Dr. Elise Bialylew, founder of Mindful in May (mindfulinmay.org) and The Mind Life Project (www.mindlifeproject.com) and author of The Happiness Plan, interviews David Treleaven

***David Treleaven**, Ph.D., is a writer, educator, and trauma professional whose work focuses on the intersection of mindfulness, trauma, and social justice. He is author of the book Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness: Practices for Safe and Transformative Healing. He received his master's in counselling psychology at the University of British Columbia, and a doctorate in East-West psychology from California Institute of Integral Studies.*

Elise: Hi, David. Welcome to the program, we've been having a nice yarn off record, but I'm really looking forward to getting into this for the listeners because your book, *Trauma-sensitive mindfulness*, is a wonderful read and I would suggest an essential read because it's an area that I think hasn't been so understood, and it's really important. So, thanks for being here.

David: Thanks, Elise. Happy to be here.

Elise: I wanted to begin by saying that you're an internationally recognized leader in this field of mindfulness and trauma. In your book, you share your

own personal story about how you ended up moving into this area. I wonder if you could share some of that with the listeners, just to contextualize this whole topic.

David: Yes. I'm happy to, but I promise I won't take up the whole hour talking about my story. Well, for folks meeting me for the first time, my basic story is, I grew up in Canada and was introduced to meditation in my teens. Probably like many people who are listening, when I came to practice, I was hurting, I was struggling, I was in a really rough spot. I grew up in a family with quite a raging and unpredictable parent. So, I just came to practice with a lot of stress and a lot of confusion. The practice was just right away super helpful for me. I found it to be this great refuge of a place to just get to learn to be with myself in a different way. Too cut a long story short , I took it pretty seriously, and at some point what I found was that when I was meditating I was paying attention to parts of my body that felt pretty frozen and stuck, and had ever since I had grown up in this family. I would go to teachers and I'd say, "Hey. I'm not sure how to work with this. I feel really stuck, I feel quite frozen" Most of the teachers would say, "Just keep staying with it, take it back to the cushion and eventually this knot will untangle" And I'm probably like you and many people here in the community, I'm a student who took that and ran with it. I went really hard into it and kind of overdid it sometimes. I found that paying attention to the knots was making things worse. At some point, someone said, "Have you thought about doing work on trauma?" And I hadn't, I started to do some work around trauma, it was super helpful. Things started to move, and it opened up this whole inquiry around what's the relationship between meditation, mindfulness, and trauma. So I've been studying that for about 15 years now. I've worked as a one-to-one therapist, and the headline is basically that mindfulness meditation can help people that are struggling with trauma, and it can also lead to some

pitfalls. So that's what I imagine we might want to unpack here is: Where can it help? Where can it hinder? What are the best practices that people can know about?

Elise: Wonderful. I wanted to just pick you up on that word, knot, because I think I get what you mean but I think that some of the listeners might be curious to know what that is, just from their own perspective if they run into a knot. What do you mean by a knot?

David: Well, let's get into our conversation here on trauma. So I might define trauma and take us into that knot. I'll give you a kind of physiology behind that knot. So, I defined trauma as any event or any series of events that are stressful enough to leave us feeling helpless, overwhelmed, and often profoundly unsafe, and of course, you and everyone else will notice, there's a spectrum of trauma. There's a spectrum of stress, we all experience stress. Then when we get to the upper echelons of stress, we're in this domain- and some of your folks will know this - but we have fight/flight, which we've heard of which really mobilizes the sympathetic nervous system. Then we also have something known as freeze, which is the parasympathetic nervous system. Often what's happening with trauma is that we experience something overwhelming and threatening. This whole series of events happens is kind of hitting the accelerator, then a freeze will happen and it will sometimes trap that energy in the body. A freeze can also be called immobility. So one way to answer your question about the knots, one way to think about stuck places when we're talking about trauma, is where are the places in the body and mind where our trauma response, a really natural response to something that's overwhelming, didn't get to complete, didn't get to finish. So, just a 15-second story on this. Imagine that you almost had a car accident, kind of a close call. The

sympathetic system gets really mobilized in the body, we're slamming the accelerator, fight/flight, do I need to run? It ends up being okay, but the freeze can come in with a certain level of stress, and if we don't get to actually discharge and move through that stress response that came in response to the trauma, that can actually trap us. That's one way to think about these knots that can happen inside.

Elise: So then, I just want to backtrack, sorry. I'm just thinking about your story because I thought what was interesting in your story was when you went to the silent meditation retreat, and correct me if I'm wrong, but it was sort of almost like a vicarious trauma. Can you speak about that side of things as well? Because I think people really- particularly for the therapists that are listening or anyone that is working in trauma, like how that is relevant here?

David: Yes, absolutely.

Elise: That was part of the initial story for you, right?

