A LITTLE BOOK WITH BIG POWER . . .

Many of us know in our heads that we need to be good to ourselves if we want to be happy. Our hearts may be a different matter. We are our own harsh judge and the lost, scared child who wants to stop feeling judged. We set up a vicious cycle that only stops when we step outside ourselves and observe how we get ourselves stuck.

TO CHANGE THE THOUGHTS THAT TAUNT US AND . . .

“Lori Deschene makes the topic of loving yourself come alive in a way that is both highly entertaining and very practical.”
—JOHNATHAN ROBINSON, founder of FindingHappiness.com and the author of Coming Apart

Tiny Buddha’s Guide to Loving Yourself from TinyBuddha.com creator Lori Deschene, shares 40 unique perspectives on loving yourself, including: realizing you’re not broken, accepting your flaws, releasing the need for approval, forgiving yourself, letting go of comparisons, and learning to be authentic. Featuring stories selected from TinyBuddha.com contributor.

INSPIRE US TO TAKE GOOD CARE OF OURSELVES.

“We can all feel broken, wounded, and alone at times, but never while reading this beautiful, wise guide to taking good care of ourselves. All of us can find inspiration and powerful lessons in Tiny Buddha’s openhearted, generous community of teachers. I’m so grateful to have found them.”
—PRISCILLA WARNER, author of Learning to Breathe: My Soothing Quest to Bring Calm to My Life
PRAISE FOR TINY BUDDHA’S GUIDE TO LOVING YOURSELF

“Loving yourself is the foundation for finding inner peace, happiness, and the ability to love others. In this wonderful book, Lori Deschene does something remarkable. She makes the topic of loving yourself come alive in a way that is both highly entertaining and very practical. This is one book that shouldn’t be missed.”


“You have to love yourself to love other people and your life. In this powerful collection of stories and insights, Lori Deschene and other Tiny Buddha contributors share how they overcome shame, insecurity, and perfectionism to help you do just that. I highly recommend Tiny Buddha’s Guide to Loving Yourself to anyone who needs a little help recognizing their worth and potential.”

—Karen Salmansohn, bestselling author of Prince Harming Syndrome
“This wonderful collection of personal stories and words of wisdom will help you become kinder and more compassionate to yourself, and ultimately show you how to lead a happier and more fulfilling life.”

—Kristin Neff, author of *Self-Compassion, Stop Beating Yourself Up and Leave Insecurity Behind*

“We can all feel broken, wounded, and alone at times, but never while reading this beautiful, wise guide to taking good care of ourselves. Some of us need permission to do that. All of us can find inspiration and powerful lessons in *Tiny Buddha’s* openhearted, generous community of teachers. I’m so grateful to have found them.”

—Priscilla Warner, author of *Learning to Breathe: My Yearlong Quest to Bring Calm to My Life*

“Reading Lori Deschene’s wonderful new book, *Tiny Buddha’s Guide to Loving Yourself*, is like listening to a good friend who reminds you of who you are when you need to hear it the most. Deschene and her contributors write about real-life situations with real-life solutions and they do it with the same unflinching honesty that has made TinyBuddha.com so popular. If you are ever hard on yourself—and who isn’t—you need to read this book.”

—Amanda Owen, author of *The Power of Receiving*
PRAISE FOR TINY BUDDHA, SIMPLE WISDOM FOR LIFE’S HARD QUESTIONS

“How can we find happiness and peace—right now, right here? In her engaging, thought-provoking book Tiny Buddha, Lori Deschene explores this enormous question to help readers grapple with challenges like money, love, pain, control, and meaning, in order to find greater happiness.”

—GRETCHEN RUBIN, author of The Happiness Project

“Lori is one of a kind. Her amazing heart and wisdom shine through in everything she writes! I am a HUGE fan of Tiny Buddha, and I’m constantly inspired by Lori and her work.”

—MASTIN KIPP, founder of The Daily Love (thedailylove.com)

“There’s nothing tiny about the extra-large dose of awesome stuffed into Lori’s writing. Read it and feel good about the world.”

—NEIL PASRICHA, founder and author of 1000 Awesome Things and The Book of Awesome
“Few people in our time have more passionately or more creatively applied wisdom teachings to a new digital generation than Lori Deschene. I am continually inspired by her writing, and also by her sincere dedication to learning, growth, and wisdom. I feel tremendously fortunate to have had the chance to get to know her work through Tiny Buddha, and to know her as a person. Both embody the same essential truths.”

—SOREN GORDHAMER, founder and author of Wisdom 2.0

“Lori Deschene doesn’t claim to be anybody’s guru. But it’s that lack of pretense and her total candor—how she tells her own often-wild story without flinching—that is so magnetic, inviting a sense of ease with our own wrinkles, too, and fostering a sense of personal possibility. As she asks: Are you ready to be free?”

—MARGARET ROACH, author of And I Shall Have Some Peace There

“Tiny Buddha is a moving and insightful synthesis of evocative stories and ancient wisdom applied to modern life. A great read!”

—JONATHAN FIELDS, author of Uncertainty
“I spent months retweeting posts from a mystery handle called @tinybuddha. I wasn’t the only one: Hundreds of thousands of people followed the daily messages. I was intrigued and made it a point to meet the woman behind the message. Today, Lori Deschene is a friend and fellow author who spreads truth and inspiration throughout the twittersphere, her blog, and now her new book! Lori has shifted the energy of the Internet with her loving daily posts and now she is sharing more with the world throughout her incredible book!”

