



**Dr. Elise Bialylew, founder of Mindful in May ([mindfulinmay.org](http://mindfulinmay.org)) and The Mind Life Project ([www.mindlifeproject.com](http://www.mindlifeproject.com)) and author of The Happiness Plan, interviews Mark Nepo**

### **Mark Nepo**

*Mark Nepo moved and inspired readers and seekers all over the world with his #1 New York Times bestseller *The Book of Awakening*. Beloved as a poet, teacher, and storyteller, Mark has been called “one of the finest spiritual guides of our time,” “a consummate storyteller,” and “an eloquent spiritual teacher.” His work is widely accessible and used by many and his books have been translated into more than twenty languages. A bestselling author, he has published eighteen books and recorded thirteen audio projects. In 2015, he was given a Life-Achievement Award by AgeNation. And in 2016, he was named by Watkins: Mind Body Spirit as one of the 100 Most Spiritually Influential Living People, and was also chosen as one of OWN’s SuperSoul 100, a group of inspired leaders using their gifts and voices to elevate humanity. Recent work includes *The One Life We’re Given* (Atria, 2016), *Inside the Miracle* (Sounds True), selected by Spirituality & Health Magazine as one of the top ten best books of 2015, *The Endless Practice* (Atria).*

#### **What you will learn in this interview:**

- The art of juggling being and doing
- A new perspective on self discipline that will transform how you work, live and create
- How to find your purpose and live with greater meaning and deeper fulfilment
- A powerful piece of advice for living a "well lived life"

**Elise:** Welcome, Mark, to the program. I am absolutely delighted to have you here. Your work has been so personally moving and supportive in my own life. I’m just thrilled to be able to share this conversation with so many listeners today. Thank you for your time.

**Mark:** You’re welcome. Thanks for letting me a part of your good work.

**Elise:** Mark, you have written so many beautiful books, poetry. The book that, today, I’d love to stay close to, because I’ve recently finished reading it, it’s just come out, *The*

*One Life You're Given*. In the book, one of the passages that just really hit me and saturated my soul was this one: "Half of the soul's work is to be. The other half is to be of use. It's in our nature to try with all our heart at everything and anything until we chance to inhabit grace and come alive. Being so alive, we become a conduit for life and a resource for others."

I'd love to hear more of your thoughts about this dance of being and doing, and how you've actually managed to navigate this, as such an in-demand poet, writer, and spiritual teacher.

**Mark:** Sure. Thank you. Firstly, as we talk about this, and the folks who are listening, nobody knows how to do this. We're just comparing notes on what it is to be here. I really believe that the human journey is the most messy, magnificent journey there is. I wouldn't trade it for anything.

Let's back up a little bit, when we start to talk about being and doing, and frame it in the sense that one of the archetypal struggles that every person who's ever lived has had to face, and will, is how do we balance our need to survive and thrive? Everyone has to find their own set of skills. It does need to be balanced. Just like x and y chromosomes, we need to have a balance. Surviving, that's how we meet the outer world, how we navigate the weather of circumstance.

If all we do is survive and never thrive, what's the point? There is no point. We can't just thrive and say, "I don't want to bother with surviving," because we won't be here very long. You and I could have this amazing conversation, but if we're walking on a street and we're not paying attention, then we get hit by a truck, that's tending to surviving. We have to do both.

Especially when I was younger, in an earlier age, I was a romantic poet. I didn't have time for being here. It was so difficult. I just wanted to transcend out of here. Life, and being a cancer survivor, and going through a lot in my life, as many of us, the journey is one where we're forced to transcend right down into the ground with things. There's nowhere to go but here.

Given that, let's talk about being and doing. We live in an age that is out of balance. We talk a lot about being, because there's such an over-emphasis on doing. Really, we need a balance of both. Just like you need two healthy legs to walk, or without two eyes, there's no depth perception. We need to be able to be and do. We talk a lot about the one, because we're so out of balance.

I think it has a lot to do with always returning to where we are, and leaning in, and leaning in. Often, we talk about being, and there's a, "Being means I don't have to do anything. I'm going to stop, and I'm just going to unplug from everything, and just meditate all the time." That's not been my experience. I think the reward for removing ourselves in our being is that we get more engaged in life, not less. This has a lot to do, I think, with the purpose of great love and great suffering. It always reminds us that we are each other.

