



**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 James Baraz**

**James Baraz, has been a meditation teacher since 1978. He created the popular online Awakening Joy course, which he has taught to thousands of participants since 2003. He is the co-author of Awakening Joy: 10 Steps to Happiness, the book based on the course, as well as co-author of Awakening Joy for Kids. James is a cofounder and teacher at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, California, and a guiding teacher for One Earth Sangha, a website devoted to expressing a Buddhist response to climate change. He has contributed blog posts to the Huffington Post and his course, Awakening Joy, has been covered on Oprah.com.**

**Elise:** James, welcome to the program. I'm so delighted to have you here for this conversation. You've been a great inspiration and teacher for me personally, across the oceans through the internet. So, it's a real privilege, thank you for being here.

**James Baraz:** So nice to be here with you, Elise.

**Elise:** So, James, just for people who may not have come upon your books, your online course or your work, I'd love it if you could give a brief background

of how you stumbled into the world of meditation so many years ago and a little bit about your context of work and teaching.

**James Baraz:** Sure. Well, like many people, I was looking for answers to find some inner peace and connection in my 20's, and had some personal suffering and insecurities and not particularly liking myself very well, but I sensed that there were some options there and some ways to come to a greater happiness. Among other things, I read a book that many people in my generation were affected by, by the name of Be Here Now by Ram Dass, and that's what changed my life, where I saw it's possible that I wasn't alone and others wanted to find some peace and get in touch with the goodness. In 1974 I went out to what was called the Naropa Institute. It was the first summer of Naropa, now it is Naropa University, because Ram Dass was there and in an individual interview I asked him about meditation and he said, "go, check this guy, Joseph Goldstein out, he's pretty good." And Joseph who's my main teacher and many people's teacher had just come back from India after being there for 7 years and I sat in that class and I heard him, and he was saying it's possible to not be run by your neurotic thoughts, and I believed him, it was something that he said and I said, "I'm going for that". And for the next many years that was the heart of my life doing meditation practice and retreats and eventually discovered some ways to really access all the good inside, and then of course I wanted to share it with others. That's what I do: when I like something, I want to tell the world that this is the best way I could imagine. So, I did and I sponsored a lot of retreats for Joseph and Jack Kornfield in those early days and then eventually ended up teaching and getting the blessing to share.

**Elise:** And so, you've actually been running your own teaching group in Berkley for many, many years. Is that correct?

**James Baraz:** Yes. Of course. For 48 years. So, weekly, on Thursday nights, if anybody who's watching us comes to Berkeley, just look at [insightberkeley.org](http://insightberkeley.org) and I'm glad to have you join us.

**Elise:** Wonderful. I'd love in this conversation to dive into some of the work you've done through your book called *Awakening Joy* and the other book *Awakening Joy for Kids* which has also an accompanying online course. But before we get into that, I just wanted to cover a couple more simple things like the definition of mindfulness because this is a program that's really about helping people understand what this is. And there's a lot of different definitions and ideas about it flying around. So, what do you understand what mindfulness is?

**James Baraz:** Very simply being present for your life, being here, knowing what's happening right now without getting caught in judgments and hoping things will stay the same when they're good, which they won't, or hoping things will change before we have control over them. So, it's just bringing a non-judging awareness to what your actual experience is in the moment, whether it's pleasant or unpleasant, and meeting it with a wise kind of awareness.

**Elise:** So, is it something that is an effort or do you see this is something that we need to somehow train in this or this is something that we have as humans that we just have to tune into. How do you see this?

**James Baraz:** Well, it's something that we all know from time to time when the moment captures our attention, when we are moved by a sunset or something very powerful happens that demands our attention in the moment. We're there for it and we often call that a peak experience or something that's so challenging that we are here for it and our minds aren't distracted. So, we all have this capacity, but most of the time we are lost in our thoughts about future either with anticipation or reservation and worry, or thoughts about the past with fond remembrance, or with guilt and regret or thoughts or fantasies that our mind conjures up, and it takes some training to actually be here for other than peak experiences. And it just so happens when we can do that, when we can learn how to be present for our life, it's so much more fulfilling than whatever our mind can create. And it also happens to be the way to find deep peace and

goodness that's right inside, waiting to be accessed. So, there's many ways that it affects our well-being but we need to practice and train our mind and our heart to be here for our life.