—Gabrielle Bernstein, author of Add More –ing to your Life and Spirit Junkie
In loving memory of Jeanne “Grambo” Santoro.
You weren’t just loveable; you were love, in its purest, rarest form.
CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ........................................... xiii
About Tiny Buddha and This Book ................. xv
About My Journey to This Book ....................... xix

1. When You’re Stuck in Your Childhood:
   Moving Beyond What You Learned ............... 1
   Top 4 Tips About Moving Beyond Your Childhood Pain .. 22

2. When You’re Obsessed with Fixing Yourself:
   Realizing You’re Not Broken ......................... 25
   Top 4 Tips to Stop Feeling Broken .................. 44

3. When You Focus on Your Flaws:
   Accepting All of You ................................ 47
   Top 4 Tips About Self-Acceptance .................. 67

4. When You’re Hard on Yourself:
   Embracing Self-Forgiveness ......................... 69
   Top 4 Tips About Forgiving Yourself ............... 87

5. When You Focus on Getting Approval:
   Releasing the Need for Validation ................. 89
   Top 4 Tips About Releasing the Need for Approval .. 107
6. When You Think Other People Are Better:
   Letting Go of Comparisons . . . . . . . . 109
   Top 4 Tips About Releasing Comparisons . . . . . . . . 127

7. When You’re Trying to Fill a Void:
   Learning to Complete Yourself . . . . . . . . 129
   Top 4 Tips About Completing Yourself . . . . . . . . 150

8. When You’re Scared to Be Real:
   Allowing Yourself to Be Authentic . . . . . . . . 153
   Top 4 Tips About Being Authentic . . . . . . . . . . . 176

9. When You Don’t Prioritize Self-Care:
   Taking Care of Yourself . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 179
   Top 4 Tips About Taking Care of Yourself . . . . . . . . . 201

10. When You Don’t Feel You Make a Difference:
    Believing in Your Worth and Discovering Your Path 203
    Top 4 Tips About Believing in Your Worth and
    Discovering Your Path . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 223

Conclusion . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 227
The Tips . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 231
The Quotes . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 235
The Stories . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 243
The Contributors . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 247
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For every book, there are innumerable people to thank, but in this one there are forty times as many. First and foremost, thank you to all of the contributors who shared their stories and insights. I’m inspired by your honesty and vulnerability, and grateful to have learned from you. Thank you also to all of the family members, friends, and teachers who have touched your lives and helped shape you into the beautiful people you are.

To my family, including but not limited to Kevin, Marianne, Tara, Ryan, Pauline, Cassie, Pat, Jim, and Justin, who will live on in all of our hearts (and my many aunts, uncles, and cousins, both Deschene- and Santoro-descended), thank you for being kind, supportive, generous, funny, and always entertaining. I’m grateful that from the east to the west, I’m surrounded by laughter and love. To Jan, Pat, Susie, Vanessa, and the rest of the team at Conari, thank you for all your efforts in making another Tiny Buddha book come to life. To Joshua Denney of Think Web Strategy, thank you for not only being a gifted designer, but also for being available for around-the-clock Skype chats, whether related to Tiny Buddha or not.
And last but certainly not least, thank you to Ehren for letting me read and re-read the same thing twenty times even after I only changed a few words; for always being willing to give me advice, knowing I sometimes may seek but not follow it; and for being such a huge part of Tiny Buddha’s heart—and an even bigger part of mine.
ABOUT TINY BUDDHA AND THIS BOOK

We are not alone with what we’re going through. That’s the core message behind tinybuddha.com, a community blog that features stories and lessons from people of all ages from all over the world. It’s a place where we can come together to share our struggles and successes, knowing that despite our unique life circumstances, we’re really not all that different. No matter what we do, what we believe, where we’ve been, or where we’re going, we all want to be happy, we all want to move beyond our pain, and we all have infinite potential, if only we’re willing to believe it.

In the past three years, more than five hundred and fifty people have contributed stories to the site, many exploring their experiences in forgiving, accepting, and even celebrating who they are right now. What always strikes me about the posts people share is how brave they are in acknowledging the feelings and experiences many of us might be tempted to hide. Once one person has put it out there it’s so much easier to admit that we’ve been there too. It’s a tremendous relief to realize that whatever we’re feeling, it’s okay. We’re okay. We don’t have to fight it. We just have to acknowledge
it, try to understand it instead of judging it, and then use that understanding to grow through and beyond it.

I decided to create this book as a collaborative effort, including forty blog posts from tinybuddha.com, for that reason. So much of our resistance to loving ourselves has to do with shame—the thought that there’s something wrong with us for what we’re going through. These posts have reminded me, and more than a million monthly readers, that we are never alone, and we can change our thoughts and our lives. They touch upon ideas that will help you:

• Release shame about your past and the limiting beliefs that keep you stuck
• See yourself as beautiful and valuable, with all your flaws and weaknesses
• Accept yourself more and judge yourself less
• Forgive yourself for your mistakes and stop being hard on yourself
• Minimize the need for approval to feel more confident
• Let go of the comparisons that keep you feeling inferior
• Feel complete so that you no longer look to others to fill a void within yourself
• Find the courage to share your authentic self for deeper connections with others
• Learn to take care of yourself instead of putting everyone else’s needs first
• Believe that you’re valuable so you can start creating a life you love

I’ve categorized the posts into ten chapters, connected to each of these themes, and then written an introduction for each one. Though I ordered the stories in a way that made sense to me, you don’t need to read each chapter sequentially if you’d rather skip to sections that feel most relevant for you. I tried to choose a balanced selection of posts that pertain to our environment, relationships, and even work—all the different facets of our lives that stand to improve when we begin to love ourselves in action.

You’ll notice that, unlike in my first book, I don’t share any of my own stories in the chapter introductions. Beyond what I share in the early pages regarding who I am and how this book came to be, I wanted to keep the focus on the contributors’ stories and lessons.

Some of the posts share vulnerable stories; others are more instructive than personally revealing; but all contain such strong insights that I felt compelled to include them. Many of the stories come from people who have experienced some type of mistreatment that they then learned to emulate through patterns of addiction. Others come from people who came from healthier backgrounds but still adopted self-diminishing habits that they’ve recognized and confronted. Even if you don’t relate to all the stories, some will sound
familiar to you, and I hope there will be lessons from each one that you can apply to your own experience.

