

The Seekers Forum Transcript

Make Peace With Your Mind: An Interview with Mark Coleman

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The Seekers Forum
Awaken To Your Life

Mark Coleman, M.A., founder of Awake in the Wild and The Mindfulness Institute, is an internationally recognized mindfulness facilitator who has guided 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.

Mark Coleman has been studying meditation practices since 1981, primarily within the Insight meditation (Buddhist) tradition. He has been teaching meditation retreats since 1997. His teaching is influenced by studies with many great teachers in the Buddhist tradition as well as from Advaita and Tibetan teachers in Asia and the West, and through his teacher training with Jack Kornfield. Mark primarily teaches at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in California, and teaches nationally, in Europe and India.

MM: Welcome everyone to our monthly guest speaker series. Mark Coleman, it's so great to talk to you today, thank you for joining me.

MC: Great to be here with you Mark.

MM: I'd like to start by asking you about your conversion from an angry young man to somebody who was interested in mindfulness. How did you bottom out and what was the key insight that turned you around in that really difficult moment in your life?

MC: So, yes. As you say, I was an angry young man. I was a punk rocker and accursed, you know, looking at the sources of my anger, blaming the government, corporations, and anything external, like my family, you name it. I was squatting in a pretty unpleasant place in the dark, dingy spot I was in, and I was pretty miserable, festering in my own mind. I began to think and realize, *there has to be a different way, there has to be another way out*. I started unconsciously seeking, picking up books and looking at teachers and I stumbled on this Buddhist meditation center at the east end of London. Back in the early '80s meditation/mindfulness/Buddhism was pretty obscure. I went into the center and the people there seemed to have a certain presence and quality, stillness and purposefulness. I just had some sense that they were on to something that I was intuiting but had no access to. So, I started meditating and as soon as I turned that lens of attention inwards, it was like, okay, game over. This is what I'd been looking for to resolve some of these inner conflicts and pains.

MM: Ah, so do you feel like you met your inner bully, your inner saboteur even more fiercely then?

MC: Back then, my inner tyrant was very, very intense. For some reason I had a lot of self-hatred and self-rejection and was a very harsh critic. I had very high standards. It was relentless. Meditation offered some way of actually seeing it and then getting some space from it.

MM: What would you say Mark, you're somewhat of an expert on the inner bully now and the inner critic. What's the most misunderstood thing about the inner bully?

MC: I think one of the misconceptions is that we need it to function, to get out of the bed in the morning, that we need it for our work, that we need it to become a better person. And so we listen to its voice in the guise of self-improvement, or being better at our job, better at decision making or making ethical choices. In fact, it's really a faulty mental construct or habit that we look to that's not so useful.

So, for example, about ethical choices. We have this beautiful thing called conscience where we feel and intuit what is right or wrong, whereas the critic has the simplistic view of what's good and bad. It's the same with many other ways we can use the faculty of discernment, discrimination and assessment, rather than look to the rather crude form of advice from the judge that's mostly attacking our sense of worth or value, instead of giving us helpful information.

MM: That makes complete sense. When we're doing this work with the bully, this mindfulness practice, how do we neutralize without engaging with the bully? That's a hard one. We have to intercede on our own behalf, but we don't want to get into a conflict with the bully. Can you describe that process?

MC: Yes. You know the subtitle of the book, *How Mindfulness Compassion Can Free Us from the Critic*. I feel like we use those fundamental skills and mindfulness is that ability to be aware, to note, to notice, so we apply that to our thoughts and mental habits and we bring that clarity of awareness to see what's just an ordinary thought, what's a judging thought that's really debilitating or pejorative or putting us down in some way. So, we first bring that lens of awareness. And then we can do all kinds of different strategies. We can inquire.

This is where we ask: Is this true? Is it really helpful? But, the mindfulness is the primary tool in that we get a little space between ourselves and the thoughts and then we actually can be more responsive, as in: Do I want to listen to that? Do I want to ignore it? Do I want to say no thank you? Do I want to inquire if that's really true or helpful? So we start with mindfulness and we bring a little more. We're not engaging, because as soon as we do that, we've given the critic authority, we start rationalizing, justifying that we're a good person and that we didn't do something right. Instead, we want to notice the critic but not give it any attention, not really give it much value. As soon as we give it authority, we start really critiquing our own value as a person.

MM: That moment between thought and emotion is so split second, the body is already feeling emotions before we've even realized the bully has kicked in. How do we work with the emotions once they are in the gut? Is it just about sitting with the discomfort?

MC: Well, certainly mindfulness is, again, key. It helps both in recognizing the feelings, allows us to bring some kind awareness to it, and of course we need compassion once the critic's views have landed. Often we feel bad, we feel unworthy, we feel deficient. And so, we need to have a kind response to that.

One of the first significant moments for me when I started to break free from the critic was when I was in meditation and the critic was really assailing me about something, and for the first time I felt how painful it was in the heart. Not just being an ally of the critic, but being an ally of my

heart, seeing how painful it was and then allowing the response for the critic to come through from compassion and a fierce self-protection.