**Elise:** I think I've heard in some of your talks you talk about mindfulness as being a vehicle for greater freedom in our lives and it brings to mind from the ancient texts the description of three poisons: the greed, hatred and delusion or ignorance. So, for the listeners that may not be familiar with this concept or this kind of collection of concepts, it's also wanting, pushing away and ignorance. Can you speak a little bit to these three things because they're so fundamental to I guess how we are not free and how meditation can liberate us somehow?

**James Baraz:** Sure. When the mind isn't trained, when the moment is pleasant, we have a tendency to want to grasp after it, hold on to it. There's nothing wrong with enjoying a pleasant moment but when we contract around that which inevitably changes, and try to hold on, or try to make it more than it is, that very movement of contraction is painful, and a setup for suffering because things will change. When the moment is unpleasant, the typical response is to contract away from it: I don't want this, I want it to go away, and of course it's natural to not want the unpleasant to stay but the more we push against it, as the edge says "that which we resist, persists". The more we try to get away from what's here, that very movement of contraction is also painful. And when the moment is neither pleasant, nor unpleasant, we tend to space out on it because it's not captivating enough for our attention and we are living in a world of sound bites and overstimulation, and so most of those neutral moments we just space out and don't think that they're worthy of our attention and in that confusion we miss out on our life. So, this is a training that's very radical and then it is saying when the moment is pleasant, as I say in my Awakening Joy, approach, don't miss it. You don't wanna miss it. But know that sooner or later it has its own lifespan and it's okay when it changes.... to fully savour it, appreciate it and then when it's gone, to know that that's the natural way of

things. When the moment is unpleasant, instead of fearing it or rallying against the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, we can learn how to open up to it and find a courage and a wisdom that can meet the difficulties, with grace and courage and wise response. And so, we can learn from these difficulties, and when the moment is neutral and not particularly captivating, we can start to see that every moment of our life is precious and every moment counts. We're only here for a finite number of moments in this lifetime. No one knows how many there are but lost in our thoughts, we miss out on the preciousness of life and so that's where mindfulness is so profound, and we're here whether it's pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. We're here for a life and either enjoying the blessings or learning to open with compassion, wisdom if it's difficult, or appreciate all the moments that are here.

**Elise:** Thank you so much. On that note, I've heard people who actually are not trained in meditation or perhaps have heard about Buddhism but don't really know much about it, say things like: doesn't this practice make you really detached and numb because you're not supposed to be attached to anything. So, how would you respond to that? You've sort of responded in what you've just said. But could you just kind of clarify that even more?

**James Baraz:** Yes. And it is a very common question. I'm just staring at my **navel** and not being involved in life. Actually, it's quite the opposite because instead of being lost in our created reality our mental fabrications, we're connected, we're actually here for our life and so we can respond and engage with life instead of living in our small reality that's not seeing the bigger picture. It's not that you don't have all the feelings that are part of being human. You actually become that much more attuned to the whole pallet of human experience. And so, when you're going through fear, "oh, this is what fear is like being human, how can I open to it in a whole different way that it doesn't confuse or overwhelm". Or when I'm appreciating some sweet amazing moment, the beauty of a sunrise or the smile of a child, "oh, I'm here for it",

instead of being lost in some kind of thoughts. It actually keeps us more engaged if we're truly practising, we're present as I said, we're present for our life instead of being lost in our thoughts.

**Elise:** And what about this kind of contradiction that people often bring out which is around: this practice which is about being present, but then the fact that in our lives we also are ambitious, we're future focused, we're goal orientated because we have to have plans in our life. So, how do you respond to that when people are asking you how to reconcile this being in the present and in the now versus wanting to plan my life. Is it okay to have ambitions and that kind of things?

