



Conscious Life presents

ANXIETY SUPER CONFERENCE

Exploring existential anxiety

Guest: Martin Aylward

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[00:00:10] Jaia Bristow

Hello, and welcome back to this event, exploring anxiety. My name is Jaia Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts.

And today I am very excited to be welcoming a very special guest. He is an author, a Buddhist meditation teacher, and my father.

Welcome, Martin Aylward.

Martin Aylward

Hello, Jaia.

Jaia Bristow

So do you want to start by telling us a little bit about your experiences of anxiety and what anxiety actually means to you?

Martin Aylward

Sure. Mostly when I hear you ask the question, it makes me go back to myself as a teenager, really, where I was actually, objectively, I was doing okay as a teenager. I was growing up in a pretty loving, stable family. I was doing okay at school, and I had a good group of friends. So what was the problem?

The problem was I was perplexed by the fact of being human. It wasn't really anything in my particular circumstances. It was more like, my God, what is it to have a human mind and to be conscious? I mean, that particular question, what is consciousness?

It seems so, like the most amazing thing that was happening wasn't the details of life or the circumstances, it was just the fact of being here. And I couldn't find anyone to provide answers to those. Those are the kind of questions that people either actively wanted me to avoid or didn't know where to point me to. And that just made the whole issue seem more perplexing.

And so the anxiety that arose, I was thinking I must be some kind of weirdo. Am I the only one who is astonished by the fact that I'm here at all?

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And so that was kind of uncomfortable to deal with. And that was also the thing that then propelled me into traveling and going to India and discovering the meditative traditions. And actually two things. One, coming across the great relief that I'm not the only person to have been perplexed by these kinds of things. There's a whole bunch of practices and teachings and explorations for how to engage with the fact of being conscious, how to understand one's own mind, etc.

And then tools that actually allow one to really meet one's own, my own background anxiety, the kind of low level general sense of, am I okay? What's going to happen? What do people think of me?

And at first, actually, in getting into meditation, it was like the volume of all that stuff got turned up. It felt as if meditating had made me more neurotic and anxious.

Actually, what had happened was it had just made me more aware of that low level background self concern that was there all the time, and that was uncomfortable. But fortunately, the very practices that were doing that were also giving me really helpful tools for understanding that background noise and getting some space from it and just to stop taking myself so personally.

Jaia Bristow

And it's really interesting. There's a lot I could resonate with being a teenager who didn't have terrible parents but who also went through a lot of anxiety. And I think that questioning of consciousness and existence and that existential anxiety is so common amongst teenagers. And of course, it exists in lots of other people.

And again, that feeling of, oh my God, I'm alone. I'm the only person going through this. No one gets this. No one can relate to this experience, is so strong in those moments.

And it's really interesting, you talk about how meditation really helped you, but how initially it made it feel like it was almost creating more anxiety because it was, as you say, turning the volume up.

And I think that that's something that I've spoken about with some other mindfulness teachers as well. And it's something that sometimes gets overlooked. People are like, oh, you're anxious, meditate. And then people start meditating, and it's really overwhelming for them. So I'm wondering if you can say a bit more about that.

Martin Aylward

Firstly, because we're talking about teenage life, you mentioned it, and I was referring to mine, I think it's important to recognize that it's normal to be anxious as a teenager. Anxiety is born out of the fact that, I don't know what's happening, I don't know how I should be, I don't know what's going to turn out. And that's exactly, that's the appropriate life stage for a teenager.

You're no longer the child. If you're 18 or 19, you're supposed to be an adult, but mostly people don't feel like an adult. I totally didn't. And so it's one of those liminal moments where a lot is possible, where a lot of learning is possible, where a lot of questioning is uncomfortable but actually very helpful. And it's one of those moments of great fertility where a lot can happen.

And so a lot of the teenage anxiety, of course, it may be just emotional and psychological and habitual anxiety. It may be related to circumstance and pressures in the particular teenager's life

around all kinds of things and the questioning of one's role in life or the questioning of one's sexuality or gender or choice of career or anything around that.

