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Elise Bialylew interviews Judson Brewer

Judson Brewer MD PhD is a thought leader in the "science of self-mastery," having combined nearly 20 years of experience with mindfulness training with his scientific research therein. He has published numerous peer-reviewed articles and book chapters, spoken at international conferences, trained US Olympic coaches, and his work has been featured on 60 Minutes, TED, TEDMED, TEDx, Time magazine (top 100 new health discoveries of 2013), Forbes, BBC, NPR, Businessweek and others. He is the Director of Research at the Center for Mindfulness and associate professor in medicine and psychiatry at UMass Medical School. He is also adjunct faculty at Yale University, and a research affiliate at MIT. A psychiatrist and internationally known expert in mindfulness training for addictions, Brewer has developed and tested novel mindfulness programs for addictions.

Elise: Welcome, Judson, to the program. Thank you for being here, and thank you so much for your time.

Judson: It's my pleasure.

Elise: Judson, just for the sake of the listeners that may not know anything about you or your work, could you just give a short background about what you do in the world, and perhaps how you came to be doing that?

Judson: I'd be happy to. I'm an addiction psychiatrist. I'm the Director of Research here at the Centre for Mindfulness at UMass Medical School. This whole crazy trip started for me at the beginning of medical school. I guess I formally started meditating my first day of medical school. As I went through an MD PhD program, was studying mouse models of stress, and how stress affects the immune system, because I was really fascinated by why we get sick when we get stressed out.

Then shifted my entire research career, when I finished my MD PhD program, into learning clinical research and then neuroscience as I shifted into doing human studies of working with people with addictions. Then moving into studying the neurobiology of mindfulness. Then finally, moving into even developing digital therapeutics, where we could test out new modalities of delivering mindfulness training to people who are smoking, or have stress, and emotional eating problems.

Elise: Great. As we were talking before the interview started being recorded, I just wanted to acknowledge that it's very exciting to have a psychiatrist on the program who is standing in this holistic place. Where you understand the neurobiology of all of it, but you're also bringing mindfulness into mainstream therapeutics and treatment. It's very, very exciting to be speaking with you.

I wonder if you could actually share with me, you've been actually practising, as you said, you started in medical school. You've been practising mindfulness yourself for decades. I always like to ask the guests on the program how mindfulness has actually personally supported you in life and in work. Just a sense of how it's been helpful.

Judson: Yeah. How much time do we have? There are so many ways. It just started with helping me be able to deal with stress, to being able to really focus more to be present with my patients when in medical school as I went through residency training. Learning how to get out of my own way when I was worried, when I was learning how to do psychotherapy. There are just so many ways that it's helped me be able to be more connected with the world, with others. Be less stressed out. Be more focused. All the things that everybody says mindfulness can actually do. Actually, it was working for me.

Elise: Yeah. It is, isn't it? When you stream off the things, it's like, "Yeah, we've all heard that before. More focus, less stress, more calm." I feel like it starts to lose its meaning, because it becomes so clichéd. It really does support that, doesn't it?

Judson: I would say anything that relates to stress and suffering, where we're getting caught up in anything, which could be many different things. Like I was

talking about earlier, all of those things can be affected by mindfulness, see, because I think it really gets at the root of them.

Elise: Can I just ask, as a side thing, what's your personal perspective? For your own practice, you're a busy guy. You're doing so many things, and you're on the front line of this field. How do you actually fit this practice into your life? Many people ask me when I'm teaching, "Do I have to do it every day? How many minutes a day?" This kind of thing. My personal perspective is that this practice has come from a monastic setting, so there is this rigorous, "I've got to do it every day," etc. When you ask someone how many times you go to the gym in a week, people feel free to say, "Four times a week." Not every day. What's your perspective on how to actually do this practice in a way that you're doing it, and fitting it into your life?

Judson: I think now, from when I started, it's a little bit different. I think of it as, I really have to fit my life into this practice, because it's so essential for my life. At one time, during regular work days, I was sitting two or three hours a day, because it was really, really helpful at that time for me to be doing that practice. It was helping me live my life in the best way possible. It just seemed indispensable. It's like eating.