**James Baraz:** Absolutely. In *Awakening Joy*, there are ten steps in my approach towards well-being that come from teachings that have been so impactful for me and the first step is intention, is wise intention. And that is getting clear on what you want to create. But that's different than making a pass fail test out of life or out of yourself, and being so caught-up in the future that you miss out on the present. So, you plan and you have a calendar, I just came back from Australia and it was wonderful being there by the way, and meeting all the great Aussies and kiwis in New Zealand. I had that trip planned a year before. I didn't know if I was going to go on it. Who knows, you make a plan, I have my calendar for next year and I see that's the game plan. But life might happen, and it changes. I'm not spending my year wondering, oh yes, next year I'm going to be in Germany in June and I wonder how that's going to be. You make your plans and then you live your life. So, rather than negating the future or negating the past, we learn from the past and have all kinds of understandings and lessons and beautiful memories. But not to dwell on it so much that you miss out on the present in your life. We use both the past to learn from, the future to plan and then you see what happens by being here for the journey instead of wondering when you're going to get to the end. And the same thing also goes for learning to appreciate this moment. The more you're here for this

moment instead of thinking about the future or worrying about the future, the more you'll likely be there for that moment. And that's the tricky thing. If we have this habit of toppling forward, then chances are when we get to our vacation that we've planned for so meticulously and with so much care and kindness, probably on our vacation we'll be thinking about what we'll do when our vacation is over and we'll miss out on that. So, every moment counts the more that you're here.

**Elise:** Beautiful.

**James Baraz:** Just one thing actually that does occur to me as well is that there's something really valuable about having a vision and inspiring a vision for the future. This is besides the calendar planning. If you have a sense of what will really move you and inspire you and bring out the best in you, that's a very healthy thing. And when I talk about intention, it's not so much having a goal – although we can have goals and I write down my goals at the beginning of the year as many people do – but rather than seeing did I make it, did I pass, I'm just inviting a particular vision. And so, I'm inclining the mind particularly towards well-being and doing and sensing what I need to bring that vision about, to bring that inspiring vision about, particularly if my happiness is seen in the context of bringing about more goodness and happiness in the world, that's a vision that can really fuel us. So, it's not that we don't think about what we want to create in our life, we get inspired by it and then live the journey.

**Elise:** Wonderful. And on the topic of the intention that I had as a question for you: how do you use intention actually in the context of your meditation practice or when you're guiding students in terms of helping people to be very "with" their practice and motivated? How do you use intention with meditation practice?

**James Baraz:** Well, as I just said, you have an idea of what you want to create but really as I've seen in my own meditation practice and share with other

people, you don't have all that much control over your mind in any one moment. If you did, you probably would sit down in meditation and say, "okay, I'm gonna be present for the next thirty minutes" or however long you're sitting "and just be here". Good luck. The mind wanders and so the key moment that I see in this mindfulness practice is the moment that you realise the mind has wandered and instead of taking it personally or thinking that we're doing something wrong, you have the intention to be here as best you can and when you see your mind wandering, to not take it personally, it's just what minds do, and with your intention to bring yourself back in a very loving way each time. And that's how the training occurs. Not by sheer effort or will, "I'm going to stay present if it's the least that I do". But you just can incline the mind towards being in the present and have a great kindness and patience and forgiveness when it does what it does and you bring it back. And just in that intention to be here in a very loving way starts to train the mind, like I often say like training a cute puppy to stay on some paper, you don't wanna scold it or yell at it for wandering off, you bring it back with love each time and after a while it gets the idea. And in the same way you have the intention to be here and in a very loving way, bring it back each time it wanders, and little by little you're training it to be here for your life.

**Elise:** Thank you. In your book one of the chapters is about the joy, it's called the Joy of Letting Go. And the principle of letting go comes up a lot when you start to practice meditation. Can you speak a little bit to what you mean by that and what you've learnt about this practice of letting go?