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But often that more, I hesitate to call it surface level anxiety because it can feel really intense and important, but while that bit is often seen, what's often not seen is the more existential anxiety underneath it that, I think it's helpful to recognize as not a neurotic problem situation, but rather a natural and potent situation that's uncomfortable and challenging for the teenager, but that can actually be met not as a problem to be solved, but as a mystery to be embraced.

So if we can sit in front of it, if somebody could have sat in front of me as a teenager and just acknowledged that, oh, you've got these deep, profound, destabilizing questions about who you are and where you're going and how to authentically meet your life. Okay. How can you explore that? And to give some support to that rather than, oh, don't go there. But what are you going to study at University?

The attempt to sideline existential anxiety, then means that the anxiety is more likely to just come out around some particular event. It's being squashed, this deep sense of I'm anxious about who I am and my place in life. Nobody can meet me there, so then my anxiety pops up somewhere else and around some other subject about what it is that I'm going to study or about whether my friends like me enough or about whether I'm clever enough, witty enough, attractive enough, etc.

So, of course, those things can arise on their own, but I do think it's worth sensing for and not sidelining a person's questions if they are deep. Because they may be deep in such a way that they're beyond the scope or understanding of the person trying to support them, and in which case, well, it's good to be able to refer them to somebody who's a specialist in existential explorations.

Jaia Bristow

Well, that was what I was going to ask when you were talking about sidelining, I was saying, don't you think that that's maybe a symptom of the person's own, either anxiety or inability to answer the questions or to meet the questions even?

Sometimes I think people don't sideline questions or dismiss questions because they want to be hurtful or dismissive, but because they might not have the capacity to meet those questions in those moments.

Martin Aylward

And of course, it's uncomfortable to stay with a question to which you have no answer. And the deepest questions, the existential questions, they don't have answers. Like, who am I really? You're never going to find a satisfactory answer to that. What is the nature of consciousness? You can search and search, you won't find an answer.

And because we don't even know how to engage with those kinds of questions, they tend to be sidelined. But actually, by staying with them, and this is a lot of what contemplative transformative practices do, is they give us a context and tools for settling into our questions so that we can give up just looking for an answer and instead actually find a response, a living response.

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You can find a way of meeting where the question is pointing, meeting the consciousness out of which the question is coming, meeting the various different senses of who I am that appear at different moments, some of which might be anxious or neurotic. Others of which might be fearful or confused, others which might be confident and competent in different moments.

And learning to navigate the different senses of selves that appear, rather than getting fixated and contracted around anxiety about what we expect to be one central self.

Because there doesn't seem to be any central self, however much we infer it, when we really go looking for it, we don't find it. And in a world that centers the self, that itself can feel very disconcerting. The fact that I can't latch onto or find or assert a reliable, steady sense of self.

That could even sound pathological in some of the psychological approaches. But I would argue that's the good news, because if you can land in the fact that there is no central self to be found or asserted, then you can stop taking yourself so personally. Then you can come forward in a variety of ways which are more fluid and more free than you might have expected.

Jaia Bristow

Okay, and that sounds all very nice in theory, but first of all, how does one even begin to do those things? And even before that, what exactly do you mean by everything you've said in that meeting these feelings, these questions, these questions without answers? How do you meet with them and be with them without, as you've previously said, turning up the volume on the anxiety or whilst managing that turned up volume?

Martin Aylward

Yeah. Important. A lot of what the basic ground of mediation practice is doing is giving you a way to meet your own mind without being identified with it.

What I mean by that is, rather than just believing everything you think, so you have the thought, oh, I don't know who I am. Or you have the thought, maybe those people didn't like me. Or the thought, oh, did I say something that was wrong? Or the thought, what's going to happen tomorrow morning?

Rather than just that thought grabbing all your attention and you go off with it and you create a lot of drama around it, the meditative practices are giving you the tools to have that thought arise and realize, oh, there's an anxious thought. I can see the anxiety in the story, what's wrong or what will be wrong? I can feel the anxiety in terms of the tensions that go along with that thought.

And the very fact that I can recognize a thought shows me that I am not that thought, that I can be both intimate with and yet also independent from that thought. That I can develop a relationship with my own mind where I'm not just pulled and pushed around by everything I think.