David: Yes, that's right. That was also a part of it. Well, for anyone that's done any study around trauma or for those that are new to it, trauma can happen in any number of ways and the Diagnostic Statistical Manual is really what a lot of mental health professionals use for diagnosing trauma and post-traumatic stress. There's a couple of different ways that people can experience trauma. One is directly experiencing trauma like in that story I just told about a car accident. That can also happen from witnessing a traumatic event, or learning that a traumatic event occurred to someone close to us, someone that we love. It can also happen through repeated exposure as you're saying here. So I was a stress-

trauma therapist for a number of years and I was working with a highly traumatized population, and that was also a time in my life when I would go on retreat. Sometimes I'd have these memories and images of the clients that I was working with or the trauma that I had been exposed to, and if I followed the basic instructions around meditation, it was to keep paying attention to those images or those sensations. Sometimes that was helpful, and we can unpack that here, and there were other times when actually paying attention to these flashbacks or memories actually made things worse. I was leaving these retreats a little bit more dysregulated, rather than regulated, and so that's what sparked this whole inquiry of, "Okay, so if someone has experienced trauma, whether vicarious and being exposed to trauma as the therapists that are here on this call. or if you directly experience trauma and you're in meditation, what can you do? What are the best practices for you? How would you know? How would teachers know if someone was struggling with trauma?" And that's really the domain that I'm doing work in.

Elise: So, let's just define “mindfulness” from your perspective, and then let's move into some of these points that you were just raising there, just so we're all on the same page. Some of the listeners are newer to meditation and mindfulness. How do you define mindfulness first? And then let's move into the juicy discussion.

David: Yes sure, it's great. Well, I define mindfulness as sustained present moment awareness, and that sustained present moment awareness, think of it like an aperture where we can narrow in that focus on particular aspects of our experience or our inner world; like in this moment I can feel some feelings in my stomach or my feet on the floor. So I can hone in with mindful awareness, but I can also really back it up and have a very wide aperture. Joseph Goldstein,

who I think was on at some point on Mindful in May- I loved his definition of mindfulness - which is our ability to know what's happening when it's happening. It's really like a super-power to me that we can develop and we can utilize it in different ways. I hold mindfulness myself as morally neutral, it doesn't necessarily come with compassion. Some people say, "Well, it might get baked in," but I think of it as a very neutral form of sustained awareness that we can cultivate primarily through meditation, but also different practices. We can use it in a bunch of different ways around trauma, so that's how I define it.

Elise: Whenever I hear the definition, my mind sort of goes into the thinking about what our minds are normally doing when they're not doing mindfulness. Do you want to just speak to that? Because it sounds really simple, there's a present moment awareness, and what comes up in my mind is, why the hell do our minds just not do this? Or what is the mind doing? So do you want to talk to show the contrast of everyday life when we're not doing mindfulness? What's going on?

David: Yes, this is the amazing thing isn't it about practice? As I went into practice I felt pretty confident, I was like, "Oh, this sounds pretty simple" And it's one of those simple but not easy things. Now I often think of life through a lens of thinking about mindfulness and trauma, so how I think about the evolution of both mind and brain is to really be taking care of things like our safety, our belonging, our ability to connect with others, like fear of missing out, it's a legitimate thing. So, in many ways we're hardwired to be tracking for things like safety, belonging and that involves a myriad of different things that we need to be tracking for. So for good reason in this moment, it's like -"the lights happening over there," if there's a phone call I have to track that, "Okay, what's happening?" There's so much happening under the surface of my

awareness that's trying to keep me safe and connected. So as I see it, and as I think many of us experience in practice right away, it's like, "Wow. It's really hard to actually pay mindful attention to one thing. Like I'm lost in thought all the time" And I think a big part of practice in both the early stages and over time is to realise that it's not our fault, but actually the mind is really made to be making assessments and judgments, and this is just happening all the time. It's more irregular to be able to find these moments of stillness and clarity that need to be actually cultivated. That's how I think about it, do you want to say anything about that?

Elise: That's actually really a stunning way of describing it. I haven't thought about it so much like that, that the brain's function is constant, it's very busy, it's got to do a lot. It's outward and it's kind of paying attention, and I like your point about keeping us safe because from a base level evolutionarily, we got to stay alive. So it makes sense then. The brain is not just still and present here because it's got a lot of work to do, so this is like the skill of up-leveling our brains to use the protective part that keeps us alive, but then to download the new software that is helping us become better humans as well, not just operating on that survival, kind of assessing the environment.

David: Yes, absolutely. Actually that might be a good doorway into talking about some of the neuroscience here and how it relates to trauma. Do you want to go there?

Elise: Yes, let's do it.

David: So I'll say to start, that I'm not a neuroscientist but I am fascinated by