**James Baraz:** I keep on learning. It's a lifelong lesson. Because as I said a bit earlier when we have a pleasant experience or something that we cherish, the mind naturally holds on but in this world there is one underlying truth and that is everything changes. And so, when you truly see and mindfulness shows this again and again that everything is constantly changing, holding on to that which is changing is a setup for suffering and futility. And so, you enjoy when things



are here and as I said before, don't miss the blessings, but when they naturally change, to gracefully see this is part of the cycle of life and so sometimes it seems that, oh, if I really learn to train the mind, I'll come to this magical place where my mind is quiet and peaceful and relaxed and it will be clear sailing. But no matter how blissful and peaceful you get, it will change. So, you start to see that – whether it's the meditation or your life – that there is a continual shifting of ups and downs and ups and downs, and you change your idea of what real happiness is from getting to some wonderful peak experience to just being here for the ride. And when things are wonderful, don't miss it, and when they change, let go of holding on to that which is changing. And when things are difficult, it's okay, it will change and you can let go of the fear or the agenda that, "oh, I've gotta do more than is possible in this moment." And so, that's one aspect of letting go: to let go of thinking that you can control life. This is a very futile endeavour. Then there are other aspects of letting go that I talk about in that theme. One is letting go of thinking that you can control other people. It's hard enough to control your own mind, but even those who you care about or love, as you probably know the people closest to us are often the ones we have most agendas for, "oh, I hope they don't disappoint me, I hope they come through for me, I hope they feel like I want them to feel". And that's also a set up for pain because we can't control how other people feel. And the more agendas we have for them, the more often there is resistance. Have you noticed when somebody says, "Elise, please don't disappoint me, please come through for me", it's like, "oh, okay..." But if they're really appreciating and loving you and just accepting you for who you are and negotiating responsibilities and agreements and things like that of course, but the more people can just allow you to be who you are, the more you want to show up for them. So, in that respect, the less agenda that we have that's an extra kind of attachment, the more harmonious are relationships. And instead of attachment, we have genuine love and well-wishing. That's another area. I'll just mention a couple of more. One is just on a very practical level, letting go of all the stuff that we think we

need, particularly in this world where consumption is doing us all in. That there is a joy that comes from simplifying our life and really distinguishing between what we need from what we want. There's no end to our wants and desires. But to live simply and see we can do without most of the stuff that we're told will make us happy, there is a tremendous ease in simplifying our life. Then another disease that we all have, is what's called called FOMO, the fear of missing out, and packing our life in with the next thing that we'll do, and we have so much on our plate, that we get indigestions trying to find balance in our life. So, these are all aspects of letting go that really lead to a kind of chilling out from that contracted mind. And then the ultimate letting go is generosity, it's the letting go that not only is relinquishing but in enjoying sharing with others. That's a tremendous source of happiness and well-being.

**Elise:** I thought you were about to say in the ultimate letting go of death.

**James Baraz:** Well, in some ways this is a rehearsal for the big letting go. And in the teachings actually there are some daily reflections that are suggested that we think of all the time: I will become old. This body is not above ageing. This body will become sick. This body will die and everything and everyone near and dear to me, I will be separated from. Those are important reflections that the more we understand - not to bum us out or to be morbid - but to just to really inoculate us with the truth. This is part of life, then we're not so afraid to encounter them or to deal with them when they're here. And we see how precious life is and how precious our relationships are. So, the more we truly see the ephemeral nature of life, the more we really want to be here for the present. And when the inevitable happens, we can process our grief with grace and process our hopes and our fears with grace because everything changes.

**Elise:** One more thing that I wanted to ask you about letting go. So, meditation is this practice that we do. But for a lot of people that come new to it, there's a period where it takes time to understand that, it's not just about sitting to meditate and then you go on and live your life. It's the idea that it's a training

that infuses you with bringing that awareness into your life. How does letting go play out in meditation? So, how are we practising letting go actually when we sit to meditate?