And that really is life changing, because then it means the most important thing isn't whether or not I'm having a difficult thought, because who knows what my next thought will be or your next thought will be or anybody watching this. You never know what kind of crazy stuff might appear in your mind in any given moment. So rather than trying to control my thinking, the shift is to having some space around my thinking, having some ground in which to recognize my thinking.

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And that is one of the most significant shifts we can make from being just bound up in all our mind content to being able to recognize and then have some genuine free space and choice around what to do with our mind content.

Jaia Bristow

So that's what you mean by it. And now my question is how do we get to that point? How to do that? How to create that space around the thoughts?

Martin Aylward

Well, there's a lot of resources. There's books and courses and trainings and online things, etc. But I would say the most important, especially for people who feel hemmed in by anxiety or that feel and pushed around by their mind, is to seek out some guidance, really, with somebody who both can really can recognize that condition, but even more so, somebody who themselves knows that space and independence from mind.

So there's lots of very good and important and helpful emotional and psychotherapeutic approaches to anxiety and medical approaches to anxiety. And those are totally helpful and necessary and useful in various cases.

But if somebody can recognize their anxiety as having its origins, in what I'm calling, existential anxiety, that actually the most profound concern is who the hell I am and what the hell life is, rather than just anxiety about particular details or circumstances.

Then finding an existential response to that, and another word for that might be a spiritual response or a transpersonal response, a response where the context for exploring your mind, is bigger than just the self. It's bigger than just psychology. It's bigger than just me and my thoughts and my problems. That's the context in which you can do, the only context, really, in which you can do that.

So then you can learn some basic practices. Like I say, it might be just grounding your attention in your body, learning to recognize thoughts and leave them alone a little bit. Learning to settle into a bit of space while the mind just does its busy thing in the background. Learning to treat thoughts in the same way that we might treat sounds.

Some sounds are sweet, like birdsong, and then some sounds are unpleasant, like trucks going past. And that's very similar to thoughts. And when we really give attention, we see they appear in the same way. Birdsong or truck noise or sweet, happy thought or aggressive worrying thought. They're sort of like bubbles. They're brief appearances in the landscape of consciousness.

So, when we keep attending in a meditative way to the nature of our experience, the way it comes and goes, the way sounds and thoughts and sensations, for example, aren't really very different from each other. And we learn to do that with somebody or in a context where we keep being pointed, not just to the content but to the space around it, that's I think what really can start to make the difference.

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic. And I'm curious as well, we're talking a lot about, as you say, this existential anxiety, and one of the things I'm hearing is that the practices you're talking about or the ways that you're talking is

maybe not for everyone. It is for those people whose anxiety is caused by those big existential questions.

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And I think in today's society, a lot of those questions, it's not just who am I? It's like what's happening in the world? All the things happening in the world can cause a lot of existential anxiety. Between the climate crisis, pandemics, racial inequality and all kinds of other social dynamics and finding one's place in the world.

And I do a lot of work around, obviously, power dynamics and privilege dynamics. And a lot of my own anxiety came from feeling very caught between worlds being of multiethnicity and queer sexuality, and all these kind of questions. So I'm wondering if you can speak a little bit to that kind of existential anxiety as well.

Martin Aylward

Well, I'm glad you made the point that it's not for everyone. I think it's important that people question, if your main concern, if what you're anxious about is a specific, belongs to the order of the details and circumstances of life, whether that's to do with one's own identity and some of the things you've just mentioned and have explored, or whether it's about one situation.

The anxiety might just be about how I'm doing in school or the anxiety might be about a romantic relationship. If it's about a specific area of one's identity or it's about a specific situation, maybe the person isn't really interested in the question of why I'm here or what's the most essential response to human existence.

And I'm sure there's plenty of other places in this conference where people are well met around the anxiety to do with specific identity or circumstances. So that's why I wanted to, in a way, to use this time to address a little more, which I imagine is less well met with that sense where...

Because sometimes it's the other way around. People may just be anxious about those things we just mentioned, but sometimes it's almost misdiagnosed. That because there isn't the wider cultural recognition that we can have profound existential questions about the nature of being human or the nature of consciousness, then what gets focused on is the particular identity or the particular circumstance.