the brain and how the brain is shaped and impacted by both trauma and mindfulness- and for those of you, who are newer to neuroscience, often the brain is divided into what's known as the limbic system which is in the older part of the brain, versus our neocortex. Dan Siegel, who some of you might know, talks about this folding over that happens in the brain, and the newest part of our brain is the prefrontal cortex, this area just above the eyes here. Now a lot of the research around mindfulness tells us that what we're strengthening when we're being mindful is the prefrontal cortex. Bessel Vander Kolk talks about this area of the brain as the watchtower, like our ability again, to know what's happening when it's happening. When it comes to trauma, the lower parts of the brain, this limbic system- the amygdala, the hippocampus- are often highly activated, and when it comes to post-traumatic stress, so someone that's dealing with stress over time, the limbic system and certain areas of the limbic system, are really firing off all the time. Now, ideally what's happening for us if we've experienced trauma, is that this limbic system is firing like a smoke detector, but we actually have the ability and the strength in our prefrontal cortex to modulate that reactivity in the limbic system. However, for people that are struggling with trauma, that's not always the case, this delicate balance between the prefrontal cortex and the limbic system really falls out of balance. So it's like the fire and smoke detectors going off all the time, and we can't control it. So it feels like the trauma is happening over and over again for us. It's happening in the present moment. Even though I might know that I'm safe, and we can talk about this in meditation. Even though I'm talking to you right now I know that I'm safe, there's a feeling inside that I'm not safe. That balance between the two falls out. The one thing I'll say is, why mindfulness can be useful when it comes to trauma is that we're actually strengthening the prefrontal cortex. There's some research that says there's actually a thickening that happens in the medial prefrontal cortex up here, and if you can imagine, as we strengthen that watchtower, that enables us to have a little bit more

regulation and control over our traumatic reactions that are happening. Now it's not a simple thing like, "Oh, just meditate and you'll be fine" But that's some of the neuroscience here of what's happening and why we will habitually be tracking for safety; that's happening all the time underneath the surface.

Elise: Thank you for so clearly explaining that concept, and I think that also for the listeners that are listening and thinking, "Well I haven't really had trauma" I think it's still very relevant, because what you just described, I think is also whether you've had trauma or not, right? We all have an overactive limbic system at times, whether in relationships, at work, or when we get very reactive, so it's like this is relevant for all humans.

David: Yes, absolutely. I'm glad you said that, and that was my experience when I did trauma training. Even when someone said, "Have you considered doing trauma work?" I thought, "Well, I wouldn't have ascribed that word to my own personal history." You and I could have a whole conversation about what we mean by trauma, or what we do not mean. What I have learned though is that a lot of the techniques and practices that have come up in this amazing field around trauma work are so applicable, as you're saying, to the majority of the population because we all need help around self-regulation. But as you say, we need the limbic system. It's important for us.

I think that a lot of what we're talking about here around trauma can be both beneficial for someone who's actively experiencing trauma and the general population.

Elise: Then also, not to forget what we inherit. All my grandparents in the war went through incredible trauma. The intergenerational trauma, the way that

epigenetics works, you may not have experienced trauma in your own life, but your brain may be set to an overactive amygdala anyway because you've inherited that heightened stress response. It's very broad. Anyway, so perhaps you could move on to how you know while practising meditation if what you're experiencing might be something related to trauma? As we were saying before recording, I'd love for the listeners to have a sense of empowerment around, "Hang on a sec, this doesn't feel right." Not all meditation teachers are actually trauma-informed, so they may inadvertently be giving the wrong advice.

David: Absolutely. Yes, that's great. The headline that I'm trying to get through with this work is that more will not always be better when it comes to meditation, and that could be for trauma, as you were just saying, or it could be for another struggle that someone's having in their life. Yes mindfulness can be so helpful, but sometimes the way we practise mindfulness, and the ways that we cultivate it, we can actually overdo it. So, let me just say something first briefly about, "Why?" Then we'll talk about, "How would you know?"

Elise: Great.

David: Because a lot of people that I talk to say, "You know, just even knowing that for some people, meditation might actually lead them down a hard place. That's new for me" And that it was useful to know. I want to be really clear both with you and whoever's listening here, this isn't fearmongering at all. It's not to say, "Hey, beware. You can really hurt yourself," it's just more to widen our consciousness around the potential tripwires with meditation. So does that work for you when I say something about the, "Why?"

Elise: Yes.

David: So, the way I talk about this comes from Peter Levine who's a trauma therapist who did something known as somatic experiencing. He's a great trauma therapist. He uses the myth of Medusa to explain this, and basically what he says is, "Whenever a human goes through a traumatizing experience, they will often then have some imprints left in the mind and body. That could be traumatic thoughts, memories or could be sensations, like fearful gut-wrenching sensations in the body" That's how trauma lives on, it's really through the body and mind. And what Levine says is, "If you're working with trauma, you can't go right at it." He says, if you just ask someone, "Pay a lot of attention to those sensations" or, "Tell me all about your trauma," that can actually be too much too fast for someone. It can overwhelm them, have them feel dysregulated and at worst lead to retraumatization. So, that's a big part of some approaches to trauma work. What's the expression? Go slow to go fast, or travel slow to go far. You know what I mean by that, it's like we don't want to go all out at once. So, this is the issue when it comes to meditation. If you just ask someone to pay attention to their experience, and they're going through trauma, in all likelihood what you're doing is you're putting them right in front of Medusa, and what Levine said is, when it comes to trauma if you stare too long at Medusa, right? You freeze, you turn to stone. The same thing can happen in meditation. If I'm just paying attention over and over to my inner world and what's there is trauma, it's like I'm looking at Medusa. So we have to be a little bit cautious around this most powerful thing. You and everyone know it's such a powerful thing to ask people to pay attention to their experience in the present moment, and we need to have some caution about this. Just briefly on your question about how you would know, let's get back to that. When I was talking about the

