



MINDFUL IN MAY

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 Mark Epstein.

Mark Epstein

*Mark Epstein, M.D. is a psychiatrist in private practice in New York City and the author of a number of books about the interface of Buddhism, meditation and psychotherapy, including *Advice Not Given*, *Thoughts without a Thinker*, *Going to Pieces without Falling Apart*, and many more. He received his undergraduate and medical degrees from Harvard University and is currently Clinical Assistant Professor in the Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis at New York University.*

In this interview you will learn:

- How the ego can be a valuable part of meditation
- What anger, restlessness and worry can teach us about ourselves
- Why 'letting go' does not mean getting rid of negative thoughts or emotions

Elise: Welcome, Mark, to the program. I'm so delighted to have you here. I've been a personal reader of your books for probably over a decade. You've been such a leader in the world, in the realm of meditation and psychotherapy, and the intersection between the two. So, really looking forward to this conversation. For those who are newer to you and your books – I wondered if you could just give a sense of actually how you came to meditation yourself.

Mark Epstein: Yeah, sure. The kind of unusual thing in my history – but the thing I'm very grateful for – is that I actually came to Buddhism and to meditation before I knew very much about anything else, before I decided to go to medical school, before I knew I would be a psychotherapist, before I became a psychiatrist, before I read Freud or, you know, really knew much about anything. I found Buddhism when I was 18... no, 17-18-19 in college, and something about the way the inherent psychology to it spoke to me, I think – and I just went for it. And I was lucky enough to find people like Daniel Goleman, who was a graduate student at the college that I was at; Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield when they were just beginning to teach; and so I had a really comprehensive introduction to mindfulness and meditation and Buddhism. I was always looking at the world of psychotherapy kind of through a lens of Buddhism and trying to understand: was it the same, was it different, how could I translate one for the benefit of the other.

Elise: There are lots of definitions of mindfulness. Can you share what your definition is or how you understand mindfulness?

Mark Epstein: Yes, sure. I always liked the definition of a German-Jewish refugee in Sri Lanka named Nyanaponika Thera. Thera means 'elder' and Nyanaponika means 'flowing toward rhythm.' His original name was, I think, Siegmund Feniger, and he left Berlin in 1931, went to Sri Lanka and ordained as a Buddhist monk, and then was put by the British into a prisoner of war camp in the north of India during the war – because he was a German national – where he translated Buddhist literature. And he wrote a book called *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* – that was one of the first things I ever read. And he talks about mindfulness as bare attention, like naked attention – b-a-r-e – and he says the definition of 'bare attention' is the clear and single-minded awareness of what is happening to us – and in us – at the successive moments of perception. So, I always liked that as definition of mindfulness: Clear and single-minded awareness of what's actually happening to us – and in us – at the successive moments of perception. So: a simple direct awareness of what our moment-to-moment experience is. That's mindfulness. Not pushing away the unpleasant, not holding on to the present ... not pushing away the pleasant and holding on to the unpleasant.

Elise: So, in your newest book, I found the title to be intriguing. So, the title is “Advice Not Given: A Guide to Getting Over Yourself”, and in the book you write, “The ego needs all the help it can get. We can all benefit from getting over ourselves”. Can you explain what you mean when you say “ego” – just for the listeners?

Mark Epstein: Yeah. Well, ego is a confusing term. So, part of my writing of this book was to try to figure out what it meant and what I mean by it when I use it indiscriminately. So, the ego... We all need an ego. So, in Buddhism it's sort of convenient to say, “oh, ego's an illusion and we need to get rid of the ego, we want to be egoless, because that will make us more empathic or more compassionate... or whatever”. But we all need the ego, if we didn't have an ego, we'd be psychotic. So, the ego, it comes into being around the age of maybe three years old, when the cognitive capacity of the mind develops to such a degree that the infant starts to realize that: “oh, I'm a separate person and then these people out here who call themselves my parents have expectations from me and so I have to modulate myself, regulate myself, mediate myself in order to deal with external requirements – my parents, my teachers, my siblings, etc..”

Elise: What's the relationship between meditation and how it supports us in sort of getting over ourselves from an ego perspective?

Mark Epstein: Well, the main thrust of psychotherapy and in western culture in general has always been around how to build up the ego, how to support the ego, in order that we not be at the mercy of our emotional life, in order that we'd be able to meet our goals, compete successfully, gather power, control the environment, control other people, control ourselves, etc. That's all the ego. But the Buddhist influence is much more around: what are the benefits of putting the ego in its place? "The ego is a terrible master but a wonderful servant," they tend to say. So, what are the areas where it's actually helpful to downplay the ego? Certainly, in meditation. If we go towards meditation with too much ego, meaning, we're going to master this thing and master ourselves, it's going to rebel. You can be all Zen samurai as you meditate, but at a certain point you have to learn how to back off. In zen they say “take the backwards step”. Something similar occurs in our intimate relationships, in love. That's one of the things that happens in life where the ego is automatically diminished, because something happens where we want the well-being of the other to actually take precedence over our own. Something similar happens when we have children. There's something fundamentally biological that rises to the surface

where our own instinctive drives for our own well-being is somehow submerged for the benefit of this little being. So, Buddhism and meditation, it's all about: how do you get over yourself enough to allow those lurking potentials to actually have room to breathe in our lives. So, I've been trying to talk about it in that way.