And there is, for some people, they may be questioning their identity or their circumstances in some way, but maybe there's some people listening to this and they might be able to recognize, oh, underneath the specifics of that, there is another kind of questioning going on which is more fundamental in a way and might be more wordless. Because we don't have words for it, we don't have cultural signposts to it.

We're told you are a self and then you can be a this kind of self or that kind of self. And there's a lot in the conversation of signifiers of identity, whether those signifiers are around race or gender or social class or all the other kinds of social signifiers. But what about underneath all the different signifiers?

It's not to dismiss the importance of attending to all those areas, but for some people, the perplexity about their more fundamental sense of human identity may actually be what's then coming forth and it's showing up and being treated in these different specifics.

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But maybe even if you solved all the specifics, even if you got really clear about who you are in the world and which categories you fit into, and even if the world perfectly respected and reflected all those categories back to you, maybe you wouldn't be fully okay and contented because this deeper level of, yes, but still, who the hell am I? It might still be bubbling up through consciousness.

Jaia Bristow

And so I think it's great that you're speaking specifically, maybe to those people about those people, about this topic that, as you say, and this is the tricky thing with creating an event about anxiety. Anxiety is such a broad topic. Anxiety means so many different things to so many different people.

And just in the limited amount of interviews I'm doing, I'm talking about all different types of anxiety with different people. I'm having a conversation about how anxiety can be directly linked to physiological symptoms, for example, for some people. And I have a condition called POTS, for example, which is the heart condition, which actually presents a lot of the same physiological symptoms as an anxiety attack.

And then I'm also talking to people with a lot of different specific methodologies on working with anxiety. So, your colleague Mark Coleman, who talks about meditation in nature specifically. And I'm talking to people about different Qigong practices, for example.

So I love that we're talking about this broader focus of anxiety. And so one of my questions is, especially because we were talking about how it can often come up for teenagers, is about how to support people?

A) how to find inner support, I guess if people are going through that, but also how to support a loved one who may be having these kinds of questions. Whether that's a child, a partner or any other family member or friend or loved one going through these questions. What can someone do to be supportive?

Martin Aylward

Good question. The things that immediately come to mind are a couple of don'ts. What not to do rather than what to do.

So the first is, don't shut down the question in the person. If one is supposedly the competent adult and we're getting questions and we don't know the answers ourselves, that can be one tendency. It's like, oh, don't worry about that. Just focus on something else. Or we try to give them an easy or neat answer. So clearly that doesn't work. So don't shut down the questions.

But equally important, on the other side, how can I say this? Some people might just go to shutting them down. Others might recognize, hey, I don't want to shut down the questions, but that doesn't mean you have to follow the questions as if they have answers.

The only thing we know to do as soon as we have a question, we assume we've got to get to the answer. When I get to the answer, that will be the resolution. But like we said earlier, the deeper our questions are, the least likely they are to have neat answers.

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The question is, how can one embrace the questioning? Embracing questioning means without shutting it down and settling for an easy answer and without assuming that there is a right answer out there that would solve my anxiety.

And I'm happy in a way to be niche in this exploration. Like you say, there's a lot of other methodologies around managing anxiety and ways of specifics of anxiety. Great.

I guess my hope is to point to somebody who may not feel, I'm sure a lot of people are met in all those other areas, but to anybody that doesn't, to anybody who feels like they're questioning, maybe, or their anxiety may be a little more nebulous and unspecified than that, then what might that mean to the person? What might that mean to you? To honor the fact that you've got this deep questioning, to not want to shut it down, to honor it, to listen to it, but also not to expect an answer.

And then I think our deepest questioning can lead us in surprising ways, and it might be uncomfortable. Like I was saying, when I first started that practice, it just turned up the volume and anxieties I didn't even know I had until then. I became definitely more fearful and more neurotic at first, which I know doesn't sound like a good advert, but it was held in a process where I could see the only way to go through and beyond my own neurotic mind was by actually recognizing it up close.

And then it's a question of finding somebody who's trustworthy, who knows that material and who can hold you in the ambiguity of questioning, can honor your questioning with you.

Somebody who's not trying to give you an easy answer or a right answer. Somebody who's not trying to shut you down. Somebody who can sit down with you and say, oh, you don't know who you are, hey, I don't know who I am. Let's sit here and listen to life and find out and just see what emerges and see what layers emerge.

