

MIND LIFE
PROJECT
with Dr Elise Bialylew

Susan Piver is a meditation teacher, bestselling author of six books and founder of the Open Heart Project.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Just to begin with Susan. I think for most people when they come to meditation it's important to have a sense of what is the motivation, what brings them to meditation and I was interested in asking you why do you meditate and what value does that bring to your life?

Susan: Well, I think like most people I came to meditation because I felt like I had some kind of problem that needed to solve and that's a perfectly fine motivation. You feel too stressed out or you feel heart-broken or you feel that there's some loss in your life for event hat you can't cope with and all your coping mechanisms have failed so you're like "I gotta find something else". **So, meditation often comes into people's lives at a time when they're feeling a lot of need, which is perfect, that's fine, nothing wrong, no one starts meditating because everything's great. But quickly you find out that it's so much more than a way to calm your mind, although that is that, too. Because, when you take a different approach to your thoughts, and make a sort of arrangement with them that you're gonna watch them, rather than go on a ride with them, a big space opens up in your mind and, interestingly, in your heart.** And, so, even though one may start meditating as I did because I was freaking out about my life, you quickly see that it actually introduces you to your authentic self, which, you know, who knew? But, that's what I found through my practice.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Thank you! Can you just say a little bit more about what you mean by your 'authentic self'?

Susan: Yes. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche who is a Tibetan meditation master who brought the Shambhala teachings to us and that's the lineage I practice and teach, I read the other day something like 'We're always trying to be someone who's not actually there.' And so, we are often going according to our thoughts of who we should be or our guilt about who we are not, or our judgements of how we should be better. But, really, who we are is so much more vast than any sort of personality trait or societal judgement that we could ever pass. So, when you relax with who you are, which is what meditation is, rather than trying to improve yourself, you relax with yourself as you are. You see who you are and, guaranteed, a 100% guaranteed, that 'who' that is, is much bigger than what you think right now.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: You just alluded to the idea of people coming to meditation looking for calm or relaxation but then they very quickly find there're obstacles that arise in meditation. There're so many different obstacles that arise like sleepiness, boredom, agitation, I mean, the list goes on...I wondered if you could speak to one of your favorites and perhaps give some suggestions around how people might work with that particular obstacle.

Susan: Sure! My favorite obstacle is actually defined in Classical Buddhism as a name. It's...thousands of years old this obstacle. It's been encountered by countless individuals over the millennia and this obstacle is called **laziness**. And it's my personal favorite (laughing). And, in Classical Buddhist thought there are three forms of laziness.

The first is **ordinary laziness**, you know, you lie on the couch, watching 'Game of Thrones' two seasons in a row, which is what I've been doing lately instead of practicing. So, it's just regular laziness, you just don't feel like it', that kind of laziness. **The second kind of laziness is interestingly called 'becoming disheartened'**. It's like losing faith in yourself and in your practice. And the reason that's considered lazy is because your practice is really good for you and you know that, and discovering who you are and what your life is about is very, very important. And, when you lose faith in that effort, it's because you've let conventional concerns override and that's considered lazy. **And the third form of laziness is called 'being too busy'**. And I'm sure we can all...

Dr. Elise Bialylew: I, I know that one...

Susan: Yes, so do I. And, it's kind of counter-intuitive because you think people who are busy are not lazy. They're busy, because they're important and they have a lot to do and that may be so, but when you let anything take priority over what is most important, and for our purpose what is most important is finding your path, discovering the purpose of your life, figuring out who you really are and living that passionately and fully...when you let other things overtake that, that's lazy because you've let the wrong priorities sort of take precedence. So, you know, the antidotes are, as you might expect, for regular it's just 'get off your ass and do it'; there's no magic, Buddhist trick, you just have to do it.

Then, remember! Remember that it is good for you. And also you could recall how important your inner search is and that there is nothing more important than that and let that guide how you order your day. What's your favorite?

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Initially, it used to be boredom. Yes, a big obstacle, I think, because, yes, you know, there was a lot of business going on for me, so to sit still and just focus on the breath or body sensations was really hard...I still do sometimes find boredom comes up..

Susan: Yeah. Boredom is definitely real and even though we've seen pictures of people meditating and they look like they've blissed out or that there's something really awesome going on. You know, anyone who is meditating, yourself included, can tell you that it's largely pretty boring. And, however, when it becomes boring, it's actually kind of a good sign. Because it's a sign that you have stopped trying to entertain yourself. We're always looking for something to occupy our minds, something to work on, something to chew on. And through meditation you stop gnawing. And quite naturally it can feel very dull, because you're used to a tremendous onslaught, of inputs and perceptions. But when that quiets down at first it seems boring, but eventually it still seems a little boring, but then it can also just become quite spacious and quiet...

Dr. Elise Bialylew: I wanted to ask you about your thoughts around the relationship between meditation and creativity.

