



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 Tara Brach

Tara Brach

Tara Brach, PhD is a clinical psychologist and teacher of Buddhist meditation. She is the author of Radical Acceptance and True Refuge. Tara is the founder of the Insight Meditation Community of Washington, and teaches meditation there and at centers throughout the United States.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Welcome Tara and thank you so much for joining us. I'm so excited to have this conversation with you.

Tara Brach: It's a pleasure and thank you for what you are doing really.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: So, today Tara there are so many things that I would love to discuss with you but I think I'd really like to focus on applied mindfulness and this idea of how this practice of sitting in meditation can actually be applied and brought into our everyday life. Particularly, because a lot of the people doing this program are new to meditation. So, this idea of bringing the sitting together with

everyday life. What I'd really like to ask you first, which I ask all of the people I interview is why do you meditate?

Tara Brach: I really meditate to come back into the fullness of who I am. So, in a way meditating is a way of stepping out of habitual trance and reconnecting with my body and my heart and reality. So, there is a sense that when I start to pay attention on purpose, I can see the stories that keep me feeling separate, deficient or special, and come back to something larger where my heart is open and I'm contacting life.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Beautiful. Thank you. Can you just describe, when you say to come in contact with something larger, could you say a little more about that?

Tara Brach: Yeah. I think for many of us in our everyday life, we are living a lot in a trance of thinking. So, we are living in the future, we are living in the past, just in these thoughts and commentaries. And in the moment of coming into real presence, and you can feel it now if you're listening, you just pause a little and just feel the aliveness in your body, and feel your breath, and sense the sounds around you and all of a sudden there is just this mysterious living reality, this presence that's much larger than any of our narratives. So, that's really the vastness and the aliveness I'm referring to.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Thanks for clarifying that. Could you just help the listeners understand also this definition of mindfulness? This word that is all over the place at the moment. There seems to be so many different definitions but how do you understand mindfulness and what it actually is.

Tara Brach: Mindfulness is a way of paying attention on purpose to exactly what's happening right here and now. The quality of it is non-judgmental, that there is a quality of friendliness and a quality of interest in how life is from moment to moment.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: So, this practice of mindfulness, can appear to be quite a passive practice. What perspectives do you have about how this practice, that looks

so passive from the outside, can actually be relevant and helpful in our working or doing lives?

Tara Brach: I actually think of meditation as the grounds of really impactful activity that can really make a difference. I sometimes think of Gandhi who took a day off each week, no matter what, to pray and meditate. So, he'd get in touch with, what he said, was his wisest self. So, all his actions would spring from his most clear and compassionate inner life. In the same way, I feel like if we take time to pause and reconnect, we are actually more in touch with our intelligence and with our heart. And then whatever activity it is, whether its creative and in the arts or serving other people or mathematical, whatever we are doing, we are more aligned. And I feel like we are more effective.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: You mentioned creativity, which was a question I wanted to ask you about, being yourself someone who is very creative a writer and a psychologist, I was wondering for you how, if at all, you experience the relationship between meditation practice and creativity?

Tara Brach: In a completely deep and profound way, when I meditate there is less of my egoic habitual self in operation. There is a kind of quieting down of the more typical thought patterns and ways of navigating and that opens up space for the universe to shine through. So, I'm much more available to my perceptiveness, and my sensitivity is more alert. And I feel like when I'm writing and I'm really trying to communicate truth, it's really the quietness of meditation that opens the door.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: What about the relationship to courage? Something I've been interested in.

Tara Brach: Ahh, Courage is a great word. Courage means actually greatness of heart. And, my experience is that our nervous systems are designed to have fear. So, it's not a matter of getting rid of fear but **as with everything in meditation, it's not what's happening, it's how you're relating to it that determines how much you suffer or flourish.** And, when we have a way of having fear be there,

but not take over, when we can have fear arise and some part of us goes, okay this is fear, and we feel the unpleasantness but remember something larger, we remember love, belonging and what we care about. Then, we can act from a place of some clarity and balance, that's the courage, with real heart and even in the face of fear. **So, I think really at the very core of a lot of meditation practices we are learning to come into a wise relationship with fear.** We are in it together. Every one of us feels fear. And there are ways with meditation that you can actually bring a lot of compassion and presence to fear so that you are not so hijacked. And that's one of the gifts of the practice.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: In your book you do talk about the practice of R.A.I.N, which is a wonderful practice. I wonder if you could share some of that on this topic of fear and difficult emotions because for many people it's like, well, I can sit and practice meditation but then I go out and have a conversation with my partner and we get angry. Or, I'm going to go and public speak and I get so fearful. How do we actually work with these difficult emotions? How can this mindfulness or this meditation support us in our daily lives in that way?

