



Dr. Elise Bialylew, founder of Mindful in May (www.mindfulinmay.org) and The Mind Life Project (www.mindlifeproject.com) and author of The Happiness Plan, interviews Bob Stahl.

Bob Stahl

Bob serves as a Senior Teacher for Oasis, the institute for mindfulness-based professional education and innovation at the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Bob Stahl, Ph.D., has founded seven MBSR programs in the San Francisco Bay Area and currently directs three MBSR programs at Dominican Hospital, El Camino Hospital Mt. View, and Los Gatos. He is a co-author of A Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Workbook, Living With Your Heart Wide Open, Calming the Rush of Panic, and A Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Workbook for Anxiety. Bob formerly lived in a Theravada Buddhist forest monastery for 8.5 years and is now the Guiding teacher at Insight Santa Cruz and visiting teacher at Spirit Rock.

Elise: Hello Bob, welcome to the program. It's a pleasure to have you here. So, before we started recording, I was sharing how I'd been on a retreat with you many, many years ago, and I appreciated the gentleness and heartfulness of your teaching. So, I'm delighted to have you here today.

Bob Stahl: Thank you so much. It's great to be here and I appreciate all the work that you are doing to help better the world.

Elise: Thank you. So, I wondered if we could start from the beginning so that the listeners can get a little bit of context about you and the teacher that you are. I wondered if you could share in broad brush strokes some of the influences or events in your growing up that may have informed who you became and also what work you are doing in the world.

Bob Stahl: Yeah, thank you. It's very clear what brought me to all of this and those of you that have come for the retreats that I've talked to probably have heard it. It all began very interestingly enough when I was in the backseat of my parent's car driving down Cory Hill Road in Brighton, Brookline, Massachusetts. I had this realisation sitting in the back seat that, at the age of four years old, I just became totally aware that I was going to die, that everyone's going to die, and that it could happen at any moment. I don't know why that understanding or realisation happened, but that was very catalytic. I remember asking my mother about this insider, and she turned around and said to me in a

very loving way, "Don't worry Bobby it is not going to happen for a long, long time". I could tell by the sound of her voice saying it was kind and she was trying to be reassuring. Even at the age of four, at that moment, I knew that she wasn't telling me the truth because what I knew was that death could come at any moment, and it was a really powerful moment of this recognition that nothing is going to last.

I don't know what you could call it, but between then and the time I was nine, I lost my younger brother who died of an illness. He stayed in the same room with me. Then I lost my best friend, who died one night, he went into a diabetic coma and died, and then I lost my grandfather. This all happened by the time I was nine, and so that realization at four and then these three very primary deaths between four and nine made me just really understand this fragility and preciousness of this life and these were very powerful experiences. It led me into a state of a lot of confusion and a lot of grief. I probably wasn't your regular kid growing up, and this is also coinciding with the Vietnam War, the Beatles grew their hair long and Dylan singing that the times are changing. I was very, very lost and confused during those years. I could just go on and share a little bit about what brought me to this.

Elise: Yeah, yeah. Keep, keep going. We have time.

Bob Stahl: Yeah, so when I was in high school, they had a draft lottery. Fortunately, I had a very high draft card and draft numbers, but I wasn't drafted into the war. I was just very lost and very confused, and I would say so lost and so confused that I didn't even know how lost and

confused I was. When I graduated high school, fortunately, I was able to graduate, some friends went off to college and some started working. I was working at a chicken restaurant and I just said, I'll just work and then think about college and just continue working. Then a friend of mine said, he is going to do a fifth year of high school to try to go to college and asked me if I want to go. I thought to myself, well, I'm working at the chicken restaurant, it's OK, but maybe I'll consider that. So, I went to this fifth year of high school, and then when I was asked about where to go to school, I was into downhill skiing, so I decided to apply to some school in Northern New England, in Vermont because I wanted to go skiing.

Fortunately, I got into one state colleges in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. There, for the next couple of years, I majored in skiing, getting high with marijuana and other drugs, and drinking alcohol. At the end of two years, I got a note, an official-looking note from my college, opening it up it said that I had just flunked out. That was not very good. My parents were very upset, naturally so, my mother begged me to reapply, so I did reapply and got accepted with a warning. Then my mother begged, isn't there some course that you would like? So, I look through the course catalog, and I had so much reading and writing and arithmetic history, science, and so forth that I just wasn't interested in any of those, its more or less like the same old thing.

So, isn't there something different? Take a look, take a look. And then something all of a sudden perked my eyes and it was called the wisdom of the East and then there was a colon, and all of these words after that,

I couldn't even pronounce those words. I had to take this class because the East had this connotation, growing up in Boston area, my family was very fond of the East. We love Chinese food and I really love Chinese food. There was something about entering this restaurant we used to go to, it had a whole different feel than these loud American restaurants. There was something there and the food was good. It had peaceful music. That was something that I felt drawn to the East.

