

MIND LIFE PROJECT

with Dr Elise Bialylew

Interview with Mark Coleman

Mark Coleman is a mindfulness facilitator and the founder of Awake in the Wild and The Mindfulness Institute where he guides students on five continents to find greater peace and fulfillment through nature-based mindfulness practice and mindfulness retreats. The author of Awake in the Wild, Mark is also a corporate consultant, individual counselor, poet, wilderness guide, and outdoor adventurer.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Welcome, Mark. So thrilled to have you on the program and thank you very much for donating your time!

Mark Coleman: Yeah, thank you so much for inviting me! I love what you're doing, it's a beautiful program!

Dr. Elise Bialylew: So, I'd like to get straight into the questions and one of the questions I love to ask all of the guest experts is a bit of a personal question, which is 'Why do you meditate?'

Mark Coleman: I meditate to rest in awareness and establish and remind myself of the primacy of awareness. So, when we're busy in our lives and we're doing things, on the phone and texting and computers, and running around, it's easy to get lost in the content of experience and what I find is mindfulness supports us to reside in the awareness that is present to all of that. So, it's a way of really establishing mindfulness and awareness in a very concentrated way. Then, out of that awareness, comes clarity and insight. So, meditation is a support for awareness, clarity, insight and freedom. It's also really nice to sit in stillness for a while.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Thank you. And how would you define mindfulness from your own perspective?

Mark Coleman: So, I like to keep things really simple and there's a lot of definitions out there that are getting longer and longer, you know, more and more sentences. ***And for me mindfulness is clear awareness.*** It's just the ability to know what's happening, as it's happening, as it's unfolding in the moment. The sum of that is that it's a clarity of awareness. Clear awareness, knowing...

Dr. Elise Bialylew: In terms of this clear awareness just being devil's advocate - do we not have this clear awareness from day to day? Is this something that needs to be practiced in order to be present to that or, you know, why do we even have this practice, aren't we already aware?

Mark Coleman: Sure! You know, it's true, I mean, awareness is innate through our nature, it's a nature of the mind to be aware, to know. Right? And, what mindfulness specifically is a conscious knowing of

our experience. So, it's knowing that we know, so it's driving and knowing that you're driving, riding and knowing that you're riding, talking and knowing that you're talking...

Usually whether we're lost in the activity or we're spaced out doing and thinking about something else other than being present. So, I use the driving analogy a lot, because everybody drives and it's relatively present because if not, they'd crash, right? But if you ask them which streets they have come down to work, they say 'Oh, I have no idea, I was listening to..., I was spaced out'...So, there's, there's awareness, but there's not a **conscious knowing** which is the mindfulness, that's making you present to what's happening moment to moment. It's the Homo sapien, sapien **knowing that we know**...So, it's innate and then mindfulness helps us cultivate that conscious knowing much more clearly and accessibly.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Mhm. And so, then, again, just, sort of playing the devil's advocate here...So what does this mean to me that I can know that I know that I'm driving, or I know that I'm speaking to you right now...or, you know, what does this knowing actually open up for someone?

Mark Coleman: Mhm. Yeah. Well, I think it opens up everything, so, it really establishes self-awareness. And, with that self-awareness we can get to know our mind, our body, our emotional life. We get to understand what's makes me tick, what brings happiness, what brings peace and when we get to really investigate and look at and know and release what causes pain. Like why do I get so caught in rumination of obsessive thoughts and reactivity to certain people and situations and it's the mindfulness practice that brings that awareness and the understanding, so we go 'oh, I get triggered by this person at work because they remind me of so and so...'. Or, you know, I feel down at the end of the workday cause by the end of the day my inner critic, my judgement thoughts have been on my case all day, so they've been mean about not being good enough at work...and no wonder I feel miserable when I go home. ***So, if we don't have that awareness, then we're just like someone going along blind and getting, you know, slapped around by life.*** And so, this gives us more clarity and then choice about how to navigate some of that inner and outer experiences that we're going through. I think it makes all the difference actually.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: So, rather than being immersed and slapped around, as you said, by in a critic and whatever reactivities are going on for us, we can have that space to...