Now, I still sit. My wife and I actually meditate in the mornings together. It's a great way to start a day in a very grounded perspective. Ultimately, even how I teach this to beginners now has shifted. Can we find a specific pain point, where somebody is really suffering? Use that as a way to guide them into a moment of waking up to what that suffering is like. I think of it more as short moments, many times throughout the day, especially as we get started, and get started learning about what this practice is actually geared towards. Seeing that suffering clearly. Then, having that supported by more formal or longer periods of practice.

Elise: I like that. Short moments, many times. Yeah, I think that would be a very helpful mantra for the people listening to this as they move through this challenge of trying to bring this practice into life.

Judson, you wrote a really fascinating and extremely useful book called *The Craving Mind: from cigarettes to smart phones to love, why we get hooked and how we can break bad habits.* I wonder if you could share a bit about the basis for cravings and addiction through explaining particularly the habit loop. And also, for the geeks among the audience, which I am a self-confessed geek, perhaps what's going on a little bit in the brain that underpins this habit loop.

Judson: I'd be happy to. This book came out of about 20 years of a convergence of my own personal practice, of my clinical work, and of our research here in the lab. I was really struck by how (1) there's there's this simple process, that seems to be very fundamental in learning. What we call the habit loop. It's basically positive and negative reinforcement. That system has been studied very carefully for a long time, for over 100 years. If we look back at the Buddhist psychology, it's been studied for 2,500 years. They really seem to have nailed this habit loop before there was even paper. I was fascinated by that. "Wow. These Buddhist psychologists were describing the same thing that B. F. Skinner was describing. That Eric Kandel got the Noble Prize for, because he showed that this process is conserved all the way back to the sea slug." When those things converge, my eyes light up, and I say, "Wow. This is worth looking into."

From a very basic standpoint, we need three elements to form a habit: we need a trigger, we need a behaviour, and we need a reward. That's the way that I think about a habit loop. We can think about that in terms of positive and negative reinforcement. For example, learning how to remember where food is, in evolutionary perspective. We see some berries, we eat the berries, they taste good. That sends a signal to our brain that says, "Oh, remember what you ate and where you found it." We get this reward that says, "Oh, that's good. Eat that again." We remember where to find these berries, and we go back and eat them in the future. That's the basic process that gets set up around this.

Then our brain co-opts this process where there's food that's relatively plentiful, at least in most countries these days. Where it says, "You know,

why don't you try using that same process when you're stressed out, when you're sad, when you're celebrating?" That trigger can be a cupcake. The behaviour: we eat the cupcake, and then we feel better. It starts to form this emotional habit loop, when we aren't even hungry in the first place. There's an example of the habit loop.

Same thing happens with cigarettes. We smoke cigarettes when we are stressed out. We learn, "Oh, when you're stressed out, we should smoke a cigarette." We get caught up in traffic, we learn to give somebody the universal sign of displeasure. We get rewarded like, "Yeah, I got that guy," and so we learn to be that jerk on the road. These are all the same.

When I started looking at this from my own practice perspective, I was starting to see more clearly how so much of my behaviour was driven by craving, by this urge to hold onto the pleasant things, or to get more of them, or to push away the unpleasant things. Then that started converging with my clinical practice, where my patients were getting caught up in anxiety. These habit loops where they're like, "Oh, this is terrible," or depressive rumination, or addiction, where they're craving drugs or craving cigarettes. Then I also started to see in our research, where neurologically, there were certain parts of our brain that gets activated when we get caught up in a craving, for example, or get caught up in rumination. The same part of the brain, very interestingly, gets deactivated when we're meditating. That's the basic habit loop from behaviour to neurobiology. There's this basic process that we're starting to really understand more and more of.

Then, when we did all this research, I started looking around, and I was like, "Oh, wow. This applies to technology. This applies to our cellphones." This is why texting is more dangerous than drunk driving now. This is why playground accidents have gone up, because parents aren't looking at their kids, they're looking at their phones. This is why, in my own experience, I got so caught up in romantic love during college that I was basically addicted to that high of being infatuated. All of this came together as a book. Where the research had matured enough where could understand it. I was seeing this in

my patients, and I had also seen this enough in my own life, where it just converged and congealed into a book.

Elise: Fantastic. Can I just ask you, you were saying that, with the habit loop, these parts of the brain get activated, and with mindfulness, they get deactivated. Can you speak a little bit more to that?

