

MIND LIFE PROJECT

with Dr Elise Bialylew

Gregory Kramer is the Founder and Guiding Teacher of Insight Dialogue, a powerful meditation practice which brings mindful awareness to the domain of relationships to deepen communication and understanding. He travels internationally to teach and recently was a guest speaker at Google, sharing his innovative work.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: To begin with Gregory. I wanted to ask you some general questions about meditation and the first one was 'why do you meditate?'

Gregory Kramer: When I sit in the morning and I have enough time for the mind to get calmer than it usually is...let's just put it that way, you know, it could be very calm; it might be a little calm, but more than usual, right? It's like it sets up a whole different reference point for my life. So that, it's sort of like 'Can you know what noise is if you don't know what silence is? Can you know what stillness is, if you don't know what action is? Can you know what light is, if you don't know what dark is? So, touching, you know, something that is not tied up with all the machinations of my mind, not tied up with all the important and unimportant things I have to do. Not tied up with all of my emotional concerns, but it's just some quality of awareness, quality of just knowing 'OK, here I am now', that isn't of all that, that's not frantic, that's not identified, that's not stressed, or any of it, that provides a reference point for everything else, so that one can know when one is stressed: 'Oh, this is different than that.' One knows when one is preoccupied 'Oh, I know what it's like to not be preoccupied and right now I'm preoccupied.' It sets a whole different benchmark on my entire life. And I can go in lots of advantages and details, but when you ask for one, that's the one that comes up right now.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Yeah, I understand it's a pretty big question, so, I think what you've touched on in terms of recognizing contrast is really interesting as well and it leads to another question that I wanted to ask you. For many people that start meditation there is an instruction in meditation to be present, let go of past, let go of the future. But we live in a world where we need to plan and being future-orientated is a part, is a necessity to some extent. So, could you speak a little bit to this apparent contradiction that comes up for people when, especially when they start meditation and, and how you see the relationship, perhaps, between, being and doing? Is there a contradiction here?

Gregory Kramer: Yeah, sure. Well, it's good to recognize that what we usually think of, as the decisions we make very intentionally, plans that we make with great care, most often are coming entirely out of this reactive framework. 'Oh, I'd better do it this way, because...', or 'I have to plan this, because...' And the 'because' is a big accumulation of history, of emotions, of ideas. And so we get stuck inside this basket of our life history. It's sort of like what I said just a moment ago, how can you know what's not stressed unless you touch it? How can you know what stress is unless, you've touched something that isn't it.

It's like how can you know what it is like to make a decision with clarity. How can you know what it is to make a decision with deep creativity and spontaneity.... not just drawing from your old bucket of longings, or your old bucket of preconceptions. How do you know that you're not stuck in that bucket? And yet if we don't take the time to come into the moment, sometimes, you know, maybe we're not gonna dwell there all the time, but we'd say 'Aha, OK. I can be aware of the reactive nature of my mind or the pressures I feel...and I, I'm now going to make some decisions. Now, if it's a minor decision, well, it's not such a big deal whether you order a coffee with or without milk, you know, who cares maybe you're not mindful? What's the big deal? Attach all you want to your notions of coffee and milk, right? But if you're talking about, 'Do I want to marry this person?' or 'Should I stay with my job?', or 'What do I do about my mom who needs care? Or 'my child is doing this?' or 'my partner is having this issue' or you really have to make a business decision that's an important one? Do you want to be stuck? Do you want to be locked into a framework that has really created your whole situation in the first place?

So, it's not that you don't use your intelligence; it's not that you don't plan. Planning is fine. But is it the planning mind touching something that is awake and creative and alive? Or is the planning mind coming only from this reactive place? That's a choice! You can make that choice if you know the difference. If you don't know the difference, no choice. No choice, the plans are just gonna reflect the same old patterns, over and over and over.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Mhm. Beautiful. I'm very much enjoying hearing you answers. You talked about the choice point there; I think that's really so much about what meditation practice is about. It's really allowing for more possibilities through awareness of what's actually going on.