Elise: Can I just clarify or ask you: When we're meditating, we often can experience that inner voice, the voice or the thoughts that we identify as us, like 'our voice' – would you say that that is kind of reflection of the ego, this kind of sense of I, this inner voice that we so connect to 'a sense of me and who I am?'

Mark Epstein: Yeah, I think the original use of the term when Freud is saying “the I” rather than “the ego” – but that that's actually getting closer to what you're talking about where that inner voice – I think of it as the inflection of my thoughts – where that's as close as I've been able to get to. Where is the self if you really try to locate it within yourself? It's sort of in the tone of the way you speak to yourself. The Buddhist – the sort of classical Buddhist thing – is your identification with that voice is different from the voice itself, you know? So, a lot of people think they have to stop their thinking when they meditate but thinking is part of our experience of the mind, so it doesn't really stop. It can have periods where it's relatively quiet, but the thinking process is always going on, actually. So, do we have to identify with the voice in our heads? The voice is going to go on, but do we have to identify with it all the time? That's sort of the notion behind my... My first book was called “Thoughts Without a Thinker” and that was the idea there, that the thoughts go on, but do we always have to be holding on to our identity as the thinker? I would say that we don't and that there's some kind of liberation, some kind of freedom that comes when we don't have to take every thought that rolls through our heads so seriously. And I talk a lot in the book, I use – my friend Sharon Salzberg – my favourite thing in Sharon's writing is when she actually gets very personal and talks about how painful her own childhood was because her mother started to bleed to death in front of her when she was like seven or eight years old, and sitting and watching television with her mother dressed in her ballerina costume, and suddenly her mother started to bleed and she had to call an ambulance and she never saw her again. And then her father went crazy and she lost her father also. So, Sharon writes very candidly, which is unusual for a Buddhist teacher, about her own inner struggle, where she was always telling herself in that inner voice that there was something dreadfully wrong with her that would have allowed these kinds of tragedies to happen. She did what most of us do as children, which is to over-identify with the things that are happening around us, feeling responsible for them, so that she was always basically beating herself up and being mean to herself, even though the environment had been mean enough to her. And it wasn't till she found Buddhism that she started to question the severity of that inner voice and that allowed her to open up in a way that's been very important for her. So, I use that example when trying to talk about what the Buddha meant by 'right speech,' that he didn't just mean, you know, not saying nasty things or not gossiping, that he actually meant: pay attention to the way you're talking to yourself, to the kind of inner speech that you're using, because a lot of people – not everyone is full of self-loathing as Sharon described but a lot of people are doing the opposite and are always sort of telling themselves how great they are, to sort of cover for how inadequate they feel. And as therapists, we're trained to get into the underside, you know, to try to eavesdrop on how people are really talking to themselves and that's something that we can do for ourselves in meditation also.

Elise: Yes. Someone recently said to me – asked me a question about silent retreats, and what's the point of going on a silent retreat, what's the point of the silence, and...

Mark Epstein: Yeah. It's not silent.

Elise: Yeah, but it made me just think about what you were saying in terms of that, yeah, when we have that external silence, we have that ability to much more easily eavesdrop on that inner voice, yeah. Actually, in the book somewhere you say that you often... On the topic of thoughts, you often say to your patients, “just because you think it, doesn’t make it true”, and obviously this is a very large piece of what becomes illuminated in meditation. But one of the things that I think is quite tricky then is actually... you know, if some of the thoughts we think aren’t true, how do we work out which thoughts to trust and which ones to disregard?

Mark Epstein: It’s a big problem, I know, how do we? How do we? Somehow – well, that’s what’s comforting about the Buddhist tradition, is that they talk a lot about a kind of inner wisdom that is absolutely latent within us. In the west, we don’t think about ourselves so much that way, we think more about original sin, but this idea that sometimes we can actually trust our intuition, sometimes we can’t, and we don’t really always know – and we can make mistakes. I think Buddhism would encourage us to learn from our mistakes and that, as we cultivate this ability to eavesdrop on our own minds, we can start to see what to trust and what not to trust. Which of our inclinations are motivated by an addictive craving, by a need to control others? And which of them are motivated by kindness, by sympathy, by some inherent kind of wisdom? We can tell more or less – sometimes –, often enough to be guided in a constructive direction, I would say. And then, there’s always therapy!