This had the wisdom of the East. So, I said, I'm going to take this. I had no idea what this was about. Then later I found out that the words after colon was the wisdom of the East; Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and Zen. That's what I was signing up for. When I went into my class on the very first day, my professor, Bill Jackson, was sitting on top of his desk in a full lotus position. I never had a professor like that ever before. I felt like I was entering into maybe what people could relate to now, like into Hogwarts, like he was this professor with jeans on and sitting in a full lotus position. He was a very different person than I had ever met. I had some sense that he might know something. Of course, I didn't know what it was that he knew, but there was something about him that was mysterious, that was kind, that was humble. So, he had started to read the 'Tao Te Ching' by Lao Tzu 'The way of life, and I fell in love with the 'Tao Te Ching' .

It was like, I never read anything like this ever before in my life. It was so simple and profound in deep wisdom about life and very earth-based. So, I just swam in the seas of the 'Tao Te Ching' for quite a while. The section was made of 81 different epigrams, there was one in particular

that I kept on reading over and over and over again, trying to figure out what was Lao Tzu trying to say. He is the writer of the Tao Te Ching, and essentially, it says in a nutshell, there's no need to look outside your window for everything you need to know is inside you. I read this over and over. And I didn't know what that meant. There's no need to look outside and everything you need to know is inside you.

I sat with this and struggled with this, wondering what was he talking about? After some time, I began to understand how confused and lost I was and that if I wanted to know something, I needed to begin to look inside my own heart. I'd never thought of that in my entire life. So that was really the beginning of my journey. There is a beautiful quote by Carl Jung says, 'who looks outside dreams and who looks inside awakens. So, this was the thread of those years from the realization of death to the beginning, to now this journey of looking inside has been my whole life.

You know, at one point I lived in a Buddhist monastery for eight half years and was a former monk for a short period of time. And it's this question of what is life? This is what has driven me to practice and still drives me to practices. Now I'm 67 and death is closer and it's always close because you never know, and as I realized that, it could come at any moment when, at the age of 67 as you get older, it gets closer and closer, of course.

Elise: Yes. Yeah, that's quite a really interesting story, and I think it's so fascinating how these synchronicities or these subtle things that come

up in our life that make us decide, like the wisdom of the East and the Chinese restaurant and, there's something underneath it all. There was some kind of an attunement that you had to the mystery of something different, coupled with the whole existential kind of death exploration, like what is this life? And sort of, the Tao Te Ching and the wisdom, it sort of makes sense that all of that came together in you and that became your calling, it seems, in a way.

Bob Stahl: . Yeah so, you know, from the Tao Te Ching eventually got into Vipassana and Insight meditation. My degree was in philosophy and religion, so I had a lot of exposure to both Western and Eastern philosophy and religion, but gradually really settled deep into Buddhist teachings. But I still actually have a great appreciation for all of the spiritual traditions and learned from them. But you could say my root practices were Vipassana Theravada, Buddhism, the Tao Te Ching, and taking the wisdom of the Tao Te Ching is, has always embedded deep within me too.

Elise: Yes. Would you mind sharing, a while ago you brushed upon you spending a while in a monastery? Can you share a story from that time of what led you to that? You know, people can be interested in philosophy and meditation, but to actually take a step and leave, and you said that you passed on eight years there. That's quite a long time in a way.

Bob Stahl: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. well, after I took my first formal Vipassana Insight meditation retreat, I really felt like I was coming home. This was

going to be my practice for the rest of my life. I just knew it and I wanted to know everything about the teachings of the Dharma because I felt so resonant with this practice. So, my first meditation teacher, her name was Dr Rina Sircar, who was a Burmese nun and a Buddhist scholar. I met her at graduate school and I was going to The Institute of Asian Studies which later became an Institute of Integral Studies. She said at one point, as her student, I'd like you to come and meet my teacher, who's the venerable Taungpulu Sayadaw, who was a forest monk in middle Burma. So, she invited me and other meditators.

So, we all went to Burma together in 1980. It was to study with her teacher and ordaining as a monk, which I really wanted to do, and to learn the fast ways of practice. It was like coming home and when I met Taungpulu Sayadaw, it felt like I'd already known him. He was so familiar to me. These forest monastics are not much different and nothing has changed in a couple of thousand years. They still live very simply and very close to the Earth. The main source of transportation where I went was Oxcart. There was no electricity. There probably is now, but there's such a simple way of living in the forest tradition that maybe because of my connection with the Tao and is such an Earth based spirituality and practicableness. Today, the forest tradition within the turbine tradition was where I just felt at home.

And of course, when I got there, you know, as one colleague of mine once said, I had all these issues around death, and no matter where I went no one really wanted to talk about it. But then when I finally started hanging out with all these Buddhist practitioners, the only thing

that everybody was talking about was death. So, I just felt like, it comes to this as tradition. We would go to the cemetery in the middle of the night, meditate on death. We did this anatomical practice called the 32 parts of the body meditation that the first monks are really into, that I learnt and meditated on these elements. So, this was like it's made for me. I was just like, yes, let me in. I want to dive into that; I want to sit with death; I want to learn from death; I want to meet death; and I want to meet this body; meet this life; meet these elements and meet my pain and my suffering and to learn from it. So, I felt very, very drawn to all of these meditative practices and living in the forests.

Elise: I heard a story you told once about a question about death that you asked your teacher, could you recall that it was quite a....