Judson: I'd be happy to. There's a brain network called the default mode network. It was named the default mode network before. Mark Raichle was the researcher who coined this, and his group at Washington University in St. Louis. They didn't really know what was going on, but they noticed that this brain network seemed to be firing a lot when people weren't doing anything in particular. Then a bunch of other research helped to confirm that, and also line that up with self-referential processing, which means when we're thinking about something in the past, or thinking about doing something in the future, basically anything related to us. When we're ruminating, we're doing something self-referential. When we're craving, we're doing something self-referential. When we're worrying that something is not going to happen in the future, we're doing something self-referential.

The default mode network was aptly named because it seems that about 47% of waking life, at least according to one study, we default to this mode of not being with whatever is happening in the present moment.

Elise: Okay. Sorry, just help us understand, then, the link between that and the habit loop, and what you were just saying about this part of the brain that gets activated in the habit loop, and then the part that gets deactivated in mindfulness.

Judson: I think that around 2008 or 2009, I got really interested in studying what brains of experienced meditators look like. One of my mentors, his name is Marc Potenza, had suggested, "Why don't you study experienced meditators?" There were some papers out about it, so I wasn't that … But he was like, "No, you should really unpack this."

We asked a different question. We said, “What happens, not just during meditation, but what happens in the brain across a bunch of different types of meditation? We want to find areas of the brain that converge in their activation or deactivation, because that might tell us something that’s more universal than breath awareness meditation, or some other type of meditation, or something else.” We looked across three different types of meditation, in experienced and novice meditators, and compared their brains when they were meditating. We scanned them using FMRI neuroimaging.

First off, we found something that weren’t expecting to find, which was there were no brain regions that were increased in activity in experienced versus novice meditators. We were expecting to see some part of the brain that activates when we’re meditating because we’re doing something. Boy, were we wrong. We didn’t find anything. We looked really hard. When we then asked, “Is there anything different in deactivation,” we found a striking difference.

Elise: Very interesting.

Judson: Yeah. This finding has now been replicated. It’s been shown in meta-analyses. There was a study that brought 78 different meditation studies together. There was a certain brain region called the posterior cingulate cortex, which is part of the default mode network, that was getting deactivated during meditation with experienced meditators but not novices. This is where it links to the default mode network. It was a beautiful finding, because this is the network related to the self. There are many, many different contemplative traditions that all, in one language or another, are helping us point toward getting caught up in a sense of self, or taking things personally. This self-referential network seemed that it was deactivated during meditation just fit beautifully with the other research, and with the theoretical understanding of what mindfulness is about.

Elise: It’s absolutely fascinating. You must have been so excited to find that. “Wow, it’s all making sense.” The Buddhist practice, from where all of this comes from, or different religious contemplative practices, the science, and your

own personal experience. It all converges to really make a beautiful picture that just works and makes sense.

Judson: Yeah. You know, we weren't actually satisfied with that. We wanted to make sure we weren't fooling ourselves. At the time that our first study was published, it was slightly different than some of the other findings, it hadn't been replicated yet. In the process of replicating our own findings, which we felt was very important to do, we started lining up this new technique, that one of my colleagues at Yale had developed, called real-time neurofeedback. Where we could actually have people in the FMRI scanner. We could be scanning their brain, and showing them their brain activity, basically, in real-time. We could bridge this chasm between their subjective experience and their brain activity, really directly linking up their experience with their activity.

The really confirmed for us where people were reporting, they were saying, "Yeah, that's where I got caught up. That's where I was concentrated." They could really trace it out as we could trace out their brain activity in real-time. That, in conjunction with all these replication studies, and other groups finding similar things, really gave us much more confidence that this, at least, was one of the brain regions that seems to be involved in meditation, and like you said, is lining up very nicely with the theory as well.

Elise: Yeah. That study you were just referencing, I read about that. I think you said something like, "We were mapping what the brain looks like when the participants were with the breath, versus getting in their own way during meditation." It was a very, very interesting thing to read about. The fact that, as you can be practising, you can be, essentially, watching your own brain changing according to what's going on.

I think for many people who are newer to meditation, there are a lot of people that listen to this program that are maybe from corporate. They have this thing like, "Really? Sitting there shutting your eyes, are you actually doing anything?" That whole feedback really can show you that there is a lot going on here, and it is quite effortful to actually be doing what you're supposed to

be doing in meditation, which is not just sitting there with your eyes closed. It's an effortful practice.