Gregory Kramer: And I should say if I may, what's going on within you, but also what's going on around you. We usually say 'OK, I'm aware of what's going on out there.' But you've also added to this 'What's going on internally, not just in my thoughts, but how's my body responding? What's the emotional edge here? And it not only brings you more into the moment, to be aware of the body, but it's also where you touch the more subtle decision-making capacities. I mean, there's a lot of science on decision-making. And a tremendous amount of it now points to the, shall we say emotional, embodied aspect of being, where decisions ultimately get made, and where the best decisions come from. Perfect! But you need to review what is really alive and awake. And, not bound up by preconception. And then the intellect will come in and say 'Is this a good idea or not?' You see, that's fine. But if you only function from preconception, from intellect and so on, you're gonna have trouble. So, the awareness is not just awareness of the world, but it's awareness internally. And meditation begins by developing this internal awareness. But as it matures, you get fluid with the internal and the external. You can move in that space knowledgeable, intentionally, spontaneously, in all kinds of ways.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: That's probably a really good place to bring the conversation towards the practice that you've developed, which is called 'Insight dialogue'. You've written an entire book on it called 'Insight dialogue. The interpersonal path to freedom'. And I highly recommend it to the listeners, but for the purpose of the interview...can you briefly give us a feeling of what 'Insight dialogue' is? And, how it relates to bringing mindfulness into communication?

Gregory Kramer: Mhm, mhm, 'insight dialogue' is based on traditional Buddhist insight meditation, Vipassana, that's the primary source of the whole mindfulness movement. Mindfulness drew its inspiration and its techniques largely, almost entirely from Buddhist insight meditation. And then, taking that quality of mindfulness, which is, this remembering each moment, what is happening here and now, remembering this body, remembering to notice let's say 'Oh, what I'm being mindful of is this..'. Like if it's being mindful of you, and being mindful of my emotions and so on...So, there's a quality of **remembering**. While you develop, as you practice these mindfulness practices, the basic starting point, the reference point is mindfulness internally. I'm mindful of my breath and it helps me calm down. I'm mindful of my walking and it helps me be more in the moment. I'm mindful of my thoughts and it helps me begin to calm them down and know the nature of the thinking mind. I'm mindful of this, you know, these kinds of techniques, right?

But, what happens is there's a kind of a gap, you develop this mindfulness, this remembering quality, this wakeful quality when you're still and calm and eyes are closed and you're not within anyone, which is really good, that's a good starting point, that's the foundation. But, when you open your eyes and you see this other person and like 'Wow!', someone's looking back at you?! And you know, we're wired for this incredible sensitivity, you know, we look in each other's eyes and all of a sudden the whole organism is vibrating, I mean, we're built like that genetically, physiologically, neurologically, we are exquisitely sensitive to other human beings. So, it's a good thing to begin your meditation practice with that simplicity of internal mindfulness. But, when you then open your eyes and engage with others, if you haven't done something like insight dialogue you're going to most likely be quite reactive and mindfulness would be very difficult to remember, to sustain in relation to others. So, insight dialogue is a specific practice, with very specific meditation instructions or guidelines that is crafted and taught to develop that mindfulness interpersonally, not just in pairs but with, with three, four, or with anyone and ultimately with all experience.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Do you think that you would be able to just touch on what these guidelines are? I mean, again, I know you've spent couple of chapters developing and speaking about each of them, but just so that it brings more something tangible for people.

Gregory Kramer: Sure, sure. There are six guidelines and the first is **PAUSE**. That pause is a quality of stopping, it is a quality of remembering, stopping and remembering coming home to the body, coming home to this relational moment. So it's mindfulness. **The pause is remembering mindfulness.**

Then, the next meditation instruction is **RELAX**. Relax, is attuning to where there might be any muscle tension in the face, the throat, the gut, the jaw, wherever. But that's just the surface, right? Because where we usually are not relaxed is in our crazy minds. But we can't always control it, right? Sometimes we are not relaxed and we can't help it. So really relax is also accept. **What relax is to the body, accept is to the mind.** So: pause, relax, accept. It's like this right now, you know? It has this quality just resting in experience. So, it's tranquility, concentration, and it stabilizes the mindfulness. Pause, relax, open.

The next guideline is **OPEN** which is exactly this thing we were talking about earlier of the internal awareness, the external and both, so that we're mindful internally of feelings, thoughts and so on.