Bob Stahl: Yeah, yeah, that was with my teacher, I was his student and I was with him for about 25 years until he passed on at the age of 98. But I'm happy, that I could share that story. I had been studying with him for quite many years and I learned so much from him. I mean, to give a sense of my teacher, there'd be many a times I'd be sitting with him in the evening and I would massage his feet and I would just listen to him breathe and just listening to his breathing transported me into almost like metaphorically, into some of the deepest forests I've ever been to.

He was so utterly content. I lived with him for eight and a half years. He was truly the most contented person I ever met in my entire life. He didn't need that. There wasn't any source of egotism narcissism. As a matter of fact, if you went into a room, you might not notice if he was

sitting in there, you might notice the lamp first because he was like the opposite of charisma. Even though I've been around some spiritual teachers that are very charismatic yet don't have a lot of ego to it. But my teacher was this, he was just so utterly content with where he was all the time.

I lived with him for eight and a half years which was extraordinary. So, at a certain point, he did travel back to Burma and I went to see him when he was like 92 to visit with him in his forest monastery. When I was leaving, I was going to go to New York, to San Francisco the next day, I said to my teacher, I've asked you hundreds of questions through the years. And I have one more, he said, OK, what is it? And I said, you know, you're 92 years old and you've already lived longer than the average lifespan and death can come to you at any moment.

I'm just curious as a practitioner, even practicing since you were young, he's actually in the robe for, 78 years. And I said to my teacher, what are you going to do when death knocks at your door? And he just paused for quite a while, and he just looked at me, and then he smiled. Then his cheek moved up and down and living with him for eight and a half years, the cheek moving up and down, I knew he's going to say something. And then he said to me, are you afraid to die, Bob? And he caught me off guard because I didn't ask him that question. I asked him what he was going to do when he's going to die, and he starts asking me about whether I'm going to die. So, you'd see that he got me kind of shaken up there a little bit. Then he looked at me and shook his head, cheek, moved again, said, you need to meditate more. I said that's right

to my teacher, that's right. I do need to meditate more. I was probably in my late forties at that point. I still need to meditate more now with 67, of course, too.

But so, I took that in and I sat with it for a while, and then I decided to ask him the same question again. I said, okay I know I need to meditate more, but what is it that you're going to do when death comes knocking at your door? And so he just paused for quite a while again, and then he smiled. And then he said to me something that I'll never forget. And it's so beautiful and so wise. And of course he's a lifelong mindfulness practitioner.

He said, as I'm dying, if I see something, I'll be mindful of seeing ; If I smell something, I'll be mindful of smelling; If I taste something, I'll be mindful of tasting; If I hear something, I'll be mindful of hearing; And if I feel something, I'll be mindful of feeling; if there's different thoughts and emotions that are rising in awareness then I will be mindful of those thoughts and emotions. This is how I will die. This is how I want you to die.

Elise: I'm just I'm sorry, I'm just like composing myself right now.

Bob Stahl: If there ever was a teaching about how to die? That's just not me, I mean, I always remember this. I remember once telling my 100-year-old Jewish grandmother about my teacher. And I told her that story and she said, you know, that's pretty smart. She even like that. I love my grandmother. Thought that was a good idea to die mindfully.

Elise: Well, you know, yeah, I'm sitting here and I sort of have this unexpected emotion. Some of the listeners who are newer to this practice might hear that and go, What the hell? Like, I don't get it all that they're talking about. So perhaps this is a great point place to kind of leap into a little bit about mindfulness and kind of what we're actually talking about here and why it's valuable because I kind of have a sense of why I was just moved emotionally.

Bob Stahl: And why is that? Tell me?

Elise: Well, I just think it's something about, you know, that the mind can spin out in all these different places, like whether we're living or whether we're about to die. And it's all kind of a story and it's all over there and it's not here. Something about just like death is another moment like any other, like it isn't and it is. There's something about like, we just we just need to stay here and something I don't know. I'd love to hear your thoughts around it.

Bob Stahl: Well, my wife is a retired hospice nurse, and she says, I can't tell you how many people that I attended to on their deathbed and it was like watching Jeopardy when they died. So, this television show called Jeopardy is like a game show, like how many people just die in the middle of a show?

Elise: I think actually watching the show is what you ask.

Bob Stahl: Well, who knows? With their consciousness is when it happens to be on in front of them because they're in the place of dying. But you know, they'll die in the middle of some situational show or comedy. I know some people really have the hope and wish to die when they're asleep, but to me, that would be my worst thing. I want to die fully awake. I want to be just like, what is the gist? Life is incredible. Maybe I like to meet that with the awareness as well and with an open heart.

I also feel for those listening, and another monk friend of mine once said to me, I was sharing with him about my fears of death. And he asked me a great question. He said, Bob, do you want to die with fear in your heart or love? I knew the answer. Love and love is so much stronger than fear and it dissolves fear and so love and mindfulness is really a unified practice. So how can we bring that sense of love into our hearts in the midst of the fear, the pain, the separation? So you say something about mindfulness? Let me hear more. You were asking,

Elise: Oh yeah, let's. Well, maybe for the listeners that might be newer to the practice, could you share your definition of mindfulness? Like in simple terms, what is this thing we're talking about?