At the end of each chapter you’ll find four tips—one from each of the four posts in that section. I advise you to look at the forty tips not as things you need to do as you read, but as ideas you can turn to whenever you need help changing your thoughts, and consequently, your feelings and experience of the world. That’s the point of this book. It’s not about forty simple action steps to change your life; it’s about forty simple ways you can change your mindset right now. That, I’ve learned, is what changes our lives: doing our best right now, and as best we can in the nows to come.
ABOUT MY JOURNEY TO THIS BOOK

I’ve often said that I practically popped out of the womb crying, “Look at me!” followed immediately by, “What are you looking at?” For most of my life, I felt a desperate need to receive pure attention underscored by insecurity about what people would see. It was the deep, all-consuming need for validation punctuated by the fear that I wasn’t worthy of it. I felt lacking, less than, lost, lonely, and completely powerless to change.

On the long, winding road to a mind less cruel, I’ve learned that a lot of us desperately want to know what love and happiness feel like, but we don’t really believe we deserve either. And we also have no idea how to give them to ourselves. We’re so used to beating ourselves up over mistakes, blaming ourselves for everything we’ve failed to do, and doubting what we can do in the future that we believe we need our punishing inner voice. If only it pushes us hard enough, maybe we’ll become better. And then maybe we’ll feel better. Maybe we’ll find a place somewhere on the other side of self-judgment where we can finally accept ourselves and enjoy our lives.

But it doesn’t actually work that way. We can’t hate ourselves into a version of ourselves we can love. Before we can feel good
about who we are, we have to choose to be good to ourselves, just as we are. You may have learned to do the exact opposite in your childhood or beyond. And as a result, you may have spent the majority of your life trying to fix yourself, win approval from everyone around you, and escape the shame of your worst decisions. I collected these stories and wrote this book because I know the pain of that reality all too well—and I know there is another way.

In hindsight, I see that I lived most of my early life mired in a deep sense of self-loathing. I thought I felt so empty and lonely because the world was against me. I had lots of evidence to prove the world is a harsh, uncaring place—that people would hurt me if I let my guard down. But I hurt myself more by keeping it up, because the space in which I isolated myself was far more cruel and toxic. No other person could be as mean to me as I was; no one else’s opinion of me could be more judgmental than my own; and nothing in the unknown could be more painful than the familiarity of my self-induced suffering.

I was twenty-one when a therapist asked me to draw a self-portrait. I’d spent the ten years prior writing my feelings in journals, though I rarely felt anything for long. I had a vast collection of worn, faded diaries, all venting my anger at the ways others had hurt me and chronicling the many ways I’d hurt myself in response. What started as an adolescent escape from cruelty turned into a log for everything related to self-torture.

Five hundred. That’s the number of calories I felt comfortable digesting each day in an attempt to control my body—one of
the only things I felt I could control. Thirteen. That’s the highest number of times I threw up on a given day to rid myself of anything in excess of that. Thirty. That’s the minimum number of times I weighed myself each day to ensure my weight hadn’t exceeded ninety-nine pounds. Ten. That’s the approximate number of times I passed out on my college campus, causing my peers and teachers to worry for my well-being. Six. That’s how many times I ended up in the ER, dehydrated, with chest pains that I feared might be a heart attack. Seven. That’s how many inpatient hospitals kicked me out, with doctors convinced I was beyond help. Three. That’s how many months I spent at a residential treatment center in Wisconsin, where I sat in art therapy, pencil in hand, tasked with drawing myself as I saw me.

I started by drawing a circle that was puckered at the top, as if cinched. Inside I drew gray matter—something colorless and almost fluid. It was a crude drawing without much detail; other people likely wouldn’t know what it was. That seemed to be an accurate representation of myself; I didn’t know what I was made of, either. But everyone in that room knew I saw myself as the contents of that bag. It was a visual depiction of my most shameful memory to date.

At twelve years old, I’d felt ugly and inferior. It wasn’t just that I was chubbier, less popular, and less talented than my older sister, who attracted boys like I never did. It wasn’t the scoliosis back brace that consistently failed to make me straight. It wasn’t that many of my peers seemed to confirm my lack of intrinsic value. It was my
belief that I was unworthy of love. Still, I always fought to get it, and I thought one surefire way was to pretend I had an eating disorder.

I’d seen an after school special about two girls—one anorexic and one bulimic—and it seemed that everyone in their lives paid attention to them. I didn’t focus on the fact that the bulimic died in the end, though that was a fate that didn’t scare me, since I was convinced my life was worthless. I just wanted people to notice me. I wanted to do something so dangerous and terrifying that people had to stop and focus solely on me. It was a selfish, ignorant desire, but I remember the first time I threw up thinking that I was only acting. I wasn’t actually bulimic. I was just doing a really good job of playing this role for attention.

I wanted to look like someone who was helpless, and eventually, I was. By college, my whole life revolved around my secret bulimic ritual. It would start with feeling—anything. Guilt. Anger. Regret. Mostly shame. But sometimes even happiness, since I felt I didn’t deserve it, or feared I couldn’t hold on to it. From there came the eating—mindless self-stuffing, devoid of pleasure or satisfaction. It was carnal, frenzied, violent even, an attempt to anesthetize myself. And for a moment, nothing hurt. There were no thoughts, just the hunt for food and the mission to consume it as quickly as possible without anyone else finding out. I was there, but not—in my body, but out of my head. It was half of a process that had to be completed, and that caused me a great deal of anxiety, the fear I may not be able to empty the hole I’d temporarily filled.
After years of hiding my binging and purging cycle, and years of others trying to interrupt it, I knew there was always the possibility I wouldn’t be able to finish. I knew I might not be able to regain control and feel the release that was my drug. The popped blood vessels in my eyes, the bloody scrapes on my knuckles, the decay in my teeth—these signs betrayed that I was still doing it, but I’d gotten creative at hiding it, as I did in my final inpatient hospitalization.