With mindfulness we can hold it, we can be with it. Kindness gives us more capacity and often what happens, when we find ourselves flooded with an emotion that's come after the judgement, we've often missed the very judgment that triggered the emotion. We roll backwards and ask: *So what's the view or idea that I missed that suddenly I went from feeling okay when I was working on a writing project or something, to feeling hopeless? Oh, that's when my critic came in and said it was pathetic, I'm not a writer. That's where I say, Okay, that's the thought. Is that true? Is that useful? Thank you [critic] for your opinion. Go have a nice day.*

MM: (Mark chuckles) Right, telling the critic, *you can move along now.*

MC: Yes, thank you.

MM: Let's talk about the negativity bias, which is something I've always found so fascinating. We're actually born with this hardwired tendency toward negative thoughts. Negative thoughts and experience impact us more powerfully than the positive do. How does that affect the relationship, the dance we do with these negative thoughts?

MC: Well, I think the critic to some degree arises out of that negativity bias in that our brains are oriented towards threat and toward survival. The critic really started as a survivor mechanism in early infancy and childhood when we were trying to navigate our early family system and culture, when we're learning how to fit in so we could optimize that flow of love and affection. And so, it was a way of an internal voice telling us and shutting certain patterns and reactions down, that negativity bias that's always looking for what's wrong, looking for the threat, and somewhat gets dovetailed into the critic. So that we don't just notice what's wrong, but the critic comes in and nails us, slams us for it.

For example, let's say you grew up in a very unstable family and as a result we have an anxious disposition, so our brain is orienting to anxiety, and the critic comes in and says, "Well, you shouldn't be anxious. Here you are in your home. What's your problem? Get over yourself. You're really pathetic for being anxious. All the successful people are not anxious."

And so, it just dovetails onto the already skewed lens we can have and then judges or ridicules or belittles us for that. I see the critic as another manifestation of that negativity bias, always oriented to what's wrong, what's problematic, what's enough. We live with that sense, *I'm not enough*, and it causes a very painful state.

MM: So painful, yes. I want to talk a little bit about anger and the roles and uses of anger. This is a slippery slope, obviously, righteous anger is almost an oxymoron. Do you find as a teacher of mindfulness that anger has it's uses in the process of awakening?

MC: Well, it's interesting and it's certainly a very topical question, right, because there's a lot of people pre- and post-election that are feeling a lot of outrage and anger and a need for a much more active response, especially from the spiritual, progressive community, in response to

election results, appointments and possible things coming down the pipe that may be impactful for many communities. So, generally in the Buddhist tradition, where mindful meditation comes from, anger is regarded as a somewhat unhealthy, unskillful emotion because we get so blind and have weakened vision and don't see clearly. We tend to do things, act and say things that are harmful *out of the anger* because we don't have the clarity.

But I do believe there's a place where we can use the anger as a basic self-protective emotion initially engaged to protect, and so, I do believe just as a mother protects a child, as parents protect offspring under threat, we need a place for the conscious use of that fire. I think of the positive side of anger as fierceness. There are plenty of times we need fierce compassion, that fierce love. Just like when a child does something that is very harmful and we say *No!* We need some kind of fierceness, as in the teenage years when there is something they may want to do, it's the same idea. Whether it's a response in a clinical situation or justice, oppression, racism, there's a certain kind of fierceness that can look like anger and it has that fire of anger, but the difference is that it's not blinded with reactivity.

MM: Right, beautifully said. And what do you recommend, speaking of this post-election and the polarity that we're feeling, the outrage, how do we move past the "us vs. them"? I think of it as a third position, like a sacred position. What would you recommend as a practice for moving toward that sacred position?

MC: Well of course that is the sixty-million-dollar question, how do we get beyond the polarity, the division, past the other-ness? I think one of the practices I like a lot is the "just like me" practice. It's one of the empathy practices where we put ourselves in the other's shoes. Rather than get caught up in the difference in the ideologies, we actually come back to the fundamental idea: *Just like me*, this person on the opposite political spectrum wants to be happy, wants to be safe, wants to thrive, wants to be healthy, wants to find peace of mind. For the most part, we can generalize in that way. If someone is acting out negatively, I can say, *just like me*, I can also go unconscious, I have my biases. *Just like me*. I get reactive. So we're not neutralizing or equalizing or saying we're the same, but we're not as different as we think we are.

I often think people on opposite sides of the political spectrum may have similar values around care, around thriving or around independence, or around helping the disadvantaged, but they have different ideologies, different ideas and philosophies about how to go about that. So, I think it's important that we start to see each other's humanness, at the same time not losing sight of those differences, not losing sight of the certain views and speeches and actions that do cause harm, and we're clearly taking a stand against that. At the same time, these people are also human and I also have my blindresses, prejudices and unconsciousness, being able to see that we're not actually as different as we like to think we are.

MM: That's really the essence of forgiveness, isn't it, what you're describing?

MC: Yes, we are seeing our humanness and seeing that we all have our limitations and follies. And, again, it's not bound between forgiving, but not condoning an action that causes harm, that's really a key distinction. There's a lot of critique of the spiritual, meditative, Buddhist world that can lend to too much passivity and I think it's important that we see clearly with

wisdom and awareness, but, we also take action. We don't just sit quietly on the side line and that's not necessarily what's going to be useful at this time.

MM: Absolutely. Mark, thank you so much for talking to me. Thank you for writing this book. Everybody, it's a fantastic book, I want you to go out and get a copy today. Mark, I just wish you the best of luck with it.

MC: Thank you Mark, really great to be with you, thanks for having me.

MM: Good, nice to see you.

MC: Take care.

MM: Bye.