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Elise Bialylew interviews Paul Gilbert

Paul Gilbert, Ph.D., is head of the Mental Health Research Unit as well as Professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Derby. He was made a fellow of the British Psychological Society for contributions to psychological knowledge in 1993 and was president of the British Association for Cognitive and Behavioural Psychotherapy in 2003. He has published over 100 academic papers and 39 book chapters, and he has published or edited 22 books, most recently Mindful Compassion.

Elise: Paul, welcome to the program. I am so delighted to have you, and I thank you very much for your time in being here.

Paul: My pleasure.

Elise: Paul, just for a starter, I was curious to know how you got into the world of compassion.

Paul: Well, that's a little bit of a long story, but I'll try and make it short. I've had an interest in Buddhism since I was a teenager. Of course, compassion is central to the Tibetan approach to understanding our minds. That's one aspect. I've been going to retreats and various things for a long time. Then the second aspect is I'm an evolutionary psychologist, and studied the evolutionary mechanisms underpinning mental health problems. One of the problems that we focused on, really, back in the '80s, was the fact that when people were trying to do therapy with themselves, such as cognitive therapy, or whatever, they were very unable to be kind, and supportive, and friendly to themselves. They were very good at being self-critical, and shame-prone, but when you asked them to try to develop a friendly orientation to themselves,

and a friendly orientation to the tone of their thinking, then they found that extremely difficult. That really began the process.

Then I began studying the issues of attachment, and how affiliative mechanisms evolved in the brain, and how those mechanisms in the brain actually play a very fundamental role in how we regulate emotions. From the day that we're born, the love and care of our parents, basically, play a centre role in the regulation of our emotions. Your brain is set up to be regulated by friendly, supportive, caring acts of other people. If you take that same orientation to yourself, then you'll have better regulation of your emotions than if you're highly self-critical and shame-prone.

Elise: Are you saying there that, in some ways, is it that self-critical people can be less compassionate, or that you're less compassionate, and therefore you didn't have that compassionate milieu growing up, so therefore you develop a self-critical relationship to yourself, and therefore can't be as compassionate by nurture?

Paul: Yes. There are many reasons why people become self-critical. What's important is that it's just the content of what they say, but the emotional tone. When they're feeling self-critical, a part of them is often very angry, or contentious, and hostile. That's the emotion of the criticism that actually does the damage.

Now, some people become very self-critical and hostile because of traumatic experiences in their life. Some because they've been bullied in school. Some because they're very competitive and they have to succeed all the time, and they can't deal with disappointment. The inability to deal with disappointment when things don't work out, or not the way you want to be, often, for some people, launches these aggressive attacks. The issue that people need to understand, however, is that the nature of the attack that you deliver to yourself will have a major impact on how your brain works. Because you can't really have a set of thoughts and images without affecting your brain.

Elise: Can you just say a little bit more about that, in terms of how it's actually affecting you when you're having this kind of emotional negative tone and attack on yourself?

Paul: Yeah, okay. There are two ways of describing this. Firstly, that humans have a brain which, over the last few million years, has evolved to be self-monitoring and have self-awareness. This means that we can create images and ideas in our minds that will be very powerful in affecting our physiological systems.

For example, if you are hungry and you see a wonderful meal, so if you're a meat eater, it might be steak, if you're a vegetarian, it might be a stuffed pepper – oh, stuffed pepper – this will stimulate your saliva and your stomach acids, right? The hypothalamus is stimulated by the sight of a meal. If you just imagine, one moment, those same images will affect the same neurological pathways in your brain.

If you see something sexy on television, or friends, or something like that, this will stimulate an area of your brain called your pituitary, and will release hormones into your body. On the other hand, you could just lay in bed and fantasise a sexual image, and that would do the same thing. Your image, whether it's a meal, or whether it's a sexual image, can stimulate a very precise set of cells in your brain.

When you stop to think about it, you say, "Oh, yeah. Of course. I understand that." The point about it is, if you are then being very critical of yourself and hostile to yourself, you will be stimulating centres in your brain. We've done research on this, we know this, we've put people into scanning machines and we've seen them do it. You are stimulating specific areas of your brain which are associated with stress. If you do that over a long period of time, regularly, then you're keeping cortisol levels high, you're keeping your stress system alert and overstimulated.

