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 Christina Feldman

Christina Feldman

Christina Feldman *is an internationally recognised meditation teacher who began teaching in the West in 1975 after spending some years in Asia. She is a co-founder of Gaia House and has served as a guiding teacher of IMS since its early days. She is a co-founder of Bodhi-College, which is dedicated to the study and practice of the early teaching of the Buddha. She teaches Buddhist psychology in several university settings in Europe and has been involved in the evolving exploration of mindfulness in Boundless Heart: The Buddha's Path of Kindness, Compassion, Joy and Equanimity and Mindfulness: Ancient Wisdom Meets Modern Psychology. She lives in England and is a mother and grandmother.*

What you will learn in this interview:

- How mindfulness can act as a protective agent for the self and the world
- Why developing a literacy for naming our emotional states is key to our self-development
- How courage is a very big piece in the mindfulness journey

Elise: So, welcome Christina to the program. It's a delight to have you here. And I wondered if, for the listeners that may not have come upon your work or your books, whether you could just give a short background of how you came to meditation and a little bit about your trajectory in your career of teaching meditation.

Christina: Ok, so I went to Asia as a teenager when I was seventeen. I ended up very quickly living in the midst of a Tibetan refugee community in the town where the Dalai Lama lived, and began practising and studying, and was very quickly accepted by a very good teacher who was one of the tutors of the Dalai Lama. I spent a number of years in Asia, initially in the Tibetan tradition, and then more in the insight meditation training, both in India and South East Asia. I returned to the West in around 1975. I was one of that first wave of teachers that began to teach the Dharma in a Western context. I mean it's been decades now, so it's been quiet a long road with its joys and sorrows. I was a co-founder of Gaia House the retreat centre in England and I've been a guiding teacher of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts since it's early days, teaching there regularly. So, a lot of my early years of teaching was involved in leading retreats, but that has changed more of late. I am one of the co-founders of Bodhi-College, which is dedicated to studying the teachings in the early texts. I've been very engaged, well quite centrally engaged in the evolution of the more contemporary mindfulness movement, mindfulness in cognitive therapy and mindfulness stress reduction. I teach in several universities on their master's programs in those practices and styles. There is a lot more to the story but that's kind of the bare skeleton of it all.

Elise: Yes, when I hear these stories, I always think to myself, you know, that sliding doors moment where, what would have happened if you hadn't stepped on that plane to India when you were seventeen. It's like….

Christina: That was a bus.

Elise: Oh, a bus! So, yes just an incredible landing in that context at that time. What a fortunate experience.

Christina: Yes.

Elise: So I wondered, as you know the word mindfulness these days is really so prevalent and, in some ways, watered down perhaps, but I wondered if you could share your perspective on what mindfulness actually is and you might like to share where it comes from?

Christina: Well, the word for mindfulness in Pali, which is the language which the early teachings were written in, is Sati, and the early translators couldn't find a good English word to translate this word into, which is the most frequently used word in the early text. So, they ended

up borrowing mindfulness from the gospels, and there we are, we have this word mindfulness, which, I think, as you say, is used so frequently now that it easily loses nuances. I think probably the best translation of this word Sati is: a present moment recollection. In the Pali it has a connotation of remembering, but the Buddha took that remembering from the context of remembering historical events to actually remembering to be present. So, he really founded it in the present moment, and mindfulness can be understood in a lot of ways through many of the images. You know mindfulness is spoken about as a gate keeper, a gate keeper of the heart. It's about really discerning what is contributing to distress, and what is leading away from distress. The gate keeper stands at the gates of the city welcoming in everyone that holds the well-being of the city at their hearts and not welcoming in those who don't. Mindfulness is sometimes likened to a surgeon's probe, a surgeon about to undertake a surgery, you know who is careful with examining the wound, ascertaining the nature of the wound, in order to make a diagnosis, in order to prescribe a path of treatment. I mean, this word Sati, if I was to simplify it, has four primary dimensions and the first dimension is, it's really simply knowing, you know, to know this moment as it is, to know a breath is a breath, to know a thought is a thought, to know a sound is a sound – and not adding to what is actually going on. It's that simple knowing, which is that place where we actually begin to step out of the eye of the storm. It's a place where we begin to disidentify to a large extent and actually begin to have a conversation with that's going on – not a verbal conversation but an experiential conversation. What is this sound? What is this feeling? What is this sensation? The second dimension of Sati, or mindfulness, is protective awareness and that's very different to defensive awareness. It's about protecting the well-being of one's mind, one's heart, but also protecting the well-being of the world. So, it's not just an internal process and that is where this discerning quality enters a stage of really knowing what leads to sorrow and what leads away from it. The third dimension of Sati is often referred as investigative awareness and that is where the surgeon probe image comes in, to really begin to know and experience the nature of what is going on, we know rather then our thought about it or our story about it, to actually ground ourselves in the present moment knowing what is being experienced and our relationship to what is being experienced. And, the fourth primary dimension of mindfulness, really lies in an ability to reframe view, to reframe perception. You know we go through life