Externally - of the other. And both, meaning this relational “between”, and really it's has a sense of a spatial, inclusive awareness where there's really no external and internal, it's just all. It's just very wide and open...So: pause, relax, open. And when you're open in the world and aware like this, you begin to sense the vibrating quality, that constant change, and attuning to that change is the next meditation instruction: **TRUST EMERGENCE**.

TRUST EMERGENCE is attuning to the emergence and the vanishing of things, of the world, of sensations, of feelings, the dynamic interchange with another person, unpredictable it's about this “don't know mind” coming right to that edge, trusting emergence right there, kind of surfing the moment.

And then, the final two are **LISTEN DEEPLY** and **SPEAK THE TRUTH**. Which sounds obvious and trivial, actually, but when you take this into meditation practice with the high degree of mindfulness, concentration and so on, the quality of listening extends beyond what even a good professional listener usually touches. You know, one becomes extraordinarily stable and receptive and attuned. And then in **SPEAK THE TRUTH**, you're actually bringing, what I consider to be one of the greatest challenges of meditation right into this practice, which is the mind of simple awareness comes together with all of the constructing of the conceiving mind, of the emotional mind, of the story-telling mind, can you speak of this life, this very lived life and still have that quality of stable awareness. Can you bring those together, or is it always going to be this big gap between mindfulness and all the stuff of my personality and my life and everything. Even my conceptual mind can be brought in. But to **SPEAK THE TRUTH** is to speak with mindfulness and stability and depth of meditation practice, even as you're talking and of course with listen deeply even if you're listening. So it's quite a profound, you might say, demanding aspect the practice.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Thank you. Thank you. That's very, very helpful to kind just give some sense of what it is. Having spent ten days practicing this with you on retreat, it really is very hard to bring it into such a summarized version, but that's very helpful.

Gregory Kramer: You know, I figured if someone can even get the taste that such a thing might be possible, we've done a good job.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Haha. Can I ask you, the insight dialogue that you teach around the world...I noticed that you take it to various different contexts? And I wondered about this practice in leadership. Can you speak to that? Have you done workshops where you help leaders and how do you see this practice as relating to being a good leader.

Gregory Kramer: Yeah, yeah, I hear you. First, mostly what I do is I teach meditation to anyone who is understanding that there's some value here, that they want to come to a retreat and they've tasted something of the power of meditation and they want to really develop and deepen in their practice. So, it's about suffering and the end of suffering. You know, it's really basic. So it's not about leadership, it's not about couples, it's not about communication, it's not about just another mindfulness practice, it's really at this very fundamental level, what in this life is stressful and confused, dark and difficult. And is it possible to know that and meet it in a way that is an awakening and then doing that relationally,

brings that into our relational lives, but more than that, it draws on the power of practicing with another person, to sharpen that awareness, to deepen that inquiry; to hold steady that concentration. Right?

That's what relational practice can do. It can really strengthen and deepen your practice at the same time making it applicable to your whole relational life. Which is most of your time somehow engaged with other people. So, that's really what I do.

So, the question, If you allow me to reframe it.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Absolutely!

Gregory Kramer: Yeah. OK, the question that I might ask among those lines is 'how might engaging in this practice in-depth in the retreat and perhaps following on with a group or something be of value to someone who is a leader or aspiring to lead or lead well or something like that', that's how I would frame the question.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Mhm.

Gregory Kramer: Rather than think about a retreat just for leaders and something, right.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Yep, yep.