Bob Stahl: Yeah, yeah. Mindfulness is this practice and you know as a working definition, it's being aware of what's actually happening in the moment as it is happening and where are we being aware of what's happening? We live in three worlds our body of thoughts and emotions, so it's bringing awareness to what's present here and now. Perhaps as I

scratch my forehead, I'm being aware of scratching my forehead. I'm aware that I'm talking with you right now. I'm aware that my body's sitting in the chair right now, that I just took a drink. And so, there's a sense of awareness of what's actually happening in the present moment, what's being experienced in the here and now.

I think as you prepared some reference to this earlier, often the case we are not that present, we are off into the future, anticipating about what will be or planning for what will be or in the past. As a friend of mine once said that we're either rehearsing or rehashing in and missing what's happening the present moment when we think about it, the only moment that we ever really live in is right now. The future's not yet come. and the past has gone by. Of course, sometimes we need to need to plan ahead. But you know, there's a certain sense of purpose paying attention on purpose to what's here and now physically, mentally and emotionally, internally, externally; what's here within us and around us.

So, it's a practice that can be cultivated. Being mindful of the body; being mindful of our different feelings; being mindful of our different thoughts and so forth. So, this is the coming all coming from the foundations of mindfulness. According to these teachings, mindfulness helps us to see more clearly the places where we get cut, where we're stuck, where we're identifying with, where we're having beliefs. So, we have stories and narratives that we believe to be true, and we begin to see, that this is something that I do to myself when I'm hard and critical of myself and that these were all learnt. We didn't come in this way. We

were conditioned. Through conditioning, we meet, we begin to develop patterns and they are re-enacting themselves. But if we become aware, then we have a chance to potentially change what's happening. Just reduce the difference between reacting that is fueled by old habitual conditioning, and when we become mindful, I can begin to respond to it in a much more adaptive way and in a much healthier way. So, there's actually a very beautiful teaching story, simple autobiography in five short chapters by Patricia Nelson. She says in chapter one, when walking down a street as we pull on the sidewalk and I fall in and it takes a long time for me to get out. Chapter two I walk down that same street, there's a deep hole on the sidewalk and I fall in again. Chapter three, I walked down that same street, this deep hole in the sidewalk and it's a habit, you know, this is kind of what I do. And so, we get lost in this habitual conditioning but as we become mindful and we see that we have a choice that between the stimulus and the response is a choice that was alluded to Victor Frankl.

We have a choice. So, in Chapter four, walking down the same street as the pull on the sidewalk, I can walk around the hole. Once they become aware of this conditioning, I can walk around it, I can see you now and in time, perhaps walking down another street and I don't need to go there anymore. So the sense of awareness can help guide us as we begin to become aware of these stories in these identifications. If we were told early on that we won't amount to anything that we're not beautiful, that we're ugly, that we won't be a good singer or an artist, we begin to believe that and begin to get shaped and this shaping begins to solidify and we begin to identify that this is me. Mindfulness is

helping us to see this story. This narrative that we say about ourselves and perhaps see that maybe there's another way that I'm being held hostage.

I think that's, very important for all of us to realize this. I'm very blessed that I have a first grandson, and he's just 17 months old and he hasn't yet learnt anything. He has no bias towards one's color of his skin or their sexual orientation or their political affiliation or their gender identity. He doesn't have any of that conditioning, it's powerful for us to realize like we all came in this way. We all came this way and we get shaped by our conditioning. I mean, it's really like, we get shaped to it.

if I'm a Jew to hate the Arabs and if I'm an Arab, to hate the Jews or this or that or that or this. So, with that, I think the powerful gift is that mindfulness is, is that when we become aware of what it is that we have learnt, we can begin to unlearn. If there's going to be a saving grace for this world to bring more peace, to bring more celebration of the diversity of our cultures and people and everything, it's through awareness as we become aware of our conditioning. Whatever is learnt can be unlearned because we didn't come in this way. This was all learnt; bias and hatred is learnt, and it's not like this was here. So, the gift of mindfulness is helping us to see more clearly these places of our own limited views and bias and conditionings. Now that we become aware of it, there's a chance potentially to not come from that place anymore.

Elise: Yes. You were talking just a bit before about presence and, you know, being present to what's happening. But at the same time, we live

in a world and we need to go grocery shopping and plan ahead. And for many of us, a lot of the time we're facing decisions, sometimes they're small decisions. What am I going to eat for dinner? Sometimes they're big decisions like should I leave my career? Should I leave my partner? Should I get married? Should I have a child? These really big decisions and we can get so caught up in the mind and cloudy and confused? Do you have any thoughts about or even from your own personal experience, where using mindfulness in decision making, what you've learnt, and how this practice can actually support these bigger decisions where you really are trying to kind of tap into wisdom?

Bob Stahl: Yeah, yeah. There's a couple of things that come up to me and there's actually a book that says something about like, your body keeps the score. There's some sense of like my body knows. I'll say yes, but my body's like, it's going to have to do to say that. Yes, but when I say no, my body just gets relaxed. It gets soft. And so, I've learnt to listen to the body. There are times where, as a parent or when you have to work in the world, that you do things that you are not 100 percent for, but you do it because it needs to be done and you try to work with your point of view to embrace it in a way that can be alright and maybe even good. Maybe even surprise you and wonderful.