carrying so many fixed views about who we are, about how other people are and about how life is and many of those views are loaded with emotional association with liking and not liking. And investigation allows us to see perhaps, how much of our views are based upon seizing just fragments of experience rather then knowing the dynamic fullness of anything at all. One of the primary ways in the early teachings of reframing view is actually through the cultivation of kindness, of befriending. I cultivate an affectionate curiosity in what's going on, I want to understand what is happening. So, those are the four primary dimensions and none of them are easy, you know for many people in their practice they're going to spend a considerable amount of time learning how to step out of the eye of the storm, how to develop their discernment, to know what to cultivate, to know what not to cultivate. That's kind of it, it's a very condensed version of what mindfulness is.

Elise: Yes, I think it's a really interesting articulation of it and I really appreciate the sort of metaphors you've brought in there around the surgeon's probe and the gate keeper. I am wondering for the listeners – because I think that gate keeper one is so powerful – you talked about it 'protecting' the mind. So, what are we protecting the mind from? Could you speak to what we're protecting the mind from?

Christina: I mean, what we're basically protecting the mind from is the surges of reactivity, the surges of ill-will and of craving and fear that so easily overwhelm. And, we're beginning to protect the mind from those surges not because they're bad or they're wrong, but simply because they create and recreate distress in our lives and in the world. And we don't protect the mind through putting up walls. We protect the heart or protect the mind really by learning that we can in those moments of being drawn towards those passions of reactivity, that we can reground, we can feel our feet touch the floor or we can feel the body breathing. We can establish this present moment collectiveness as a means of protecting the mind. It's also important to just acknowledge that in the early teaching when the Buddha speaks about mindfulness as a protective agent, it's not only about protecting our own mind, you know those surges of ill-will or the surges of harshness or anxiety make a powerful foot-print upon the world. So, it's also about protecting the world. But I think what's really most important in this protective awareness, is really the acknowledgement that the mindfulness is much more than just watching something. Mindfulness holds this element of understanding something and understanding what really leads to

distress, and what leads to the end of distress. Because it's that discerning element that is the bridge between mindfulness and skillful effort. You know without the discernment, mindfulness is easily reduced to a kind of passive observation or passive watching rather then as being one of the critical elements in a process of transformation, and that involves how we act, how we speak, how we engage, what we cultivate, what we learn to unwind from. So, that is the critical part in that protective awareness.

Elise: So, there is a seeing but it's not just about the seeing, it's a practice that's helping us see but then in service of understanding and then transformation.

Christina: Yes!

Elise: Yes and I was just going to dig deeper into this protecting the mind. What I find really interesting about that is that for me personally when I started the practice, I think it was a revelation to realise that there is actually choice, that there can be a gate keeper there.

Christina: Yes!

Elise: I mean that was completely transformational or transformative because, it's amazing that people might not discover this their entire lives, if they happen to not train the mind. But the power is phenomenal to actually realise that when I'm being taken over by anxiety or fear, there is this capacity to actually recognise it and somehow make a choice, "am I going to go along with that or can I come back to…." as you say, coming back to your feet or grounding.

Christina: Yes and I think as you experienced, this is probably the first and most powerful revelation of anyone who cultivates mindfulness. That we have a choice about where we place our attention and we also have a choice about the quality of our attention, you know in this moment I can give my attention to listening to you, I could give my attention to listening to the wind outside, or I can give my attention to my feet touching the ground. You know I think the revelation is that most people experience attention as being involuntary and unchosen. Suddenly we discover actually I can be a participant in this attentional field, and step out of really what doesn't serve me well.

Elise: Yes, so I think with this mindfulness that we are talking about, obviously the meditation is what we're doing as a form of training and practising this type of quality of attention and awareness. I guess, you

sort of hope that maybe this can trickle into your non-meditating life – but how can we actually manage big emotions mindfully. It's one thing to talk about it but I know for myself even after practising, obviously not a full lifetime like yourself, but it can be so hard, I will give you a practical example. We have an ailment and we go the doctor and get a test. We're waiting for the test results or a family member is waiting for test results and for some of us, myself included, there's fear which starts to come up, a reactivity, and so that protecting of the mind, how do you practically bring this into your everyday life? Aside from practising meditation.