And if then the layers that emerge are difficult, painful, confusing, anxious ones, somebody who knows that territory well enough to hold your hand through it, to accompany you through it. And holding our hand, accompanying us, accompanying each other through confusion and anxiety is a much better approach than trying to solve it. I would say.

Jaia Bristow

And it's interesting because the advice that you're giving to someone trying to support someone with anxiety sounds similar to what you were talking about earlier when you were talking about how to be with the anxiety itself.

So, not shutting down the questions and so being with them, but equally not trying to find answers and fix the questions and solve the problem, as it were.

So it's really interesting that that's what you were saying earlier when you were talking about meeting it and how to be with the anxiety. And the practice of meeting it and being with it, is also the same advice you give to people supporting people going through this kind of questioning.

And you're talking, of course, about finding someone who is the right guide or the right support. And so how would someone go about doing that? What kind of person, other than you, would be a right fit? Or what exactly do you mean by and how do people go about that? Because sometimes it can feel like, okay, great, but where do I even start with this kind of thing?

[00:28:02] Martin Aylward

So firstly, just to pick up on your first point about the advice for the person themselves being similar to the advice for someone supporting.

So that language I said about accompanying someone through anxiety, that's actually a language I use with students in terms of their own inner, accompanying one's own, accompanying your own mind. It's like befriending your own mind rather than arguing with it, defending against it, trying to shut it up, being afraid of it.

That's a lot of what's going on with anxiety. It's like there's all that battle. It's like learning how to accompany your own heart and mind. And at first, if we can't do that, it's really helpful to have somebody else who's a steady presence, wise presence, kind presence, supportive presence to accompany us.

And then the process isn't that they're with us constantly, but they're there in the support of us learning to accompany ourselves to a great extent.

And in terms of where to look for that, I would say to anybody listening who feels what we're calling this existential anxiety is a fit for them, look for people, whatever the modality, can most represent the meditative practices, particularly, but not only, within the Buddhist tradition or the derivatives like mindfulness practice, etc.

I would say to look for somebody whose description of the practice and what they're doing with the practice is bigger than just a psychological framework. It's bigger than just stress reduction or particular psychological benefits.

Look for somebody who talks about, not exactly the meaning of life, because that's a little bit of a hackneyed expression, but that talks about what it is essentially to be human. That's interesting that you can read in their description something about getting some space from your own mind, rather than a description of those practices that's just more about managing your mind.

I don't have a great deal of faith in managing my mind. My mind has turned out to be quite unmanageable. So it's much more faith in giving up trying to manage the mind and giving it space.

In the tradition, there's this idea of a horse in a field, and the horse is like your mind. So the horse's nature is to run around, just like the mind's nature. It's as natural for mind to think, as it is for eyes to see and ears to hear.

So if you want to kind of contain that horse, don't tie it to the short rope, to a stick in the ground. It will just fight and buck to try to get away. Rather give it a big field with plenty of grass and some water and make a strong fence. So the strong fence will stop it getting out. It's contained, which is what you wanted, but it has freedom to move.

And so it's the same with meditative practices. If you're busy trying to control your mind, to tie it to a stick, to try to make it behave in a fixed or narrow way, it will rebel, guaranteed. So rather, you give it the space of some meditative practices, the fence of some good understanding, and then you might find that without trying to manage your mind, it becomes much more dependable, much more well trained, much easier to ride, if we do take the horse metaphor maybe a bit too far.

[00:31:42] Jaia Bristow

So befriending your mind, creating containment rather than tightly contracting and controlling. Is there anything else around that?

Martin Aylward

Well, when we talk about befriending, there's a whole aspect I think. Sometimes people think of meditation or mindfulness, it can seem like a bit of a mental type of exercise or even a dry exercise, as if it's just training the attention. Okay, when your mind wanders, come back to the breath, etc.

But that quality, when we say befriending, that quality of friendliness, that's equally important. So if one's going to speak about mindfulness, one could equally speak about a quality of heartfulness. Holding experience lightly and loosely and lovingly.