Tara Brach: RAIN is an acronym that's actually a really easy to remember strategy to bring mindfulness and self-compassion in moments when we get caught. So, it's really like when you get stuck what do you do. Typically, in the moments we are stuck, is when we have the least capacity to remember how to bring ourselves back to balance. RAIN gives you this handy acronym.

The way it works is **R is to Recognize.** So, let's say you're on your way to work and you know you have to perform in some way. You have to speak to a group of people and you're nervous about it. Right before you leave, you pause and go, okay, R-Recognize. Anxious.

Then **A means you Allow it.** Meaning you say okay it's here. I'm not going to fight with it. I'm just going to make space for it right now. So you just kind of pause with it. The pause is really important.

The I of RAIN is to INVESTIGATE with the quality of kindness. What that means, and again, you can do it and take a few minutes so you can do it and spend an hour and do it with a therapist but the I is critical because then you say okay, anxiety is here and **what am I believing?** I'm afraid that I'm going to fall short and underneath that, there's a sense of this fear that then I'll be rejected and the people will push me away. Then, you just say, "Oh, okay, fear." And you name it and you feel it in your body. Then the kindness, somehow you offer some kindness to that fear. Because that fear place really needs to be seen and cared about. For me, I might say "it's okay sweetheart". And in those moments there is a shift. When you really **recognize** and **allow** it and you've **investigated** and offered some kindness, there is a shift. That's the N of RAIN..Non-Identified. You don't have to do anything with the N of RAIN. The N of RAIN is what emerges when you've offered that kind of presence and it means you're **not identified**. In other words, the anxiety can still be there but you're in a larger kind of presence. You're taking care of that fearful place but you're not stuck inside it. You shifted from the what's happening, to relating to it wisely. I also think of the N as you're back to your natural loving awareness. Then, you go off to work and you may still have some anxiety but more of you is resting in a more resourceful and more expansive place. And, one thing to know about it is, it's not a one shot. Stuff comes back again, you have to do RAIN over and over again. But gradually, your sense of who you are shifts. You go from being the victim and the scared person and the deficient person to that place of presence that's noticing what's happening and offering kindness. That's a shift that really is a gift of a lifetime.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Thank you for sharing that because it's a really helpful practical strategy that people can apply straight away.

Tara Brach: By the way, even in a moment that you make a gesture of kindness to yourself, that itself was a mindful moment. If you forget everything else, but in some way put your hand gently on your heart, sometimes I'll just say, "You know

I'm sorry this is happening and I love you." And just a gesture of kindness shifts our biochemistry. It's very a powerful part of meditation.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: It's something that I've wondered about a lot. I have spoken with Kristin Neff about self-compassion. Her work is wonderful. But, what comes to my mind is why the hell are we so hard on ourselves or why do we find it so hard to be kind to ourselves? It seems sort of counter evolutionary that that would be the case.

Tara Brach: And yet it is actually evolutionary. Here is my understanding; it is that evolution has a negativity bias. It's looking for what's wrong as a way to protect ourselves. So, we look for what's wrong in the world around us and we keep scanning ourselves for what's wrong so we can fix it. So, self-judgments and self-aversions are actually a tool, like if I'm just hard enough on myself, maybe I'll get better. The sad thing is, it's what I call "false refuge" because it gives you a temporary feeling you are controlling things and doing something but it doesn't actually, in a deep way, allow you to tap your true resourcefulness, which is why we have to decondition it. So, even a gesture of kindness, Kristin gives beautiful phrases to use and I love those, I also feel like just a gesture and some words to your own heart, starts shifting your relationship with yourself in a way that's really profound.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: That's really interesting the way you describe this. The negativity bias to the outside world and then of course it's just becomes turned in to ourselves as "the whip of self-criticism" to kind if make us be better. So, you just talked about how meditation can support a new relationship with ourselves, how do you think it helps us develop different relationships with each other and possibly even with the world, particularly in this time that we are living in which is full of such crisis?