Judson: This is something that was really interesting for us, where it can feel like it's a lot of work to meditate.

Elise: Yeah.

Judson: This has really even fundamentally shifted how we teach people to be mindful. These short moments, now I look it as, "Can we start with when this brain is getting activated?" Just draw awareness to that. When I'm getting caught up, literally, does that contraction of being caught up in something, like worry, or fear, or a craving, can we point to that, in that moment? What does that feel like? We don't need to be sitting on a cushion, or in a cave, or have incense, or anything like that. Simply seeing that clearly helps us see how painful it is when we're caught up in our experience, versus when we're even letting go a little bit.

Just starting with that. What's that feel like when you're agitated, when you're stressed out? I find is a really great away to start to calibrate the system so we can pay attention to that more. We're naturally drawn to see, "Oh, wow. I really am suffering." Then we can start to see more clearly that habit loop around, "How am I perpetuating that? How am I supporting this?" Rather than, "If only I meditate, then I will feel better," which can become its own habit loop. Where it's like, "I need to be calm, I must meditate." Then we get caught up in, "I need to be calm." Whoops! Doesn't work then.

We've really shifted to this idea. It's very much, again, in line with these practices about the effortless quality of awareness. For example, you and I can hear each other and see each other, and it doesn't take any effort to do that. We can tap into that quality of awareness, and we can layer on an attitudinal quality of the mind: curiosity or interest. That interest can help draw us into the object – whether it's the breath, or our pain, or whatever – in a way that doesn't take a lot of effort. Interest, well, it's interesting. Suddenly, we're like, "Wow, that's really interesting." We're naturally leaning forward.

We're starting to play with, how can we train people to really tap into this curiosity that helps draw us into meditation or to an object, rather than sitting there, sitting our timer, and saying, "Okay. Got to meditate for 30 minutes so I'll be calm." Does that make sense?

Elise: Yeah, it does make sense. Something about effort versus curiosity. If you set your timer, "Okay, I'm going to meditate," you get all stiff, and like, "Okay. I'm going to really … Okay, where's my attention?" Then it's all contracted, and the whole experience is very tense, which is not going to be helping the process. You're saying that this attitude of curiosity naturally allows us to be witnessing and present to what's happening in just a different way. In a way that, as you say, helps us lean forward into this moment to see, rather than whipping ourselves, and sternly forcing ourselves to pay attention. Almost like a stern parent would be disciplining their child. "Don't do this," or, "Do this."

Judson: Right. It's like, "Okay, meditate. Okay, relax."

Elise: Yeah.

Judson: Instead of doing something, we can really emphasise the being quality. Awareness is always available. We don't have to do anything to be aware, it's there.

Elise: Judson, I want to move to now, specifically, your work with mindfulness and addiction or cravings. First of all, could you share your working definition, or what you think mindfulness is? Then, how this practice can help us in those moments of craving. I pulled up the idea of a Facebook craving, because I just feel like it's such a pervasive craving and addiction, that probably more people will relate to in 2000-and-whatever year we're in, than smoking. Smoking, it's still there, but I think so many people are addicted to Facebook now. If you can just define what you see mindfulness as, and then how it can actually be applied into the moments that we're having a craving.

Judson: A great question. Mindfulness is a concept. I think that concept can be unpacked experientially with taking awareness. Awareness is an experience.

We're aware or we're not aware. As I mentioned, laying in that attitudinal quality of curiosity. We can be aware, and not liking what we're seeing, so we're like, "Oh, I don't want this to be here." Or, we could be aware and liking what we're seeing, and trying to hold onto that. Both of those have an energetic movement that says, "I want more," or, "I want less of this." This curiosity, or even equanimity, helps us be with whatever we're with, in a way that's not pushed or pulled. That's where I would define mindfulness. There's this awareness that's not pushed or pulled by whatever's happening. It's just curiously open to whatever's happening.

Elise: Beautiful. That's a wonderful definition. This push-pull. I really like how you framed that. It's a unique definition that I haven't heard articulated like that. Now, can you take us through, then, how does this awareness, or this presence and awareness, where we're not pushed and pulled by what we're seeing or experiencing, how does this come into play to support craving and addiction in ways that can be helpful?