And again, how to do it? Sounds good, but how? A lot of us, we don't even know. We say, okay, be kind to your own mind. We don't even know how to do that. The image that the Buddha gives is of a maternal embrace. This is the way a mother would hold her beloved infant.

And if you have children or if you've got nephews and nieces or if you've got pets, any helpless being that you're in touch with, that if they're in some distress, it's just easy to take them in your arms. You don't have to do something to make it better. There's something about the way we know instinctively how to provide a gentle, reassuring, loving presence to a young, helpless being in distress, child, nephew, niece, pet, etc.

And I found early on in my practice that a very helpful image and guide for how to cradle my own poor distressed mind. That our awareness can care for our mind in that same way that a mother might care for a beloved infant, that we might care for a wounded pet or etc.

And then, of course, there's ways of training that capacity and ways of then we start to wake up to all the shocking ways that we find that, habitually, wow, I'm just not kind to my own mind. I tend to be judgmental, harsh, overly demanding, expecting perfection.

There's a famous line from a very old Zen practitioner of about 1500 years ago, who in the Buddhist tradition talks about a free life as one being without anxiety about imperfection. How can we live without anxiety about imperfection?

And we're tyrannized by ideas of perfection, whether that's physical perfection and the Instagram filters which keep suggesting to us. Even Zoom you can flatten out or smooth out the wrinkles. And just that simple example of assuming we could have physical perfection. Whereas actually, as you can clearly see here, it's graying, wrinkling, wearing out, falling to bits.

Or relational perfection, the whole delusion of happily ever after, as if you could fall in love when you really find the right one. And that term, happily ever after, what kind of delusion? Nobody's ever lived happily ever after. Me and your mother have been together for more than 30 years. We have a good, steady, good working relationship, but it's not happily ever after. It's happy and bumpy. Of course it is. It's human.

So there's something about expecting perfection of ourselves or of others or of the world, is a cause of anxiety. And actually, to recognize, to know a life where we put down the anxiety about the fact that everything is imperfect. We put down the anxiety that I'm imperfect, what a great relief that is.

[00:36:09]

I don't know how much time we've got, but I feel like that phrase somehow, again, I found it very helpful in my own practice. And it speaks, I think, to a question of rather than solving anxiety by trying to create or get the conditions right or get my situation right or fix my problems, the sense of we relax a little bit around the fact that I've generally got a mind that's, my shorthand for it is, lazy, crazy, needy and greedy.

Now, as a meditation teacher or a Buddhist practitioner, how easy it would be to get down on those things. I shouldn't be needy, I shouldn't be greedy, I shouldn't be lazy and I certainly shouldn't be by now. But it's like, but pretty reliably I can find, no, that's the kind of mind content that often arises.

But then when I'm not expecting it to be otherwise, when I'm not anxious about that imperfection, it ceases to have much power. It just is like those bubbles, like birdsong or truck noise passing by.

Jaia Bristow

And talking about perfection and imperfection, I'm wondering how you can tie that into meditation practice as well?

Because sometimes people have this idea that during meditation you have to be sat straight, focused on your breath, and if your mind wanders, then you're doing it wrong. Or if you're having a particularly stressful meditation or a jangly meditation, then that's wrong.

And you've given me some very good advice in the past on meditation, so I'm wondering if you could talk about the imperfection and perfection around meditation practice.

Martin Aylward

Good. I think the most helpful thing is to see meditation as a process of meditation rather than fixating on the quality of experience I'm having.

The quality of experiencing you're having will be probably pretty ropey most of the time. You're sitting with dullness, discomfort, racing mind, distraction, dullness, boredom, impatience, fantasy, worry, regret, nostalgia, clouds and all that stuff coming and going, punctuated occasionally by some feeling of momentary quietness or momentary spaciousness. Wonderful.

But then the idea of perfection comes out. It's like, oh, if I got what's supposed to happen, is it supposed to be all peace or all quiet? And then I wouldn't be troubled by that stuff anymore.

It is true as a practice goes by, that kind of peace and space can become more accessible. But don't worry about that stuff. The fact that you're going through these clouds of distraction and delusion and all the rest of it, the process of meditation is, and people often don't notice this or recognize it for a while, you're getting familiar with your own lazy, crazy, needy, greedy mind.