Tara Brach: First big picture, I think that meditation facilitates a shift from being egoic, like really completely fixated on what's wrong with me and what I need and what I want, to a sense of the truth of our connectedness and a sense of belonging

to something larger. It dramatically impacts our relationships. First, when we are mindful, we start catching on to our intentions. And, we start recognizing, let's say you and I are talking together, Elise, and we sit and in the background we have some intention to impress or to control the conversation. When you mindfully start sensing that and because you are aware of it, you are no longer so hooked into it and you can say 'what really matters'? And then realize what really matters is deepening understanding, feeling our connection, our hearts. So, just noticing our intentions with each other, if before we engage, we say what really matters with this person, it actually inclines us towards the behaviors and the listening that could make a difference.

So, that's one really big thing another is, I find that mindfulness makes me very awake of my own judgement. So, we get very in a trance of judging each other where we don't even realize how many moments we are in some way putting another person up or down and in the moments that we are doing that, we are not able to really come into true contact with our own experience. So, let's say we are blaming somebody. Let's say somebody in your family you're regularly resentful for, for the way they are behaving. As long as we are hooked on thinking well I'm right about this and we are hooked in our judgement, we can never bring any true healing or transformation to what's going on inside us. So, we have to release the narrative of "you're wrong" and bring mindfulness to inside me, 'Oh, okay so I'm feeling hurt by the way this person is behaving' or 'I'm feeling a sense of fear, I'm feeling threatened with this person' and then we can begin to bring RAIN, which means really bringing mindfulness and compassion to the root of the judgment. So, that's just another way that mindfulness makes a difference.

And I want to very briefly name two others because this is something I have a real passion for, how much we can consciously wake up with relating to each other. One is that when you and I are together and we are really paying attention mindfully to what's going on with each other, we can start seeing past the mask, to the vulnerability that's here. And we can get it that of course everybody is insecure somehow about how well they are doing and in that we can feel a kind of

tenderness, that kind of shared humanity. We also, when we are looking past the mask, can see the beauty, the goodness, and see who's looking through those eyes. It's really the same consciousness. It's the same tenderness and sentience and then feel our connection. So, I feel that mindfulness is the way of paying attention that awakens us with each other.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Beautiful. I think what you were saying just resonated with me in that sense of being on retreat, being deeper in meditation and discovering that we all very much are the same, in essence. We all have different stories but we suffer the same kind of challenges at a core level. And that does give quite a lot of comfort when you realize we are all in this together.

Tara Brach: It really does. If you stop taking it personally, then you can actually begin to respond to the suffering with a lot more tenderness.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: We're living in this time where stimulation is everywhere. The sense of craving for stimulation. There's this sense of craving, craving for stimulation. We have lots of different cravings. How do we manage craving?

Tara Brach: That's a big one. And you're right, we are only getting speedier and we are only consuming more and more. And that is like being on a bicycle and the more we feel angsty and restless, the faster we pedal and the more we try to consume and we're pedaling away from the present moment. So, craving takes us away from our hearts and our presence. You know, the first thing is not to make ourselves wrong or bad for it. I've worked with many people with eating disorders and the first step towards healing is to truly get it, that it's not our fault. I mean we are subject to the conditioning of a culture that is addictive and we are subject to our genes and the way our parents brought us up. And nobody wants to be overeating or overdoing drugs or addicted to things. *So, the first step is not to blame ourselves.* Far from what people think, people often think well then I'll be irresponsible and I'll do it more but it's the opposite. When we can really get it that it's not our fault, and let go of the shame, then we are able to start bringing the

qualities of clarity and presence and kindness to where the woundedness is, the very root of the craving. **So, the first step is to drop the judgement.**

The second is to learn to pause when we feel a craving. I had one twelve step sponsor tell me that learning the sacred pause does more for people he works with in 12-step programs than a year of meetings. I don't think of it as an either, or. We really need the relationships. But we need to pause. It's like how Viktor Frankl put it that "*between the stimulus and response there is a space and in that space is our power and our freedom*". So, the pause gives us a little more choice. We are not quite as hooked into that tumbling into the future and going after something. We can maybe breathe and then sometimes we'll decide to still go for what we wanted and other times we may say wait a minute there's another way I can soothe and comfort myself that is actually more healthy. So, that's the next step. Then, keeping on bringing more and more mindfulness to that space where we are pausing helps us to gradually really uproot the cravings.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: We have to have that mindfulness to be able to remember to pause.