Elise: I guess the other thing, is even just understanding the notion that perhaps our thoughts are not to be as trusted as we previously had been trusting them, then opens up a window to, kind of, even just go: "hang on, like, is this real or...?" I know, for example, for myself, I remember one of my earliest silent meditation retreats, I think I spent the whole retreat in the hindrance of doubting. So, it was just like, I didn’t even know why I was there and I was doubting maybe this whole thing isn’t for me, and I was just so caught in these thoughts, that I just really struggled through most of the week. But then I think my teacher said something like: you know, the thinking of doubt has its way of pulling the ground from under you. Like you can’t, you’re not sane when you’re in the cloud of doubt, you can’t trust doubt, because by its very nature it actually just makes you doubt everything, so you have to wait till that kind of passes – or something, which I thought was quite helpful.

Mark Epstein: Yeah, I could see why that would be helpful. I think all those classic hindrances, you know, like doubt being one of them and anger and addictive craving and worry and restlessness and sleepiness – all of these classic hindrances have a positive aspect. So, even if in your first retreat you were doubting all the time... In Zen they talk about the great doubt, that’s a thing to cultivate the ability to doubt everything, even your most intimate thoughts, even your most intimate identifications that you could take that ability to doubt, which was so strong in you, and instead of using it to erode your self-confidence, you could actually use it to open your mind. I like the nuance of all of that. It’s true about anger too. People can become obsessed with anger and in Buddhist psychology they say that anger should be regarded as like stale urine mixed with poison, or it’s like a forest fire that burns up its own support. But there’s also something about anger: anger comes when there’s an obstacle that needs to be overcome and so the mind needs to figure out what is that obstacle that’s making you angry and what constructively can you do, if anything, to overcome the obstacle. So, the presence of anger doesn’t have to be seen just as a hindrance, as something’s the matter with you. It can also be seen as a sign that there is something that you have to deal with in your life. And I think that’s helpful where we tend to create this split when we’re coming from a traditional Buddhist side, where there’s the unwholesome aspects of mind and the wholesome aspects of mind and we want to get rid of the unwholesome ones and cultivate the wholesome ones. But that kind of split, that kind of duality, sometimes gets us in trouble and locks us in, feeds all kinds of self-deprecation, beating up on oneself that we already have enough of in our regular lives. I was at a silent retreat not so long ago where the teacher brought a human

skeleton out and asked everyone, “is it okay if we have a skeleton up here on the platform where the teachers are so that we can all contemplate the loathsomeness of the body, which is a traditional meditation”, and no one objected. So, he brought out the skeleton and he led the entire group – which was like more than a hundred people – in these long meditations on, you know, skin, flesh and bones: that’s all that we are and the body is sort of putrid and all that. And then in the group interviews, they were all these people who were really upset with the meditation, who were saying, “I already hate my body! I came here to try to get away from that, and this is just feeding: if I hear anything more about the loathsomeness of the body, I’m going to have to go throw up”. So, I think we have to be careful as we try to use these traditional practices, because there’s already such a tendency to be self-critical, and meditation can feed that or it can be the antidote to that, depending on how it’s presented.

Elise: In your book – I really loved this phrase – you say, “trauma is not just the result of major disasters, it does not happen to only to some people: an undercurrent of it runs through ordinary life. Shot through as it is with the poignancy of impermanence.” This is a really big theme in meditation. Can you speak for those newer to the practice of this idea of what we’re talking about? We talk about impermanence and also how meditation perhaps offers us a new relationship to it that can kind of ease our difficulty with it and perhaps reduce the trauma of it.

Mark Epstein: Sure. Well, I wrote a whole book called *The Trauma of Everyday Life*, which was meant to be a little bit funny, but I don’t think people necessarily saw that as funny. But the idea is that, no matter how hard we try, no matter how good our egos are at keeping everything safe and secure, which is really what the ego wants – and we can be very good at that if we have enough resources and so on – we can get everything, we can live a whole life if we’re lucky and experience very little trauma until old age, illness and death. But what I always found kind of perversely comforting in the Buddhist psychology, is that when he outlined the four noble truths, which was the first talk, the first teaching that he ever gave – which he presented in the form of a traditional physician: here’s the illness, here’s the cause of the illness, here’s the treatment for the illness, and here’s what to do to get the treatment, kind of thing – right from the beginning, he used the word ‘dukkha’ which is traditionally translated as *suffering*, to say: this is the nature of the illness. But dukkha, when you actually look at the word, dukkha means hard to face. The Buddha was saying there’s something in life, in undercurrent of life – not that all life is suffering – but that there is a kind of a tinge of un-satisfactoriness in us, there’s something that’s hard to face – *du* is like difficult and *kkha* is face – so the opposite of *sukkha* which means sweet to face which is all the pleasures of the world. And the Buddha wasn’t denying that there’s pleasure in the world, he was all for the pleasure, but what he said is that we want the pleasure to last longer than it does. It can’t last forever because everything is impermanent and therefore even with pleasure there is an undercurrent of dissatisfaction because it won’t do enough for us and that’s the source of addictive craving of addiction because the first taste is always the sweetest. We have a word in English called ‘bitter sweet’ but there’s a wonderful poet named Anne Carson who does a lot of translating from the Greek and she wrote a book called *Eros, the Bitter Sweet* and in that book she said that the Greek word is actually ‘sweet bitter’ because the sweetness comes first and then in the aftermath it’s this sense of bitterness, that there’s this gap always that we’re trying to fill. So, the Buddha was right there with that gap and he said that’s kind of a source of our frustration, that everything comes to an end, that we know that deep inside but we don’t want to look at that, that the treatment for that kind of dissatisfaction is actually to stare it straight in the face, and that’s where our humanity comes from, because we’re not alone in facing that. Everyone has to face some kind of trauma. So, if we’re lucky – as I was saying before – you can get from birth to death facing very little, but that’s very rare actually. Most people experience some kind of trauma either in they’re growing up which we in the psychotherapy world call ‘developmental trauma,’ where the caretaking environment is not sufficient to keep us feeling loved all