The key thing, the first thing is to recognise then, that what goes on in our heads, the things we imagine, the things we think about, are not physiologically neutral. They are going to be stimulating these underlying pathways in our brain. On the other hand, when somebody is very kind and supportive to you, when you're struggling or under stress, this calms you down. This stimulates a different area of your brain, and that area of your brain down-regulates your threat system.

It's the same mechanisms of whether people are being critical to you, or whether you're being critical to yourself. It's the same brain mechanism. If you're stressed, and somebody's very critical to you and says, "Don't be stupid. Pull yourself together", that's going to stimulate your threat system. If you do it to yourself, it will also stimulate your threat system. If somebody's kind and supportive to you, that's stimulates different brain areas, the vagal nerve, and various other things, which will help calm you down. If you learn to do it for yourself, you can stimulate these same brain pathways, which allow you to get the physiological benefits of being cared about and cared for.

Elise: It's extraordinary, isn't it? I mean, it's truly incredible. I think that, generally, in the public, people do not understand the very real connection between mental image, thought, and physiological response.

Paul: Yeah. That's right. That's very, very important. That's why started with very simple examples of the meal, and something sexy, that everybody understands. "Oh, yeah, if I lay in bed and having a fantasy, I can get myself really hot under the collar." That's the fun side. The point about it is, it's the power in your mind to stimulate a very precise set of cells in your brain. It doesn't stimulate your whole brain, it sets a very precise set of cells.

It's the same with criticism, stimulates a very precise set of pathways in your brain, which are associated with threat, and feeling excluded, and so on. Whereas compassion, and compassion imagery, will stimulate a very

different set of cells in your brain. Literally, you can practice stimulating your brain when you practice compassion.

Elise: For the science geeks, with the two systems you're talking about, can you specify what they are? Is it the sympathetic nervous system and the parasympathetic, or is it even more specific than that, that you know of, from your research?

Paul: Yeah. These systems are a little bit tricky. Look, you have an area of your brain which is called your amygdala. Not completely, but for the most part, the amygdala works in conjunction with your hyperpituitary adrenal axis, which produces cortisol. That's all of the threat system. When threats come in, then you produce more cortisol, you have the arouse and the sympathetic arouse, and so on.

When there are signals that suggest that things are safe, then you can go into what is called the rest and digest system, which is, as you said, the parasympathetic system. We also know that that parasympathetic sympathetic system, that calming system, that slowing system, "Oh, it's okay. I'm okay," that system is also stimulated by signals of friendship.

Very easy example. Imagine you've got to go to party, because your job's on the line, or something like that. It's a works party. You don't really want to go, but you think, "Okay, I've got to go." You think, "I'm not going to know anybody." Then when you walk through the door, you see your best friend, and your best friends says, "Oh, hi. I didn't know you were coming. That's great." What happens to your stress? The moment you see a friendship signal, voom, down it goes. You're still in the party, you're still in the place you didn't particularly want to go, but now there's a friend there. The whole thing slows down.

Imagine going to see a friend, and they open their door and they say, "Oh, it's you," or, "Oh, it's you. Hi." You see?

Friendship signals are designed by evolution. Friendly signals are designed by evolution to calm us down. Whereas threat signals, criticism, hostility, rejection, indifference, that activates threat.

Elise: Okay. I feel like I got very immersed and curious immediately. I sidetracked it, because I wanted to ask you, actually, coming back to this notion of compassion, what your definition of compassion is, and perhaps the components of compassion.

Paul: Okay. That's fascinating. We spend a lot of time on this, because there are many, many definitions of compassion, actually, all kinds of definitions. We're pretty traditional, in terms of Tibetan Buddhist traditions. There are different approaches to compassion. One is to have a diagnostic symptoms and science of what is called phenomenological approach, where you say, "Compassion is empathy, and this, and that, and this, and that." You can have three or four things.