**James Baraz:** In many-many ways. One is letting go of our agenda or ideas about what is supposed to happen... and if I'm a good meditator, then this will happen, it'll look like this, and if my mind is wandering, or I'm getting caught up in emotions then I'm doing something wrong. We have all kinds of ideas about what it should look like: whether it's meditation or whatever our projects are. Am I good enough, am I doing well enough? And there's a tremendous relief that comes with just knowing that you're showing up as best you can and having a sincere intention to be present and then, letting go of the report card. That's the first one. You say that in Australia? Letting go of the report card and just seeing, "okay, what is this moment in life, how can I meet it with wisdom and compassion." So, that's one: letting go of agenda. Another is when there's a really delicious experience that happens, it's almost a setup for "yes, now it's working. And how do I keep it here?" And that in itself, that grasping on to the pleasant is a very quick way to destroy the sweetness because as I said before, any contraction of mind and there's a setup for suffering and you're getting in the way of the sweet moment. So, it's letting go when the pleasant moments change. And it's also letting go of your fear that when things are not pleasant, that they'll never go away. And just saying, "oh, okay," instead of the doubt that says, "I don't know if I can be with this" to see through that and say, "oh, if I can bring some curiosity and interest" which goes against the grain of everything that we are conditioned to do in the face of unpleasant, "If I can bring some interest, oh, this is what sadness is like and this is loneliness is like or this is what worry or fear is like." And so, we let go of our thinking that we're not up to the moment and see that little by little if we have the courage, we can start to touch even those difficulties and not get lost in our assumptions about what we can or can't do. Letting go of the stories that we create in our

mind, let's say, "oh, I'll never gonna be able to do this" or stories about who we are, "oh, yes, this happened to me when I was younger and therefore I'll never be able to..." and you can fill in the blank. To not be run by our stories is a tremendous source of freedom, to see we can create things any way we want if we have the tools and see through the stories that are created in our mind.

**Elise:** On the topic of the stories: I think for me, one of the biggest revelations in practising meditation was that new seeing around the mind and the thoughts and understanding that there's another way of relating to thoughts. I think you said that in one of your talks something that I'd loved. You said something like, "when you can move from gosh, look on my mind, wow, look at the mind do its thing and not take it personally, that's freedom". Can you just speak to this idea for the listeners around thoughts and how you see them when you start to practise in this way, and that maybe they're not all you and where's the evidence for that, because that sounds crazy when you start hearing that for the first time. If my thoughts aren't me, who are they? Of course they're me.

**James Baraz:** One would think that's so. But actually you don't have much control over the thoughts that come through your mind. If you did, you'd probably only have loving thoughts of blessing everybody. But a few others probably sneak through from time to time. You just sit down and it's very humbling to see what the mind can create. If you had control over your thoughts, you would probably not be saying, "oh, I could go for a little self-judgment right now." But it comes through. Or "oh, yes, some rage, that would be good for me." There it is, completely unbidden. So, your thoughts are coming out of nowhere and if we don't mess with them, they unravel into nowhere. If you sit back and watch your mind, it's like this amazing movie that never stops. Many of them are repetitions from the previous day and if you had somebody hook up a loudspeaker to your mind, you'd probably say, this is cruel and unusual punishment. But all of these thoughts coming and going, coming and going and mostly if we're not aware of how it works, a thought comes in

that's a worrisome thought and we get worried. Or a thought comes in that's a lustful thought and we say, "yeah, I need that." And we believe our thoughts. So, when you sit down and look at the mind, you see all these thoughts just coming, all the thought trains coming and saying, "oh, believe me, believe me." You can think of them as thought trains or sometimes I think of them as hooks with baits, saying, "oh, yes, try this one out." And mostly we jump on the thought train, we believe whatever thought is coming through our mind. But if you sit there and somehow take the centred seat in the middle of the whole theatre and with awareness just see the mind creating all of these thoughts coming and going and you don't jump on the train, there's a tremendous sense of centeredness and stillness that you train yourself to not believe all the thoughts and then you can choose which thoughts to energise and which thoughts not to. Thoughts have tremendous power. One little experiment, maybe we can do it here with you right now and anyone watching can try it out. Just try this: if you would close your eyes for just a moment and I'm going to say a word and notice what happens. This is a two-part experiment, so don't worry, I won't get you stuck on the first part. But I'm going to say a word now and notice your experience. Trouble. Trouble. Notice what happens inside. Notice if there's any images or memories. Notice how it feels in your body. Trouble. Trouble. Okay, I'll leave you here. Take a nice breath. And I'll say another word. Kindness. Kindness. Notice how it feels and the images, or memories. Kindness. Okay, you can open your eyes. Notice any difference between the two?