nervous system, I was talking about the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems in trauma. So I've often talked about the accelerator and the brake. The sympathetic nervous system, fight/flight, is the accelerator. The parasympathetic, the freeze response is the brake. Now, usually these are happening for us all the time, so we could all just do this together right now. Just take a mindful moment and see if you can notice, where are you wherever you are in your day? Would you say that you're more at the bottom end of your scale around your energy, or are you more at the top. Is it more of an accelerator right now? More of a brake? Where are you in your day? What's happening right now? Mindfulness helps us do that. When it comes to trauma, this brake and accelerator often fall out of balance, and it's known as dysregulated arousal where we have either too much of the accelerator or too much of the brake, or for some people, both are slammed down at the same time, they're cycling through both. So, it might be that I meditate and I feel hyper-vigilant, I'm sweating my heart's racing, or it could be that I'm actually dissociated. I can't feel myself, I feel very flat. So the most basic way for people here to track if they're having a potentially negative or challenging experience of meditation is if they're really in a zone where they're accelerator is going in a blast, as in too much, or if they're brake is on, which is too little. If your energy is just cycling through these two things, that can be a sign to go and talk to a teacher. Go talk to a therapist, it's not saying you have trauma but it could mean that you're dysregulated in practice and you might need something different.

Elise: Can you just clarify that a little bit more? So, you're saying that perhaps if someone sits for one session and it's up and down, is that what you mean? Can you just say a little bit more about this balance and actually what it would feel like? It doesn't matter if it's physical feelings or thoughts? What would it feel like?

David: That's great, I'm happy to go deeper. Often what's happening for us throughout our days is that the accelerator and the brake are in this very delicate dynamic relationship where we need a little bit more energy, and we need to actually relax a little bit at night, say before bed. So ideally these two are in this balance, and with trauma, as I was saying we have this dysregulated arousal. Now that can look different for everyone. That might mean that if you're someone who has lived through a traumatic experience and you're still having some symptoms, something very little could leave you hypervigilant, meaning that you're always tracking, your heart is racing, your pupils are dilated. There's just this experience of vigilance, that I'm on the upper echelon of my energy here, or physiological arousal. Alternatively you could be in this lower end where, "I'm checked out. I can't really feel myself" Then for some people, as you were just saying, some people might actually be cycling through this dysregulated arousal. It can look different for everyone, and one of the ways that this is talked about in trauma work that I think could be helpful for us here is something known as a window of tolerance, and some of you might've heard of this, and it comes from Dan Siegel, he's a neuroscientist. What Siegel says is, "There's going to be a window where we are having some optimal functioning" Now you could talk about this in a variety of systems, like the ecosphere, and we talk about global warming, there are all these different systems. Here we're talking about the nervous system, and what Siegel says is, "Basically, there's an optimal zone of physiological arousal that we fluctuate in during the day, and with the trauma, we can end up outside of that zone of arousal." So at the most basic level you could say, if you're noticing that inside of your meditation practice it's really hard to be in a zone and you ask what does that feel like. Well, the zone is a place where we feel often somewhat regulated, connected to ourselves, the breath is quite easy. It doesn't mean that we're calm, but it does mean that we can tolerate and be present with the range of our experience.

When we're outside of our window, we start to get into more of the red zone. A territory where it's like, "Wow, it's really hard to think straight, it's really hard to have a conversation, to connect with others, to feel myself. I feel spun out, I feel anxious and nervous" Again, we can be nervous and in our window, but when we're out of our window or more in this red zone, that's when we need to start maybe actually doing some modifications around meditation to support us. We need self-regulation tools.

Elise: Okay, great. Thanks for clarifying that. So then let's move into some of the modifications. What you mean by modifications.

David: Yes. Well, that's really what I learned in these 15 years now being in this emerging field, is that mindfulness and meditation alone won't necessarily help everyone who's struggling with trauma. Now it might, for some people and that's great. I don't want to miss the people who have a really good experience, but we often need these, what you call self-regulatory skills, these extras that you can add-in. So, here's a couple of examples, one would be the ability to just take breaks. I don't know about you but when I started meditation I was like, "Well, I have to do this 20 minutes or half an hour no matter what. I have to stick with it" It's really simple but one of the simple things you could do, if you're someone who struggles with trauma and you're trying to learn to meditate, sometimes less is more. Set your timer for five minutes, take a two-minute break, come back for five minutes. Actually having those breaks can be very regulating for the nervous system, especially if meditation is too activating. Different postures are also something that we can experiment with. We could both try this right now and anyone who's listening, you could imagine if we were about to do a ten-minute meditation right now, you can just check in with yourself. Would you want to sit during this meditation? Would you want to lie

down? Or would you want to stand up? Because each of those is going to be different and will have a different impact, right? So everyone's going to be different and we want to give people a moment to actually reflect, "What's actually going to support me right now inside of my window of tolerance?"

