliefs and feelings that separate people from one another in love relationships. Let’s start with attachment. Do you believe it’s possible to have human relationships without attachment?

TB: You know, I think it’s possible to have experiences of love without attachment, but I think in an ongoing way, part of our conditioning is to grasp at certain times, especially when there are unmet needs. It’s just part of our nervous system to hold on to where we think those needs will be met. I would say, yes, for moments or seasons, it’s quite natural that it gets marbled with attachment.

MM: When attachment comes up in “love,” how can we work with that without creating suffering for the other?

TB: First, we need to not make it wrong. There’s a healthy kind of attachment especially at certain phases of our life, like a mother and child and so on. That kind of attachment needs to be closed in and it’s biologically part of our survival. If attachment then carries forward in a way that it’s not as healthy, first we need to not judge it because that just deepens our identity as an attached, needy, not okay person. The first step is to just let it be there without judgment and bring as compassionate and honest attention to it as possible.

I find for myself at different times when I’ve watched my attachments with my son, my husband or my sister, when she’s been sick, the first step is to just honor that this is part of being human. It’s also knowing when attachment can end up getting in the way. When I’m attached I find that I don’t see the other person so clearly. I’m more caught up in what I’m wanting. Attachment blinds us to what’s going on with another. I have to be honest and say, “Okay. I’m holding on, holding on.”

In the moments that I watch it, I see the beliefs that I have around it. If I don’t try to control something or if somebody’s not paying attention to me in a certain way, it means they don’t love me, they don’t respect me, in my mind. If I start to bring my awareness to the beliefs that are underneath the attachment and bring my awareness to the way my body and heart are tightening, that very attention helps me to wake up out of the self that is holding tight and to re-inhabit a larger space of being, where that holding and pushing away might be going on but I’m not as involved with it and I’m more free to respond in a healthy way.

MM: And that softens us, rather than becoming aggressive, which happens a lot in love when we don't feel attended to or feel we're not being paid attention to. A tenderness is created instead of a separation.

TB: That's exactly right. If I'm judging the attachment or judging myself, or if I'm judging another person for not responding in a certain way, then I create separation. But if I can just forgive the attachment in myself and open to the vulnerability that's underneath it, then rather than fixating on another person to satisfy my need, or being the "bad" one for not satisfying my needs, I'm actually going right to the places where the needs come up from and I'm able to bring a real healing attachment.

I think the mistake we make is that when we have needs or we're feeling unattended to and we're feeling not seen and not understood, when we're feeling another person is not treating us in the way that makes us feel secure and loved, we fixate our attention on that person and what's wrong with them. We also fixate our attention on ourselves and what's wrong with us. But, instead of that fixating and that blaming, we can simply bring the two wings of awareness: the wing of mindfulness (noticing what's going on inside us) and then the wing of kindness (compassion to what's going on inside us). Then, we actually begin to heal the wounded place that really is the source of the attaching and the judging. So the trick is to stop fixating on the "what's wrong" with another person or ourselves, and to bring kind attention to where the vulnerability is.

MM: I'd like to talk about healthy detachment rather than disassociation. There's a misunderstanding in spiritual circles that detachment of the disinterested kind, of the chilly kind, is actually our goal. What is the difference between healthy detachment and disassociation?

TB: It's a really good question, Mark and I'm glad you're bringing it up because a lot of times in spiritual communities, detachment is considered to be an expression of being spiritually evolved when often, we have so much "want" and so much "fear" around being in relationship with each other.

The fear side can often have us pull away and protect ourselves from the distance and it might be in service of spiritual detachment, but it's really a withdrawal, a disassociation, a cutting off. Rather than the word 'detachment,' I usually use the word non-attachment, and where that can be wholesome is when we care and we're completely engaged with each other.

But there's not an attachment to things being a certain way. I'm not attached to you responding to me, affirming me, or I'm not attached to you paying attention to me in a certain way. That non-attachment gives me the freedom to let you be just as you are and let me be just as I am. That's what I would consider non-attachment. My identity is not hinged to you acting a certain way or me acting a certain way.

MM: To me this is connected to the misunderstanding of desire in spiritual circles, where our desires are often vilified, where it's the clinging and craving that cause suffering. I

don't actually know how you can have a love relationship without desire, not meaning sexual desire, but desire in the true meaning of Eros. What do you think about that?

TB: I think of desire as the essence quality that brings forth the whole universe. If it weren't for desire, the formless would not have come into form and engage creatively. Desire, this longing to live, and express and celebrate life, is innate. Where desire ends up causing suffering is when it fixates, when my desire for a certain person to be attracted to me or want to spend time with me, when that becomes not just a desire but becomes an "I have to have" kind of grasping, then my identity gets organized around needing that, it becomes very solid and sticky.

That causes suffering because then we're not inhabiting the fullness of who we are; rather, we're fixated and contracted on life being a certain way. The energy of desire itself is just life wanting to live itself fully which is something quite beautiful and something to celebrate.

MM: As a teacher and therapist you must hear a lot of stories about intimacy gone wrong. What are some of the misunderstandings about intimacy that cause suffering in your experience?

TB: Our greatest longing is to be intimate. We want to be in open, loving communion with each other and our greatest fear is intimacy and that it won't work and we'll be rejected. I speak a lot about what I call the *trance of unworthiness* which is really epidemic in our culture, this sense of "I'm not enough," or "Something's wrong with me," or, "I'm falling short." Most of us have some level of it because our culture has all these standards of what it means to be 'okay' that are handed down through our families.