And the more familiar you are with something, the less fooled you are by it. The quality of your practice doesn't matter in some way. The sincerity of it matters. I'm often saying to people, transformation happens despite the quality of your practice, not because of the quality of it.

And I think that's very helpful then, for being able to just sit down with yourself every day, even though what you're sitting down with doesn't feel like very magnificent or spiritual content.

[00:39:45] Jaia Bristow

So would you say this is one of the rare occasions where it is quantity over quality?

Martin Aylward

Well, I would say regularity, but yes, the regularity of your practice, the willing to ensure to engage in the process, the willingness to keep sitting down is exactly way more important than the quality, or at least more important than measuring the quality.

That's the problem. The quality will change over time, will deepen, maybe not in the way you expect. But measuring the quality of it is a recipe for feeling discouraged. And then you lose the discipline if you like, or the willingness to sit.

So yeah, trust in the process. Trust in the process. Be sincere. And after even a month I would say, if anybody meditates pretty sincerely, it doesn't matter how long they're sitting, if they meditate pretty regularly and sincerely for about a month, they'll notice, not necessarily that the quality of their meditation has changed very much, but they'll notice that something's changed in their life.

A month is mostly enough to start to notice, oh, I'm a bit more attuned to when I'm starting to get stressed and I'm a bit more able to feel that and relax it a bit. I'm a bit clearer about when I start to spin off into some kind of unhelpful thought pattern, and I'm a little bit more skilled in just letting that go.

Hey, if that's true, after a month, what might it be like if one was to allow that to really build in momentum and goodness and potency? And to do that with some wide guidance of somebody who can actually lead you through the magical mystery tour of your own consciousness.

Jaia Bristow

And I'm curious as well if you have advice for people either starting out with meditation or who have been meditating for a very long time, who sometimes get stuck with the actually sitting down and meditating. Especially when it feels like that volume is being turned up and it can be quite uncomfortable to sit down and meditate or meditate in any, I guess it doesn't always have to be sat down.

But any advice on how to actually get, it's not just during the meditation, but to actually do the meditation in the first place?

Martin Aylward

Yes, I've got the absolute perfect recipe. People ask me this, so how do I establish a daily meditation practice? It's very easy. You want to know how you establish a daily meditation practice? You meditate every day. I've never found any other way to do it.

And of course, that's obvious. But sometimes that's a real click for someone, because in the back of their minds they're like, oh, I want to establish a daily meditation practice. Okay, so then today sit down, and then tomorrow sit down. Don't think about the daily meditation practice over time. You don't have to establish a daily meditation practice for a month. All you need to do is sit today.

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And don't worry about the length of time either. People will go on a meditation course where we sit for half an hour or 40 minutes, and oh, that's what a meditation is supposed to be like. But see, what's a period of time that actually feels manageable?

And sometimes that might only be 2 minutes. But hey, 2 minutes your mind might tell you that's pathetic, it's not enough, but hey, if you actually just sit down for 2 minutes and sense and breathe and give a little space to things, 2 minutes of actual meditation is much better than the half an hour of meditation that you keep telling yourself about, but you never actually do.

So sincerity is more important than quality. Regularity is more important than duration.

Jaia Bristow

And what do you mean exactly by sincerity of meditation or sincerity of practice?

Martin Aylward

Well, it's recognizing the goodness. It's good that you sit down. It's good that you sit down. It's like letting yourself recognize, oh, I know that meditation is a good thing, and here I am actually doing it. And acknowledging the goodness of that to yourself rather than, as I say, measuring, oh, I just got distracted or I just fell asleep. You undermine the goodness of your practice in that way.

It's not easy to sit in that rather naked way in front of yourself, to sit without giving yourself up to distractions. It's easier to watch Netflix. It's easier to go to the fridge. It's easier to go to the pub. It's easier to go almost anywhere and do almost anything rather than just sit down and face myself.

So if you're going to do that, the sincerity is like acknowledging, wow, that's a beautiful thing. It's a good thing. It's a kind thing. And just because it doesn't feel like, often might not feel good, it might feel uncomfortable or restless, etc.

So the sincerity is recognizing it's a good thing the fact that you're aligning your intentions to befriend your mind and to train your mind in some way, and then you're aligning your actions and your attentions together.