Susan: Sure. I love that topic, too, and I'm really happy you've brought it up. You're a meditator, so you know that meditation is simultaneously one-pointed, right? Your attention is on your breath. Everything else is considered a distraction. Thoughts, feelings - they can all happen, but you let go and come back to your breath, so it's very focused, very concentrated. One-point. At the same time, for whatever reason, through meditation practice, insight arises. It's like your mind blossoms open and you see things you didn't see before and you make connections that you didn't quite make before and you just see to the point, you see clearly! It's very interesting that, it's simultaneously one-pointed and...panoramic. So, this is how it relates to

creativity. You know, I'll just use writing as an example because that's what I do. It's one-pointed, you can only write one word at a time - word, word, word, word, word...no matter how hard you try. And at the same time, you need this sort of spacious awareness to know what to say. It comes from somewhere else. And so they both combine these two qualities of one-pointedness and panoramic view. So, I find that they aren't replacements for each other, but they evoke the same rhythm and the same space in your own mind. So, the more you do one, I really think, and the more you can do the other...if you want. But, 'b' the more you see there is not so much of a difference between creative work and meditation.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: And there's creativity like creating books or art, or music...But then there is this creativity in life, like, you know, in relationships, or how to find new creative ways of navigating, whether it's in your career path or relationship path. And I know that that's another area that you're extremely passionate about and that you've explored a lot, relationships and love. It's a huge topic, but I'd love to just hear something from you around how you see meditation as having supported you in relationship or in love or more generally, how you think people can benefit from meditation in that domain of life?

Susan: It's really a great question...If the person you're interacting with is present, you can trust them. Doesn't mean you're gonna get what you want. But you can sort of go 'OK, this is the trust or the interaction'. It's only unconsciousness or unawareness on the part of our friends or partners or colleagues that scares us. And when you're a meditator, your commitment is to awareness. So, I find that it's very helpful for me in determining how I navigate relationships, because I try to be as aware as possible. But even if I'm in a relationship with someone, who's not trying to be aware or who is more aware, or whatever reason that don't match, my commitment to awareness or your commitment to awareness, calls forth the same thing from other people. Not identically, but it changes the vibe. So, that's one way, it makes you a more trustworthy partner I think is the short way of answering it. But also it gives you a tolerance for discomfort, not that the discomfort doesn't feel uncomfortable, discomfort still feels like crap, but you don't quite buy it. Because when you work with your thoughts repeatedly over and over again, you see 'oh, now I feel cranky, now I feel happy, now I feel bored, now I feel confused', and it all sort of comes and goes. So, in a relationship when a certain feeling arises, negative or positive, you can sort of take its measure honestly, and not cling to what's good as a sign that this is gonna work out, or, you know, hate what's bad as an indication that this is all wrong. You can sort of ride it a little more easily. So, that's what I find.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Yeah...it's very interesting. Do you have any personal practices that are outside that kind of sitting practice of when strong emotions come in? You know, whether it's anger, fear, shame, whatever the emotion is, like, how do you move with that?

Susan: I spend a lot of my day, I'm sure you, I mean, I imagine you do, I think, most people do, just sort of riding this constant wave of doubt and fear and 'this could work out or this will never work out', especially when you're self-employed there's this constant like 'I don't know what's going on'...So, every day, job one for me, is to manage my own moods. And, I've tried everything. I don't mean manage them by constraining them or trying to control them, but try to ride them. So, I see all day long fear and doubt and happiness, and confusion, and clarity and it's just constantly streaming, streaming, streaming...And I just try to 'go oh, oh, that's happening right now'. But sometimes something comes up that knocks me down. Like grief, or anger, or something...And I can't do anything else but be sad or angry. At that point your meditation practice can still really help because you can sit down on your cushion or your office chair, wherever you are and instead of placing your attention on your breath, as you know we do in meditation practice, you can place it instead on

the emotion itself. So, say you're feeling anger. And by placing your attention on the emotion, I don't mean the story of the emotion, like 'she said that, she's such an ass and I'...but more like **where does it live in your body**, does it make your shoulders tight or loose, is it cold or hot, does it seem to be in your chest or in your back or, wherever it might be. And just place your attention on those sensations of anger. Meditatively. And when your attention strays, onto 'what's for lunch', which it will, then you let that go and bring it back, to the sensation. So you meditate on the emotion until you feel that it begins to dissolve. And you could either stop or resume meditation on your breath. Pema Chodron, the American Buddhist nun whose written amazing books, says '**when it comes to strong emotion, feel the feeling and drop the story**'. So, when you feel it, without the story, 'she said, I said, this happened...' it becomes like a weather front that's moving through. And some weather fronts are beautiful, and some are horrible, and terrifying, but still it's just moving through. So, that's one way, and then the other way, and I'll be brief about this, is the practice of lovingkindness meditation. It's a very potent way...to work with the energy of your heart, whether that energy is brilliant or devastating. It's a way of stabilizing your heart in the midst of strong emotion, like opening it further which is very interesting and powerful.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: With the lovingkindness practice which I also love, and find very useful, some people that I've spoken to or taught or facilitated have said 'oh, when I'm doing the 'lovingkindness' I don't feel anything. Like I'm not feeling, you know, that they can be guided through 'lovingkindness' and I find it difficult to feel something'. What would you say about that?