Elise: I particularly love the posture suggestion because I think, historically, there's a fixation around how you should be postured when meditating, like in lotus position on the floor, in cross-legged and this is like a really wonderful integration of science into the old practice that supports people to take care of themselves more in this practice.

David: Yes, absolutely. To be clear, as we talked about offline, this isn't in any way about doing away with the thousands of years old teachings which mindfulness emerges from, and these amazing frameworks. It's not saying, "Well I, as a trauma professional, know best." To me, it's actually saying, "Oh my gosh, mindfulness and meditation can be so powerful for all of us," and the metaphor I often use is around exercise. If someone has a shoulder injury, we wouldn't necessarily tell them, "Well, go and do a hundred push-ups for the day." This really maps on to mindfulness and trauma as trauma is very much an injury: For some people it's a moral injury, while for others it's really a biological and psychological injury, and meditations is practice, it's an exercise, it's something that's very powerful. So, we wouldn't just tell someone who necessarily has this injury, "Oh go ahead." We actually give them modifications, "You might want to try being on your knees. Trying it against the wall." There are different ways that we can do it, and I'm curious, about your opinion on this, it's definitely not saying, "Well, let's just all be comfortable." Well the whole job inside of a trauma-sensitive approach to meditation is just that if you start to feel uncomfortable, then move away from that. I'm not saying

that actually mindfulness enables us to be able to be with more and more. I think that's one of the powerful things and I think we just need to be complex and nuanced about it and sometimes be offering some of these different modifications that we were just talking about.

Elise: Absolutely. Yes, I think that makes a lot of sense, and I think it's like anything. If for example you go to a yoga class and you're being taught by a teacher who has done six weeks or six months of yoga training, but doesn't have a depth of understanding of the mechanics of the body and you've got an injury, then you could do more damage in that class.

David: That's right.

Elise: I really like using that physical metaphor for it.

David: Yes and one of the- I'm sorry, carry on.

Elise: I was just seeing where we were at. We were talking about the modifications. You were also then saying that it's not about disregarding the 2,000 years of knowledge and experience, but it's just making it accessible to more people in a safe way.

David: Absolutely. I mean in this conversation between us, really the takeaway idea here is two-fold. One is to raise consciousness around this particular relationship between meditation and trauma, and then second is to empower people. You were asking, which I appreciate -you really are looking out for people that are in the audience here - "Well, what can they actually do?" I think

the first thing is to really be assessing this idea of a window. When you meditate what happens during, but also what happens after? Do you feel more regulated? Do you feel more connected to yourself? Or do you feel more dysregulated? Do you end up kind of outside of your window with the feeling that the accelerator or the brake are really strong in one direction? So you can start just tracking that. One other way you could think about it is, have you seen these three circles, one's like a comfort zone, learning zone, and overwhelm?

Elise: Yes.

David: To me, it's like that, well we don't just want to stay in our green, always in the comfort zone. We do want to stretch inside of this learning zone, but if we end up in the overwhelm zone it's just not going to be helpful. We all, I think, have a sense when we're in overwhelm when we need to back off. Then we get to these modifications that we could talk about here. Well, if you want to keep practicing, which I'd encourage, what are those little tweaks that you could make to empower yourself? You might say "Okay, I'm going to do ten minutes instead of 20, and then I'm gonna take a walk. That's actually going to help me cultivate mindfulness." So, what's going to support you, and again not to do away with the grounded traditions. We don't want someone to say, "Do anything you want, go ahead and watch Netflix." We still want to keep a container, but having people practice with being in a little bit of choice and agency while they're practicing.

Elise: Yes. In what you're saying the word compassion comes out for me because it's like doing the practice within the container, boundaries and instructions, but actually bringing an attitude of compassion. I don't know but I think some people that perhaps have experienced trauma can be very hard on

themselves as well, beating themselves up. I think bringing a sense of compassion, being kind to yourself in that process, and then if you're being kind yourself that can be a way that it can lead you to make the decisions that are healthy and good.

David: I'm so happy you brought that in, and one of the ways I've heard this talked about is from Rick Hanson, someone you might know. He's done writing around one book Buddha's Brains and he's a psychologist who's done neuroscience work. I was recently talking to him, and he's thinking of this as this distinction between being with and working with. That mindfulness and meditation is often a really strong way for us to cultivate being with, that we learn how to be with our experience across a range. There's an itch on my nose, I feel heartbroken, whatever it is for me. I'm stressed, I'm bored. I learn that I can be with that. I can cultivate that amazing skill, competence, whatever we want to call it here around mindfulness, to be able to be with. Rick's saying, that there are times where actually, what we need to do is be a little bit more active, and it could be to work with what's happening. I think this could be a debate. Compassion for me is one way sometimes to work "with". Now, sometimes I think compassion can also be a way that we are "being with", in a very compassionate way. But I think sometimes, to your point, the compassionate move is to back off, or the compassionate move is to stay in with the practice or to just have total loving-kindness for ourselves, or maybe go look in the mirror for five minutes and just send ourselves a lot of loving kindness and compassion. So, that's a distinction that I really like that it's not just about being with, we also need to learn how to work with, and there's a myriad of tools that we can learn over time to help us actually work with stuff.