We don't take that approach. We take a different approach. We say that compassion is rooted in an evolved motivational system which evolved for caring, particularly for mammals. The basic aspect of compassion is this desire to care, to look after. That then leads into compassion in humans, because humans have a capacity for intentionality. As far as we know, chimpanzees don't sit around and plan their holiday, they don't plan what they're going to eat tomorrow, they don't worry about whether they're getting along with their neighbours or not. Human have a capacity for understanding themselves as objects, and for making intentions. They have an intention.

Intention gives rise to a whole lot of other competencies, such as the ability to be empathic, to stress tolerance, the ability to override an emotion. In a lot of our everyday lives, we learn to override emotions, particularly threatening ones. When you go for your driving test, you might feel very anxious, but you don't run away, you override the emotion. You might feel very angry, but you don't speak anger, because you don't want to be harmful. You override the emotion. You don't act on the emotion.

Compassion, then, comes from a caring motive, with human abilities of self-awareness, intentionality, empathy, and so on, and so on, many of them actually. Which is directed with the intention of, this is the definition, the being sensitive to suffering and distress in self and others, addressing it, and acquiring the wisdom to work out what to do. Compassion is this attending to suffering, on purpose. It's not just like a rabbit attending to their babies, you wouldn't call that compassion, they're rabbit caring, or rat caring, you wouldn't call that compassion. It's caring, but it has this awareness and intentionality. You're going to ask me a question about mindfulness in a minute. Of course, that's the point. It's on purpose. It's paying attention on purpose, with the intention to try to be as helpful as you can.

The other aspect of compassion, that is absolutely crucial, is the awareness not to do harm. Compassion also gives you the intention of the kind of person you want to be. "I do not want to be a person that causes harm, either to myself or other people."

Compassion then, just to finish, is motivation rooted in the evolution of caring mechanisms in the brain with the more recently evolved human competencies for thinking, self-awareness, intentionality. You put these two things together, and they give rise to compassion.

In animals that don't have this intentionality, this awareness, there can certainly be caring – they care for their offspring, and they care for each other – but whether you'd call that a compassion or not, I'm not sure. For humans, where you get intentionality, mindful intention, that's very clearly compassion.

Elise: Okay, thank you. Can I be devil's advocate? I'm being devil's advocate, because I'm all for compassion, but I just want to ask you the question of why does compassion matter? I mean, particularly, let's say, for someone who's a little bit more self-centered: "Yeah, okay. I can worry about myself. I don't need to worry about other people." Why does it matter? For the

sceptics, how can we personally benefit from being compassionate, if you like?

Paul: Okay, well that's great. Maybe you don't. I mean, we're not saying you should or you shouldn't. It's up to you. From our point of view, your mind is organised around motives. Let's supposing that you have a competitive motive, a "me first" motive. Then, if you live your life as a me first with a me first motive, that would have consequences. One of the consequences, that actually you'd be very narcissistic and people won't like you very much, so you won't have many friends. That's one possibility. Another possibility is that when we become very competitive, we also become much more vulnerable to shame when we fail. We're not very good at coping with the things when we fail when we are very self-focused. We also become very vulnerable to self-criticism, and we also become very vulnerable to envy.

Self-focus is okay, if you want to do that, but actually, if that's out of balance with other social relating, pro-social aspects of your personality, you're going to end up lonely and unhappy, basically. We know that there are many people who are very wealthy, and they've been very successful, but they're still pretty miserable and depressed, because they're living in a cold world. It's cold. There is no real pro-sociality or affiliation with friendliness in that world. It's empty. Even those individuals who become very narcissistically successful, they have to continue, because they can often feel that, actually it's only because of their success that people like them.

Elise: We've spoken a little bit about the system, so the neuroscience behind compassion, and the different systems that you were talking about. I wonder if you could maybe speak a little bit more about how this relates to earlier childhood, and the relationship between nuturance as a child and your capacity for compassion later on.

Paul: Yes, this is very important. I think this is a great question. I think the point that you're making is an excellent one. We know that, over the last 20 years/30 years, there has been a shift towards more self-focused, "me first".