Since I’d already been thrown out of the only eating disorder ward in Massachusetts, I found myself in several psychiatric units, each incapable of effectively treating me. No one on staff possessed the knowledge or ability to provide me with the help I needed—but really, I wasn’t open to receiving it, not from my family and not from them. In that last hospital, they left me unsupervised at meals and then locked me in my room. I’d have free reign over a fully stocked kitchen for breakfast, lunch, and dinner before a staffer escorted me to torturous solitude where I inevitably felt unhinged.

There came a time when I couldn’t breathe. I’d spent thirty minutes sitting barefoot in a sweat suit, with other patients in the kitchen. Since my neighbor had tried to hang herself with a shoelace, none of us were allowed to keep ours. I could hear her screaming from down the hall, but it was nothing compared to the noise in my head. I couldn’t believe this was where my life had gone. I couldn’t believe I was here and not well on my way to graduating from college. Mostly, I couldn’t believe that I’d soon be locked in a room where I wouldn’t be able to rid myself of the toxicity inside me.
I panicked. I decided I had to do it. Every second that went by was one second closer to digestion—one heartbeat closer to losing control. I had to be empty again. If I allowed myself to feel that sense of powerlessness, all the pain from all the other times I’d felt the same would wash over me like a tidal wave. That bag I drew in art therapy—it was the hollowed out pillow inside a case that I’d convinced a young girl to smuggle out of my room after I’d purged into it.

I’d knocked on the locked door, telling a nearby mental health counselor that I needed my friend to get my laundry. I knew the pillow hadn’t made it to the trash when I sat before one of the counselors in his office. He told me I should be ashamed of myself, and that it was time for me to leave. With those words echoing in my head, I considered that perhaps I should just give up. I deserved to feel ashamed. I did horrible, reprehensible things. I was selfish and weak. These were the beliefs I’d spent the decade prior trying to numb—that the times when others bullied, intimidated, and berated me, I’d brought it on myself. And yet, somewhere inside me, I held on to hope that I was so much more than the worst things I had done; that’s the part of me that located the residential treatment center and begged them to accept me.

I left Wisconsin after three months of intensive treatment not completely healed, but with my most life-threatening behaviors either eliminated or dramatically reduced. I had started ascending from the depths of my self-loathing, but the reality was I had a
long way to go. No longer was I slowly dying, but I had no idea what it meant to really live. I only knew I wanted to get far away from everything that reminded me of who I’d been. So I left—moved as far away as I could without leaving the country, from the East to the West Coast. After a decade of therapy and medications, I now lived in a world without either. That was the beginning of a new kind of healing, and it brought me all around the United States as I moved and traveled for work, trying to discover who I could be.

Looking back, I see it hasn’t been a linear journey, every day better than the one prior. It’s been a process of two steps forward, one step back. I’ve gone through many periods of confusion, desperation, and self-doubt. I’ve also impressed myself, inspired myself, and enjoyed myself like I was rarely able to do when my life revolved around being sick.

There came a time, six years back, when I returned to Wisconsin to share my story with new residents. As I stood in front of the room—eyes clear, hand unmarked, skin pink instead of sallow—I shared some of the many self-destructive things I’d once done in secrecy. Then I recounted the words a mental health counselor once told me, after I’d sunk to a new low: You should be ashamed of yourself.

I told them he was wrong. Yes, I’d made a big mistake. Yes, I’d done selfish, dangerous things. Yes, I needed to take responsibility for my life instead of drowning in my victim mentality. But if I hoped to do that, I had to challenge the voice inside that told me I
should feel ashamed. I had to see myself more as the light I’d shuttered for years and less as the darkness that threatened to suffocate it. I had to start telling the story of my strength instead of dwelling on the stories of my former weakness. That, right there, is why I never again told this story, until now: I no longer wanted to build my identity around my eating disorder. I didn’t want it to be how you defined me. But I now realize it doesn’t matter if you choose to define me by the lowest lows of my past; what matters is how I define myself through my actions in the present.

This, I’ve learned, is the foundation of self-love: knowing that we are so much more than our greatest mistakes, our weakest moments, or our most shameful decisions; and realizing that we can be who we want to be right now, not just in spite of where we’ve been, but also because of it.

I share these specifics from my own journey now knowing full well that you, the reader, may never have hated yourself quite so intensely. You may never have come close to death, or wished for your death, or wondered if the people in your life would be better off without you. But this is part of my truth. Though it took me a long time to realize it, these feelings of unworthiness caused all the pain in my life—not the relationships that didn’t work out or the many jobs that didn’t feel fulfilling. Nothing ever felt good enough because I didn’t believe I was good enough. That, I suspect, may resonate with you too.

It’s something most of us have in common: We don’t fully believe we are as beautiful and loveable as we are. Just as we may
find proof that we can’t trust other people, we search for evidence that supports our distorted perceptions of ourselves. And so it goes inside our heads, the cyclical negative thoughts about who we are, what we think we’ve done wrong, and what we wish we could change but fear we can’t. Everything that happens externally reflects what goes on internally. The good news is that we all have the power to change one by starting to change the other.

It’s this realization (among others) that prompted me to start tinybuddha.com in 2009 as a space where we can all learn to heal, and not just survive, but thrive. It’s also what led me to this book. Every single one of us has amazing potential to create purpose, passion, and joy in life, but first we need to believe we deserve it.

You do.

Even if you’ve made choices you wouldn’t make based on what you know now, you don’t deserve to feel inadequate, ashamed, unworthy, or inferior to anyone else. You don’t deserve the anguish of beating yourself up over the past, or the insatiable emptiness that comes from believing you’re fundamentally lacking. No matter where you’ve been, you deserve the opportunity to go where you’re going less burdened by your own mind.