Elise: Wonderful. I wonder if I could just raise a couple of things that I think

commonly come up, and see where they fit in relation to trauma and mindfulness. So, for example, people are practising a very common experience is when you bring attention to the breath, and as people describe, it becomes quite anxiety-provoking. Do you have any comments about that? Whether it's trauma-related or not? Just for people that start practising and they're doing breath meditation, and you're invited to allow the breath to be as it is, and not control the breath. People get into this kind of struggle, and a bit of anxiety comes up around that.

David: Yes, absolutely. This gets back actually to about eight minutes ago when we were talking about modifications and different ways to work that. Often the breath is considered a go-to anchor, or an object, a place to focus our attention and then bring our attention back when our mind inevitably wanders into thought. That's kind of like the puppy metaphor, just bring the puppy back to the newspapers, keep bringing it back. Where this gets interesting and tricky with trauma as you know, is our respiratory system is intimately connected to our sympathetic nervous system, that accelerator, and so when we are asking someone to pay attention to the breath, if they're struggling with trauma in any way, that can again put them right in front of Medusa. So, to your point I just want to normalise, that's a very normal experience that you ou might pay attention to the breath and actually find that you're more anxious, and there are good reasons for that, not all of which are gonna be trauma-related. Now for some people, that might be the way to go, it might be like, "Okay, well let me see if I can hang with the anxiety that comes up around the breath. I can work with it. I can learn to be with." Then for others, I think for a lot of us, cultivating attention is hard enough without having an object or an anchor that's actually more activating for us or our nervous system, produces anxiety. So, one of the modifications that any one of us can make is that we can shift from working

with the breath to a different anchor of attention, so that could be, for example working with sensations that are a different part of the body. So, for me, it could be like the feeling of my buttocks in the chair, or my feet touching the ground, or maybe my hands touching my thighs or together. We can also work with sound. it's another common one. Anyone that's listening, you can try that here. Just notice, "Okay, sound. Sound is ever-present. You're hearing my voice," but there's also going to be a soundscape around you, and that can also be an anchor of attention. We don't have to work with the breath, we get this idea that the breath is the only place to work, but we can actually work with different anchors of attention, like sensations, like sound. The whole goal to me, is cultivating mindfulness. The breath is a means, it's a means to an end and we don't need to get too fixated on the means, it's a means to somewhere. So, that's one of the modifications. I love that you asked about that. Do you have any experiences that you want to talk about?

Elise: Yes. I think that it's just interesting to know that it can be both something that is tolerable and not necessarily related to trauma, but it could also be something that is related to trauma. So, again, coming back to your point around knowing your own kind of tolerance zone, comfort zone. I think the message here is a sense of trusting yourself to some extent.

David: Yes.

Elise: I think we all when we start something in this, where a student and there's a teacher, we defer our trust to the teacher, and I think it's just a really important message, to trust yourself, and if someone's telling you something that's just really not making you feel safe, then you need to attend to your sense of that.

David: Absolutely. I couldn't agree more, and there are two things on that, I love that you brought that up. One is what you just said, this piece that I've now done my research around, around compliance. That there's definitely a tendency that we all have as humans, to want to appease authority figures. Of course, if we're a new student, and we're just learning meditation, of course, here's a teacher who knows more, so let me try to do it right and I want to fit into the group. This tendency for compliance or to appease people in authority will sometimes get people into trouble, and so I absolutely 100% agree. It is about trusting your experience. If you feel like, "Huh, something's not working here," be willing to name that, to raise it, and then where I find us to become not always so clear cut, is that I don't want to be promoting so much avoidance that people are just doing their own thing. I do think there's also something important about a container, about a structure, that holds our discomfort, that holds our feet to the fire just somewhat in a range actually where we grow. I am in the US, a group in Canada but there's- I don't know it necessarily in Australia right now -but there's something happening culturally at times, where it's becoming like a, "Me. What do I need?" Do you know what I'm saying?

Elise: Tailoring. We're tailoring it so much to our needs that we're almost losing resilience. It's like not to tolerate any discomfort.

David: Exactly, exactly. One word makes it coddling, and I've heard some of my millennial friends, younger people, this is a debate about people saying, "You're just being coddled inside of your life and you just want everything." But anyway, it's just that balance. It's not saying, "If you're five minutes in and you're bored, well then just do something else"

Elise: Yes, I hear what you're saying. I think for me then it comes up again, skillful teachers, and also for people listening, skillful everything, skillful therapists. That was my bugbear, people going into therapy for five, six, seven years with therapists, there's an authority figure, and it's like you're completely... I feel it's super important for people to keep a sense of their own intuition, and challenge. Challenge your teacher, challenge your therapist. That's a whole other topic.

David: Yes, but there is a practicality to this, where you know Elise, I went for years inside of my meditation practice thinking, "Just one more retreat. Just one more set, if I can just hang with this, this tangle will untangle." That came because I did extend, well we could talk about all the different reasons, but I just had a deep belief that if I just hung with it long enough.... Now that's gonna be true for some people and in my case, I needed something different. Yes, to trust that we can hang with the difficulty, but it's also like you just said about therapists, that there might be a moment to actually gain some different tools. Not to throw the baby out the bathwater at all but to actually just keep being practical with ourselves and saying, "Is this making me feel better?" Do you know Reginald Ray?