The whole sense of being, it's like a tree. When a tree starts to root, as it roots, it also sprouts. As we go deeper into our being, we grow more, in equal measure, into the world. Then, when our heart is awake, our challenge is to stay awake, and to be of use: to be kind and of use.

One of the great Chinese philosophers, Mencius – M-E-N-S-C-I-U-S – he was about 200 years after Confucius. He had the most beautiful metaphor about the nature of goodness and kindness. From the beginning of time, there is very much a play in the world, and especially in America today, there have always been two unanswerable takes on the human condition. One is that we are innately good, we are innately kind, and when we allow nature to happen, then we take care of each other. The other is that, no, we're wild, and we're irresponsible, and actually we could be evil if given the chance. Therefore, we need all these rules and regulations, and laws, and moral codes, to make sure we don't really mess things up. No one's going to solve that.

I'm, obviously, of the first camp. This is where Mencius was. Mencius said, "Look, human beings are, by their nature, kind. If you look at water, water, allowed its own true nature, will always flow and join other water. We can manipulate water to flow sideways or upwards. Allowed its true nature, it will always flow down hill and join other water." He said, "Just like that, human beings allowed, their true nature, will always flow to each other, will always join each other like water." That's beautiful. I love that. I think it's true.

I think that when we get too wrapped up in doing, as a way, often, to run from fear, then we start to see each other as different, and we start to fear each other. This is very much at play in the world. Obviously, in our country here, depending on which side it is you are on, but for me, it's been a very troubling time. I think below the politics, what's most upsetting about Trump, and about the people that have supported him ... Before I even talk about this, under all of that, we were they. There

is no they. We are they. We are all one community. I see this at work at a deeper level. It's made me think about this.

From the beginning of time, there have always been, if you will, two tribes. I imagine cave people, in the very beginning, the first one that came upon each other. One would look and say to the other, "You're different. Go away." The other one would say, "You're different. Come teach me." We have the go away tribe and come teach me tribe.

The challenge is that we belong to both, and we can switch in one second, depending on the level of our fear. The go away tribe has always said, "No. Go away." In the metastasised extreme of that, the fear gets to a place where that leads to prejudice, and bias, and even, in the extreme, to genocide and persecution, because in such deep fear, we don't trust that they will go away. To make sure they go away, we have to contain them, or hurt them, or kill them.

The come teach me tribe, and there's a whole tradition, Plato was part of this. Plato said, "We are born whole" – W-H-O-L-E – "but we need each other to be complete." The come teach me tribe says, "Thank god you're not like me. Teach me what I don't know, and I'll teach you what you don't know. Together, we'll be complete." All the periods of enlightenment in history have been the extreme of the come teach me tribe. This is the inclusive nature.

I think that the swing we can see in the world, we have swung, there are pockets right now where the go away tribe is having a resurgence. I feel that it's so important, more than ever, that all the things that we care about, the you're involved in, that I'm involved in, they matter more than ever now. Just as in the Middle Ages, it's believed, and it's true, that the medieval monks kept literacy alive during the Dark Ages. We are charged with keeping literacy of the heart alive right now. It's very important.

**Elise:** You know, as you say that last point, I just feel this wave of emotion come up, of the truth, and the depth. Yeah, just the truth of what you're saying.

**Mark:** There is this rhythm in just being human. This is the messiness of being human. That we are in this constant dance of leaning in and pulling away. Of leaning in and being pushed away. Pain, fear, worry, anxiety, loss, these things by their very nature, the way they say hello, is they push us away. A big part, very tangible, of the spiritual practice of any person is, what is your practice of return? How are you going to lean

back in once you're pushed away? Because you will be pushed away, because you're human. We're all human. That's the thing. Not that we're, "Because I understand this, I'm never going to be part of the go away tribe." No, we will. But what keeps us human, and what restores our love and our humanity is that we return, that we return.

This is where things like the 12-step program, or Alcoholics Anonymous, has so many amazing beautiful things. One of the most beautiful of all is the step of making amends. Sometimes I think, the older I get, that the only difference between those who are wise and those who are not, is that those who are wise say they're sorry. Say they're sorry and make amends.

**Elise:** This concept of what you're talking about, this returning, and this leaning in, I think it speaks to, actually, a question that I wanted to ask you, which comes from a quote again. This comes from your book. Obviously, you would know. "Life is a journey from no to yes. The classroom appears wherever we dare to imagine life as a transformative question that we somehow awaken into together."