You've seen it in America now. We see how we respond to immigrants. In many, many areas of life, people are becoming self-focused. We also know that our young people are becoming more self-focused, and they're becoming miserable. The rates of eating disorders, and depression, and self-harm are just going through the roof, because of the sense of connectedness is really not there, or it's fragile now.

The question that you're asking is a really important one. When you grow up in a caring home, where the people around you are very sensitive to your distress, they are responding to your stress. That's compassion coming in. As a child, you are experiencing your parents as responsive to your distress, with the power to alleviate that distress, often, and facilitating your flourishing, encouraging your exploration into the world. You develop what we call an internal working model of yourself and others, which is called secure base. In other words, you have a sense of security, a platform. There are people around you you can turn to, will help you and support you. And you have what is called an experience of safe haven, which is that when you're distressed, you would experience a calming down, because your mum, or whoever, has picked you up, and cuddled you, and given you a cuddle and said, "It's going to be okay." The experience of caring in early life creates brain architectures which allow you to experience the effects of calming through relating, particularly positive relating. That sets up a whole set of systems and brain pathways in your head.

If, tragically, you do not grow up in that environment, maybe you are more neglected, when you're distressed you're not comforted, you have to try to work it out yourself, if you're upset, people just say, "Go to your room and sort it out," or you're threatened a lot, or you're, even worse, abused, then that internal working model and those brain systems don't develop quite in that way. You become much more cautious of others, you're less trusting of others, you're more critical of yourself, you don't know how to treat yourself kindly and wisely, because you never learned it. Those brain systems, that

are really important for how we regulate our emotions, don't get an opportunity to develop.

The point about it is, however, not to be too despairing about it, because we can still learn, as we grow up later, to choose to cultivate some of these brain systems by practices which can help to bring them back online.

Elise: Great, yeah. For those that might be listening that didn't have that, or are feeling, "Whoa, I missed out," there is this optimism and this positivity that we know that these things can be built with practice and development.

Paul: Yeah.

Elise: I wonder if you would be able to share for the listeners, I know you outline these in your various books, *The Compassionate Mind* and *Mindful Compassion*, but if you were able to share, perhaps a tool, a practice, or an exercise. Something that someone might be able to do at moments where they notice that very self-critical tone, or moments where they find that they're aren't able to be compassionate. What do you suggest to people, in terms of practising, to develop this skill?

Paul: Okay, so that's great. Okay, a couple of things. When we started doing the compassion work, I was working very much within the cognitive traditions. In the cognitive traditions, people have become aware of certain ways of thinking. For example, people when they're depressed, they may feel they're a failure, and they're not going to succeed at anything. What you have them to do is to stand to one side and say, "Okay, how do you see this if you weren't depressed? How would a friend talk to you?" They're able to generate alternative thoughts, such as, "Actually, I'm successful at this, I have a family that cares about me," or whatever.

What we discovered was that even when people had these alternative thoughts, if you asked to say to you how do you hear them in your mind, they would tell you in a very aggressive way. They would say things like, "Well, I'm trying to challenge my negative thinking by telling myself, 'Come on.

You've got a family who loves you. At least they say hello when they pass, for god's sake.'" We discovered that the tone of their thinking was very hostile.

The first thing is to remember then, be careful of your tone. Be aware of your emotional tone. Practice, every day, talking to yourself in a friendly voice. Create an internal friendly voice. Maybe wake up in the morning and say – my name's Paul – "Hello, Paul. Welcome to the day. Let's see how we do today." Emotional tone is very important. When you're critical, it's the tone, it's the hostilities, the anger, the frustration that's going to do you in. That's this key. If you develop a friendly voice, and really practice the emotion of the voice, when you're practising saying hello, it's, "Hello, Paul." You practice that friendliness in the voice, because that stimulates your brain.

Then next thing is learning how to breathe. When we are in threat mode, what happens is – I don't know if you can see me on the video – your body curls inwards. When you're angry, your body curls inwards. When you're anxious, your body curls inwards. The first thing is posture. You lift your shoulders up and back, and this opens this diaphragm. That's the first thing, up and back. When you have your shoulders up and back, you create a little curve in your back. When you're sitting forward like this, your back is curved like that. When you sit upright, your back is curved like that. Get your posture.

