

## Cultivating mindful desire

**Guest: Justine Dawson**

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### **Alex Howard - [00:00:09]**

Welcome, everyone to this interview where I'm really happy to be talking with Justine Dawson.

Firstly, welcome, Justine. Thank you for joining me.

### **Justine Dawson**

Thanks, Alex. It's great to be here.

### **Alex Howard**

I'm looking forward to this interview. Justine and I have done a few talks together in person, talks together over the years, which I really enjoyed and enjoyed the rapport that we had.

We're going to be talking about desire and intimacy in this interview. And I think, really important topics. And one of the things that I really value about Justine that we'll come to is that Justine also has a very deep and long term meditation practice, which I think brings a much more embodied perspective to some of these issues, which I think is super important.

Just to give people Justine's bio background, as it were. Justine Dawson is a teacher and guide of Intimacy and Awakening, a 23 year practitioner of insight meditation. She completed training as a Buddhist teacher under Jack Kornfield in 2012. In addition to her training and practice in meditation and Buddhist psychology, Justine has spent 14 years practicing and teaching in the realms of the erotic. Sex, desire, expression and connection.

From the inside out she works with students to dismantle the shame, fear and judgment that prevents them from discovering intimacy and aliveness in all aspects of life.

Justine is based in Los Angeles, California, where she teaches at InsightLA, mentors emerging mindfulness teachers and maintains a private practice working with individuals and couples throughout the world.

So, Justine, I would love to start a little bit with some of your own personal journey. I know that you've gone deep on these issues and have really been able to bring together some quite different worlds and perspectives in a really powerful way. So, how did your journey with relationship and desire start?

### **Justine Dawson**

It's a great place to start. So, let's see, as you mentioned, I for many years have practiced insight meditation and it was actually almost exactly 20 years ago that I came from Canada to California to really deepen my practice. And not long after I first moved here, I actually, in a Buddhist community, I

met a man and developed a relationship. And it seemed like a relationship that on paper should have been perfect.

We were both Buddhist practitioners. We had the same social values. We got along really well. There were so many things about it. We did long retreat together, we did some of our longest meditation retreats together, we both worked in social services and all of those things for some reason, that I didn't understand at the time, didn't add up to an aliveness in that relationship.

And it was really one of my core experiences of feeling that something is wrong here. Is something wrong with me? Am I doing something wrong? Am I not grateful? Is my practice off? What's happening? That it could seem like all of these great things, but for some reason I'm not feeling like I want it.

And that really sparked the beginning of my questioning about intimacy and the erotic that if it could seem like it checks all the boxes, but there is something beneath it that's not quite clicking in, what is that thing?

And of course, over the years, I went on to discover, oh, desire. Desire and erotic energy. Two things that really weren't included in my Dharma practice, in my Buddhist practice, and in fact, in many ways were discouraged. Often we hear in the Buddhist world there can be that interpretation that desire is dangerous, it leads to suffering. It's better to be equanimous or neutral about things.

And so, when it came to actually relationship, which of course, most of us know and I came to discover, desire is so key. I was really missing a key ingredient.

### **Alex Howard - [00:04:37]**

And how did you resolve that? Because I think for some people that could be very frustrating. I put all this effort into my practice but there's clearly something that's missing. What allowed you to move forward with that?

### **Justine Dawson**

Yeah, well, at first I had to face all of my demons, all of the, wait a minute, am I meant to be a nun? Maybe relationship life isn't for me. Maybe I'm in fact meant to give up more. The way that kind of this feeling that something wasn't working was confronting my identity, the identity I had of a good practitioner, a good mindfulness practitioner, someone who, the identity that I had in the world.

So, as I worked through all of those layers and then realized, oh, wait, there's something here that I just don't have the answer to. If I'm not going to go the monastic path, let me actually really dive deep into this question of desire and see what I can learn about it.

So, it took some time. It took actually, and this is the experience that I see a lot of women have, from the moment of, something's not quite right or even I'm not sure that I want this. To being OK with the fact that that's true, even starting there. To be able to accept, oh, that little voice might be trying to tell me something. It's not that I'm wrong. It's that if I'm willing to listen to that whisper and to get to know it and find out what it's trying to tell me, I might be led somewhere.

And so, for me, it took quite a while. And then eventually being able to say, oh, wait, OK, this relationship, at that point I decided to leave. It wasn't the right thing. And I embarked on this journey of really trying to understand desire and my own erotic and what I needed to be deeply in touch with that.

### **Alex Howard**

And where did that lead you?

### **Justine Dawson - [00:06:39]**

Well, for many years, after many years of practicing insight meditation, I decided to add some erotic practices. So I did a practice called Orgasmic Meditation. I studied deeply into relationships and intimacy and through this time was really coming into relationship with my own body.

And also, like I was saying, that internal sense of desire. Of that often small, silent voice that was trying to guide me, but I had a lot of ideas thinking that if I were to follow it, it meant that I was greedy or too much or not grateful or not doing it right.