So sometimes we do need to do better. But I think when learning to trust the body, the body reveals, when you're faced with what you can try the decision by saying, 'Yes'. You can try it by saying, 'No', what does your body sit with the 'No' for a while? What's your body feel like with that; what does it feel like when it says yes? And then, of course, when

it's feeling like from the practice context, that I just don't know. There is something that you know, and we sometimes forget what it is that we know when we're in a place of not knowing. That is that we know that we don't know. We could actually in that moment of knowing, know that we don't know, rather than trying to force an answer, because the wisdom has not yet been revealed.

So can I just sit with this for a while to even let go of trying to answer, because the more that I'm trying to fit an answer, the harder it is to come, so let me just feel it and live it. There's this beautiful quote from Rückert, the German poet, about live the question, and maybe one day you will live into the answer. So that sense of living into the least, okay, I'm aware that I don't know, is a hard decision. Let me just be with it and see what happens. How many of us have experienced this type of hindsight wisdom where we've come to, let's say, four corners, so we have the option of turning around, going to the right, going to the left or going straight ahead of us and maybe other ways to go as well up or down.

So, let's say, you know your age, you struggle at four corners and you take a left because you think that's the way to go, and you go down the left for a while and then you realize that you shouldn't have taken the left. You should have taken a right, but you wouldn't have known that you had to take a right unless you took a left. And so, there is there's nothing wrong. It's like, like there's learning that's called hindsight. Oh, now I see I went down this path, but I needed to go down this path to know that there was a different path to go on, and I wouldn't have

known that unless I went down this path. And so, it's all wisdom if we learn from it.

Elise: I love that answer. That's so, so helpful. And something about when you said, you know, there is something, you know, it's that you don't know what I was thinking about, and how difficult it can be to sit in, not knowing or to speak in any kind of uncertainty. And I think now, we've been in this pandemic for nearly a couple of years and like this is the global experience in a way like this sitting in uncertainty. I know people have been talking to sort of talking on the more superficial level of, you know, I don't know if I can plan a holiday. There's just this, I don't know, I don't know, I don't know.

So, the question I have, well, maybe the discussion point is many people come to meditation because they think it's going to make me feel calm and it's going to help me feel better. But then it starts to reveal all kinds of uncomfortable feelings. Can you explain or share with the listeners as to why you would do a practice? It's kind of almost painful sometimes, like you could be crawling out of your skin or it's just so hard to sit still or actually what are we doing here or what is this practice?

Bob Stahl: Yeah. Well, hopefully one can get a little bit more benefit than detriment with the practice because there's a certain aspect of it that is like a calming agent, beginning to become aware of the breath or listening to sounds that settle the mind in the body. But yes, sometimes when we bring the attention inwards, we're getting in touch

with, a lot of anxiety here, and sometimes we'll say, you know, and there's a reason why one might begin to feel the anxiety. Well, number one, because it's already there, but number two, rather than turning away from it, you're beginning to shine a flashlight on it, shining the flashlight metaphorically, meaning turning on the light of awareness like, there is anxiety here.

Usually at that point, there's an impulse and a knee jerk reaction to get away from it. Thinking, I don't want to go here, let me go somewhere else. But then just wherever it is you go, then you have to go somewhere else and to go somewhere else, you have to go somewhere else. So, what we're learning is, we're learning how to tune into what's there, and we don't have to dive headfirst into the cold water, but maybe we can begin to dip our toes into the cold bucket dip in and dip out. And gradually there might be some acclimation to the temperature. Let me begin to acknowledge this anxiety, I didn't realize I'm carrying so much anxiety; I didn't realize my jaw was really sore from grinding my teeth, wow, my belly's in knots.

So, we're beginning to get some awareness of how whatever's going on in our life is affecting us internally. But this is actually not bad news. It's good news because it's actually beginning to reveal to you the places where we are caught, where we're stuck, where we actually need to bring more attention to rather than less. Because the more that we turn away, it just keeps on following us . There is a beautiful line from a Jennifer Welwood poem called Unconditional, where she says "whatever you flee from will actually pursue you, but whatever you

welcome will begin to transform you.” So, we're working with this practice of learning to turn in. Not radically, not dramatically, but we gently begin if we're feeling safe enough and interested enough, and there's a curiosity that begins to arise. This is a place I find myself into a lot and I spin out in it. I know getting a little curious about this and like the love of truth is beginning to arise within us and wanting to understand more, which is a great ally. It's a factor of awakening this quality of investigation as we bring mindfulness to it.

So, who knows, if we come in to learn from the things, what does the anxiety have to say to me, what does my fear have to say to me? Maybe my teacher that just come and drag, is here to reveal more about my heart? So, there's ways perhaps we can begin to meet our suffering, our pain and get insight an understanding. Then naturally, the heart of compassion may begin to grow as well. So, it is easy does it, as we turn into what's here, but meditation also has again that calming effect, calming the body. There's a sense of calmness, a sense of developing sense of steadiness and ease, which is also part of us, so we're developing both that quality of stability, but also the quality of insight and getting more insight into what is actually getting activated inside me. If so, we can work with both ways.