Judson: If we take the example of Facebook addiction, for example, it's really helpful to know how the habit gets set up around an addiction. Let's say with Facebook, we're somewhere, and we're really excited about where we are, so we take a picture of it. Then our brain says, "Oh, why don't you post that to Facebook?" We post it on Facebook, and then we get a like. That like has been shown to activate these same reward centres of the brain that get activated when we smoke crack cocaine, when we use heroin, when we drink alcohol. There's something addictive to that getting the likes. Then we find ourself spending a lot of time looking for the likes on Facebook, or Instagram, or whatever.

Just understanding that process is the first step. "Okay, here's the trigger. It's something that I want to hold onto." There's that, "Oh, I want this," and then that urge to post, and then the urge to go and check Facebook all the time to look for this, yeah. "Oh, wow. Suddenly, it makes me a more valid person, because I got 50 likes."

The negative is true here. That was positive reinforcement. We can look at the negative side. When we're not feeling good, when we're feeling down, or isolated, then our brain says, "Oh, I've got a great idea. I know what can pick you up. What don't you go on Facebook?" It's learned to go onto Facebook to get that exciting reward. The problem is that we go on Facebook, and then we start seeing how everybody else is having a good time, but we're not. There is good data showing a linear correlation between the odds ratio of being depressed and going on social media with these things, because it doesn't help whatever the underlying cause was.

If we can understand the process, whether it's positive reinforcement or negative reinforcement, either of those helps us step out of the process, in that it acts as the next step.

This is where mindfulness comes in. Simply seeing clearly what that craving, what that urge feels like to go and check our Facebook feed again. Importantly, see clearly what the rewards are. "What did I just get from checking Facebook five minutes later than I just checked it? I just checked Facebook, and now I checked it in five minutes. What did I get from that besides wasting a bunch of time?"

When we check in with our experience, be like, "Well, I feel agitated now," or, "I'm looking for something," or, "It didn't quite satisfy whatever I was looking for." If we see that clearly, this is this awareness that says, "Oh. Well, I can learn something now. When I go on Facebook, it's not as rewarding as I thought, or as my brain was tricking me to think." We start to take off what is described as the subjectively biased glasses, because we had seen the world through, "Oh, go on Facebook, and you'll feel better." When we really see clearly, we're taking those glasses off, and saying, "Oh. No, Facebook actually doesn't make me feel that good." We start to become disenchanted with that behaviour. That disenchantment is what drives the process naturally to unfold, to unwind itself. Where we're like, "Well, Facebook didn't do it for me as much as I thought," because we're really paying attention. Does that make sense?

Elise: Yeah, it does. You're saying that, just by bringing mindfulness, or this presence and awareness, curiosity, to what's happening, is helping us to unhook from the automatic loop?

Judson: Yeah. Not only unhook, but see those rewards really clearly. Reward is what drives behaviour. It's not behaviour, it's reward. If we get less of a reward, we're going to be less driven to do that behaviour the next time around.

Elise: You're saying that, if we don't look at, we get this tricked feeling that this is really great. If we can catch, "Hmm, how do I actually feel now that I've just posted on Facebook," and see that clearly, then actually within that, it becomes clear that, actually, we don't feel that good. It shifts the reward from a positive to, "Uh, not that good." That stops the drive in the behaviour.

Judson: Yes. I would say the "Not that good" comes from the really clear experience. We're not fooling ourselves saying, "I shouldn't go on Facebook." That's a cognitive brain. Where our pre-frontal cortex is trying to say, "Oh, don't do this." It's really about the experiential component of, "Oh wow, I'm really paying attention. What did I get from this?" We start to question why we're doing it in the first place.

Elise: Okay. Just as a practical exercise for any of the listeners that are facing their own Facebook cravings and trying to break that, can just you explain what do they do? What to they do the next time they're going to grab their phone? It might be they're lying in bed about to go to sleep, and it's like, "I just need to pick up that phone." What do they do? Can you just explain what they need to do in that moment, so it's clear?

Judson: Yeah. The first thing I would say is, go for it. Don't try to restrain yourself from doing the behaviour just go for it. It's like, "Let's just see really clearly what we're getting from this behaviour." Go on Facebook and drop into your body. Notice, "What do I get from this?" Simply ask that question. "What do I get from this?" Experientially. Not cognitively, but in our actual experience. That's the first step. That can help us see clearly what we're actually getting, which then starts to build this disenchantment, like, "Oh. Well, it's not that great."