So I might suggest that when somebody sits down, even if you're just sitting down for a very short time, take a moment to acknowledge, here you are, here you are showing up for your life, and you're going to stay here only 2 minutes. Fantastic.

And you never know, some days, 2 minutes go and you realize, actually, I think I'd quite like to sit another 2. And some days you don't. Some days it's a struggle even to get through that 2 minutes. Okay, but you've brought yourself to the cushion and you've dared to meet yourself very directly for 2 minutes.

And then other days, it's like a great relief to just breathe out and land and soften your body a little bit. And you find that 2 minutes can turn into 5 or 10 or longer.

Some people, they naturally find that they can quite easily or quickly establish rhythm where they're sitting for 15 or 20 or 30 or 40 minutes daily. And I'm not telling those people to go back to 2 minutes, but if you're struggling with any kind of regularity or discipline or anything, it's like it's much better to

set yourself a low bar and then gain the confidence of consistently daily meeting that bar, getting over that bar.

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Rather than setting yourself some kind of overly idealistic high bar of what you think you should be doing, and then you're just fostering a sentence of failure because you don't end up doing it.

And being overly idealistic about inner practices is a classic problem. Again, it's about the expectation of perfection. We get overly idealistic about how I should be in my life, in my relationships, in my work. Let me just translate that same pressure to a meditative practice.

So when I talk about 2 minutes and it can seem sort of transgressive in some ways, it's a way of undercutting that kind of tight relationship to it.

Jaia Bristow

I know that that advice that you've also given me in the past has really helped because I'm someone, I have an endless to-do list, and meditation had just been added to my endless to-do list. And it was one of things I never got to, especially because it was meant to be a daily practice. So it was just like, I'll do it tomorrow because I don't have 20 minutes right now. Where I can always find 2 minutes in my day.

Now because we're talking about, I'm mindful of time, but because we're talking about sometimes all you need is 2 minutes and the best way to meditate is just to do it right here, right now and just sit down, I'm wondering if you would feel like giving us a 2 minute guided meditation session? Then I can tick it off my list for today.

Martin Aylward

All right. Okay. Good. So you might want to, whoever you are listening, you might want to just shuffle a little bit in your seat. You might want to lengthen your spine a little. But don't get like, oh my God, you don't have to get super formal. But just sit in a way that you can feel the steadiness of body sitting. You can let yourself be a little bit dignified upright.

And then let's take just two or three big breaths where you get to enjoy the sense of inflation in the in breath and then you really sigh the out breath, and you loosen your throat and your chest and your belly.

And please, just do it a few times and see if you can really enjoy filling and expanding and then relaxing and sighing.

Do another one if it feels helpful. And then as you let your breath come to whatever is a natural rhythm for it, see if you can invite your attention to just settle into the feeling of being here. Not in a tight way, just feeling the way there's a natural aliveness to your cells, to the sense of body sitting, to the feel of body breathing.

Even though the habit of your attention is to bounce around a lot, you can keep gently inviting your attention to settle and to soften and to soak into the feel of being here, the expansive feel of an in breath, the relaxing feel of an outbreath.

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And while habit keeps on tugging your attention to go somewhere else, that's okay, that's normal. Intention keeps gently inviting your attention back in and down softening and settling.

And it's like this now then we cultivate a gentle, steady, meditative attention.

All right.

Jaia Bristow

Thank you. And anyone wanting to pause and continue meditating, I invite you to do so.

Papa, Martin, how can people find out more about you and your work?

Martin Aylward

They can see my website at martinaylward.com or find me on social media [@martinaylward](https://twitter.com/martinaylward) or just Google my name and there's plenty of stuff about my activities.

There's lots of talks and things that you can download on various themes of meditative life. I've got a couple of books, etc. So all the propaganda for my work is out there somewhere.

Jaia Bristow

I am a big fan of your book, *Awake Where You Are* so thank you so much for your time today. I really enjoyed getting to interview you and I think it's been a really interesting conversation and I really hope people going through that kind of existential questioning can benefit from this talk.

Martin Aylward

Thank you. I've been happy to share about it and it's been a particular delight to be interviewed by you about it too, so thanks, Jaia.