Elise: So, if someone is practicing, for example, people listening, you know, there can be a common experience of concentrating on the breath. And then people find that very some people can find that they get very uncomfortable, somehow focusing on the breath. It's not an uncommon experience. So how would you suggest you work with that?

Bob Stahl: For a number of years and this actually happened. I learnt about this many years ago, teaching MBSR that even though we all universally breathe, it's not the universal meditation object for all people all times. I would get reports from people saying, I'm breathing fine but when I begin to bring my attention to it, I'm holding my breath, I'm beginning to breathe more rapidly, more irregularly, I'm getting myself anxious. So, I came to understand that not everyone that the breath is helpful, so right away, I always offer different meditation object options, and I no longer would favor the breath as the primary object.

So, I like to explore and give people options, particularly three options. One is the breath that we're just talking about; but also hearing meditation; listening to sounds or feeling sensations in the body. I find that by giving practitioners options of where to bring their primary object to is much more helpful because for you, it might be the breath and it might like this is my home, this is my go-to, this is my anchor. For others, it could be that sounds are the anchor, and for others, it could be the sensations are the anchor. So I think it's important to offer some options of different meditation objects right away right at the very beginning. Not just do the breath alone, but the breath and other options, and give instructions and guidance from each of those objects in equal time, not favoring one over the other, but in equal time. Which object and may be trying out to see what works for you?

Maybe, sometimes the breath will work fine, and other times we might be hearing it; other times it might be bodily sensations. So, giving those options and helping to support people to feel sovereign that they can develop their own practice and develop their own confidence in themselves. And it's really important, too, I think, to, offer some options so people can begin to feel safe as they begin to explore the practice.

Elise: Yeah, thank you. What about when people ask you how long should I meditate for? How do you approach that question?

Bob Stahl: You know, well, this is like an MBSR classes, for example, to the, you know, the meditation CD or download audio. These days, it's 45 minutes and they say, if you can't do 45 minutes then do 44, if you can't do 44, do 43, you get the drift into 43 to 42. So, any amount is good. My teacher used to say that if you can practice for one moment, that will be better than having lived 100 years without practicing. I once asked him, how long is a moment? And this is how he answered it, ten snapping of a finger, and he says just practicing mindfulness for those ten snapping of the fingers are better than having lived 100 years without ever practicing it all. So that emphasis of knowing, so even with people I want to support them in a user-friendly way. Like, you know, if five minutes works for you, then to five minutes, you're going to do a May 10 minute challenge, and if he can do 10 minutes great, and if he can't do 10 minutes, how about nine minutes and 30 seconds? Yeah. How about nine minutes and 29 seconds? But even that moment is better than no moments,

Elise: I mean, people can be very sort of black and white about this. But I think the key that you're saying is just do something that works for you. Start with something, you know, don't throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Bob Stahl: Yeah, I mean, it all depends. Some people like the military meditation campus, like, just do this and that's what you have to do, for some people, that really works well. For others, it's like as soon as you tell them anything, they're going to say, no, I don't want to do it. So, I really want to support people to be where they are. But in the forest tradition, we don't even we barely even sit together. Every person lives underneath a tree or caves out in the forests, and we just meet once a day.

If there's any questions for the teachers and other than that you're just living alone and you're just cultivating your own practice and development. I think the main thing is, how can we develop this mindfulness in a natural way that these times that we are sitting; this times that we're bathing the body; the times we're eating; with toileting; there's times that we're sweeping the devil and cleaning and that we can bring our mindfulness into all of these activities that include sitting meditation as well. So the formal practices and the informal practices equal a way of life practice.

For some people, sitting longer periods of time really works for them, for other people sitting shorter periods of time works. But bringing their mindfulness into day-to-day activities works well for them. For some

people, they like their eyes partially open, some people like them partially closed. Of course, there are those who say you can only meditate with your eyes closed. It's no secret argument to have your eyes open, but in the spirit of sovereignty, how do we support people to discover what is best for them? But you know, it's different for different people.

Elise: Yeah, no. Thank you for that. A final kind of question around practice or maybe the philosophy of meditation. So, in the four noble truths, which for those that are new and perhaps more secular and haven't come upon this, this is sort of, I guess, the seminal teaching around suffering and there is suffering and how can we kind of liberate our selves from suffering? And so, in the noble truths that talks about, you know, the cause of suffering is clinging or craving.

Could you speak to that teaching at all in terms of how you've like, how you use that teaching in your life and how you navigate that teaching in a world where we are always doing things and wanting things? And, you know, as a teacher, maybe, you know, next book or going on this next retreat, like, how do you make this teaching meaningful? How have you kind of integrated this teaching. Maybe first share what your understanding of it is and then how you integrate it in this modern world and what it means. Does it mean you just kind of stopped doing things or just don't have any desires? What does it mean?