Then the next thing is the sense of grounding. Where you're sitting, or where you're grounding, imagine that you're grounded into the floor, almost rooted into the floor. The floor or the ground is holding you up and supporting you.

The next thing is slowing the breath. In through the nose, out through the nose. Just allowing the breath to slow. Now, there are many apps that you could get that will help you with this breathing. It's about five breaths per minute. The idea is the breath comes in, slowly, slowly, slowly, evenly, smoothly, hold for a moment, and then out, slowly, slowly, slowly, no rushing. Getting this rhythm, this rhythm of the breath.

We know that this rhythm of the breath stimulates part of the parasympathetic system called the vagus nerve, which comes all the way down. Vagus means wandering. It's nerve that's all over the body. This breathing helps to produce a physiological state of slowing down. When we create that physiological state of slowing down, it also helps the frontal cortex to come online, which is the part for your empathy and your rational thinking. One of the key things, then, is slowing. Learning to slow the breath and ground the body. It's the grounding, posture, chest open, rooted to the ground. That's key.

Now you've got friendly voice, then you've got the physiological stimulating of the vagus, then you've got the grounding in the body. Then you bring in your compassionate intention. Being aware, what is your intention? The intention is, "May I address suffering, whether it's to me or others, in a wise and helpful way?" Because I don't want to contribute to it, I want to try to help relieve it. You bring in this intention. This intention is really extremely important.

Now, when you get more deeply into the compassion work, then you'll get more deeply into the fact that part of the wisdom of compassion is the recognition that life is very fragile, unfortunately, that suffering is all around us, that everything is impermanent. That many of the thing that we don't want tend to happen, and the many of the things that we do want don't last very long. That's a bit tricky.

Suffering is part of life. People often think everybody should be happy, and that's great, but happiness is fleeting. The most important thing is how do we deal with the ups and the downs of life in a wise way, with this intention, this intention, that I will try to address suffering and difficulties wherever I come across them in a wise and courageous way, to be as helpful as I can? As long as you've got that intention, that's important.

Those are some key things, really. Focusing on how. Not just what you're thinking but how you're thinking. Practice this emotional tone. If you find

yourself thinking, “Yeah, but I don’t like myself, I hate myself,” you say, “That’s okay. I’m going to just put that to one side, okay? I’m not going to fight with it or try and challenge it. I’m just going to spend some time just practising having a friendly emotional tone.” Then the breathing, then the grounding, then the focusing. Then every day, focusing on the intention, my intention. What is my intention? What is the person I want to become?

We argue that if you focus on compassionate intention, this does things to your brain. It actually creates better relationships around you. Many, many positive spin-offs for you when you have compassionate intention. Also, be open to the compassion of others. What we find is that when people are depressed or they’re anxious, they close down. They don’t notice when people are being helpful to them or they dismiss it. Even small things, like the person who smiles at you in the shop, notice that, allow that to come in. Allow that to come in. Again, if you do that, that will be affecting your brain and your body.

Elise: Beautiful. Can I just clarify, with the intention piece, is that coming up with your own mantra or phrase? Are you actually saying it silently to yourself in times of moments of tension or suffering? I’m thinking about, specifically, if you have a conflict. One of my questions, actually, was going to be about, that sometimes it can be most difficult to be compassionate to the people that are closest to us. We watch the news, we can be very compassionate to the suffering in the world, but when we’re under a lot of stress, whether that’s we’re at work, and we’ve got families, and we’re pressured, and it can be very difficult to be compassionate to those most close to us. In those moments of tension or suffering in those intimate relationships, I guess, what you’ve just explained could be a very helpful tool to bring into that. I was curious about that intention, how you actually use that. Is it say to yourself, or stick it on the wall?