of the time and we start to instead drop into that space that I was talking about before with Sharon where you start to doubt the love that's in the world for you when you start to doubt yourself. So, we call that developmental trauma or a 'small t trauma' – and then we all face the possibility of what's called big 'T Trauma,' which is the horrible things that can happen, war and rape and illness and loss of a loved one or the Buddha talked about it as separation from those we love and being too close to those that we don't love. So, those potential traumas are there for everyone, and we tend to respond to those when we hear about them happening elsewhere with a moment of compassion, like let's send money to the victims of this genocide or that flood or this tsunami or that earthquake. But then we gradually close up very quickly because there's so much of it around we can't handle it. And our own little world is relatively secure so we really don't want to stay too open. And that's normal, but it kind of perpetuates a lack of empathy, lack of compassion. It's possible to stay open to the universality of trauma that everyone is experiencing – that is not one horrible thing that happens over there, but it's common to all of humanity and that we're all kind of in this together. And that changes our relationship to trauma and I think that's one of the things that the Buddha was actually trying to convey.

Elise: Thank you for clarifying the first noble truth for those... perhaps actually if you wouldn't mind going over the four because there are listeners that might have got lost it not knowing what the four are, but I think it was great to get that definition because I know a lot of people that have touched upon Buddhism and the teachings and they say, "Well, why would I want to follow anything that says life is suffering?", you know, the first noble truth. And there's obviously a nuance there. So, could you just go through the four noble truths?

Mark Epstein: Yeah, sure. Well, the first noble truth as I mentioned is simply the truth of dukkha. The Buddha announced it with a single word, which is that there's something that is hard to face in our lives and we don't want to look at it and it has to do with impermanence, it has to do with change, it has to do with the fact that everything comes and goes, that decay is as much a part of our life, or our experience as birth and renewal is. And then he said the cause – which is the second noble truth – the cause of our dissatisfaction is that we don't want to look at that. So, the traditional presentation of the second noble truth often says that the cause of dukkha is desire. And I wrote a whole book called *Open to Desire* that was trying to counter that. I think that's kind of superficial interpretation of what Buddha actually said. He did say that sometimes, but the Buddha changed the way he presented these depending on the sophistication of the audience that he was talking to. So, what I would say his clear teachings about the second noble truth, he used the word *tanha* which was the Sanscrit word which means clinging or craving rather than desire. So, that's getting us back to this idea of ego, that ego is always wanting to have control over things. So, the clinging or the craving that the Buddha was talking about is really this thing within us that doesn't want to see what we don't want to see, that wants to hold on to what's giving us pleasure, that's wanting to push away what's giving us displeasure. And the Buddha also used the word delusion or ignorance to talk about the cause of suffering, which is that word... So, when the Buddha talked about ignorance, he's saying the ego, again, or the self or the person wants to believe that we are more real, more separate, more protected, more unique, more in control than we really are. And so, we're always trying to prop ourselves up. And that he said is very understandable but it's deluded, that if you really pay attention to who or what you are, you'll see that you're not as separate as you feel but you're actually embedded in a relational way with not just with everybody else, the way an infant is with a mother or father, but with the entire world. There's no way you could be as separate as you feel. So, the third noble truth is "oh, there is a cure". There is a cure for the sense of separateness, of isolation, of vulnerability, of fragility that we're all harbouring but kind of scared to admit to, and the cure is what he called nirvana or enlightenment or awakening. And what that is, it's something we have to take on faith, most of us because most of us aren't there, we're still locked into the first noble

truth or the second noble truth or if we're willing to swallow the medicine, then we can go to the fourth noble truth which is the path to the awakening of the third noble truth. So, the fourth noble truth is what's been codified as the eightfold path which is what I try to write about in that book *Advise not Given: A Guide to Getting Over Yourself*. The eightfold path is not just about meditation, it's also about right understanding, right view, right speech, right livelihood, right action, right efforts, as well as right concentration and right mindfulness. So, it's a whole kind of way of reorienting ourselves to what it means to be a person in the world, how can we be here without giving the ego more than it deserves basically. That's the fourth truth.