And so, I did a lot of practice of listening and applying and this is what I do a lot with people now is applying those same principles of mindfulness. And I think Jon Kabat-Zinn's definition is great, paying attention to something in the present moment on purpose, in a nonjudgmental way. And like, oh, what if I took that and applied that to desire? What if I took that and applied that to the erotic? And worked with all the judgments and ideas that came up but actually stayed with it, brought that mindfulness to really know it deeply.

### **Alex Howard**

I think for a lot of people there is so much story and judgment and often shame around desire. And I think often many of us that have gone on spiritual paths in some way, it's almost been trying to, the idea is to transcend that and bypass and get away from that. How was that for you? And also, as you see in the folks that you work with, that shame piece that's often the block to even being able to explore this area?

### **Justine Dawson**

Yeah, yeah. I mean, often when I'm teaching about desire, just recently I was teaching at InsightLA, which is a mindfulness center here in Los Angeles. And I asked students when I say desire, what are the first things that come to you? And almost always there is like rattle off a list of when I think of desire, I think of causing harm. I think of being selfish. I think of going the wrong way. I think of shame, like just trying to keep it at bay.

And what I found over time, and it's true for myself and everyone that I work with, is that if you're going to work with desire, you have to learn to work with fear. Because all of the layers conditioning, which a lot of it we pick up from our spiritual practice. Not that I could say, oh, it all came from Buddhism. I think I was like a lock and key, I came in. I remember even being young and thinking, oh, if I don't need anyone, I'll be set. If I can be completely independent, if I don't need to rely on anyone, what a great way of being in the world. And that was really exalted. I remember being exalted for that. Justine's so independent, Justine needs so little. She can just get by with so little.

### **Alex Howard**

It's like there could be a narcissism that we've risen above everyone else that's buried in these human desires.

### **Justine Dawson**

Exactly. And this kind of exaltation of independence, which I didn't even realize and then the kind of meditation was sitting alone on a cushion in silence not interacting with others, which I will say gave a lot of profound grounding, but also could really reinforce that sense of that I'm not connected to others and that interdependence isn't actually the highest or the deepest reality. And that instead I kept thinking, oh great, I can handle this on my own. And so, all of those ideas for me along the way everything reinforced.

And I often see that for people. Whatever their initial psychology is, they take a path that reinforces that. And then when it comes to desire, we need to sit down and really look at, oh, what are those beliefs? And what are the fears that if you were to, first of all, even acknowledge your desire?

One of the things I often say is that acknowledging desire doesn't mean, or desire itself doesn't mean acting on desire always. Mindfulness of desire doesn't mean, OK, let me just go figure out how to do it. Can I be intimate with it? Can I know myself? Can I acknowledge what's there and come into relationship with it so it's not driving me from behind? And as we go through the layers of fear and shame, then there's some more space to actually know what's there. And so then we can actually decide what we even want to do with this?

### **Alex Howard - [00:11:50]**

That relationship between desire and intimacy is interesting. Say a bit more about that.

### **Justine Dawson**

Oh, yeah. Yeah. I often say that desire and sharing desire is one of the most intimate things that we can do. Actually recently a student told me about how she had been with a partner in the past and lying in bed, and her partner would say, tell me what's on your mind, how are you doing? And the first thing that would come up in her mind would be, I don't want to be in this relationship. And she would just say, I'm fine, I'm good. And how many nights passed like that? And I think everyone has their own version of that in a relationship that slowly shrunk.

But on the other hand, also, if those conversations can open and we can speak what's there, how much more intimacy is available? Conversely, it could be, and again I often see this with women, but it can go both ways or for any gender in a sexual experience, that there's a desire that rises up like, oh, I want to be touched a little more lightly. And because of all the shame and fear that comes up of what that means to want that and the challenge of saying it for so many people, that the experience, the sexual experience just goes on.

In a way we become frozen in time at that moment when we desired something and the space is created where if it was expressed, actually there was a chance for some deeper intimacy. But of course, that means inviting someone in to see our more vulnerable raw place and that's challenging, but then it's also so rich when that actually happens.

### **Alex Howard**

And that example of the person who, what was coming up was, I don't want to be in this relationship, obviously especially about that example, but sometimes what someone's actually feeling is, I don't want to be in this relationship when you do X, Y, Z, but they're not speaking of it because it feels unspeakable, because it would be too devastating, just becomes a barrier, right? And then everything else becomes stuck.

### **Justine Dawson**

Yeah, yeah, yeah. And I say that every desire that we withhold becomes a layer on our genitals. And you can say that's true, that could be true of anything. That when we don't speak something that's arising in us, that really actually pretty natural impulse that arises and then we judge it, all of our ideas about it make it wrong. And instead of being able to just be with that and say like, oh, well, I'd like you to touch me lighter or it could be even simple as like, oh, would you make me a cup of tea? Is that we clamp down and we hold it and then we create more separation. And so then, yeah, there's this space that develops.

And the other thing that I really notice here is that the alternative that can happen too, you just find you're not saying it, is that we think our desires are too much.

I worked with a couple where they described how for the woman she had a desire to explore her sexuality. They were quite young. They'd gotten together quite young. She hadn't had many sexual experiences. And this desire rose up in her. So she looked at her partner and she said, well, how about we maybe once a year we have a threesome and try something out? And because she thought that might appeal to him, but it wasn't really what she wanted. What she wanted was a little freedom to go out and even just know what do I want? Who am I in this intimate relationship? But to have a little freedom to explore for herself.