Paul: I think that’s a great question. The point is, firstly, actually, I suspect that you are very compassionate to people you love. If there was anything wrong with them, you’d rush them to hospital, and so on, and so on. You spend,

probably, a lot more money on their birthdays than you do the starving children in Africa or wherever. I'm sure that, actually, in reality. But, because they are so important in your life, they're also the sources of conflict in your life and disappointment. If you don't care about them, you're not going to really be bothered, are you.

Part of the problem comes, then, when we recognise that they're not behaving in the way that we want them to behave. Particularly children. Children are great at making you rageful, because they have their own things they want to do, they don't want to do what you want them to do. They don't want to go to school, they don't want to be eating their greens. They want to watch television.

Elise: I'm just at the beginning of that journey. Lots of compassion ahead.

Paul: The point is that what you're asking is that, how does compassion help as a point of conflict with individuals who are important to us? This is really an interesting question. The key thing is, firstly, I think, what you're doing in your program is learning to be mindful. Being aware of whatever is arising. "This person's making me angry," or, "I'm getting angry now." Always remember that, in the CFT, in the compassion approach, it's understanding that you are a multiple. In others words, when you're having a conflict with somebody, there will be a part of you that's angry, but there will also be a part of you that's a bit anxious, and there will also be a part of you that's a bit sad.

Sometimes, when we have conflicts with people, we only listen to one of the voices. When you have conflicts with people, the key thing then is recognising what it is you're actually feeling, and having the compassion to meet those feelings honestly. If you're angry, then let's think about your anger. If you're very sad, or you're very anxious, let's meet those feelings compassionately.

When you develop a sense of a compassionate self, you stand back, you become mindful. "What am I actually feeling" What's going through my

mind?" You don't judge it. It's a non-judging engaging. Then you make a decision, "How do I actually want to act? If I was at my compassionate, wisest, calmest, if I was at my best in this situation, what would I like to do?"

What we know is that, unfortunately, angry self and anxious self, they are gate crashers. You don't have to practice them. Nobody lays in bed and thinks, "You know what? I've got to have more rage in my life. I've got to go practice raging and telling people to sod off. I've got to practice this. I'm just no good." Nobody practices having panic attacks. Anxiety and anger, the two big ones, these are the two big ones that cause most of the problems in humans, they just turn up. They're turned on automatically like this all the time.

Elise: It's a bit of a design fault, really, isn't it.

Paul: Sorry?

Elise: It's a bit of a design fault, really, isn't it.

Paul: It's a design fault, yes. It's a design system. They were originally designed to protect you, and therefore they need to be quick. If you hear the sound of a lion in the jungle, you've got to be quickly anxious. If somebody threatens you, you've got to respond quickly.

The calming system, on the other hand, your parasympathetic system is slow. It's slow to calm down. It is not a rapid system. It takes a while. Imagine that you've been driving your car and you have near miss. You can be anxious and frightened very, very quickly. Almost the moment that the accident just about happened: "Phoo". It could take you hours, or even days to calm down, because it's really just shaken up the whole system.

Coming back to the issue of conflict, conflict can spiral out of control very quickly. Getting yourself into a calming position, where you try to work out exactly how you want to do that is a little tricky. That can take a little bit of practice. The other things with conflicts is that, because people don't like

them, they don't know how to deal with them. They tend to push them under the carpet until they rise up again. The compassionate thing to do when you have a conflict is to find a time with the person you're in conflict with, and say, "Look we do have a conflict about this. It's not about one person being right, one person being wrong, but how do you think we should deal with it? What's the best? Because I'm disappointed in you, you're disappointed in me." Try, as best you can, to find a wise way of dealing with conflicts, because conflicts are part of life, you're not going to avoid them. You're just not.

With children, on the other hand, that's using your breathing and your grounding, and thinking how you just set boundaries. Sometimes you just have to be prepared to say no, or, "We're doing this anyway. That's the end of the game," and learn to be quite firm.

Elise: And breathe.