**Mark:** Yeah. Whether we admit it or not, those of us who write, write about what we need to learn. I retrieve these things more than author them, and they become my teachers. Learning about this is that I needed to learn more and more about how to move from no to yes. I think that life is that journey of moving from always going, "Yes, but ..." or, "No, I can't." We're brought to a place where we are asked continually to work with what we're given, as opposed to what we want. If anything, our great gifts, our greatness, lies in working with what we're given. Putting what we want as kindling on the fire of our aliveness.

There's a paradox, that was actually in my last book, *The Endless Practice*, that was a real teacher for me. The paradox about this, it's that we are challenged to have the courage to ask for what we need, only to practice accepting what we're given. We're challenged to have the courage to ask for what we need, only to practice accepting what we're given. This is our journey on earth.

As I was being with that, what does that mean?

Can you hear my dog in the background?

**Elise:** Yeah, it's fine. We're accepting what is, which is life, right? Yeah.

**Mark:** She's not accepting the other dogs walking down the street.

It would be nice if we had the courage to ask for what we need. It would be nice if we got what we asked for. Obviously, we know in life, that doesn't happen very often. We don't often get what we ask for. What's the reward for having that courage? I think what I've come to understand is, the reward for having the courage to ask for what we need is that we become intimate with our own nature. It allows us to know who we are, thoroughly.

The reward for practising accepting what we're given is that we become intimate with the nature of the universe, of life. Saying yes to life is this dance between the intimacy of our own nature and the intimacy of life. Saying yes to life, it requires sometimes saying no to others, setting boundaries. It requires sometimes staying open beyond our disappointments, through our losses, and working with what we're given.

There's a little story that I can tell that's so moving. It's about a monk by the name of Tetsugen. Tetsugen, in the 1600s lived in Japan. As a young man, his call, what he wanted, what he felt called to do, was to translate the talks of Buddha into Japanese. They had never, up to this time, had not been in Japanese. With great excitement and dedication, he went about translating, little by little. He enlisted an artist friend of his to do beautiful wood cuts. They went about begging alms to have enough money to publish this eventually.

After 10 years, they had almost enough money. There was a flood in the part of Japan where Tetsugen grew up. Like Katrina, in New Orleans. He gave all the money away. Went now back and started again, continuing to translate more, and went back, started begging again to gather more money. About eight years later, there was a famine in another part of Japan. He felt, "I don't know these people, but what's the difference? How can I not help them?" He gave it away again.

After 25 years, they finally had enough money, and they published the first Japanese version of Buddha's talks. Today, in the museum in Kyoto, there is the original copy. Under it, there is a plaque that reads, "In his lifetime, Tetsugen published three versions of the holy text. Only one is visible."

Tetsugen is a noble hero. That's a wonderful example of working with what you're given. His greatest came from working with what he was given. He still translated it. His want to translate, there was no way that he could know that that would lead him. His destiny was to inhabit what was holy about Buddha's talks, more than translate them.

**Elise:** It's exquisite. Exquisite. Yeah. Such a deep story and teaching for all of us, in terms of, I suppose, this constantly realigning to ... I'm even lost for words. We have a particular intention, or we have a purpose. That can be a generous one, to serve others. When things are coming up, the importance of actually returning, as you say, back into the moment, actually to see what's happening, and make sure that our actions are actually living out the values that we're intending to try and do here. Not be so fixed on the outcome of what's going on, and blind to the reality of what is.

**Mark:** Often, we're trained to be very wilful. That is the misuse of will, is to insist. Even if it's a noble goal, to insist on it when it prevents us from seeing what we're being called to work with. This is one of the hardest things, even in terms of writers, to teach young writers. You have a vision, you have a dream, and you see something. Then you work toward it. When it comes alive, it says, "Okay. Now, let's do this." Often, a young writer will feel like they're failing, because it's veering from their intent.

**Elise:** Mark, on this point, this does connect to another theme that I wanted to ask you about, which is, when we're engaged in life, and we have good intentions, and then, as you say, it veers off and it's taking us somewhere else, there can be periods of confusion in that, in terms of this concept of when do we keep going with will, and when do we surrender. This is a theme that comes up in your book. My question to you is, when we find ourselves in that situation, and there can be very conflicting messages from the heart and the mind, what's your experience of that? What is your relationship with what your mind tells you, what your heart tells you, in knowing what step to take next when faced with, "Do I push through, or do I surrender?"