Christina: If it doesn't come into our everyday life it's not really a very effective training. I want first just reframe this word meditation okay because again that's being sort of naturalised in our culture and if we go back to the early teachings, the word that translates meditation from is bhāvanā. Bhāvanā actually means to cultivate, to bring into being, to nurture and the Buddha taught in an agricultural society so this would have been, really understood easily for people as they knew if something was going to grow they needed to look after it. So, when we practise formally, we're in the process of cultivating and what are we cultivating? We're cultivating capacities that are already seeds of potentiality within the mind. We are cultivating capacities for mindfulness, compassion, sensitivity, empathy, for clarity, calm, and serenity. The Buddha actually did not just teach formal meditation, he really did teach how to live an awakened life, you know as much as he was a contemplative, he was also a social activist, you he cared greatly and focused all teaching upon the relational domain of our lives. You know, how we are with difficult life situations, with difficult people, with states of uncertainty and in the face of aggression or ill-will, this is really the classroom of the practice. And as you say, the tendency is, in those moments, to almost default towards those patterns of distress-making, that don't serve us well, but they actually make no difference at all to what we are facing, in fact they actually are compounding distress. You can approach this from many many different angles, but one of the images that the Buddha used that I think is very helpful, is that if you want to keep a fire burning just keep throwing logs on it, if you want a fire to cool just stop throwing the logs on it. Now some of the logs we throw upon those fires of conflict, or anxiety, really come in the domain, of thinking, how much we obsess, how much we ruminate, how much we've become pre-occupied and actually… part of that is very

understandable because the nature of rumination is to try to be problem solving. We try to find an answer, try to find a solution, try to figure something out and all that we're actually doing is adding more and more layers of complexity and distress. And it is the practices of grounding, of collecting, of gathering, of learning to step out of those modes of log throwing, that are so important. It's why in the teaching of mindfulness, the body is highlighted so powerfully, because it is a tangible place we can ground, as we can breathe, we can gather, we can collect and we can begin to calm some of those waves of agitation. We actually really undermine our capacities for resilience and steadiness and balance. It's hard as human beings to live with not knowing and yet the reality of life is that it's so uncertain and so unpredictable. And we tend to fill those not knowing moments with a demand for certainty or answers or solutions, and you know you can feel the agitation of that. I think part of the gift of the teaching is learning how to have patience, how to have resilience, how to have compassion and how to find some stillness in the midst of that agitation, not outside of it, but really in the midst of it. And, sometimes it really is just a simple gesture of choosing what I'm going to do with my attention in this moment, I can feed that attention into the rumination, or I can bring that attention to something that is very available to me just now. And yes, I am being the gate keeper. But it's more than being a gate keeper, I'm developing, I'm cultivating those capacities for balance, for kindness, for steadiness in the midst of everything that is going on.

Elise: I think that when people start meditation, they often come to it thinking that it's somewhere they can go to feel calm and relaxed, that it's a nice place to go. But we know as we progress that's probably not really the purpose of meditation. So, what you're saying about this connection between resilience and meditation is that there is something going in meditation that's going to translate into a greater steadiness in these moments?

Christina: Yes, how we cultivate that, how we bring those cultivations into those moments. You know, you think of yourself sitting in a busy airport or in a hospital waiting room or you're watching unwelcome news on your screen. You can feel how much your attention begins to disassociate from the body. You begin to move out into the agitation and the capacity to know that, and to bring the attention back into a sense of grounded-ness. I think it's not a denial of the agitation that is there, it's not a denial that fear arises, or that anxiety arises. But the Buddha's

teaching was very much concerned with, how do we stand in the midst of this with understanding, with compassion, without being overwhelmed and these are sometimes very small behavioural gestures of the mind. You know, I can walk through that busy airport with my eyes everywhere, my sensors prowling, you know listening caught by all the sounds and sights, or I can actually come back and feel myself touching the ground, how is the body just now, how am I listening, how am I seeing. I can sit in that hospital waiting room, leaning forward into the next moment about what might happen, what might come. Every time we move into those patterns you can feel that your world contracts, your world shrinks and it shrinks around whatever you're are identified with. And, sometimes sitting in that waiting room, I might notice, of course the mind is leaning forward, it wants to figure something out, it's wanting answers, but I can also notice in that moment the birds are still singing and you know the palm of my hand actually feels perfectly fine and you know my ear lobes are completely not agitated. There is something about learning about co-existence not to deny the difficult but to acknowledge that the lovely and the unlovely are present in every moment. And, by focusing only on the unlovely, it's a recipe for contracting. By beginning to be more inclusive and focusing on the co-existence we allow for a more spacious awareness and a greater steadiness because it's beginning to undo that pattern of identification and contracting.