Mark Coleman: Yes, to see.. and then to choose a different way which might be unhooking, letting go, might be shifting our attention to the positive, you know, there's lots of ways we can counter these negative tendencies.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Yeah, so, that's probably a nice point to move on to this idea of letting go which you've just mentioned. So, letting go is a principal that's sort of fundamental to the practice of mindfulness. Can you speak a little bit more to this concept of letting go, both within the practice what it means, but then how through practicing letting go in the practice that translates into benefit for us in our everyday life.

Mark Coleman: Interestingly I don't talk so much about letting go when I teach because I think it's a problematic concept and it gets misinterpreted. So, for me mindfulness supports letting go through

letting be. I mean sometimes we let go, you know, we notice we're thinking about work, or obsessing about an argument in our meditation and we recognize that and we drop it, right? We shift out tension, right? Some things are easy to let go of, right? But other things like grief, or frustration or existential angst, or feeling deficient or lonely...You know, when someone says 'Wow, just let go, if you have a problem' it's like 'Well, I would if I could...'

Dr. Elise Bialylew: (Laughing)

Mark Coleman: These emotions, some of them are really deep and, you know, enduring over time and so, I think what's more important than letting go, is letting be, which means allowing, which is, you know, another one of those qualities of mindfulness is we start with acceptance, with accepting what's here and allowing what's here to be, let's say it's grief, or sadness, right? And then in that allowing and that letting it unfold, the letting go, which means the reactivity or the stuff around that, can sometimes release. *So, I like to talk about letting go as the end result of a process of letting be, being present with acceptance and allowing and non-judgement...and then letting go happens... when it's time.*

Dr. Elise Bialylew: That's a really nice helpful concept, I think, the letting be. Because otherwise it can be really frustrating and demoralizing for people if they try 'Yeah, I'm trying letting this go, but it's not going'.

Mark Coleman: Right, right. Yeah, if something is pervasive and sticky and compulsive or repetitive then obviously letting go doesn't work, as it keeps coming back, so it needs a deeper inquiry and mindful investigation of what it's about and how it's arising and what's causing it and how do I get stuck .. So the allowing and the letting it be is actually encouraging a curiosity and investigation into what's here.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: On this topic, while we are still here on the actual what's going on in meditation, this domain of thoughts - if our thoughts are real but not necessarily true, how do I work out, like, when I have repetitive thoughts or ruminative thoughts, or, thoughts that are kind of negative in some way, that have an impact on me emotionally...How do I know when some thoughts are true or not true? How do you navigate that?

Mark Coleman: Mhm, yeah. Well, sometimes we don't know. You know? I think what I've learnt through the practice is: one, not to take my thoughts so seriously, not to believe everything that I think and to hold them lightly, you know, and be aware that my point of view which seems totally and absolutely right, right, whether it's about life, or meditation or anything...you know, I know that five years ago I had a different view and 10 years ago I had a different view, and probably in five years' time it'll be slightly different, too. And so, I really see the relativity of views. The relativity of thoughts and perceptions; that what seems so absolutely right now, you know, often changes with a bit of information, you have or had some view on somebody or some work project and you're convinced that it's right and then you get some different information or data and say 'Oh, right, it's actually not how I thought it was' it's this.

So, what I've learnt is to hold everything that comes in my mind lightly, particularly around views and perceptions and assumptions and beliefs. That, to take them seriously and to, you know, use our mind and to use our thinking and also to not take it to be the ultimate truth of things. So, it's always the finger

pointing to the Moon. It's also important to know what we know and to stand in the truth of what we know. And at the same time, to also know there are other perspectives and positions and points of view and that they might be equally valid.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Mhm.

Mark Coleman: So, it's really about how we hold it, can we hold it lightly, right? Rather than getting so entrenched in our positions and believing everything our mind thinks, you know...the critic is a good example. The inner critic has lots of views about who we are, judging we're not enough, you know, not being smart enough for whatever that stories...Often it's a very distorted inaccurate perception, like there's somebody else, a friend of mine might have a very different view, so, that's an example of, you know, it's good not to believe every thought that you think, but to hold it with a curious attention, just like you would anything that you hear, or read, or...

Dr. Elise Bialylew: But on that note, I suppose that there are going to be some thoughts that seem to really be hard to do that with, like particularly when they've got a lot of emotion attached to them. If there's like anxiety or, shame, or something like that. It's a pretty challenging practice.