Bob Stahl: Yeah, that's thank you. And. My understanding is that the deepest cause of suffering is not greed and hatred. The deepest cause

of suffering is unawareness is ignorance, and that due to misconception, leads to craving and aversion. So not to say that grasping and, you know, desire and hatred are not there, but it's the origination is unawareness or misconception. And you know, when the Buddha was awakening and understanding the truth of suffering that it really does exist, yes, is the joys and sorrows of this life in this world. But that was his first realization, the sobering and humbling truth that there is pain. And then we began to investigate what is the cause and what arose was ignorance, unawareness not seen clearly that led to types of craving and aversion. So, this is why awareness and mindfulness are so powerful because when you're aware that, as my teacher would say, if you're aware that greed is arising in your eyes, your nose, your mouth, your ears, your body, your mind, if you're aware of it, you're gaining knowledge because at least now you know that greed is arising.

He'll say the same thing with hatred and ignorance. But if you don't know, then you go around and around. So, if you know this is gaining knowledge, and so I want to just say that first, but with unawareness, it gives rise to craving or to misconception because there's a belief that somehow happiness can be found outside of us and when we look at the causes of suffering, it speaks about the craving for sensual delight, the craving to be someone, the craving to feel nothing. And so, from a psychological standpoint, it's like it's like that first one is the craving to lose ourselves in sensuality or to lose ourselves in our narcissism or to lose ourselves in this sense of annihilation disappearance.

So, for example, this love of getting lost.. I want to just say that all most of us, as human beings, we do want to feel good. There's a longing for some type of happiness and peace. But the question is, where is this to be found? Is it inside? Is it outside? If we have this belief that it is outside due to our misconceptions and unknowing, such as sensual delights? Everything just feels so good and I just want more and more and more of it. And there's a certain suffering that's very inherent in the wanting because you can never quite get what you want or you can get it for a bit. But then it goes away, then you have to go get it again and again and again.

A friend of mine who's a meditation teacher was a heroin addict in her younger life. And you know, I was alluding that I've tried some psychedelic drugs, but I never did heroin or anything like that. And I was curious to ask her, what did heroin feel like? And she said, Bob, it was the best feeling I ever experienced in my whole life. And all I knew was I just wanted it again and again. But every time I injected myself, it would stay. Then it would leave, and I kept on wanting it, but it would never stay.

And I don't know if that was just so chilling to hear that type of a description for something that felt so good but couldn't keep it. And I'm also curious about for all of us, like what is it like when we lose ourself into our senses of pleasure? Where do we go? It's a very curious thing to bring our mindfulness to like yoga. I'll be the first one to admit and probably everyone is, I love losing myself and to my pleasures, and I've examined this. And what is it that I love about losing myself and to

my pleasures? And what I come up with over and over again is I lose my sense of self. All there is just pleasure and I just want to be there. But it goes. So, it's all in our relationship to pleasure, if we have this belief that somehow this is going to make me happy, that keeps on going like we can't hold on to it.

But there's another teacher, Ajahn Chah, he speaks about his teacup like he had this whole Dharma talk about how much he loves his teacup and finally sunsets and what the hell is going on. You getting demented? I mean, you've always said that liking things causes suffering. And he says, you know, you don't understand I love my teacup, but I already know it's broken. But in the meantime, I'm going to use it and enjoy it and be happy.

And so, it's all in our relationship to all of these things, and these things are not bad, is in our mind. And so, it's our mind in its wanting and possessing something that can't be possessed because it's coming and going. It's impermanent. And the same thing with a sense of, you know, this craving to be someone this narcissism. If for some reason we lost our sense of our own sovereignty early on we were shamed, we were humiliated, we were made to feel small. Then I begin to look outside of myself for approval for recognition, it's endless. No matter as like, I'm leaving myself all the time wanting to be part of this group because then I'll be whole. Then I'll be a whole person so we can get caught in this second source of suffering, of this craving to be someone because we lost ourselves in this.

And so again, that sense of losing that sense of our own sovereignty due to our conditioning and being humiliated and shamed early on that we begin to feel negative about ourselves, that I'm not worthy; I'm ugly; I'm a bad person. I don't belong here because we were conditioned to believe that way due to the experiences that we had as we were developing our sense of our personality and identification. We began to solidify that this is who I am. This is why it's so important to investigate this sense of who is this I, me and my? This narrative, the story, so you can say this craving for sensual delight is like the Rolling Stones was about I just can't get no satisfaction, no matter how much I try.

In this one, for narcissism, it's like I'm looking for love in all the wrong places. I'm looking outside for this love rather than knowing it inside. Interestingly, the word utopia in Greek means nowhere, but actually, if you change the letters a little bit, it also spells now here. So, there may be some pointing that that is not outside, it's inside. And then this last craving for to feel nothing is a sense of annihilation. It's like numbing out like, let me just not be here so I don't have to feel. So, we can get caught in that. So, these were the three cravings that the Buddha discovered due to misconception, the belief that somehow something outside of me. I go to losing myself into sensual delights. I lose myself into trying to be someone or somebody or losing myself by just trying to disappear. Just to lose myself in drugs or puzzles or whatever it is if you just don't have to be here. So, this is what we mean by this.

But again, this is borne out of unawareness and misconception. This is the deepest cause of suffering. There's a whole Buddhist teaching

called the Theravada the dependent origination to say it very shortly. These chain events, when this happens, that happens, this happens. It's a causal chain of events of suffering. But my teacher would say, if you know you can break the cycle, if you don't know, you will go around and around. This is dependent on origination. So, if you know that's the beginning of breaking the cycle of suffering, you don't know. Off you go.