This means not only being good to yourself, but also cutting yourself some slack when you struggle with that. I’ve learned that we may never completely eliminate self-doubting and self-critical thoughts, but it’s possible to think them a lot less often, and to give them less power when we do. And there’s great power in this
gradual, imperfect journey. Tiny shifts in our minds can create massive change in our lives. I hope this book helps you be a little easier on you and a little more present and joyful in your life, one thought and one moment at a time.
So much of how we feel about ourselves pertains to our experiences as children. If you didn’t grow up with love and support, odds are you’ve struggled to offer those things to yourself and others around you. If the people who were supposed to care for you neglected your emotional or physical needs, you probably concluded that your needs weren’t important—and that you somehow deserved to be ignored.

Ironically, if you grew up in an abusive environment, you may have felt overwhelming anger toward people who hurt you, only to grow up and adopt their voice in your head. That’s the paradox of mistreatment: you may feel outraged when you recognize you’ve been wronged, and yet pick up where your abusers left off. We often treat ourselves the only way we know how—the way we learned through example from our parents and/or peers.
For those who didn’t experience abuse growing up, you likely still formed conclusions about yourself based on your relationship with your parents. Many of us learned at a young age that love, acceptance, and approval were conditional on certain behaviors and achievements. But we didn’t conclude that our behaviors weren’t good enough; we internalized it to mean that we weren’t—that there was something innately wrong with us. According to psychotherapist and researcher Alice J. Brown, author of *Core Beliefs Psychotherapy*, because we’re egocentric as children, we assume that when our parents aren’t there for us, we’re somehow to blame.

As adults, we may understand that we did not deserve to feel bad and that we shouldn’t torture ourselves for things other people have done. But sometimes despite knowing these things, we don’t fully believe them. We don’t grasp that we’ve always been beautiful, even if we’ve never been perfect, and that we’ve never deserved to feel scared, alone, or ashamed—not when we were kids, and not now.

It’s helpful to understand how our childhood experiences shaped us, but it’s not about placing blame or playing the victim. It’s about recognizing that we all learned to question ourselves, on some level, growing up—even those of us who had the most attentive parents, since various factors contribute to our beliefs about ourselves. And we can all learn to love, support, and nurture ourselves now, regardless of how we’ve struggled. We can all challenge our thoughts and beliefs to cultivate positive feelings about ourselves—flaws and all.
How do we let go of the stories that we’ve been clinging to for years? How can we begin to move beyond trauma and pain? How can we release our shame and start recognizing our worth and beauty? Countless Tiny Buddha contributors have addressed these questions on the site, sharing their experiences and insights. Some of those include . . .
OPENING YOURSELF UP TO LOVE WHEN YOU DIDN’T GROW UP WITH IT

by Marie

You, yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection.

—Buddha

I’VE ALWAYS CRAVED LOVE AND ATTENTION. THIS IS NOT TO SAY that I accepted love willingly—quite the opposite, in fact. If someone decided to like or even love me they would have to pass through a path of obstacles, being pushed, pulled, and tested at every corner. Only then, upon arrival at the finish line, would they gain my acceptance.

As you can imagine, this eliminated a number of potential friends and partners, and I often found myself lonely and disappointed. The root of my inability to accept love easily stems from my childhood. My mother was unable to connect with me. She got pregnant during the height of her modeling career. After she gave birth, her career dried up. She resented the attention that a baby attracted, and, in addition to this, she was highly addicted to narcotics.

Growing up with my mother telling me that she felt no love and was ashamed of me made me desperate to be the perfect daughter. I would go to any length to prove myself worthy, even taking drugs.
with her as a way of connecting. When I was fifteen years old, she upped and left with no good-bye, leaving me with my stepdad and an overwhelming sense of failure. If my own mother could not love me, how and why would anyone else?

After my mother left, I disguised my pain through drugs and control. Drugs provided an instant, closely bonded social network. I tried to take control through self-harm. My life continued like this for ten years. I hated myself, and I was terrified of letting anyone in. Throughout these years, I did several stints in rehabilitation centers, where nurses and psychiatrists worked hard on me. I would almost give in and build connections with these people, but when the time came to leave these institutions I would find myself alone all over again.

I was desperate for a loving relationship and a career. My battles were hindering me from achieving either. Luckily, I had a fantastic education under my belt, through a childhood spent at top boarding schools. It was just a matter of escaping this vicious cycle that I had spent the majority of my life spinning around in. I had stopped the drugs, but I was addicted to self-pity. Therapy had taught me that I needed to let go and learn to trust. This sounds quite easy now, but back then the very idea was not only terrifying but also impossible.

I always dreaded birthdays and holidays. On my twenty-fifth birthday I woke up with an annual feeling of dread. I went to the store to buy some cigarettes, and the lady at the counter asked me for some identification. I handed it over and she said to me “It’s your
birthday today. You look so young. Your mother should be very proud of you.”

It was such a simple compliment, but for some reason it struck a chord. After all my years of therapy, these words from a stranger hit home. I can’t really explain it, but I felt a whole hoard of emotions release: anger, regret, understanding, and, finally, relief. I felt that, yes, my mother should be proud of me, and I felt sorry for her that she was unable to feel that way.

I wanted to have a chance at life, to meet someone and have my own children who I could love and be proud of. I realized then that this would only happen if I stopped treating myself the same way my mother did. Considering how long and hard it was to reach this point, turning my life around was surprisingly easy. The hardest point was the realization.

If your parents didn’t treat you well, and you’d like to treat yourself better and open up to love, I recommend that you:

Write through your fears and feelings. I didn’t want to cause myself any more harm; I wanted to connect and understand how I worked instead. Writing things down served as a great release.

Go out and get a journal with the main intention of putting your emotions into words. Try and pinpoint when and what makes you feel good or sad. By putting everything on paper, you can then reference your emotions, look into your behavioral patterns, and recognize what made you feel a certain way and how you dealt with it.
Keeping a journal keeps you connected to yourself so you can make real changes that last.