Gregory Kramer: So, what is leadership at its essence? It's relational. Right? In other words, if there is not another person, there's no one to lead and there's no leading. And there's no leader. Right? It's a relational act. Leadership. And so, I think, any leader that you would speak with would readily acknowledge that the capacity to be attuned to people, the capacity to be balanced and awake and deeply intelligent while with, if not one other person, the work or the people in the whole organization, and the people you relate to, who then relate to others in the organization, as you set a certain tone of relationship with those around you, it's naturally gonna flow out to others, right? So, there's hardly anyone, I think, in a leadership position that would say that quality of presence, of intelligence of creativity, and of equanimity is not critical, right? So, that's my assumption...And...It's exactly those qualities that I see unfolding for people in retreats. I get, you know, thousands of people, and I get a lot of feedback. It's very beautiful, it's very lovely to hear people's lives being changed. And there are patterns in that feedback, things like a lot of people finding greater kindness to themselves, greater self-compassion, a lot of people finding themselves listening very differently to others, and people who find themselves stepping out of old habits of speech and so on. And people who are actually at a very basic level, shifting out of patterns of hunger, living life from a sense of absence and lack. Right? So, real basic stuff. Included in that is people leaving feeling inspired and energized around how they can interact with people and situations that is far more equanimous, balanced, sort of standing in the middle when there's difficulty. And also it's not just about doing better in difficulty, it's about seeing the positive possibilities you didn't see before, too. You know? You know, we touch on the guidelines briefly, so that might be a touch point for what it would bring to leadership. I mean, there's plenty of people now writing about mindful, the mindful, the mindful leadership, mindfulness and leadership, and...And mindfulness teachers and mindfulness coaches or coaching leaders in mindfulness. It's like a fad, right?

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Yeah.

Gregory Kramer: But, how do you bring it to your relational practice? In the moment and keep it sharp? Right?

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Thank you. I wanted to ask you one final question. Um, when we were on retreat there was some beautiful music, imminently from the main area and then we discovered that you're also a musician or composer. I wanted to ask you what you see if any the relationship between meditation and creativity for you?

Gregory Kramer: Mhm, mhm...Well I should clarify. I used to be, you know, a composer, and then, you know, quite serious, taught music composition in New York University and got grants and all that kind of stuff. I did music from dance, video and concerts and everything. Nowadays, all I do is sit down to play and I improvise. Right? So, to call me a composer is a very generous thing to do. So, thank you! But it actually allows me to answer your question in a simple and direct way - because for me music always, since I was a teenager, I started when I was five, but since I started improvising when I was like fourteen or so, it's always been about coming to the edge. And when I was old enough to know what that edge was, you know, like seventeen, eighteen; I started being aware that that edge was awareness itself. And so, my meditation practice is coming to the edge of this unfolding moment of awareness. Like being with you, and talking and saying each word that I say and being present, right? So this is the moment. This is the edge of this encounter, you know, you and I speaking, people are listening and so on. So, I bring that to the piano. And, enter that moment and as soon as I fall into any desire to perform to gain compliments or something like this, as soon as I fall into wanting to impress people; as soon as I fall into wanting to make it sound good; or wanting to try and make a style; as I soon as I fall into any of these doorways of limitation, right, it's exactly tantamount to falling out of the moment and falling into a cliché, may even be my own style, just a cliché, right?

So, I would suggest that in any creative act even if it's not improvised, it's just easier to talk about one that's improvised, but you could come back and craft a piece and you're still in the moment of crafting. And you can come back the next day and the next day and you can work on an oil painting, or a sculpture for three years and it's always that moment. And when someone comes to encounter your sculpture, or your painting, or whatever it is that you've made, that's the moment, right? **So, it's all in that sense, it's always about that quality of awareness and love that can come through it or not.** And meditation to me is very much about touching that awareness, touching that love and dwelling, right? So, it's not separate.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Thank you very, very much! Before we end I just wanted to give you an opportunity to share anything else that you would like to add to the conversation about insight dialogue or about the work that you do?

Gregory Kramer: Probably just to say, you know, the sense of if you're endeavoring to bring meditation, mindfulness practices, this kind of thing to people in ways that it can filter into their lives, just to share a sense of compassion for all the challenges to do that, you know, of bringing it to people in such a way, but also people who for all of us life has so many compelling factors, you know. A child gets ill, a friend

breaks a leg and we have to run over there, we get fired from our job...All these things press and press and press and press on us. And, so it makes sense that it's hard to pause. It makes sense that we don't give it a priority. **So, I really want to encourage a kindness to ourselves about that and a sense of hope, that if we can make our moments of relational contact, moments of mutual remembering, mutual awakening, ground them in kindness and compassion and in awareness, then that which usually causes us to spin out, causes us to spin in, you know, to really arrive.** So, I think there's real hope.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Thank you! Thank you so much for your time!

Gregory Kramer: Yeah. You're welcome! Thanks very much!