Elise: Thank you. And I must say your latest book really does give such a clear accessible outline of that eightfold path for anyone that wants to pursue that.

Mark Epstein: I'm trying anyway without just falling into the clichés about it. I was trying to show what it could mean if we really take those ideas inside and try to work with them and make them our own rather than just swallowing them as some kind of given.

Elise: On what you've just been discussing around impermanence – a phrase came up in my mind which I think I heard from Joseph Goldstein originally, but it was fantastic. It was something about that analogy of what you talk about with impermanence and then this attempt for us to control, to make us feel secure and he says something about if you try to hold on to a rope that's moving, you get rope-burned or something like that. It's just the way that we hold on to something that can't be held on to and there is the suffering. Another principle that comes up a lot in meditation is this idea of letting go which you hear about a lot, which you write a lot about, and in the book you write, "Letting go does not mean releasing the thing that's bothering you, trying to get rid of it only makes it stronger. Letting go has more to do with patience than it does with release" which I just found so helpful. Can you speak a little bit about what you've learnt, what you understand about this letting go and maybe particularly how we do this inner actual meditation sitting.

Mark Epstein: I think you can see from these things that you're picking out from my writing, that I'm always trying to go at what has become accepted language among those of us, especially in the West who are knew to all these concepts. So, at first this idea of letting go was so helpful to people, like along the same lines of "oh, I don't have to believe all of my thoughts". Like, someone makes me angry, someone hurts my feelings, I'm immediately in a reactive mode where I have to let them know that they've hurt my feelings and process it. So, this notion that "oh, I could let go of that impulse" was so helpful to me and I think to a lot of us. But then it became sort of the thing you said to anyone when they wanted to confront you about anything, like, "why you don't just let go". And then people start saying it to themselves, so it became that you couldn't believe any of what you're feeling cause you just had to let go of it. So, they became a kind of prejudice I think against emotional life in general. And there were books that came out of the neuroscientists talking to the Dalai Lama in the Mind and Life meetings with titles like *Destructive Emotions* and *How to Release Ourselves From Them*. So, the certain mistrust of emotional life was something that I think bothered me as a therapist because as a therapist I want to know about your emotional life and I take your emotional life seriously, and that's where the action is. And people are so scared of the intensity of themselves that I want to help them breathe in the midst of their intense emotions so that they can learn from them and not be afraid of themselves. So, that's when I think I'm coming from that piece that you're reading. Letting go doesn't mean setting up this split where everything – every nuisance that we see in ourselves – we have to just get rid of. Letting go actually means being patient and being willing to stay with that which makes us uncomfortable, more along the lines of: *dukkha* is that which is hard to face. And the treatment for

dukkha is to learn how to be with that which we're uncomfortable with. So, it's the letting go of the impulse to get rid of, letting go of letting go is the actually the letting go.

Elise: And on that point, just to take that a little further: when people start meditation, often they can come to it thinking that they just want to come and meditate to feel blissed and to have these moment when they just need calm. Obviously, we know that it's not really about that, that can be a side effect but it's really much deeper than that. But a lot of people get confused about: why on earth would I want to stay with the unpleasant, like if I've got an anxiety that comes up, why would I sit in that? You've kind of already described it a bit, but how can we benefit from actually – as Jon Kabat Zinn says – turning towards suffering or, rather, staying with that.

Mark Epstein: Well, it's not clear that everyone does benefit from that. I think it's worth doubting, you know, to go back to the way we were speaking before, it's worth doubting it and seeing it for oneself whether it helps. I think a lot of people, as you were saying, are drawn to meditation because they want that feeling of relaxation, that sense of bliss or of inner peace that is promised. And if meditation was such a reliable vehicle for creating that, then I think it would be even more popular. It was presented that way. I worked – when I was first beginning in my investigation of all of this – I worked for a cardiologist at one of the Harvard hospitals named Herbert Benson, who did all the initial work on transcendental meditation, measuring what actually happens in the laboratory in the body to people who were doing 20 minutes twice a day of TM, and he coined the phrase 'the relaxation response,' you know, that meditation leads to relaxation, and he wrote a best seller about it in the 70's. And if only it were as true as he made it seem. When it works like that, it's great but that was never, as you were saying, the primary function of meditation – at least as it was taught within the Buddhist framework. Where the Buddha was coming from was more, that we're troubled, we have this kind of anxiety - although he didn't have the word anxiety - but I think that's what he was talking about many of us are struggling with anxiety and there's no great way to get rid of that. We can try to get rid of that by focusing our mind on a single object like a mantra and giving ourselves some kind of relative peace and quiet, but as soon as we stop, the anxiety comes back. So, what happens if we do the opposite of what our inclination is, and we try to make room for the anxiety to well up. What happens if we don't run away from it but instead expand the framework that we're holding it in, make a large enough space for the anxiety to do whatever it's going to do, let it kill us if it's going to kill us, we're just going to sit there and watch ourselves be slain. What the Buddha found when he did that for long enough was: *wow, everything changed*. And that's what he wrote about, spoke about – he didn't write – that's what he spoke about as enlightenment. So, we know from cognitive therapy and behavioural therapy and even from psychoanalytic therapy, that if we can do that for ourselves with anxiety it does change, it can change. We start to have a different sense of like: *oh, do I have to be this anxious?* Or even Ramdas was saying the way you were quoting before, maybe it doesn't actually totally go away but our relationship to it changes, and I have a little notebook that I always smuggle into my silent meditation retreats, many of which I've been with Joseph Goldstein who you were talking about before, and I'm always waiting for like the grand thought that might come or the great teaching that I'll hear from Joseph that I can later put into one of my books. It's a very little notebook cause the grand thought doesn't come that often, but every ten years or so I'll look through it to see if there's any inspiration there. And what I tend to find is that over the years I'm writing some version of the same thing over and over again, cause the grand thought, which seems so life-changing when I hear it – then I forget about it – but it always has some version of the following: It doesn't matter what you're experiencing, so much as how you relate to it. That what we have control over and what meditation is teaching us is that we actually can relate differently to our experience. And this idea of not reacting instinctively but instead making space for is