Elise: And, it's in the steadiness and resilience that we're not completely contracted and swallowed up by that unpleasant catastrophic fear.

Christina: Yes!

Elise: Yes, when people begin meditation or even once they've been practising for quite a long time, resistance commonly arises in practice. I wondered if you could speak a little bit about that, and just give the listeners some warning or advice. Rather than them experiencing something and then thinking, "oh well I'm a terrible meditator and I am just going to stop this." If you wanted to describe to them or maybe offer some sort of technique or some suggestion around how to manage this when it arises.

Christina: Resistance is quite a complex word, basically we just don't want what's happening to be happening. So, resistance is one of those kinds of craving, diversion mechanisms, that I want to be somewhere else rather than where I am. I want something else to be happening,

rather than the problem that is happening, I want something to be different. This is not confined to meditation by the way, these are life matters. They're uncomfortable, but beginning to wake up and beginning to walk new pathways in our lives is bound to involve some level of discomfort. Because, you know the whole orientation of the process is to turn towards life rather than to flea and abandon, through our usual dissociative patterns that we call resistance. So, there is something about having the courage to bear discomfort, that is really central in this whole path, and it's not just about the courage to bear the discomfort in our own moment to moment experience. It's the courage to bear the discomfort of a world that is actually filled with dissociative patterns, you know, of craving, aversion, and agitation. What we call resistance is often a combination of a grouping of patterns that are so clearly identified in the early teachings. We experience them very personally but they're actually pretty universal stories. When we face a moment that we don't like, for example the body's uncomfortable, or the mind's uncooperative, we look for some better moment of experience. Maybe we'll will have a little fantasy here or maybe we'll fill that space up with a whole lot of judgment – blame or despair or maybe we'll will become very agitated, "how do I fix this, how do I make this different." Maybe we start doubting ourselves, "I can't do this, this is beyond me" or maybe we just check-out and fall asleep. This is what we call resistance, it's this combination of patterns and some people specialise in one much more than the other. But these are life patterns, they are not just something… resistance is not just something we experience in meditation, we find it when we are in midst of any emotional or psychological storm that is difficult. Those are the avenues that are default modes. So, a lot of the process is learning to develop a certain literacy about what's going on. This is doubt, you know, this is agitation, this is aversion, this is pushing away or this is numbness. We need to develop that kind of literacy and begin to be curious about those patterns and how they manifest in our practice and how they manifest in our life, and how we actually begin to grow through those patterns. Now, many people when they experience these patterns that we sum up under this word resistance, either force more, or they give up, or they despair. In the early teachings again, the Buddha was very clear in recognising these as being a kind of universal story, this reaction to distress. He didn't say: work on these, work these out, he didn't say hammer away at them you know. He said actually, in the midst of these, let's cultivate. And what do we cultivate: curiosity, kindness, patience, interest, investigation. So, we actually learn to turn

these patterns into objects of our practice, rather than being an obstacle to our practice. They're not obstacles to our practice. These are universal patterns that arise so frequently they're like old friends, you know. Oh, hello doubt you here again, oh, hello despair, here again. This is part of reframing cognition rather than these resistances being enemies to be surmounted or transcended. They actually become the classroom where we cultivate that, which is lovely. Meditation doesn't begin after these go away.

Elise: Yes, yes! And, so tomorrow, if someone listening sits to practise then just name them clearly as sign posts. I think there are probably lots, but the traditional text I think has around five or six?

Christina: Five.

Elise: So, can you just name them.