David: Yes.

Elise: So, he actually, now that I say his name, his community is going through some controversy, but Reggie Ray, a teacher in the Vajrayana tradition wrote this book called *Touching Enlightenment*, and what he said is, "I've come to the conclusion after thirty years of teaching meditation that we're not that much better off. None of us are really in my community, we're not that much happier.

We've been sticking with it" And for him, he said, "The reason I think so is that we're not actually practicing in an embodied way." But it was such a brave way to say, "Let's be really practical about this. If you're practising for a month and you don't feel somewhat happier, more regulated, more connected to yourself, I think that's just worth being in a conversation about what this is, what are we doing here and what needs to happen?"

Elise: Yes, yes absolutely. One of the speakers, who's featuring in this program, she referenced the fact that she actually tried meditation and didn't really work, and she wrote a blog post about it. She said she got more comments on that blog post than anything else she's ever written, and there were some really angry people on there talking about like, "What do you mean? Really?" Sort of evangelising about meditation and, "You might have been doing it wrong" And I think it's up to all of us to explore for ourselves and come to a conclusion in an intelligent way about whether this is actually working for us or not.

David: Absolutely, and trauma, this is where I've learned, people who've studied trauma both clinicians, but also trauma survivors, they are fiercely creative about what they need. When you say that about being able to just be aware for yourself, of what's going to support you to grow in your life. I imagine many people who are in Mindful in May, are coming here on that path of growth. One quick example that I just recently learned about that I thought was so brilliant, was in yoga. There's trauma-sensitive and trauma-informed yoga classes. I don't know if you've seen this but they will have tokens at the front of a class, little wooden tokens, and there are two of them. One says, basically " I'm open to adjustments," so you know in yoga class sometimes the teachers will come, and they'll actually physically touch people; and one token says, "I'm open to you touching me," and the other token says basically " No thank you. I don't want any adjustments." And that came from a trauma survivor who said, "I'm going into yoga classes and when someone touches me in a way

that I'm not prepared for and doesn't ask my permission, I get really dysregulated" And they just thought, "Here's a way that I can communicate that," and it's being taken on now in the yoga community." And I thought, "Oh, that's just so smart." We can be creative about what can we do. What are the best practices inside of meditation to help people be as safe as possible?

Elise: I wanted to maybe move as we are running out of time, to this topic of resilience because I think that it's really coming through our conversation. This balance of what Pema Chodron, refers to as developing discomfort resilience or learning to stay through meditation. So, I think the theme of what's been coming up in our conversation is this balance. In order to grow as humans, we need to be able to be with discomfort at some level, like discomfort tolerance and resilience, but at the same time, all of us and particularly those of us who have experienced trauma, have more sensitivity. Being with certain discomfort can really push us over an edge and stunt our growth actually. So, I wonder if we could just explore resilience, and how you see mindfulness as being in a relationship with resilience both from a trauma perspective and just more generally.

David: Yes, I love it. I define resilience as that innate ability to bounce back from adversity. This ability that we have to generate goodness and this is in the being with and working with. For me resilience is more in the working with. We can purposely cultivate resilience, I love that you brought in Pema Chodron, and I think that's spot-on, which was it ……?

Elise: Discomfort resilience.

David: Discomfort resilience. I was recently reading an essay called anti-fragile. Talking about the ways that humans and our nervous systems, are anti-fragile. The more that we're put through, there are some things that if you put it

through enough stress it will break and shatter, and you can't put it back together, but humans, yes, we can live through adversity and difficulty, and we become stronger through those challenges. So yes, it's absolutely not just about staying comfortable. Mindfulness and meditation are, to me some of the most powerful practices. It's the most powerful practice that we can be doing to grow that muscle of being able to stay present with discomfort. Then as you said to your point, trauma really throws a wrench into this. It's not always easy, and everyone will be different. You might suddenly notice a smell come and remind you of an experience that was hard, overwhelming or traumatic, and all of a sudden you've gone from the green zone to the red zone. So again, those three circles, the green, orange, that learning zone, and then the red overwhelm zone. I think our dynamic work as humans, anyone on the path, is to learn to stay inside of learning, or a comfort zone, and really stabilise there, and of course, we'll go into overwhelm, and that's okay. That's what we're designed to do, but to me, resilience is actually purposely noticing when we are in a state where we feel a sense of strength, a sense of courage. It could be the green zone, but it's about noticing our ability to be healthy, to be safe, and really letting that deeply into our nervous system. I'll tell one story, when I first started to do my work around trauma, the first-ever trauma therapist I saw said, in the first session, "Start by telling me about what's working for you" And I was like, "What the fuck are you talking about? I don't want to talk about what's working. I want to talk about what's hard, and why I came in," and they said, "Yes, I know that." And I'll never forget, she said, "Your ability to be with what's good is actually going to support your ability to be with what's traumatic and what's hard," and that's how I think of resilience. We can purposely cultivate it over time using mindfulness inside of meditation, as a way not to override. It's not about blowing sunshine here, but actually to purposely increase our capacity as Pema's saying, to be with discomfort, even to be with trauma over time.