Risk trusting other people. Instead of testing people in my life, I let go and granted people access. This was a difficult step, as rejection is way out of my comfort zone. However, I put myself on the line and trusted my instincts. I decided that even if someone let me down, I could handle it. Moving into different social circles helped. I got back in touch with people I liked growing up, and I was surprised to find that a number of them were happy to reconnect with me. As I started to feel more connected and less alone, I realized this paid off.

I also decided to be open with new people who came into my life. I didn’t scare them off at the first encounter, but as relationships began to develop, I would explain how my past affected me, and how I’d chosen to move on and be happy. Almost everyone I opened up to was completely supportive. Openness became a two-way street. I learned that most people have experienced their own struggles. Our confessions strengthened these new relationships. I also learned that not everyone is someone I can open up to—but the more I do it, the better instincts I have about who to let into my life. Taking risks with people is essential for happiness. After all, it is better to have experienced at least some loving friendships than to sit alone, fearing heartache.

Let go of the old stories. I have let go of my mother. I realized that I was heading down a path similar to hers, and this taught me to
feel compassion for her. I have released all the negativity that I held toward her, and now I just hope that one day she can learn to love herself. In order to let go, I needed to understand her. Because we were barely in contact, I had little information to go on. I collected everything I knew about her, from her childhood, her time with my dad, and the time she spent with me.

With all this information I recognized that my mother was a troubled woman who was unable to make real human connections. I sensed that she must have been suffering from some kind of depression or illness. By looking at her in this way, I could see that her leaving had nothing to do with me. Once I realized that our unhealthy non-relationship wasn’t my fault, I was able to stop blaming her and hanging on to the victim story.

Once you stop telling the story, it has less power over you.

Choose not to hide from yourself. In the past, I tried to hurt and hide from myself, and all this did was make me lose myself further. By braving up and removing all the escape methods, I have found my raw being. Vulnerability is not a negative state. It is how we start our path. I have just started mine slightly later than most. By loving myself, I allow others to love me. I love myself because I am still here, and I can see my life changing around me. When I have moments of insecurity, I read through my journals, speak to friends, or throw myself into activities I enjoy, like baking.

Since changing my outlook, I have started working and have formed a number of great friendships. I have even gotten in touch
with my mother and told her that I have forgiven her. I don’t think we will ever have a relationship, but I am okay with that. The important thing is that I have finally opened myself up to other loving relationships. We can only do this when we make peace with our past.
I grew up believing that nothing I did was ever good enough, and this is something I still carry with me. It affects every aspect of my life: my hobbies, skills, relationships—even my understanding of my body, my appearance, and my mental health. I often think that I must have done something quite terrible in a past life to go through any of this, to not be good enough.

As certain as I’ve been of this, I’ve been sure that I wasn’t responsible for these attitudes and beliefs. Other people did this to me, so I literally can’t let go of the pain they caused. They hurt me too much—did too much damage for me to confront them, stand up to them, and forgive them. But blaming others hasn’t helped me move on and become the person I want to be. It’s helped me stay a victim, sure—and it’s gotten me some sympathetic ears along the way—but it hasn’t helped me get out of bed with a smile every morning for the past twenty-odd years. It’s made me feel sluggish and sick to my stomach whenever the thoughts and memories worked their way into my consciousness.
There’s no mystery to the way I think. Negative thinking is exactly that—negative. However, understanding negative thoughts is paramount to overcoming them. It’s taken me a while to connect with the idea that the harmful actions of others has shaped my thinking; and it’s taken me just as long to realize that it’s time to let go. Change can come quickly, but more often it’s a gradual process in which we endure and learn many lessons: I don’t want to feel like this anymore, so I have to start changing my beliefs.

The first belief I’m changing: I’m a waste of time. Not true. I make a difference simply by being. I know I make a positive difference because I am mindful of my impact on the environment and do my best to reduce it. I support charities that are close to my heart with regular donations. My close friends wouldn’t consider me a waste of time. Even though I sometimes find it difficult to believe, they do value my ideas and opinions, and they love my company.

The second belief I’m changing: Nothing I do is good enough. My ideas of perfection aren’t mine—those ideas belong to other people. How can I ever live up to someone else’s perfection? I can’t. There are many things I can do with great success, but in order to make those achievements real for me, I have to define my own perfection: peanut butter on toast, growing my own fruit and vegetables, the smell of freshly baked vegan cookies, writing off the cuff and producing lucid prose.

The third belief I’m changing: I deserve pain. No, I don’t. Nobody does. There’s a difference between accepting responsibility...
for how you think about hurtful things other people have done, and
taking the blame for those actions. I’ve not done anything to deserve
the things that have happened to me.

And the last belief I’m changing: I’ll never be happy. Not with
that attitude, I won’t—but then, aren’t I already happy? I may not
have all the things I want yet, like my dream job, but I do have a
lot of other things in my life that mean a lot to me: my friends, my
home, my cat, my family, waking up to the river every morning,
my floating garden (I live on a boat), my creativity. Happiness comes
from the small things—it comes from inside of me. I don’t buy hap-
piness or find it or receive it; I make it, for others and for myself.

The fact that people sometimes hurt other people won’t change.
My beliefs that have left me open to suffering—my beliefs—will
change.

Take a minute to think of your beliefs about yourself. How
many of these things are accurate? Which ones belong to you and to
you alone? If you find a belief that you question, explore it and find
out where it came from, what it’s founded on. Challenge it. Become
true to yourself. When you change your beliefs, you change your
life.

It’s taking time to work through these things, and I don’t expect
to be finished by next Monday, but that’s what I love about change
and self-improvement—there’s no pressure to be complete tomor-
row. I can do it all at my own pace, in a way that suits me. I’m a
work in progress. And that gives me a lot of hope.
RELEASING SHAME AND LOVING ALL OF YOU

by Sarah Louise Byrne

_When there is no enemy within, the enemies outside cannot hurt you._

—African Proverb

If you’ve had any experiences where you had to keep your truth quiet, particularly as a child, it’s time to reclaim it and value its power. By doing so, you will release energy, old shame, and subconscious blocks that may now be holding you back from living your life to the fullest.