Most of us grow up with a sense of "I'm not intelligent enough." It's such a sad thing that in the West we worship a certain kind of intelligence. Our kids go to school and only a certain percent of them have that kind of left-brain intelligence, and they come out feeling not intelligent, not desirable, not attractive or appealing to others. And if they get into loving relationships, that person is afraid they'll be found wanting, or they think they don't have the looks, the body shape that our culture deems worthy. Many of us feel that we're falling short and then that makes it so that if we start feeling close to another person, there is the fear that we'll be found out, we'll be rejected.

The main thing going on around intimacy is that we have a lot of strategies. We've developed a lot of strategies so that the package that we call Self will be a desirable package. I sometimes call this our *spacesuit self* because we come into an environment that is difficult and challenging, where we're told to be different and we're judged. We're told to jump over hoops to be loved and appreciated, so we have to develop spacesuit strategies to get through, to get approval and ways to avoid being judged and so on.

The sad thing about it, Mark, is that we get identified with our spacesuit, our egoic strategies and we forget who's looking through. We lose sight of, and lose touch with the authentic being that we are. When we get into intimate relationships, if we start trying to

be more real, it's very, very scary because we're so used to presenting ourselves and getting approval according to our achievements that it's difficult to get authentic with other beings and trust that we'll be accepted just as we are.

MM: What's the role of space in intimacy, the importance of maintaining space between lovers, or anyone, in relationships?

TB: If, by space, you mean giving people space and not having so much time and close-up togetherness, every two people have to find their rhythm. Some people have a need for more contact, more time together and some people need more space. In a way, in the gift of space, there is a sense of allowing another to be as they are. That's more what I think of as "space," the space to express yourself and know that you're going to be accepted as who you are. That's more where I go with that question than with the actual physical logistics of how much time you have together and how much time you have apart.

MM: That's more where I was going with this question because we have this romantic myth, this idea that to be in love means to be joined at the hip, but that doesn't actually create intimacy, does it?

TB: Not at all, no. It really is more energetic. I think that the more we can tell each other the truth and be who we are, and have space for the other person's vulnerability in being who they are, that space allows us to then move in a kind of dance together that's very fluid and graceful. And to the degree that, instead of that, there's expectation and judgment, a demand of being together in a certain way, any of those expectations then take away from that space and creates more of an edginess and a cramped-ness to the relationship.

MM: Andrew Solomon has a wonderful line in *The Noonday Demon*. He writes: "Depression is the flaw in love. To be creatures who love, we must be creatures who can despair at what we lose, and depression is the mechanism of that despair." Do you think that's true? Is depression the mechanism of despair in love relationships?

TB: Hmmm. My understanding is that to love we need to be able to die, that we need to be able to totally surrender to the living/dying nature of this world. Everything we love goes. So to be able to grieve that loss, to let go, to have that grief be absolutely full is the only way to have our heart be full and open. If we're not open to losing, we're not open to loving. I think of depression as the mechanism that pushes down, pushes under the pain of that loss. It tries to distance us from the loss but it lowers our whole energy level. I'm not sure that the word depression goes with it, although I think that's a pervasive way that we end up responding to the loss or the anticipation of loss. So, it's natural but not necessary.

MM: And what's the role of surrender in love?

TB: Ongoing. Every moment. If this heart is to love, we are continually experiencing the conditioning to hold on, tighten, or resist. It's just part of our nervous system that when

we experience stress, the nervous system tries to control things. So, part of waking up, discovering what we are beyond that controlling organism, discovering a more quality of beingness is to keep surrendering, letting go of the resistance.

So, in this moment, as we're communicating, there is a tightening around "Is this the best question to ask?" or a tightening around, "Am I being understood?" To open in a loving way is to let awareness notice that tightening. I'm doing this as I'm speaking with you, Mark, noticing "Am I saying this right?" An awareness to notice that self-consciousness as a kind of contraction and then to surrender it. Surrender happens in a moment to notice it fully, and if it's fully included in awareness, then there's a relaxing to open, to become that awareness and then no longer be identified in that self that's trying to answer a question. Once we open to awareness, love flows naturally.

MM: One last question, Tara. How do you work with someone who fears the risk of love to such an extent that they are afraid to put their toe in the water? What tools and practices can you recommend?

TB: I think we all have a degree of that. All of us, unless we're completely awake, don't let love in, we tense against love and we hold on in a way that doesn't let love flow. So for us all, when it's really, really strong, (especially when it's strong), the key piece to freeing our hearts is self-compassion.

I mentioned earlier the two wings of awareness. One wing is to recognize what's going on in the moment. So, for the one person who is really afraid of love, afraid to start exploring it and getting close to others, the first step is recognizing it, where there's just this honest witnessing. So, we say and notice, "Okay, fear. Afraid. Tight." Witnessing where it is in the body, witnessing where it is in the belief, "If I try, I'm going to get rejected and hurt more." That's one way of awareness, this honest recognition of "This is how it is."

The other wing is the wing of compassion, where there's a quality of tenderness that regards what's seen with kindness. I often concretize that, Mark, by placing my hand on my heart. This is for anyone that is listening or reading this, anyone who wants to explore it, just to recognize the thought, "Okay, afraid of loving," then to gently put your hand on your heart in some way to send a message of kindness.

It's the beginning of radically opening to love, even if there's not a feeling of kindness toward oneself, even having the intention to say, "It's okay, sweetheart," or, I even say, "I'm sorry and I love you." Even going through the motions is a way of establishing a new relationship with our inner life, one that is caring and being tender, versus one that is judging, distancing or ignoring. This is the beginning of being capable of intimacy with others.

So the two wings, seeing what's going on inside us and offering kindness to ourselves, will begin to open the field and open the heart to connection with our world.

MM: Oh, how wonderful! Tara thank you, it's always great to talk to you.

TB: You too, Mark. I hope things are going great for you.

MM: They are, I'll talk to you again soon.