Elise: Wonderful, I love that story. It's a beautiful reminder, I think, for all of us about what's actually working here, and that being with that helps us to move through what's not working.

David: Yes. Not copping out, and people I know, "Well, how can I do that?" Someone's in your meditation, if you're in meditation you can actually imagine, "When's a time that I felt strong? When's a time I felt courageous? Let me be with that, let me feel it, let me actually deepen the neural pathways that have to do with that feeling" That is not copping out of what's difficult, it's actually really growing that muscle around resilience, and Rick Hanson as I mentioned, he just wrote this book on resilience where again, we can be purposely cultivating it. So it sounds like it's a focus also in your practice in Mindful in May as well maybe.

Elise: Yes, absolutely. I have a couple of questions that I ask all of the people I speak with, and they're more random and broad. One of them is, a couple of books that you've read recently or in the distant past, might not even be on this topic at all. Just what would have captured your curiosity and really had an impact on your thinking and understanding.

David: Yes, that's such a great question. One book I've read is called *Conflict is not abuse.* I'm sorry, I forgot the author's name right now, and it has to do with this discussion around coddling in some ways. If we're experiencing conflict that doesn't necessarily mean that we're being harmed, and inside of the social justice work that I've been there's a way I think in which people can be quick- I include myself here- quick to say "You harmed me," where actually what I'm experiencing is significant discomfort. And I think that if we go too far into

saying I feel harmed, that's traumatic. The power of us saying this word, trauma, it loses its power. So I'm really interested in how we talk about trauma, conflict, abuse, and that's a book that's had a big impact on me. The other one that just came out recently is called *Widen the window*, and it's by a writer named Elizabeth Stanley. Elizabeth worked in the military, and she's a mindfulness teacher. She's actually doing a lot of work very similar to a domain that I'm in, and she's talking about Siegel's window of tolerance and saying, "What are strategies that help us widen the window? What helps us be more powerful human beings? To be with the wide range of our lives, for good, for bad?" And I've really appreciated her care, her rigor. She's totally type-A and owns it. She's just like, "Hey, here's how I got here" and I really enjoyed her writing, and so those are two books that I've enjoyed.

Elise: Great. Anyone owning anything of theres makes you warm in your heart, and it makes you feel okay about yourself when people do that to you.

David: Absolutely. We're just all a mess. We're all in together.

Elise: My final question seems on a similar vein, but if you were to have be able to curate a dinner party with anyone in the world, alive or not alive that you find fascinating, that you just love to either be part of the conversation or just listen in, who would be at the table? You can have multiple dinners over time, but just for the sake of, in this moment who comes to mind?

David: I can't remember her name, but maybe someone could help me remember, and this is a somewhat heavy note to end on. There was a case here in U.S. gymnastics where there was a coach who had been sexually abusing a

number of- you might have heard of this- and a couple of years ago an awards benefit, I don't know if you saw this or others but-

Elise: Yes.

David: Yes, and there's a woman who basically spearheaded, “We are all going to walk up on stage ,” as a way of receiving an award for everyone who had been abused by this doctor, and it was one of the most powerful moments I've seen around the trauma. Just this courage of the women on the stage, really looking into the audience and the public, and saying, "We were impacted, and if one adult had taken us and this more seriously, this might not have happened in this way." So I would really want to have dinner with the person or the people who both had that idea and really spearheaded the work around U.S gymnastics. It brings together so much of what we've been talking about, and that courage in the face of trauma is so moving to me, and why I think mindfulness is so helpful. As Pem -as you said- we were growing that muscle of being with what was too much to bear. So, I know it's a heavy response, but I appreciate the question.

Elise: Yes, thank you. And I think also ending on this note of courage, is there anything you would like to share? Maybe from your own experience or work for the listeners, about the relationship of courage and mindfulness.

David: Yes. That would be a fun conversation to have with you at some point. It feels like a circuitry that we learn over time. We take the risk of being with something an extra three to five seconds, and then cultivate some courage that comes from that, and then use that courage to get back onto the cushion or be in

practice. I guess I would say that having now worked with people for 15 years around trauma, that there's a lot of freedom on the other side, wherever you are in the spectrum of trauma. That the willingness to work with trauma in a way that doesn't leave us in this red zone but is really respectful of our pace, can come with a lot of freedom but it's hard. You need a lot of courage, to me anyone on path, anyone who's here in Mindful in May, who's just doing the work of awakening and leading a conscious life, that is not easy at this moment, and we didn't even talk about the fires right now, it's what's happening there.

Elise: Yes and the climate in general.

David: To really be with that, to me, is courage . But we need that right now, so let's do it together.

Elise: Wonderful. I think that's a wonderful place to end and I just want to thank you again for the important work that you're doing, bringing this into the awareness of the mindful community. So, thanks so much for offering your practical insights from your experience.

David: Thanks, Elise. It's great to be here.