Christina: The craving for sensual pleasure, you know, that's different then appreciation by the way. This is actually a kind of an aversion: I don't want what's happening, I find it boring or I find it uninteresting, or you know I'm, whatever, detached. So, I start to find something that's going to excite me. It's easy isn't it, we feel discontent we go and open the fridge. It's about the fact that I just don't want to be where I am, it accounts for a lot of the distraction in our life. The second of these is the aversion stream, again I don't want what's going on here, you know the craving, the aversion are co-dancing together. They're agitation and worry and the doubt that comes. And then just often the dissociation of wanting to numb out, I don't want to feel. Buddha says let's be interested in what's going on here. Let's develop the literacy, let's sense how we know these patterns. Ah! This is what doubt feels like or is this what aversion feels like, this is what restlessness feels like. Isn't that interesting, and look how it changes, this is how it feels in the body, this is how it feels in the mind. But let's actually illuminate that with sensitivity and mindfulness, rather then abandoning it. This is where we actually do cultivate, the moment we turn this into our objects of practice, we're already in that journey of cultivation.

Elise: Thank you. In meditation, a common sort of guidance that you hear is, "just allow things to be as they are," a sort of invitation to stepping to a level of acceptance or allowing, and I wanted to ask you what your perspective is. I know I struggle with this quite a bit in terms of discerning the difference between acceptance and resignation, and how

you see acceptance as actually being a stepping stone towards change and transformation paradoxically, if at all?

Christina: I mean the word acceptance has very much crept into Western practice styles much more in recent years. You wouldn't find that word in the early text so much. Probably the phrase you would find much more is to see things as they actually are. There are two extremes that people can fall into in practice and in life. One of those extremes is striving, or forcing, which is kind of the near enemy of skilful effort. The other extreme is a kind of passivity or resigned acceptance, which is the near enemy of seeing things as they actually are. The teaching of the first step of transformation is to actually know things as they actually are, you know: sadness is, sorrow is, ill-will is, compassion is – to know things as they actually are. That's not the end of the journey, that's the beginning of embracing what is, without that reactivity which different. It's a very powerful piece of the journey. But then, it's also recognising that because we learn to be with things as they are, doesn't mean that everything's acceptable. And the Buddha was very, very clear on this. You know, the teaching is very clear on this, not everything is acceptable, there is that which actively leads to suffering and distress and to torment in our world, rooted deep in hatred and delusion and it's unacceptable not because it's bad but because of the imprint that it makes upon the world and upon the lives of so many. So, being with things as they are is the first step, where we move… turn towards what is actually happening and we know it, and we learn to put down our own ill-will and hatred and wanting, so that we not adding to the fire. But then, we actually look: how do we actually bring about change? How do we actually transform suffering? You look at the early teachings of the Buddha and it was very clear, the one thing he said was, dukkha is to be understood, "un-satisfaction" is to be understood. He also said " I only teach one thing, there is dukkha, there is un-satisfaction and then there is the end of dukkha." So, the commitment – the third noble truth – is the end of stress. You know, we are talking here about psychological, emotional and world distress that is born of greed and hatred and delusion. So, how do we bring that to an end? And, that's a very complex and profound picture, but it's also about how we are in the moment, it's not talking about huge ambitions that I am going to end all hatred in the world, but I actually may address the ill-will that I meet in the moment in myself and in others. I may learn how to not be a participant in that, but be a participant in the healing of that. When you

look at the early images of Kuan Yin, the deity of compassion, we often see compassion as being represented in this mode of inner softness and receptivity and gentleness, but if you look at the early images that portray compassion, it's an armed warrior. It's not just about listening to the cries of the world it's the commitment to bringing about the end of struggle and distress in all the forms that we see it in our world. In the moment it means, how do we take care? We might see greed inwardly or outwardly, we might see hatred inwardly or outwardly, we might see aversion inwardly or outwardly. How do we actually take care of this? And, I think this is where in the practice and the path, you know, courage is a big piece of this journey. It's not about being a spectator upon disaster, courage is actually a very big piece in this journey. Courage is not always about approaching life with a lion's roar, courage is often those very small behavioral gestures of the body, speech and mind that are really committed to bringing distress to an end.

Elise: Thank you, what a beautiful quote to end on and I also just wanted to offer you the opportunity to share anything else about your work or, where people can find you, anything else you would like to tell the listeners.

Christina: As well as being involved in teaching retreats, I think one of my passions at the moment is Bodhi-College and people will find that on the web bodhi-college.org. If people want to actually look more at the discussion around mindfulness, particularly mindfulness in secular settings, I've recently been a part of an online tricycle course, which is available through their archives, which explores this territory in much much more detail and much more nuanced ways. If you go the Insight Meditation Society websites and click on my picture that sort of gives an idea of where I am teaching and when.

Elise: We have a lot of people listening that are in the UK, that are often writing in to ask about retreats and so that will be good for them to know. Thank you once again, I really appreciate your time, generosity, insight and it's been a wonderful conversation.

Christina: Great, you be well.