It could be that you had lots of family secrets (which creates shame), or it could be that you were bullied and felt unable to confide in anyone about it. There are many circumstances when we have our truth kept locked in. If you feel unable to speak your truth, then you feel shame. It’s nature’s law.

When we become shameful of our truth, we end up cutting off, discrediting, and devaluing a hugely important chunk of who we are and how we show up in the world. This is true for me. When I was growing up, my parents had an emotionally abusive relationship, and I was sworn to secrecy about it. My parents wanted no one outside of the house to know what was going on. While my father had anger
issues, my mother always tried to keep the peace, so I decided it was better to not speak up or voice my feelings. Living under the same roof as them, it was impossible for me to not be affected by what was happening; yet I was unable to have my experience validated.

My parents were busy fighting, being in tension, or creating drama, and I was conditioned to not talk to anyone about our “trouble at home.” So my truth was released only to my journal and me. After my parents divorced, I moved on to college and started my adult life. I felt proud of myself for staying strong through all the tough times at home, for being an emotional rock for my mother, and for forgiving my father for not being the kind of dad I wanted him to be. But in my mid- to late-twenties, things started to shift. After a few career U-turns, I started to feel unsure, confused, and shameful.

Up until that point I’d always considered myself to be strong, independent, and able to make decisions easily, and I was, overall, really confident. I wanted to understand where this shame came from. When in my life had I felt shame this strongly? It led me back to when I was unable to truly have presence as “me” growing up—I was the girl who could only be a silent participant in an unhealthy household. When I was told to not talk to anyone about what was going on, it was as if I was being told that my truth, perspective, and feelings were shameful.

At first I felt angry toward my parents and any adults who may have known what had been going on but hadn’t shown concern
toward my experience of the situation. But then, like a scientist, I detached and focused on how to release the shame. I could see that some part of me must still be carrying shame toward speaking my truth, and the only way to release it was to share it. So I told my story to a trusted friend (who is also a counselor). I made no omissions, and I quickly started to feel better. No one outside my family had known about what was going on, or what I’d experienced and seen. By telling someone outside of the family, I felt a shift—as if a spell was being broken.

Telling my truth did not make the sky fall down. It did not make me feel shameful. And it helped me see that while I’d been nurturing the brave, confident, no-BS side of me, there was a neglected side that needed to be seen—the lonely, frustrated, confused, and ignored side. Those “negative” aspects of ourselves are often the emotions we try to avoid, but as I began to validate them (“of course you felt isolated Sarah; the adults in your life were cutting you off from expressing yourself”), it helped me feel more compassion toward myself.

Feeling proud of yourself for your good qualities is one thing; being able to embrace yourself when you feel anger, resentment, or jealousy is another. And I learned that I have a right to feel all things. Just as it’s okay to be excited, happy, and content, it’s also okay to feel sad, nervous, and bored. Especially if you had an incident as a youngster where your “negative” emotions weren’t given space to be expressed, it’s important to be able to validate them now as an adult.
A lot of self-love work is about uncovering that hidden part of yourself and giving it light, room to breathe, and the capacity to exist. When we deny any part of ourselves, we are not allowing ourselves to be truly who we are. That’s not to say we should broadcast all our vulnerabilities on Twitter or share intimate stories with people who we know are incapable of honoring our truth. It could mean seeing a counselor or airing it to a nonjudgmental support network.

When we realize we were “made” to keep our truths hidden by our environment or others, the first natural step is to feel angry, especially if this pattern of having to keep quiet took place as a kid or teen. Why didn’t the adults in our lives do the right thing and give us space to be heard? Normally it had to do with their fears, insecurities, shame, and inability to face the truth for themselves. The important thing is to accept that they were unable to have done anything differently—to have provided you with what you needed.

Whatever you feel you needed (validation, support, safety to speak the truth), accept and make peace with the fact that you may never get these things from them. You can’t rewrite history, and it may be likely that they are still, now, incapable of giving these things to you. What you can do today, right now, is begin to release the habit of self-repression that you may have learned from the past.

How do you do that? Start to shine light and love on your truth, whether that’s turning your attention to your true passions that may have been ignored or taking baby steps to speak up on what doesn’t
work for you. Often we swallow our own opinions or needs in order to “keep the peace.” It’s time to take very small steps to rock the boat!

If you are subconsciously holding out for someone else to finally “see” you or love the real you, drop in with yourself and ask: “Do I see the ‘real’ me? Am I allowing my true self to be voiced, to be seen, to take up space?” Do you have spaces in your life where you can let your guard down and be authentic?

I’ve found that having my truths validated is hugely important, and this simple exercise is a good place to start: Visualize a kind, benevolent being (which could be a trusted friend or person you know, or your preferred idea of the universe/higher power/spirit) is with you, saying, “I love that you love.” Then allow yourself to list all the things you love! Write down what you come up with.

“I love that you love making art. I love that you love dancing. I love that you love to have fun.”

This always leaves me feeling reaffirmed and self-secure. It never fails to make me feel happy to be me. And it allows me to feel loved for who I truly am, not for what I do for others.

If you have repressed anger, frustration, or resentment (which is likely when we repress part of ourselves), find ways to healthily express it—for example, through a martial arts class.

Send love and validation to the aspects of yourself that perhaps your peers, family, and colleagues didn’t or don’t “get.” You have to expand to be all of yourself.
FINDING BEAUTY IN YOUR SCARS
by Alexandra Heather Foss

Because of your smile, you make life more beautiful.
—Thich Nhat Hanh

Beauty is a concept I struggle with—what it means, why it matters. I struggle because huge chunks of my life have not been beautiful. They have been ugly, marred by trauma, and accompanied by pain and anger.