**Elise:** Yes. It's really interesting. It could be subtle, like you really have to pay attention. But it's definitely very different. It's like an immediate difference. It's like, hang on, there's something, there's a threat here. And then there was like a relaxing with the kindness.

**James Baraz:** And if you think about it, those are two words plucked out of my mind and plucked into yours and there's that response. Can you imagine

when you're repeating particular thoughts over and over and you get stuck on a particular themes like, "what if this doesn't happen or why would she say that". And you just keep on replaying that and every time you're pressing that replay button, there's that response inside. That's a very profound effect that we're creating without even realising in our minds and in our bodies and in our hearts and the more you can see, "oh, it's just a mental fabrication, just the mind has created an image" and we can train ourselves in a different way to see, "oh, I don't have to believe that." But then a thought that comes through, "oh, I really love this person or I really want to do this because it will feel very fulfilling", and we energise those kinds of thoughts, then we have a very profound effect on what you want to choose to create our lives.

**Elise:** It's just such an interesting topic. And I feel like this is what drives me, what I'm so passionate about because having worked in psychiatry for a long time, and you see people... I think medication is very important in particular context, the depression, anxiety but to not teach people how to use their own minds and the fact that we actually do have a choice but the first step is we actually have to see what's going on first and that's where the mindfulness fits in, is just very extraordinary.

**James Baraz:** The best medicine of all is kind awareness, that can hold it all.

**Elise:** Yes because when you were talking about the fact that thoughts just come and go and we really don't have a lot of control over what pops up in our mind, I just wanted to draw out this point again because I know it used to confuse me a lot. If you were saying that thoughts come into our minds and we don't have to believe them all, we do have to take action in our lives, so some thoughts must be true and some thoughts aren't true. So how the hell do you know which ones to trust. But I think you've answered it. I just want to draw that point, highlight that point. I think you said that it's up to you, you can look at what that thought is doing and do you want to follow that thought or not. Is that what you mean?

**James Baraz:** That is what I mean but as you're saying, we have lots of different thoughts that come through and it's really hard often to have that much space around the thoughts unless you've been doing a fair amount of mindfulness practice. The more you do, the less you're apt to believe every thought that comes down the pike. But even if you've been doing this for a long time, I can have plenty of thoughts that I sometimes say "press the right button and I could be right back in the third grade" with insecurity and judgment and pettiness. But what has changed over all these years is that I don't get lost for very long. When I first started this, I could get lost for weeks, months, even years, just keep on replaying "I'm not good enough, people don't like me" or having some kind of world view. But even then I can still get lost in my thoughts. So, you asked how can you tell the difference between thoughts that serve you and thoughts that don't. And I think this is one of the most important elements of mindfulness practice. So, maybe I'll just ask you if you'll go on a little journey for me. Are there times where you get really clear about something and you know this is the way to go?

**Elise:** Yes.

**James Baraz:** Okay. Think about a good decision you've made in your life or maybe getting into this Mindful in May project or something that inspired you. How do you know that it was just the right thing to do?

**Elise:** It's a great question. I think I've learnt that I can do a lot of thinking about what I'm supposed to do but at the point I actually go and make a decision, it's always like there's a full body, it's like an impulse, it just happens, it's not even "I should do this", it's like more of a feeling than tallying up pros and cons.

**James Baraz:** Okay. Very good. And let me go just a little bit further: how would you describe the feeling? And I'm not looking for any right answer.

**Elise:** I'm just reflecting. I think it's almost like a settledness or grounded in the body, this is the right thing to do, this just feels right. Even though there can be fear but there's still an inner feeling of like this is what I have to do, even though I'm terrified as well.