Susan: That's interesting. Well, you know, it's different for everyone, I'm sure, but, you know, very interestingly, you've done this practice, so you know this, the practice of 'lovingkindness' goes in a sequence. You start with yourself and you think 'oh, I've tried so hard in my life, and sometimes I do well and sometimes I do poorly, I'm gonna start by just acknowledging that I really want to be happy myself. And be happy and so on. And then you think of someone you love - 'oh, they've tried really hard, too! I really want them to be happy!' That's easy, someone you love. Then you think of a stranger, someone you don't know, you think, 'oh, they've probably tried really hard, too, and I don't have to know them to go oh I'm sure they want to be happy, Mr. and Mrs. Stranger'. And then you think of someone you hate, or dislike and you think, 'well, even though they're nutty, they probably also have tried, so I wish this happens to them', and so on. That's the sequence and then you do it for everyone. I think that at the time that the Buddha gave that instruction, you know, 2500 years on ago, that starting with yourself probably seemed very logical. Like, who doesn't want themselves to be happy? You know, who doesn't wish themselves well? Obviously that's the easy place to start, because we all like ourselves. But, 2500 years on, that's actually the hardest thing for us to do. Just to wish ourselves well. It's easier - friend, loved one, stranger, enemy...even, everybody, but...wish myself well? It's very hard. So, my guess would be that when people don't feel anything it's because there's some sort of a block, understandably, between themselves and their own heart, like they can't find a way to wish themselves well, to wish for their own happiness and their own longings to be fulfilled...and when you can't do that, or you're afraid to do that, or it seems absurd to do that, there's no way that you can do that for others. So, I would stay there. Stay with yourself and try to offer this to yourself, and work on that step for a long time, as long as you need before moving on.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Mm, thank you. So, anything that comes up for you that you'd like to share like a helpful tip to live with?

Susan: Yes. Thank You. I don't think meditation is for everyone, but probably almost everyone. You know, if

you're struggling with some mental illness it can be actually bad for you if you do it without a therapist, so...but barring that, it's really good for people, for almost everyone. It enables your mind to rest at the very least. And, our minds are very busy all day long, and sometimes all night long, and we never give them a chance to rest and, so, it's like our body - if we're constantly like going to gym, working out, you know, within about eight hours exercise would become bad for you. And you'd need to rest. So, your mind also needs periods of rest. So, it's a very ordinary in that sense, there's nothing woo-woo about it, it's just resting your mind. But at the same time, there's one obstacle, one misconception, that almost everybody has that, I would like, to close, by saying that 'you don't have to do this'. **And that obstacle, that misconception is that to meditate you have to stop thinking. And you don't. You don't. You only have to stop thinking that, because it's not about clearing the mind of thought or blissing out or anything like that. It's about relaxing with your mind as it is and letting it, just sort of do its thing while you establish a sort of different relationship to it.** So if I could offer anything to people, it would be: Please don't think you have to stop thinking in order to meditate! And if you have any doubt, just give it a try! And, see how it goes!

Dr. Elise Bialylew: This instruction or invitation in meditation to allow things to be as they are and to accept whatever is present some people find that a little bit confronting or confusing around, in relation to having agency in your life. Like 'how does accepting something fit with wanting to change it if it's not feeling OK?' Can you speak to that at all?

Susan: That's a really good question! And, yeah, I think sometimes that meditators get the reputation for being like "woosers" or, you know, just people that are like passive or whatever.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Yeah.

Susan: Yeah, exactly, passive. And, it's so not that way! Because allowing your experience to be what it is, is different than accepting your experience. Like if someone is mean to you, someone punches you in the face or someone hurts you - you don't have to go 'oh, that's fine, I meditated on it and it's no problem'. No, not at all. But if that happens, that happened. And, you have to place your attention on it, in order to meet it and manage it and conquer or pacify it or whatever it is that you might need to do in response. But if you're never paying attention to what's happening, you can't actually have agency. **Agency only arises when you are present.** Then you know what to have agency in regard to. Otherwise, you're having agency in your mind, about your thoughts, but when you allow your life to be what it is, which you don't have any choice anyway, it's not saying you can't make your life great, you can! But, things hurt you, things make you happy, things confuse you. When you allow your experience to be what it is, power arises. It's when we try to push things away or hold things too tightly, that our power drains. So, it's actually very powerful and empowering thing to do, to turn toward your experience.

And I'll just close with a short anecdote, once someone did something really mean to me. I'm not going to go into the details, but really, really mean. And I was devastated. And I ran into a friend of mine, just happened to walk out of his office building and just run into a friend of mine who's a meditation practitioner, senior teacher, and I was like 'my practice must be so weak if one jerk can just like...completely destroy my equanimity' and he said 'so, you think not feeling things is a sign of progress on the path?'. I was like 'Yes', and he says ' **No, it's not how little you can feel! It's how quickly can you turn your attention to what you do feel. That's the sign of progress on the path.** So, it's brave! It's very courageous! So, it's the opposite of being a wimp, in a sense. So, it's not about tolerating or being a martyr, it's about facing your life.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: I think that's a beautiful way to end!

Susan: Good.

Dr. Elise Bialylew: Thank you so much