I think a better definition of letting go and of what meditation is actually capable of teaching us. And it does something.

Elise: Yeah, I think that's such a helpful thing to sort of clarify and to share with the listeners. I have to giggle, cause I have many notebooks as well for retreats. I think a teacher once came up to me and said, "What are you doing with all this writing, do you actually look back at these notebooks?", I'm like, "Yeah, I actually do". As a psychiatrist, I got so many questions, although I'm aware of the time... So, on this topic of anxiety then, where do you stand, what's your opinion about medication for anxiety? I mean, I think that's a sort of one in four people and people are really turning to medication. I don't know how it is in the states but in Australia it's certainly a medicalized model of mental illness is very prominent. Sometimes what concerns me is that we're actually trying to maybe treat away the human condition or something like that and in the process people are actually somehow being robbed of understanding themselves and developing tools that they can turn to.

Mark Epstein: Yeah. I don't really worry about it in that way because the medicines are not really that effective. When they are effective, I think of it as a God-send. And I always talk about the... in Tibet they have these thangkhas, these beautiful paintings of the medicine Buddha – medicine Buddha is a blue Buddha, who's sitting with all these vats overflowing with medicinal herbs and pills and so on. So, I always think whatever helps, people are suffering, whatever helps them I'm all for it. The thing with the medications within the field of psychiatry – there's maybe three or four medicines, there are all different variations of them but basically there's just three or four things that have been found to be helpful at all. I think we're really in the infancy of understanding how any of this works in the brain. No matter what the neurophysiologists say, they don't really understand very much, even about how Prozac works or Valium works or Xanax works or lithium works or anything. They just know from strange trial and error that all of this might have some kind of effects, you know. So, I find that if the antidepressants, for instance, are helpful for depression or for anxiety, what a relief, that's just wonderful. But often, people are trying to take them, hoping to get rid of everything that's bothering them, and then all they get are the side effects. Because if you don't have a real condition that the medicine touches, it doesn't do anything. So, people still have to dig down and confront. There's enough suffering, enough impermanence, enough change anyway that if you can get a little bit of benefit from one of the medicines, I don't worry about it. And I prescribe them, I'm into doing anything that would be helpful to people.

Elise: Do you see any contra-indications to meditation? I think it's interesting cause a lot of the Buddhist teachers don't come from a psychological background training. So, what's your perspective on that? And also, on going on a silent meditation retreat, what would be your advice?

Mark Epstein: In a way that's connects to your last question. Because of my books and because a lot of people within the Buddhist world trust me as a therapist, as a psychiatrist, because I was so influenced by Buddhism, I've actually seen a lot of very accomplished meditators, teachers and so on for whom meditation has not solved all their problems, who actually suffered despite being very accomplished meditators, they suffer from anxiety, they suffer from insomnia, they suffer from depression and what they actually need or are looking for is there anything from the western side, from western psychiatry that would help them despite how accomplished they are. So, that's been very interesting and I think it's been a privilege of my position to be able to be witness to that, because it's helped me not put meditation on a pedestal but to see what's it good for and what isn't it good for. I think there are very often people who go to a silent retreat hoping that it will, in one fell swoop, take care of all their problems, and instead they're just left alone with their minds and there's more going on than they can handle. And at the place that I've done most of my retreats – the Insight Meditation Society in