Mark Coleman: A lot of these things that we do within our lives it takes time, it takes practice, it takes ongoing vigilance and inquiry, and so, you know, an example like fear we get lost in all our thoughts about the future that never happens, right? About anticipating a job layoff at work, about a partner leaving us, right? So, those thoughts are very strong and we give them a lot of power and the more that we can bring a curiosity to them and hold them with some discernment, and examine "is this really true"...I think that just that simple question 'is it true that I can know what's gonna happen in this upcoming meeting?', 'Is it true I can know what's gonna happen in my, with my kinds?' No! I can do my best to respond in the moment and all those fear thoughts, you know, they're just a set up for pain, you know...Mark Twain's line: The worst things in my life never actually happened although I spent my life thinking about them...

So, what mindfulness does is, it helps us take a step back and see all of these thoughts' swirling around and inquire into whether they serve me, are they in alignment with the truth or are they actually distortions that cause more fear?

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Thank you for clarifying! So moving on to a slightly different topic now. Through your experience of going into companies and teaching mindfulness through delivering the Google training or through your own training with corporates, how would you explain the relevance of this practice in this setting?

Mark Coleman: Yeah, mhm. Yeah, I think there's different dimensions of that, so, there's the inner personal dimension and then there's the social dimension and then there's the organizational dimension. So, for the inner dimension we know mindfulness supports developing concentration, focus, attention, the ability to let go of unwanted thoughts, to stay steady on task, right? So, all those mental qualities can be applied to any job. Any job requires attention, focus, concentration, right? And, particularly given our times which are speedy, full of multi-tasking, distractions with web surfing and

what not, anything that teaches you to become more focused and concentrated is gonna support you whether it's delivering a presentation or simply just getting a task at hand, getting your focus at work, rather than, you know, starting to work and then checking your Facebook. So, that basic level of attention, it also helps us manage our internal states. Work for many people is a very stressful environment, we can be triggered by colleagues, and difficult bosses or tight deadlines. And, so, the more that we can learn to manage our stress or our reactivity, our emotional frustration, then the less that's going to impact us and how we work, how we communicate, how we perform. And so, the more we can start to self regulate and manage our emotional life, the fears, the anxieties, the frustrations, then the more we can actually...not exactly put it to the side, but learn to contain it so we're not driven and tossed around by it.

Then on the social dimension, I probably see the most impact in the mindfulness work that I do in companies is around **mindful communication**. Most people are really good talkers and not very good listeners. And so, you know, mindfulness is a practice of deep listening – initially to ourselves, and our experience...and then when we apply that to another person in conversation we actually develop really basic but necessary skills about how to better listen, how to give someone space and enough time so they can actually develop their own thought process. And so, what I see especially in smaller companies where, you know, when you train enough people you can have a critical mass, that the culture of communication gets better. People listen more, they're not multi-tasking as much when they're on a conference call, their supervision skills really increase because they for the first time are actually listening to the other person as opposed to just jumping in with advice and problem-solving and fixing. Then, of course, people reporting to them, feel more heard and one of main complaints you hear in a company is that management and executives, don't listen, they don't hear, they don't see the problems of their teams, right. So just having that basic skill can dissolve a lot of tension.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Mhm.

Mark Coleman: And then, organizationally, I think, you know, when you have people around you who have more skills around focus, emotional self-regulation, and better communication skills, of course it becomes a better place to work. There's a little less stress, a little less suffering. People are kinder to each other because they're actually more present, they develop more empathy. And mindfulness is the building block for empathy. So, you start creating a culture that actually can really change. You know you still have the overarching challenges of the company and the crazy deadlines that's an overarching issue. But, you can start to have an influence on a culture that makes people's lives at work a lot more happy, a lot more sustainable.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Mmm.

Mark Coleman: There may be some more ease and it can create better dynamics in team or a whole division.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Mmm.

Mark Coleman: And so you're contributing to people having a better time at work and happy employees make more effective workers and so it's a win-win.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Yes. And what about the domain of creativity and innovation. How do you see be any mindfulness in supporting innovation?