Subsequently, when we have that urge to pick up the phone, we can remember what we got last time, but also then bring in some very simple practices, like, “Okay, let me drop into my body to see what craving feels like itself. Oh, it’s tightness, it’s restlessness, it’s this.” As we see clearly these simple body sensations, that are literally driving us to do these behaviours, we can start to see, “Oh. Well, I can be with restlessness. I can be with tightness. I can be with this energetic push-and-pull. Oh, no. Well actually, it comes, and it doesn’t stick around that long.” Then there’s, “Oh, that doesn’t stick around.”

Every time we’re curious about that, and dive into it, and we don’t act on it, it actually stops feeding that habit loop in the first place. We can start to learn, “Oh, I actually have a little more control than I thought, where my hand was zombie-like reaching for the phone. Oh, I can notice what that hand feels like. Oh, what happens when I stop before I pick up my phone?” Just drop a lot of curiosity into the process and notice this. In that noticing process, we step out of it.

Elise: Great. Thank you for clearly articulating that. What we’re talking about, you’ve done an incredible program around quitting smoking, in particular. This process we’re talking about can be applied to any particular craving, right? It could be people that suffer from over-eating or smoking addiction. It’s the same process.

Judson: Yeah. It’s interesting that you mentioned over-eating. We had some people in our smoking programs saying, “You know, I’m actually changing my eating habits, just going through the program.” That was a big eye-opener for me, because people tend to gain weight when they quit smoking, and here were folks saying that they were actually changing their eating habits. We started looking into that, and developed an entire program around stress and emotional eating, because that is an even more evolutionarily conserved process. This is probably why it was set up.

We can use awareness practices to help us see clearly, “Oh, when I eat that second cupcake, what’s it feel like? When I eat that third cupcake?” So that

we can naturally start to step out of the process and literally change our relationship to the eating, rather than the typical yo-yo diet, where we try to force ourself to lose weight, and then we fall off the wagon, and then we gain more weight than we lost, and it just goes up and down and up and down.

Elise: It's such an interesting alternative to bring to something like losing weight, which is such an epidemic problem. When you talk about it like that, the dieting, which is like, "I can't have this. I'm not allowed this food," versus the mindfulness approach to this whole craving thing which is, "We're not saying you can't have it. Do whatever you want. Just start to pay attention." It's fascinating how this can be so much more, I think, transformative over the long-term.

Judson: Yeah. If we look at it, even from a very simple perspective of, "I can't have this" has this clenching quality to it. Whereas, "Oh, wow. Look what happens when I eat three cupcakes," there's more of an openness and a curiosity. In that open quality, that's when we're open to learning, so we can see clearly. Whereas this is not a great place. We're not in a good mind space to be learning anything.

Elise: Judson, a couple of other questions. I'm not sure if you could speak a little bit more to this, just to clarify how the habit loop leads to an addiction. Is there anything more that you could share about that? Even from a brain perspective. We've got this habit loop, but then it then goes into its own world, and we lose control of it. The habit loop is something that we engage in, and then it turns into an addiction. Is there anything else to say to that to just highlight that shift? We've covered it already,

Judson: Right. I think of it as a spectrum. Let's say we get caught up in a daydream, and we can snap out of it. Somebody says, "Hey, wake up. Did you hear what I said?" We wake up. We can habitually be lost in thought, which happens, again, about 50% of waking life. A little farther on the spectrum is stress. We get caught up in stress. It's a little harder. Boy, wouldn't it be great if we could just say, "Hey, snap out of it." "Oh, great. I'm not stressed any more." It's a little harder, or a little more caught up.

You can think of addiction being the far end of the spectrum, where we know what we're doing, we know that it's a problem, but we're so caught up in that loop that we feel like we're completely out of control. The definition is continued use despite adverse consequences. We know we're doing it, but we feel completely helpless and under its spell.

That's where there can be genetics that play a role in this. There can be certain substances. For example, all substances of abuse cause dopamine release in the brain, which makes those habits stick a little bit harder. Repetition plays a big role too. Smoking, for example. If somebody smokes a pack of cigarettes a day, if they smoked for 20 years, that's 20 cigarettes, times 365 days, times 20 years. That's a lot of repetitions. That pathway gets grooved pretty heavily. We can look at all of these different factors that make something go from a benign habit to something that's really driving our lives.