Massachusetts – they have developed a protocol for dealing with this because almost at every retreat there are a couple of people who really can't handle it and who shouldn't be there, there's too much going on, and their egos actually aren't strong enough to handle the rigors of meditation. And that's something that maybe I should have mentioned earlier when we were talking about the ego. I actually think of mindfulness and meditation as an ego function, you know. You need an adequate amount of ego to be able to watch your own mind. That's a requirement. If you don't have that, if you're overwhelmed by what's going on, then there's no way that you can have the kind of stability that's required and that meditation actually grows. It actually can be very helpful for the ego to learn these practices. So, I think, yes, of course, there are people who shouldn't be meditating in an intense way. And a lot of times young people who are maybe vulnerable to bipolar disorder where it hasn't been completely diagnosed yet, because it tends to emerge in young adulthood – and you can have very creative people who have a lot going on in their minds but haven't necessarily figured out, haven't found what they need in order to have that inner sense of stability. They'll go on a meditation retreat and just be flooded and have to leave.

Elise: Yeah, thank you for clarifying that because I think it's a great message to also share, because with how popular meditation and mindfulness is now, it can be a sense of evangelism that it's going to heal all wounds. Yeah, I think it's good to keep balanced with that.

Mark Epstein: It's really taken over than the therapy field, so that a lot of young therapists in training just want to be certified in mindfulness. They are not learning the basics any more that came out of psychoanalysis which has gone so far back underground that all the dynamics that can happen between a therapist or even a meditation teacher and students or patients who are bringing their whole selves to the relationship and they tend to idealize the teacher or devalue the teacher as the case may be, project all kinds of things onto the teacher. Often, the meditation teachers are not adequately trained in how intense those relationships can be. And what I found in a lot of the teachers that I know, they just want to get away from the students, they want to see them for five minutes and talk about the meditation but they don't want to deal with any of the stuff that's coming up between the people. They're not trained that way anymore. But it still comes at them very intensely. And so, then people are left feeling like oh this person doesn't like me, and I needed much more of a relationship than I'm really being offered and no one knows how to handle that. Teachings and therapy are helpful for that.

Elise: Seems like there's a need for another book from you, Mark, a sort of manual for meditation teachers to manage the projections and transference, and counter transference.

Mark Epstein: Yeah. I don't know how big a market there would be...

Elise: I know there's so many stories, but is there a particular story that comes into your mind in this moment from the ancient teachings that you particularly resonated with or that has particularly illuminated a teaching around meditational philosophy?

Mark Epstein: Well, I'll give you a story that's not from the ancient teachings, but it's one that's been coming up a lot from me in the aftermaths of writing this book. The title *Advice Not Given* – the title came to me when I was on a meditation retreat a couple of years after my father had passed away. My father was a very well-known academic physician. He was chairman of one of the departments of medicine at Harvard and not interested at all in the spiritual world or in Buddhism or in meditation. He was proud of my writing, but happy that I went to medical school, and we never really had a conversation about meditation or any of what I had learned from it. But my father got a brain tumour at the age of 84 which came in the silent part of his brain that only affected the sense of balance and

direction. So, he was still working as a clinician, as a researcher and so on, but he got lost driving home from work the same 15-minute drive that he'd taken for 20-30 years. And that's how the tumour was identified. And by the time they found it, it had progressed so far that they couldn't do anything about it. It was the same kind of brain tumour that John McCain just died, from that Ted Kennedy had, it's a kind of lethal brain tumour. And he knew that there was nothing to do and I knew there was nothing to do and I realized, oh no, I've never really tried to talk to my father about whether I may or may not have learnt from Buddhism, about what happens when you die, but I wonder, maybe there's something here that I've been holding back, that I should be trying to talk to him about, so maybe there's advice not given. That was the origin of the title. So, I screwed up my courage and called my father from my office one day, and he was still fine and his mind was fine, but he knew what was coming around the corner, and I said I don't know if you want to hear this but maybe there's something that would be helpful. And he's like sure, tell me anything, go ahead, so I said something of the following: I said, you know that feeling that's deep inside where you know you're you, that hasn't really changed very much – it's kind of like what you were saying at the beginning – that hasn't really changed very much from when you were 20 or when you were 40 or when you were 60, even now that you're 80, you still feel pretty much the same inside to yourself? But if you turn your mind to try to find that feeling, it's sort of invisible, like you know it's there but you can't really put your finger on it? I said what the Buddhists seem to be saying is that if you can learn to relax your mind into that space where you are who you've always been, that you can kind of ride that feeling out when the body falls away. And that's about the best I can do. I'm trying to talk in LA language, not in a lot of Buddhist jargon and he was, okay, darling, I'll try. And was pretty much the last conversation that I had with him, but I felt like it was a real conversation and that maybe, hopefully, depending on what really does happen when we die, which none of us will know, maybe it would prove to be useful.

Elise: It gave him a sort of a Buddhist surfboard into the next realm, if there is one.

Mark Epstein: If there is one, exactly.