**Mark:** Let me give you a metaphor, and then we'll talk about how I experienced that. When a fish is swimming in a river, it swims, and when it catches the current, the current now carries it. Now you can't tell how much is the strength of the fish swimming or the current carrying it. It's all one. The proper use of will is to catch the current.

This is a way that Taoism can be understood. Taoism – which just means the way, when we try to name it – is that the life force of the universe is like an invisible river. Our job as beings, like fish, is to catch the current, so we can be aligned with it, and carried in it. In other traditions, this is really what the word is meant by grace. Grace is when you catch the current.

Another way to think about this is, and then we'll flip back to how I experience it. A lot of the book, *The One Life We're Given*, is about the relationship between effort and grace. I use in there this metaphor of the surfer. A surfer does all this effort to paddle out, and wait, and then catch a wave. Then for the time that he catches the wave, he's one with the wave. He or she is one with the wave. That is the moment of grace, the long moment of grace. No wave, no matter how great or long, it always ends. Now it's the effort either to catch another wave, or to swim back to shore and bring what you've learned back into your daily life.

I've come to understand, the proper use of will is to get in a position where you can catch the wave, or you can align with the current. We all know when this happens. jazz musicians study long and hard to intricately learn their instrument, so that there's no distance between when they hear music and play it. Similarly for me, as a learner, and a writer, and a teacher, all this time and these is years is so that when I retrieve things, or questions, or delve into things, that I can quickly, without anything in the way, bring them into expression.

Likewise, what we were talking about, like with Tetsugen. This is also the gift of the heart, that we can recognise need and meet it effortlessly, with an open heart.

I think that when we insist, there's always times, again, because we're pushed back, and then we have to lean in. Just because I talk about this doesn't mean that there aren't times I don't push, or I don't speed up. I'm aware of it at this point in my life, so that when I do speed up and I'm pushing, stop.

It's re-framed what discipline is. Discipline, when we start out is, "Can I be focused and single-minded enough to persevere through distraction to accomplish whatever it is I'm working on?" That's valuable, that's helpful. But it has led, over the years, to a deeper form of discipline, which is, when I fall out of the current, find my way back to the current. When I'm doing something that's real ... One example, say I'm working and writing. When I'm in it deeply, it's timeless. As soon as I start to say, "Well, it's getting near dinner time, and if I stay here another 40 minutes, I might be able to finish these few pages." Now I've fallen out of timelessness, and I've made a product out of it. As soon as I hear that thought in my head, the discipline is, "Stop. Put it down, and walk away, until I can come back from my heart."

**Elise:** It's so interesting, that new perspective on what discipline is. It's actually the discipline to be aware and recognise when you're out of the flow, or out of the



current, and actually be disciplined to stop, rather than that addiction to, “I’ve got to get this done.” It’s happening from a place of not flow, or push.

**Mark:** To apply this to healers, and healing, and teaching. Basho, the great Japanese poet, has this beautiful expression. He says it for poets, but I like to translate it for healers. He says, “If you want to know about the bamboo tree, go to the bamboo tree, and sit with it till you are at one it. Otherwise, any rendering you do of the bamboo tree will be counterfeit.” All you have to do is replace patients for bamboo tree. If you want to know anything about a patient, or a loved one, or a friend, or someone who is suffering, you must go to them, and sit with them until you are at one with them. Otherwise, anything you do, or say, or observe will be counterfeit.

Discipline for a healer, and I’ve said this at medical schools where I’ve had the chance to speak as a cancer survivor, discipline isn’t making sure you go from patient, to patient, to patient. Discipline is when you feel the press of having to go to the next patient, that you stay where you are, and look the patient in the eye that your with until you’re at one with them.

**Elise:** Beautiful. We could handle that message in our medical schools in Australia.

**Mark:** Everywhere.

**Elise:** Yeah.

I want to just shift into a different place, which is that I think so many people these days are quite lost. I think, as humans, there’s a really deep need that we have to feel that we are living a sense of purpose. Having trained in psychiatry, and come upon the statistics of the World Health Organisation talking about depression being the second leading cause of global burden of disease by 2020, to me, it’s like something really wrong is going on. I wonder what your perspectives are. If someone was to come to you and talk about this sense of, “I just don’t know what my purpose is.” It’s really a distressing place to be. I know it myself, from many, many years ago. No longer. I was curious to know what you would say, or how you would advise.