Elise: Okay. Thank you. That's an external kind of habit that's driving a large addiction. I'm thinking about, for many people that start meditation, the habit or addiction to thinking. When you say, there are 20 cigarettes times 365 days, when I'm teaching, people, the classic is thing is, they get so frustrated. "Oh my god, I can't do this. My mind's just wandering off. My mind's just wandering off." I just feel it's a poignant or relevant place to say that this practice or habit of thinking all the time, how can you expect to break that suddenly, when that's actually been going on for probably your whole life?

Judson: Yeah, I know.

Elise: Yeah.

Judson: I was going to say, I was so fascinated by that very question that that ended up being an entire chapter of my book: addicted to thinking and addicted to distraction. We can be very enamoured by our own thoughts. We're like, "Wow, that's a great idea." We get this little surge of dopamine that says, "Oh yeah, that was a good idea. Oh, that's a good idea too." In reality, maybe there are some good ideas in there, but I certainly know from my own experience, they're not all great ideas. We don't know the difference, because we're like, "Oh, it's my idea. It must be a good one."

Elise: Also, when we're sitting and practising meditating, particularly for someone like me, who's a doer, and I'm sure it's probably the same for you. I'm not this Zen. I'm always thinking, and creating, and making, and I love that. You know, when you can be tricked when you're sitting in meditation. The boredom factor can be a really big obstacle, and then the mind just spurts out an idea, I think, as a way of giving you something feel good.

Judson: I've been caught in that many times, where it's like, "Okay, I'm supposed to pay attention to my breath. This breath is boring." I'll get out. My brain is like, "Let's think about some science experiments," or, "Let's think ..." On one retreat, I remember designing a backpack. I was like, "Oh, I'm going to design this custom backpack and get it made." I had that fantasy for way too long. It's so easy to get caught up in that. This is again where I hadn't noticed the essential quality, this attitudinal quality of the mind of curiosity. When I'm curious, I'm not bored. If there's boredom, I can be curious about boredom. "Oh, what does boredom feel like?" Checking in to see what the attitudinal quality of the mind is becomes really, really critical. If that curiosity is there, there's a saying, curiosity is the cure for boredom, there is no cure for curiosity. That's a great antidote that can draw us into any experience. We can be curious about anything. Even boredom.

Elise: Even pain, and things that are coming up in the present moment that, automatically, we would tend to push away or, "Get me the hell out of here."

Judson: Absolutely.

Elise: Yeah, great. Thank you. Yeah, I think this theme of curiosity has really come through the interview, in terms of that being just such a helpful doorway to support our mindfulness and our presence, and powerfully help us with these habit loops and addiction. I'm aware of the time. I just wanted to offer you an opportunity to share. We've covered a lot. I feel like we could keep talking for hours. There's so much to discover. Is there anything else that we haven't covered that you would like the audience to know about?

Judson: I think we've covered the basics. Awareness is important. The habit loop, we've covered that. Curiosity being key for all of this. I can't think of anything else.

Elise: Yeah. I might just finish with one last question, which I'm curious to know your answer to. Mindfulness is a practice that really supports us to live with greater wisdom, happiness, compassion. Ultimately, to live a life well lived. I was curious to ask you, from your own personal journey and path with mindfulness, and your work, what have you learnt that you could tell your 20-year younger self about living a life well lived? What advice, or perspective, could you share with your 20-30-year-old self about setting your path up to live a life well lived?

Judson: Honestly, I would say to myself, pay attention. Really look to see what you're getting from what you're doing. I remember being very driven. It was like, "Oh, I have to get this done. I have to get this. I have to get this." I would just tell myself just to really pay attention as I was driven to do this, to do this, to do this, to see if the manner in which I approached it, and what I was looking for, was actually just setting me up for pain and suffering in the future. Also, setting up others for pain and suffering in the future. This is about this relational. It is about all of us. Things that I might do when I'm not paying attention might actually cause suffering. That's something that I would definitely tell myself to pay attention to. The beauty of that is just seeing it clearly, it's like a no-brainer: "Why would I do that? Oh, god. Why would I do that?"

Elise: Beautiful. Thank you. I think that links to everything you've just shared about just how this simple practice of paying attention, and being aware in the present moment, the pushes, and the pulls, and what's driving us, can be so transformative. Thank you so much.

Judson: It's my pleasure.