Paul: Yes, breathe. The most important thing this blaming and attacking. "Look, you know you shouldn't be doing this. Look, if you loved me, you wouldn't do this. Look, why are you giving me such a hard time this morning? You know how busy I am." All that blaming the child. The child is just being a child – pain in the arse, that's what they are. Perfectly normal, perfectly natural. That's what they're supposed to be doing. As long as you hold your position, it is frustrating, this is irritating, but it's not my child being purposefully difficult. They're just being what they are. What I have to do is try and regulate my emotions so that I can find a wise way of dealing with this.

Of course, some children, they have difficulties with settling. I won't give you a diagnosis, but they can be quite tough. Sometimes we need advice, we need help with what's happening with our kids as well. The key thing is trying as best we can. The compassionate position in the conflict position is recognising that these relationships are where you're likely to experience your most powerful anger, your most powerful disappointment. Also feelings of love as well, of course. That's why we have to be cautious, because it's

easy for us to be stimulated in situations, in relationships that matter to us. In relationships that don't matter, then it's not so powerful. In relationships that matter, then those are ones that can really get under our skin.

Elise: Absolutely. Thank you.

Paul, I'm aware of the time. You've been incredibly generous. I wondered if I could just ask you, there's another question I wanted to ask you which I ask all of the experts. This program that I'm offering is really about helping people to develop skills and inner tools to live a life well lived. I wonder – it's a personal question, just a fun one – if you could think about the advice that you give your younger self. With everything you know now from perhaps your professional work, your own journey, what advice, or perspective, would you give yourself, your younger self, in order to help you direct towards a life, a happy, well-lived life?

Paul: Well, that's a great question. Firstly, that life is a rainbow of opportunities, a rainbow of things. Life is full of ups and downs. There will be times when you will be happy, and there are times when you will be miserable. I think all of us may have been through times when perhaps even life seems so dark we think, "What's the point of us being here?" Understanding that these are natural flavours in life. It's not all happy, happy, like the television makes it.

Also, to build on those moments of happiness, and also to focus on making other people happy. I think that we've got in the West this idea that it's all about us, but the fact is that having the privilege of being a clinical psychologist, it's been a wonderful career for me, to be able to work with other people and help other people. I think, if we spend more time thinking about how we can focus on what we can do for others, this is – and there's quite a lot of research now – a recipe for happiness.

One of the little Buddhist things is that as you go walk through your day, the people that you'll meet, just form a little wish that you hope that they will be okay. "I hope you'll flourish. I hope your life's going well. I hope there is

happiness ahead in your life." Just have a little wish in your head. Rather than walking down roads thinking of all your worries and telling yourself, "God, what I shit life this is," look at the people around you. Because they're sharing this time space with you. In 100 years, you're all out of here, you're all gone. Everybody's gone. None of you will be here. For this moment, you are sharing this life space, this life flow, with the people around you. Therefore, if we just tune into that.

Recognising that, unfortunately, life is a mixture of the good and the not so good. How we learn to deal with the not so good is really important. Learning how to treat ourselves with respect and friendliness. It's easy to be angry and hostile with ourselves, so practice the more difficult way, and focusing on how to create a more compassionate world. To see it as a joyful thing to do, not just a miserable thing to do, but it's a joyful thing. It brings joy. This wishing well for other people is a joyful thing.

Elise: Beautiful. That could be a wonderful practice for people to experiment with, for the listeners to experiment with. Noticing what you actually feel as you walk down the street doing that.

Paul: Yes. It really is. Just being aware that you want anybody who sees your face, or passes you, to have a good feeling. When they pass you, they see a friendship on your face. They see maybe a slight smile on your face. They see somebody who is reasonably confident. Now, some people will say, "You'll just make people envious then. They'll say, 'Why are you so happy?'" The point of that is, you're able to just focus on the wish for them to be happy. I think that actually comes across.

Elise: Yeah. I'm just laughing. I'm really laughing at that last comment, that people look and you and just think, "Why are you so bloody happy?"

Paul: "What have you got to be happy about?" Yeah. That's always possible. My wife and I, we used to have a little competition. There's a lovely walk by a river, and people would walk there on a Sunday. We used to have a

competition where we'd just smile at people to see how many people we could get to say good morning, to actually say something to us. It was just very fun. It's great to do. Just this idea of wishing people well.