Mark Coleman: I work with a bunch of people, you know, designers and artists, and writers and what I see is two things: because we haven't really learnt to train our minds generally as a culture, we're just consumed in thought, right? Our minds are clouded with static with worries and thoughts and plans and speculation and judgements and there's not a lot of space. **One of the greatest supports for creativity, is space. Having space in your mind. Having space in your life. Like, I'm a writer and I know if I don't have a space to write, it doesn't happen. So, if we can develop some awareness where we're reducing the amount of clutter and chatter in the mind, it's a little quieter, then that allows more creativity to come through. Right? One of my mottos in life is that if you don't create space then nothing can emerge. It's like gardening you've got to clear the soil before things can emerge. So, it's the same with our minds we need a certain amount of space, stillness, spaciousness, in which to support creativity and innovation.**

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Moving onto your own personal practice now, around writing poetry...you've written a book. You've written a book and lots of poetry. The book's called 'Awake in the wild. Mindfulness in nature as a path in self-discovery'. Could you talk a little bit about how you see this relationship between mindfulness and nature, and what if any practices that you could share that, to just give us a sense of how these two things support one another?

Mark Coleman: So you're asking me to talk about my passion and my love and probably the thing that's the most dear to my heart - nature and our relationship to nature and how these practices of awareness and mindfulness intersects with nature. What I've discovered through my own life, my own time in nature, my practice in nature, writing a book about meditation and nature is that they're beautifully complimentary. That as we cultivate awareness, presence, listening through mindfulness, through meditation, then when we go out outside or we go anywhere but particularly in nature, then we're much more receptive. There's much more openness, sensitivity, there's more attunement to our senses, we're more in our bodies, mindfulness is a body practice, so we are more aware of our body and it's response to the stars, or the ocean, or the sound of birds, or the smell of the forest after the rain. So there's this kind of aliveness. And, so that aliveness, that presence, enriches the experience, and at the same time there is this beautiful reciprocal dance that happens where, you know, because we've spent so much of our history in nature. Then, when we go outside our animal nature wakes up. We become more alert. We become more sensitive to the hairs on the back of our neck. We notice the skin tone, we notice different smells, we notice what's behind us. So, nature allures our awareness through our animal nature. But also allures us because of its beauty. So, when we go outside energy follows attention and when our attention is stimulated by the natural world, birds' songs or fragrances, or the touch of grass under our feet, we're less prone to spacing out because we're captivated, right? So the natural world supports us in staying present, staying in our bodies, staying in our senses. So mindfulness, or presence becomes easier. One of the reasons I lead people on nature meditation retreats is because it's much less

of a struggle to be mindful. When we are contained in our boxes or houses our minds just get busier. When we go outside, for the most part, they get quiet, we're not around our stuff and computers and man-made things that have a lot of self in them. The natural world is just being, so it invites that quality of presence in us. So, the mind's quieter, there's more space there's more openness. And there's more access to insights, to seeing clearly, to understanding our relationship of connectedness, of understanding impermanence and transience and love. And it's all there, you know, to be revealed in nature itself. It's like the teachings are waiting to be delivered. There's this line from Kabir who said: *"When the eyes and the ears are awake, even the leaves in the trees read like pages in the scriptures"*.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Oh, that's beautiful!

Mark Coleman: When we are present, then nature is a teacher and for me nature is my primary teacher. Because there's so much to learn, it's such a reflection of our own nature.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Mhm, that's such a beautiful quote that really speaks to this relationship we're talking about. Meditation and courage, do you have any perspectives on whether there's a relationship there for you personally, whether or you could say courage or fearlessness...