**James Baraz:** Okay. Beautiful. So, I think that it's possible for all of us to become familiar with how we know that something is right, that you know when something feels right. Sometimes people say, "oh, it was just a gut feeling" or they'll say, "oh, my heart told me" or "oh, everything felt aligned". And I ask this question to people all the time and some people say "oh, my body just relaxed" or "oh, there was a sense of aliveness" or a sense of ease, or a connection with the truth. You have to listen to your body, your body will not lie. And just as I said before about suffering being about contraction, when there's contraction, the body will know: it's either agitated or tight or heavy or your mind is spinning around and that's very different than when it just feels right. So, one way to hear or to sense is just tuning in to your body. Another way to tune in is hearing the voice in the mind and there are many thoughts that come through, "you'd better not blow it" or "why did he do that?" and there's an agitation in it and there are other thoughts that come true in a much more supportive kind way. "This feels right," or "no, this doesn't feel right." And like you say, it might be even scary, like, "oh my goodness, can I listen to this voice?" But there's something supportive in it that you can trust and feel. So, part of the mindfulness practice is really getting better and better at learning how to listen to the voice of truth that's right inside of you. Even though everybody around might say, "oh, Elise, you really should do it this way" or "you really should do it that way". You know when it's the voice of the truth and the voice of wisdom, that's usually loving, supportive, kind, viscerally aligned and that's when with the gifts of mindfulness that you start to get more and more in touch with that.



**Elise:** Thank you. Just to add to that, I think something that I've learnt is you can learn to sense that voice of the truth, but sometimes it takes a while for that voice to speak out. Sometimes when we're facing something, when there's conflicting thoughts, you've got your own inner time demand, for example "I have to work this out" or "do I leave my job?" or "do I not leave my job?" And there's turbulence and pressure and then you just have to sit and be patient because that inner knowing, that feeling in the body isn't thereon demand and you have to say "okay, I'm in a storm here and I actually don't have clarity and even though I'd like to know what to do right now, I don't have the voice, it's not here, I just have to wait," which is really painful sometimes.

**James Baraz:** Yes. That's very true. And what I've often found is rather than figuring out, to listen and to calm down and just invite that voice of truth and whether or not – this is something I often do with people that are faced with decisions whether I've got to do this or I've got to do that – if there's no deadline, then sooner or later it will become clear and it will become obvious. It always does. But if there is a deadline and you've gotta come up with something – yes, it's useful to have the pros and the cons – but if you can quiet down and often it takes maybe... a friend even guiding you, what I often do is just... I never tell people what to do unless they say they're stuck and I can see that it would be useful. But that's not my first response. What I do is, okay, let's play both scenarios or three scenarios, how many there are. And I'll just go through the optimal unfolding of each of those choices and just let somebody just try it on for size. "Okay, let's try that one." "Okay, now let's move to option No 2. Try that one on. Let's move to option No 3." And almost always the body will reveal which one at least in this moment feels the most aligned. And although things might change, it's really quietening down and listening to what's true for you in this moment. At least that helps you take the next step and just see how things are unfolding. As I often share this story of a very wise man: I was at a crossroads in my life and I didn't know which of three different

choices to make and I went to this psychic, maybe you read this in the it was back in 1975. He had been very helpful in a number of different instances in my life. I used to go out to Colorado to learn from Joseph each summer and I said, "Listen, I've got these 3 choices and I don't know which one to do. Can you help me out?" And he said, "Well, I'm not gonna tell you what to do." I thought, "oh, wow, I just blew 5 dollars." But then he said, "but I will tell you one thing: it doesn't matter." I said, "What do you mean it doesn't matter? That's my life you're talking about". And he believed in spirit guides and that's how he kind of framed it. He said, "If you're frozen in decision in paralysis and you're afraid to take the next step, your guides can't help you. But if you get the sense of what your truth is in this moment and then take that next step and that next step, if you go down one road, it might turn out just opening up as you hoped or you might go for a while and say, "no, this isn't it, I need to try the other option". Or you might start on that path and a door opens that you never could've imagined. Because that's often how life works. As long as you are going by what your truth is in this moment - he talked about it - then the guides can help you. And I think of it as life will support you, if you have the courage to listen to your truth and flexibility to make adjustments as needed. Because life always keeps on unfolding. It's the best five dollars I've ever spent.