At the moment, we are full of a world where everybody's focusing on threat. Our leaders are all focusing on threat, threat, threat, threat, threat. As opposed to actually, "Why don't we just try and create a better place for everybody? Wouldn't that be nice?"

Elise: Absolutely.

Finally, was there any other research that you've done that you feel is really pertinent? I know you've done a lot. Anything that we haven't covered that you think that would be really valuable and interesting to the listeners to know in the field of compassion. We've covered a lot already

Paul: I think, coming back to your other point, we've done a lot of work on competitive behaviour, because with my other hat on, I've done a lot of work on depression and shame. One of the things we find that cause people a lot of trouble is they're competing to avoid being inferior. You often think that people are competing to be superior, and some people are. I won't say exactly what part of the world that seems to be the case. A lot of the everyday depressions are because people have this underlying sense of inferiority and not being good enough, or there being something wrong with them.

Compassion is really addressing this underlying sense of personal inadequacies, which might be quite small, or might be quite big. If we can begin to use compassion to address those underlying sense of personal inadequacies that we carry, that sense of shame, that sense of criticism, and recognise that we're all in this, we're all imperfect beings. We've all just found ourselves here. We have bodies with two and two legs. We never built that, the genes built it. We have a head that sits here and a brain that sits in

here. In here are all these systems for anger, and anxiety, and joy, and sex. We never built any of that stuff. Where the hell did all that come from?

Elise: Let alone chose the family that you happen to fall into, or the hole.

Paul: That's brilliant, that's right. If I had been kidnapped from hospital as a three-day-old baby, and brought up in, I don't know, an Australian drug gang, this version of Paul Gilbert wouldn't exist. A much more sadistic and aggressive would exist. I might be very wealthy now, or dead, or in prison.

This is very important. Not only do you not choose your genes, you didn't choose the kind of brain you have, or the body that you've got. You didn't choose whether you're male or female. You didn't even choose the version you've become. That was decided by the environment you've grown up with. Not to see that as something personal to you.

One of the key things in compassion is that we've all found ourselves in this head, and how do we learn to drive it, and not overly identify with it? Matthieu Ricard makes this point, that your mind is like water. It can contain a poison or a medicine, but it is neither. Water is pure. When you come to your mindfulness discussions, that part of you that's observing, that is mindful, that's pure. That moment to moment observation, that nature of consciousness itself is pure. Content, what fills it, is created by your biology, by your body, by your genes. What fills consciousness for a human will to that fills consciousness to an antelope, or an elephant or something. Understanding that what's in consciousness is coming through the way that we're created, and the way in which our environments have shaped us. Actually, the observer part of you is relatively pure.

The trick is learning how to deal with content, not identify it. Not to see, "This is me, this is me." No, no. It's a version of you. It's a version of you that's been created by genes and background. There's nothing special about it. Although I don't believe in incarnation, this where incarnation is an interesting idea, because there can be loads of version of you.

There we are. Recognising that we're biologically created, we didn't choose any of that. The compassion is the intention. Given that I have this brain and mind I never chose, how can I develop my compassion and wisdom so that whatever suffering that I find, be it in myself, or inadequacies, or whatever it is, or suffering in other people, I will, to the best of my ability, be as helpful and as supportive as I can. That's what I want to do. That becomes your life goal, your life intention. Wherever you meet suffering, whether it's in yourself or other people, you're going to try as best you can to bring wisdom to deal with it.

When anger turns up, try to deal with it compassionately. When anxiety turns up, try to deal with that compassionately. Always practice wise ways of dealing. If you ground yourself in your body and your breathing, this will help you to slow down and give you a chance.

Elise: I think it's an extremely worthy pursuit to dedicate your life to.

Paul: Yes.

Elise: Thank you so much for your time. If there was anything else that we haven't talked about, your work, your books, I will share links to your work, as I mentioned, for the listeners. I really appreciate your time today. It's been a thoroughly fascinating conversation. Thank you.

Paul: I'm glad it's useful. Thank you so much for asking me.

Elise: Thank you.

Paul: Okay. Bye, bye.

Elise: Bye.