Elise: If you were to have a dinner party with a curation of humans, thinkers that have inspired you over the years – either alive or not alive – who would be sitting at the table? And obviously if I asked you a different day, you'd probably would come out different names by the look on your bookshelf, but who comes up now, who would you have to have a dinner party with?

Mark Epstein: Well, one person who I always think about in terms of talking about Buddhism to western audience is the artist and composer John Cage – do you know him? Do you know about John Cage?

Elise: No.

Mark Epstein: John Cage, well, he died maybe 20 years ago or so. He was a partner with the dancer Merce Cunningham – he was a very influential cultural figure here in New York, and he attended Buddhist teachings in the 50's at Columbia from D.T. Suzuki, Japanese Zen professor who taught a number of the – you know, Allen Ginsberg and Eric Fromm, Karen Horney, Philip Guston, Agnes Martin – I would have all of those people at the dinner party, all those cultural figures from the 50's, including John Cage and D.T. Suzuki, because those lectures that Suzuki gave, J. D. Salinger was supposedly there, and I think it was amazing – those lectures that he gave really affected the entire New York cultural world. And Cage was a great composer, he had studied with Arnold Schoenberg and already committed himself to music. So, he said, he was never going to sit and meditate but he was going to try to use what he learnt from Suzuki in the composition of his own work. And so, he was

always trying to take the ego out of the act of composing, and he turned to the I Ching and to what he called chance operations to give him away into making music that he did a lot for Merce Cunningham's dance company. He'd be an amazing person to have at a dinner party. So, I would invite him and all of those people. And then the British child analyst whose name was Donald Winnicott who's the big influence on my psychoanalytic thinking, who coined the phrase in the 40's and 50's of the 'good-enough mother'. Now we would say the good enough parent but in those days it was all about the mother and the infant because Winnicott was always talking about how a mother is able to get over herself enough to not fall victim to the natural anger that her ruthless infant aroused in her, but was always able to put the well-being of the infant enough ahead of her own to be there in an ordinarily devoted way. Those are all the kinds of words he used. So, and then he used that as a template for what it's like to be a therapist, that what comes up in therapy is as intense as what comes up for a parent with the new born and requires the same kind of altruistic capacity but also self-reflective honesty that a mother naturally brings to the journey of being a parent. So, I think that kind of combination of people would be good.

Elise: Wonderful. And I think in the book I remember vaguely you using the Winnicott analogy of the 'good enough parent' – correct me if I'm wrong – to actually apply to oneself.

Mark Epstein: Oh, yeah, totally. That's what I think about meditation, that in meditation we're kind of doing that for ourselves, we're applying that kind of a devotional acceptance to our own minds, the way we imagine a 'good enough mother' might in the way she holds her infant. I talk a lot about the holding environment that we're creating for ourselves in meditation as analogous to that which a parent does for a child where the child's filled with very-very intense emotions, but the mother's response is often to, in a very quiet way, poke a little bit of fun at the child. You know, like, oh, you're so upset, what's wrong with you, maybe you're hungry, maybe we have to change you, like, let's not make such a big deal about this, come on. That sort of attitude is actually underlying what we're doing in meditation for ourselves.

Elise: Beautiful. Finally, I'm very curious to know what you're most curious about these days, like where your edge of your own investigation or curiosity is taking you.

Mark Epstein: Well, I'm still trying to write and I would say it's somehow in the writing: what can I find to say that I haven't said before, how can I still be engaged in this process of writing which somehow has become important to me without just stilling out more of the same. So, that's led me into reading a fiction, into reading poetry, into looking at art, into an appreciation of music, of all the creative fields, like where does that creative inspiration come from and where does bring us, and how could that possibly apply to me.

Elise: Beautiful. And just final words for the listeners. In your decades of practice and your experience as psychotherapist, or psychoanalyst – any final words of advice or suggestions for those that might be more beginning on the path of meditation.

Mark Epstein: Well, I will just say don't be afraid to investigate, don't give yourself over too easily to someone who claims to know the truth. Be suspicious, hang on to your doubt, hang on to your egos even, but realize that they can be flexible and go for the flexibility. And allow yourselves to be a little bit uncomfortable, put yourself into new situations that test you. Don't be afraid.

Elise: Thank you. Thank you so much, Mark, for your generosity and for books and teaching. It's been a total inspiration and so valuable. I really recommend the listeners explore the many books you've written. Where is the best place that they can find you online?

Mark Epstein: There's a Facebook page that I try to keep up to date that's just Mark Epstein, M.D. and I have a website that's also I think Mark Epstein, M.D., which has bare outlines of my books and a couple of interviews and other writings and so on. And the books are still in prints, so with all other work you can find that.

Elise: Yeah. And I have to say I kind of, in the lead up to this conversation, enjoyed re-reading the ones that I'd read from many years ago and it's amazing how you get so much from a re-read.

Mark Epstein: Oh, thank you.

Elise: Yeah. So, thank you so much and wishing you well.

Mark Epstein: Thanks a lot. Nice to meet you, even in this virtual reality.