**Elise:** That's great wisdom. I think also when we're facing those decisions, for me it's been about recognising when I'm in a decision point, what's really going on for me is that I'm trying to avoid suffering like get most pleasure or avoid the most suffering. And then mindfulness has really helped me to recognise it doesn't matter because whatever path – when I was deciding whether I want a child or not, which was a big one for me, I really didn't know, stuck with that one - I just realised, you know what? There's going to be joy and suffering and that decision is going to be joy and suffering and that decision. There's no way that I'm gonna control that one's going to bring joy and the other one's going to be terrible suffering.

**James Baraz:** Even in the most wonderful decisions whether it's getting married or having a child or taking on a new exciting position or job, there's ambivalence cause there's always the unknown. And there's gonna be anxiety about, "oh, what if it doesn't turn out the way I like." That's not wrong, you're not doing something that you should feel discouraged about if there's ambivalence or fear. Any time you're moving from the known and the familiar to the unknown, there's going to be some anxiety or fear because fear is really the scout into the unknown and you're getting out of your comfort zone, so of course it's going to be uncomfortable. But as my friend and colleague Jack Kornfield says, "Fear is really saying: about to grow". You don't have to worry about the fact that there is fear or ambivalence, or you can go by is what the truth is in this moment and making the best decision not from your head but from your heart and your body. This is what feels right. Okay, let's see. And then it becomes an adventure instead of some kind of horror show. Because the mind will create anything and if it's caught in fear, it will create an unpleasant scenario. So, you just see, "oh, let's see what this one is gonna be like." Living your life is an adventure. It's so much more fulfilling and exciting.

**Elise:** Thank you so much, James. Before we close this conversation, I have one final question and then I wanted to open it up for you to share anything that you'd like to share with the listeners about your work or where people can find you. I just wanted to ask you a piece of advice or an offering to the listeners that are maybe beginning this journey in meditation, something that you learnt that really has helped you stick with the practice or overcome an obstacle. I mean, I know there's a lifetime of lessons within you but anything that arises in this moment.

**James Baraz:** Patience is very important as it's said, the spiritual journey requires a cup of wisdom, a barrel of love and an ocean of patience. That you are training your mind and your heart in a radical way and so all the conditioning that has gone into neural pathways that maybe have not served

you, it takes time to retrain and recondition, but it's really worth it. It's really worth it. Especially when you think that the alternative is just getting lost in more greed, hatred and delusion. But as long as you're facing in the right direction, and you bring a sincerity of heart to keep on waking up and grow and you are hanging out with like-minded friends which is huge, hanging out with good people whose values are aligned with yours, then that's a huge support, and to see also that your own well-being and your own inner peace is not just a self-indulgent enterprise, that your greater consciousness is a gift to the world. Is a gift to everyone around you. This world needs as much consciousness as it can and more than ever. And so, your own well-being and consciousness helps awaken that in others just like when you're around somebody who's inspiring you or who has some centeredness or calm it rubs off on you, that you can see your own practice in that context as well. Even when you get freaked out, even when you feel like you're back in kindergarten, don't worry about it. That's just part of being human. But if you're facing in the right direction and see that you are learning all the time - As one of my teachers said as long as you're learning, there are no mistakes and see your own practice and development in that context that you bring more kindness and awareness in the world, then that uplifts the whole project and the whole journey.

**Elise:** Beautiful. Thank you for ending with that wise advice. I just wanted to open a space for you to share anything else about your work that the listeners might want to know about, how to find you, what your offering.

**James Baraz:** Sure. I wrote this book *Awakening Joy* and teach an online course that people can take from anywhere in the world, that's how I get invited to go to Australia, New Zealand and other places like that because people take courses and say that is really helpful. It's fun and it's nourishing and you learn these mindfulness practices and other supportive practices in a spirit of this inner development which is really a path of happiness. Sure there's suffering along the way and it's important to know how to not be overwhelmed by it. But

this is about bringing all the goodness inside of you out and sharing it with the world. So, I invite anyone listening to it on [awakeningjoy.info](http://awakeningjoy.info) and do the course with us and read the book. But most important of all, just keep on facing in the direction of greater wisdom and kindness and understanding and do your part to bring that out into the world.

**Elise:** Wonderful. Thank you so much, James. It's been a privilege and a pleasure.

**James Baraz:** Lovely to be with you, Elise. Thank you for your work.