Mark Coleman: Yeah, I do, it's an interesting twinning the two qualities that aren't often twinned. One thing that comes to mind is working with fear. **So, what mindfulness does is, you know, we're sitting in meditation and it's like the lab for the mind and we learn how to sit still and stay steady no matter what comes right - fear, joy, peace, restlessness, existential despair, love, hate - all of it comes and goes in the course of meditation over time. And we learn just how to deal with that, feel it, know it, find some ease and spaciousness with it. And so that develops a certain kind of resilience and a certain kind of strength that we know that we can tolerate even really intense stuff over time.** So, the nature of fear is to hold us back. It's to stop us from moving forward. And sometimes, when you're experiencing fear, the thing you have to do is move through it, so example I have is, is when you have to speak the truth to somebody that they don't want to hear, or you have to confront somebody who's, an intimidating person at work or powerful in their own way, and it brings up fear the thought of doing that, or terror even. I've had plenty of situations when I had to confront people or say things that are uncomfortable for me or for them. And, because I've done so much work sitting with all kind of emotions, including fear, and knowing that I can survive, even if I'm having a very strong experience of fear, I'm not gonna die. So, what happens is, how that supports courage is, when I go to confront that person or talk to that person, even though I'm feeling fear, I know it's not a big deal, I know it's just another emotion, I know it's gonna come and go, I know that I can still function, I know that's not who I am. And so, it allows me to have that conversation and include the fact that I might be feeling afraid, I may even say it or not, depending on whether that's appropriate...But it allows me to sort of stand steady and say what I need to say even though my body wants to run the hell out of there, right...But I've learnt how to just find that place of like 'oh, fear? Fear is like this and it's not gonna kill me.' And I can still have that conversation. So then you're not victim to what's going on in your inner life and then it gives you more strength, gives you more courage and capacity.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: It's just...brilliant. I mean, to be able to master, to be able to learn a way to just manage all kinds of emotions that are coming up and allow yourself to be able to take action or move in a direction despite the emotions that might be wanting to make you run in the other direction, like it's just such a liberating practice! It offers so much freedom and potential for people to kind of go beyond where their emotions are holding them captive.

Mark Coleman: Right. Totally! It allows, you know, it's freedom. It's the spaciousness of freedom that you know that awareness has the capacity to hold everything and you've seen a million things come and go. And it's OK, you know. All just comes and goes, comes and goes...and, you know, when it remains, so there's a certain freedom and ease. Yeah, it's, it's tremendously liberating.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Mm. So, thank you so much for your time, Mark! I just wanted to offer you some space at the end if there's anything that was felt that you wanted to share that we haven't covered and do you have a concept for anyone who is just starting to learn meditation or just of any of the work that you're doing that we haven't touched upon.

Mark Coleman: Yeah...right. That's a lot...

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Haha. Sorry...

Mark Coleman: You know, I think one of the things I like to leave people with is like at the end of a practice period, is to remind people that the practice is within you. That the quality as we talked about in the beginning, this quality of awareness, of knowing, is your nature. And so, what we're doing is, we're not adding something onto who you are, we're just bringing forth these qualities of awareness, of presence, kindness, mindfulness, and attention. We're just cultivating that, that's already within you. And to remember that it just takes a moment, right? You may have been spaced out and reactive, you might have had a terrible day, for whatever reason and you might think 'I've blown it, I should stop this mindfulness thing cause you know, I just blew it and I yelled at someone and, you know...what's the point...' And it's like well, that happens, you know, shit happens, and then, oh, right, and there's just now, and I can come back to this moment, and "oh, I'm feeling a little regretful, I'm feeling remorse, I'm feeling ashamed, I'm feeling bad, I'm feeling frustrated, I'm feeling, you know, like giving up". OK, so mindfulness can hold that too. And then there's the next moment. And then there's the next conversation. And there's a next step, and breath, and whatever that meeting you got to go to that day...So, it's always available, no matter how far you seem to go, it's closer than your own breath.

And a couple of other things... to be patient, you know. This practice is slow. Any real progress mostly happens slowly. So to be patient and to be kind with where you are and with how things unfold, perhaps not in the timescale that you wanted to happen like 'now', or 'yesterday', right...

Dr. Elise Bialylew: (laughing)

Mark Coleman: And to remember this phrase that is attributed to the Sixth Zen Patriarch great Chan meditation teacher from China, who says: *'Awareness is the foundation of kindness. Kindness is the expression of awareness'*. So, for me what happens in a mature practice is the qualities of love and

awareness come together. The qualities of kindness, of care and mindfulness come together. And so, our practice is infused with kindness, it's infused with care, it's infused with connection. ***So, to be mindful of not just what's happening, but also of the attitude in which you're bringing to experience. Is it flavored with kindness, with care, with warmth, both in how you meet yourself, because how you meet yourself, will be how you meet others in the world.***

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Mmm.

Mark Coleman: So, that would be my...

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Thank you! I'm glad I asked!

Mark Coleman: Yeah. Haha.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Haha, well thank you so much!

Mark Coleman: You're welcome. Thanks for your beautiful work and I wish everybody well in their practice! Thank you!