**Mark:** I think what I’ve come to feel and understand is that the soul only wants to be as alive as possible. It’s like a fire. It doesn’t care what you put in it. You could be a gardener, you could be a mechanic. It just wants your all. Your thorough, holding nothing back, giving everything attention. All of our dreams, and our goals, and our ambitions are kindling on the fire of the heart’s aliveness.

With that in mind, I would say that we need to be engaged in the world, but only so that it brings our heart alive, so that we can be useful, and that our light can burn and give off warmth and illumination.

I use this metaphor in the book about a match.

**Elise:** I love that. Please do share it.

**Mark:** Thank you. That's been a real teacher for me. We all know that a wooden match, one that you light a fire with, or a stove, we all know that that unlit match, in the phosphorus tip, the flame is dormant. It's there. Just like the tree is in the seed. We don't see or feel that flame until that match strikes against the surface.

That is a metaphor for every soul on earth. Our light is dormant until our gifts strike against the needs of the world. Then our light and our warmth become possible, become visible. It's through our interaction, our relationship with life, that the wisdom that waits in our hearts comes out through the one life we're given to live.

This whole sense of purpose, I would offer it this way. Our career is the soul's awakening. Where that happens is our occupation. That can change, because we're changing. It's always about being awake and staying awake.

I have a line in one of my poems that reads, "Those who wake are the students. Those who stay awake are the teachers. How we take turns." How we take turns. That's going back to Plato, how we complete each other.

This sense of purpose, I think one of the things that I would say to people, how I experience, is that both in my journey with cancer, and in my journey just in regular life, we are by nature, part of our nature, we're impatient beings. Part of our deeper challenge is that under that, in our depth, we are very patient. Just like we have to balance being and doing, a lot of our doing comes from our impatience on the surface. Our being comes from that deeper patience. We are challenged, when we feel urgent, when we feel, "I don't know where I'm going. I don't know what's going on," we're challenged to wait and listen. Often, we move away before we can hear the universe speak to us. We move so quickly. Things that matter take time to reveal themselves. This is what I've learned myself, because the times I've been impatient, when I've had to wait, and been forced to be still, then always, life speaks to me.

We all suffer from a myth of urgency. Urgency is if you or I are bleeding or can't breathe, then there's urgency. Everything else might be important, but nothing else is urgent. Therefore we have time. We have time to listen.

In the Hindu tradition, there is a phrase, upaguru, which means the teacher that is next to you at this moment. There's always a teacher next to you at this moment. We often run by the teacher, we often knock the teacher over, because we're looking for a teacher. It's dropping back in, that practice of return. Returning to a place where we accept that there's nowhere to go.

Du Fu was a great Chinese poet in the 700s. When I was in college, he was a voice that I read across time, who I felt so intimate with. When I was in my cancer journey, he appeared to me as a guide in dreams. One of them was, as a younger poet, and struggling with my purpose, and, "Would I ever do anything worthwhile?" I had a dream. I was climbing up a mountain to find and to ask him about poetry, and writing great literature, and all of this. He was coming down the mountain, back into the world. We met. He didn't really want to talk to me. I was very humble and respectful. I wanted to ask him all these things. He only said, "Have you seen my family? Have you seen my family? Are they okay?" I was trying to muster a question. As if he read my mind, he just put his hand up as if to stop me, and he simply said, "If you can't see what you're looking for, see what's there. It's enough."

That's been a great companion and teacher. That is it. One of the menacing assumptions that we all fall prey to, and have forever, is the menacing assumption that life is other than where we are. There's nowhere to go. It is all right wherever we are.

**Elise:** Just to close. There's a question I like to ask all the people I interview. It's probably come up already in the conversation. It's about now, who you are, and the journeys you've been on, the advice that you would share to your 30-year younger self about living a life well lived. You've written so many books on this, so it's hard to, obviously, pin you down for one. Whatever comes up in the moment.

**Mark:** This was a chapter in one of my books. I would tell my former, younger self, what's in the way is the way. To trust, never doubt what your heart is telling you about that.

**Elise:** Beautiful. Thank you.

All right. Thank you very much. I look forward to continuing to follow your work from afar. Thank you so much.

**Mark:** All right. Thank you so much. It was great to spend this time together.