We think of beauty and often visualize glossy magazine pages and wafer-thin models. We see beauty as superficial—eye color, hair texture, and numbers on a scale. We see beauty as something to be measured and weighed.

I don’t see beauty that way. I see beauty as the grace point between what hurts and what heals, between the shadow of tragedy and the light of joy. I find beauty in my scars.

We all have scars, inside and out. We have freckles from sun exposure, emotional trigger points, broken bones, and broken hearts. However our scars manifest, we need not feel ashamed, but beautiful. It is beautiful to have lived, really lived, and to have the marks to prove it. It’s a testament of our inner strength. To wear a snazzy outfit takes nothing; but to wear our scars like diamonds? Now that’s beautiful.
Fifteen years ago, I would have laughed at this assertion. “Are you crazy?” I’d say, while applying lipstick before bed. I was that insecure. Lips stained, hair fried by a straightening iron, pores clogged by residue foundation, all in an attempt to be different from how I naturally was, to be beautiful for someone else. I hid my face because it hurt to look at myself in the mirror. I was afraid my unbeautiful truth would show somehow through my skin—that people would know I had been abused, and that in an effort to cope I was starving myself, harming myself. I was afraid people would see that I was clinging to life by a shredding thread.

Now? I see scars and I see stories. I see a being who has lived, who has depth, who is a survivor. Living is beautiful. Being a part of this world is beautiful, smile-worthy, despite the tears. Beauty isn’t a hidden folder full of Kate Moss images for a kid who’s dying to forget and fit in. And it isn’t a fat-injected smile, or six-pack abs. It’s the smile we are born with, the smile that sources from the divine inside, the smile that can endure, even if we’ve been through a lot.

My healing started with a birthday gift. It was a photograph my friend had taken of a forest, the word “forgive” painted in pink on a stone. I didn’t understand why that word meant something until I really started to think about what forgiveness could mean. I’d blamed myself for so long for things that weren’t my fault. Life stopped being beautiful to me, I stopped feeling beautiful inside, and my smile stopped shining beauty out into the world.
I think in order for us to make life beautiful we need to feel our smiles as we feel our frowns. For so long, I only honored my pain and my sorrow. I lost my smile, less because of the trauma and more because I spent so much time lamenting my scars. When I decided they were beautiful, I became beautiful. When I took power away from the negative emotions, my unchangeable traumatic past, I was better able to find joy in the present.

How did I do this? First, I made a soul collage, a board for the life of my dreams. I pasted onto the poster magazine images that depicted things I see as myself and want for myself. It became a beautiful visual guide for what matters to me beyond the superficial. This board reminds me to honor who I am in essence, who I was before anything bad happened to me, before I believed anything was wrong with me. This board provides me with a path of beauty through the scars.

Secondly, I found the book *The Why Café* by John P. Strelecky. In it, Strelecky encourages readers to pinpoint their PFE (purpose for existence). While reading, I realized beauty is my PFE. My purpose is to make whatever I can beautiful. Not beautiful in the superficial sense, but beautiful in the smile of the heart and soul sense. So far it’s working.

Sometimes all it takes for your life to change is a shift in perspective. One solitary action, one solitary word, and everything is different. Take a moment now to smile. Do you feel it in your muscles? In your skin? In your toes? Where do you feel happiness?
When bad things happen we don’t instinctively feel happy and beautiful, but we don’t need to despair because life gets ugly sometimes. Joy and beauty are everywhere, in everything, in every one of us—no matter how we look, and no matter how we may hurt temporarily. Grace is beauty in motion, and we can create it by choosing to smile—to recognize that we’re strong, despite our insecurities, and that the world is an amazing place, despite its tragedies.

We may hurt, but we will heal—and there is beauty in our scars.
Top 4 Tips About Moving Beyond Your Childhood Pain

1. Tell empowering stories of healing in the present instead of sad stories of hurting from the past.

When you live in the story of how you were hurt, you define yourself by your pain, and you essentially pick up where others left off in mistreating you. It’s hurtful and crippling to rehash these events over and over again (though it can be helpful in a therapeutic setting). When you find yourself dwelling on an old story, tell yourself that you’re creating a new one—a story of forgiving and loving yourself in action. Try to understand whoever hurt you, and recognize that their actions were probably caused by their own pain. Then proactively choose to do something to take care of yourself in the way you wanted to be taken care of years ago.

2. Challenge the limiting beliefs that make you feel bad about yourself.

You may be holding on to all kinds of limiting, inaccurate beliefs about your worth, your potential, and what you deserve. Realize these are not facts—you formed these beliefs based on difficult experiences and years of misguided thinking, and you can change your life by challenging these beliefs and forming
healthier ones. When you start thinking the old belief, look for evidence to support the opposite one. It’s there—proof of your intrinsic value is in your choices, your actions, and your daily life. You just have to start recognizing all the good you do.

3. **Shine a spotlight on your shame and douse it with empathy.**

When people abuse us, disrespect us, silence us, or disregard our feelings or needs, we often internalize that and feel shame, as if we deserved to be hurt because we were unworthy, bad, or flawed. We then feel the need to hide ourselves to avoid the pain of being seen, but hiding just creates more pain. It’s not your fault that you feel shame—it’s a natural response to the way you were treated—but it is your responsibility to heal it. Researcher Brené Brown wrote that shame requires secrecy, silence, and judgment to grow exponentially, and that it can’t survive when doused with empathy. Offer yourself that empathy by choosing not to judge yourself for what other people did to you or what you did in response; and let someone else into that process, whether it’s a friend or a professional.

4. **Recognize the beauty in your journey.**

You may not feel that all parts of you are beautiful, but there’s beauty in the strength and courage that have helped you get where you are. Whatever you did in the past, you were doing
the best you could, based on what you learned and experienced. Shift your focus and take some time to acknowledge how amazing your journey has been thus far. How have you displayed grace and bravery? How have all the chaotic dots of your past shaped up to create something unique and inspiring? If your life were a movie, what positive message would viewers take away?