Tara Brach: Which sounds like a catch twenty two, but mindfulness is intrinsic. We do have a remembering capacity in our mind. There is something that wants to remember. If you just know your aspirations, like let's say you are a compulsive overeater, just if you have the prayer or aspiration to be able to step out of the compulsion that is sincere, and then you start with forgiving yourself and pausing, you've opened the door to healing.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: That's fantastic. Yes, the power of the aspiration.

Tara Brach: Really strong.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: You've talked about the egoic self and getting more space from the narratives. The way that mindfulness meditation can help develop a different relationship to our thoughts, is a really big step for people in the process. And, I found through teaching, it can be very confusing for people. It takes a while.

And this idea that you've so articulately encapsulated which is that "thoughts are real but not necessarily true", which is such a helpful statement. If this is the case though, one question that often comes up is, if they are real but not necessarily true, how do we know which ones are true and which ones aren't? Can you say something about that?

Tara Brach: That's a beautiful question. By the way that phrase was from one of my Tibetan Teachers Sogyal Rinpoche and it has helped me enormously. You know thoughts truly are representational, I mean they are audio and video in the mind, and they are like a map. I think you can check in a few different ways, and one is if you just say the word "trouble" and you feel in your body, what it brings up, you can kind of sense the squeeze and the tightness in it. If you say the word "kindness", you can sense a kind of openness. So, you can begin to check your thoughts by sensing what state of body and heart do they create? And, if you are regularly running thoughts in your mind that are creating tightness and tension, that's kind of a signal that the thoughts are not serving you. *So, the real question is - do these thoughts serve healing and awakening? Or, do they actually perpetuate a fear based state of heart and mind? The other question worth asking is - what's the outcome if I keep on thinking this and acting off of this kind of thoughts, what's the outcome going to be.* Gandhi again said "our beliefs create our thoughts and our thoughts create our feelings and our feelings create our actions, our actions create our character and our character creates our destiny". So, we live in a cocoon of very habitual thinking. And it really pays to be able to pause and open up some and sense ok these are thoughts not reality, and are they serving?

Dr. Elise Bialylew: That's really helpful. We can relate to our thoughts and ask, as you're saying, is this serving me? And we actually choose our own adventure. We actually choose which thoughts we are going to buy into, or which thoughts we are not.

Tara Brach: I love it. Because it's like deciding what TV show to watch. I'm going to watch this channel because it teaches me more about – it's a nature's

channel - the earth. You're paying attention to what you think is going to make your life enriched.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: It's quite a radical paradigm shift, isn't it? Because the way we are brought up, no one ever teaches us this and so we just assume that the thoughts that come into our mind are true. So this is quite a massive opening for more freedom, right?

Tara Brach: It's a massive opening and I think it's the key piece in all the really freeing meditation strategies. When I have people come to retreats and they leave, one of the biggest insights is **you don't have to believe your thoughts**. And that's the beginning of freedom, it really is.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Thank you so much. That feels like a really nice place to close the conversation. But, I did want to just highlight the two books that you've written. So, its *Radical Acceptance* and *True Refuge*, which I can recommend to everybody. They are both beautiful books. Was there anything else that we haven't discussed that you wanted to share as we finish the conversation?

Tara Brach: Well, just that you asked about relationships and I really do see the hope of the world in this waking up out of our sense of separateness and being able to see our connections with each other, and realize that one of the greatest gifts we can give anyone is to be able to see them and see their goodness and let them know that. Be a mirror of goodness. So, for anyone that is listening to this and learning meditation, to be able to offer compassion to yourself and to able to move through the world and, it's really an adventure to see past the mask and see the goodness of other beings and let them know it. It ripples out. It ends up being the healing of our world.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Thank you so much.

Tara Brach: Thank you so much for what you're doing, Elise. It's just beautiful work. I'm so grateful.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Thanks so much for your time.