Elise: Thank you.

Bob Stahl: I felt like I was speaking a thousand words a minute, then

Elise: oh, I was looking at lapping it all up and as I'm sure the listeners were and are, and I think that gives a really, you know, just to kind of summarise that or highlight what I heard. It's really, you know, people can think that sitting here and being present and meditation can be a whole lot of nothing if you haven't really done it before. But I think from what you just said, it's everything because it's kind of starting to see what is here in this moment and offering new possibilities like catching, catching ourselves in the moment and offering new possibilities.

Bob Stahl: Yeah, you may think looking on the outside that not much is going on. You just sit and really still and silent. But on the inside, it's another whole story this each of the senses the way to stimuli in the mind, to the senses as well to itself. There's a lot going on underneath the hood. And as we sit still, we can begin to see more clearly what's happening and perhaps gain deeper understanding of what's pulling us

to the left, to the right forward and backward and this understanding will set us free. It's beginning to see the conditioning and that perhaps in time we can begin to unlearn what we've learned. We begin to understand how that conditioning it's like the sense of being unconscious and it didn't come out of nowhere. It was learned by someone close to us in being hard on us and shaming us didn't come out of nowhere.

Elise: Also, I'm thinking that, you know, there are things when you say conditioned, can you just define what you mean? I mean, I know, but just for the listeners, what do you mean by conditioned?

Bob Stahl: Thing is our story, our narrative, our inner dialogue or identification, our beliefs, and if we are brought up in a very judging and critical environment, we become often a very judging and critical person when we look to ourselves or to others. We learn this is part of our conditioning. There's a beautiful teaching story by Pema Chödrön that she speaks about when training a puppy. You can train it in a very rigid and tight way to learn some commands like sit and stay. But often the dispositions of those puppies, they become very neurotic and confused because they've been brought up in an environment of fear. And that's kind of their conditioning is a fear-based. You also could learn those commands in a very kind and very patient way. And often, the conditioning of those types of dogs become more confident and flexible.

And so, we're conditioned through our environment. We're like a piece of clay that gets shaped by our environment as well as, we're developing our own autonomy and independence, but it's powerful from the standpoint when you see who it is that you've individuated into. If you're lucky enough, the rest of your life is unindividuated into. When you think, Wow, I'm this person that's hard on other people and myself and I learn this. But what can be learned can be unlearned as we learn what it is that we've learned

Elise: As we finish. I wanted to ask you a question. I ask all the guests, which is, you've written some wonderful books, including My favorite, which was "Living with your heart wide open. How mindfulness and compassion can free you from unworthiness, inadequacy, and shame". And we've spoken today about sort of those self-narratives. Are there any books that come to your mind or writers that have had an impact on your life that could be directly about meditation or more broadly?

Bob Stahl: Well, I always love science fiction, but actually, you know, the 'Tao Te Ching' by Lao Tzu. I've the Buddhist canonical literature with the words of the Buddha. And of course, as so many commentaries, contemporary writers have also written about mindfulness in the heart. But actually, as one teacher said, a student asked him, what books should I study? What books should I know so I can grow? And he looked at this person said, go to this book (points to self), this is the book. So, I feel like that's the best book. You know, again, there's no need to look outside everything you need to know is inside you. I can see the beautiful books behind you in the bookcase, and if you look

over here, I got a lot of dharma books and different books, and they are important ,the balance of theory and practice support realisation. But it has to be integrated.

Elise: Yes, a great point.

Bob Stahl: I really want to encourage practice, but the theories that you learn about it apply to practice to help support awakening in the heart.

Elise: I can confess that I spent many years reading Buddhist books and not actually sitting because I was too averse to sitting. I was just really interested in intellectual stimulation, but the last thing I wanted to do was sit. So yeah, I think it's a great point. My final question is, what is a life lesson that you've learned or earned that you would share with your younger self?

Bob Stahl: A life lesson actually was learning from my father when I grew up in Boston. I was a young driver at 16 years old, driving in the winter with a lot of snow and ice on the roads, and when I would encounter ice in my car it would skid out. I'd get very scared because I'm losing control. I remember sharing this with my father one time, and he said to me, Bob, if you want to get out of the skid, you have to turn your wheels towards it. That seems so counterintuitive. So, I didn't believe him because it scared me and I kept on spinning out. But finally, one day I turned an incy bitty little bit and I could feel my car beginning to come back into control. It was a very powerful life learning experience. I feel this kind of like a metaphor, even though it feels

counterintuitive to turn your fear turned into pain. What I found over and over again is that by turning into it, that's how it straightens out. When I turn away, it just keeps on skidding up further. So, I've learned to trust turning into my pain physically, mentally, emotionally. The pain, fear, whatever it is easy, but I trust it.

Elise: Wonderful, Bob, thank you so much for your time and it's been a very rich conversation. And where can the listeners find you if they want to know more here more?

Bob Stahl: Yeah, yeah. There's a website that I have called www.mindfulnessprograms.com and there's information on different retreats and different things and classes.

Elise: Yeah, wonderful. Alright. Wishing you well. Thank you so much and thank you so much for your wisdom.

Bob Stahl: Thank you for the opportunity to talk. Thank you so much.