And then suddenly they were in this conversation and negotiating this whole thing, which wasn't even actually what she really wanted. And it just took everything off course. And so, again when we go for the compensatory thing because we don't have confidence that our actual desires are OK.

### **Alex Howard - [00:16:34]**

I'd love to hear a bit more about that and particularly the price that we pay when we reject and shut down desire. How that affects someone's emotional body, their physical energy, their vitality for life. What's the price we pay for that?

### **Justine Dawson**

Yeah, well, I mean, I think that's where I started my journey, is feeling like what's wrong with me? And feeling a bit empty or kind of flaccid and the difference of being able to say, oh, this aliveness that wants to move through me, you know, I would invite everyone who's listening to think of, oh, when you think of desire and you even allow yourself to imagine having desire and following desire, how it even starts to feel in your body. Just even starting to think of desire, often starts to add a little more energy and aliveness.

And there's actually this other thing that comes to mind as we're talking about this. I'm imagining someone else that I worked with in the past who would describe how she didn't quite trust her own desire. And she really struggled with feeling confident because what had happened in the past is she'd have a little bit of desire and she'd start moving towards it.

For example, like a sexual experience, and she'd start to get into the sexual experience and then the desire would shift a little bit and say, oh, I actually want to slow down or I don't want to go all the way. And she moved from desire to obligation. When that would come in, she'd go, oh, but I already said, yes, I am already here. This person's already excited. I guess I have to go through with it. And so she found herself over and over again having experiences that initially she said yes to, but then at a certain point she didn't want.

### **Alex Howard**

I was just going to say. No, finish what you're saying.

### **Justine Dawson**

She ended up feeling like, oh, desire's dangerous, I can't follow desire, desire gets me in trouble. And then shutting it down. When really it was oh, desire was always, I would say loyal to her. Desire was always saying exactly what she needed, but it was when obligation would suddenly take over, that suddenly everything started to collapse and she ended up in places she didn't want to go.

### **Alex Howard**

What really comes to mind as you're speaking is something that was a really helpful lesson for me many years ago around intimacy was, often to be able to really say yes to something we have to also know how to say no, right?

## **Justine Dawson - [00:19:26]**

Yes. Yes. I was just teaching this exact thing in a class the other day. I mean, this is also where desire and boundaries come together, right? The foundation of boundaries is knowing what you want. And if you can't say no, you can't really know that you're a yes. I mean, I just think like this example I was sharing.

And then equally, I would say it's actually funny in the same class I was talking about how if you don't really know your desire and don't truly feel like you can sit in it and you can speak it and you can ask for it and move towards it, if you don't feel that you can do that, any trying to let go, the equanimous, just accept is in some ways compensatory. Because you don't actually believe or don't have the experience that, oh, I can do that because if we can, it's like, oh, I can do it. I can move towards it. And maybe at some point the object of my desire isn't realized. But I can stay connected to the energy of desire.

But if we think, oh, it's not possible the minute desire rises up, oh, it's not possible, forget it. I'll just be OK with things as they are. I mean, talking about not feeling alive, how often that happens. Like, oh I'll just make do. Then the energy just starts seeping away.

But I often think of people like, let's think of like Nelson Mandela or so many of the people who made incredible change in their life and went through really torturous circumstances. How true he had to stay to his desire for freedom and his desire for freedom of the people of South Africa. And despite it seeming so impossible or it seeming for him, like what are the chances of him getting out of prison? Being able to stay true to that thing.

And that's a big example. But I think it's really relevant because in the world even if we think, oh, there's big desires we have and we can just feel hopeless. It's how do we stay with the energy of it, even when things are difficult?

## **Alex Howard**

And there's also something in that example, I don't know it well, but what I understand of the Nelson Mandela story, that it was anything for freedom, but not at any price. There was certain things like freedom not as a form of revenge, for example, which was very unpopular in a lot of his comrades, as it were.

And again, there's something about, it strikes me to go back to this question of having one's no to be able to say yes. That sometimes on a sexual level someone may want to try something and but it feels edgy and then is terrified if they say yes and then it's too much or it's too fast or it's too intense, they won't be able to stop and so desire then gets shut down.

## **Justine Dawson**

Yeah. And I mean that's exactly that experience of the woman that I was talking about, where she'd go into these experiences and because she wasn't confident with her no, her yes was real in the moment, but then because she didn't have her no she couldn't stay connected to her real desire.

And that is it's actually knowing, like, OK, can I truly say no to this? That's why I say practice saying no to things. You could think that seems the opposite of desire, but really practice even small things. No, thank you. Oh no thank you. I don't want that. Someone offers you extra milk in your coffee. No thank you. Whatever it is so that you know.

And then from there you could practice asking for what you want, but actually really know...

Actually the one thing I want to add on to this is that when we think of desire sometimes also, we think of it as static. Like, oh, I want this thing. I want to create this thing, let's take it like an experience or a job or something, and we start moving towards it. And I think it's also a very Western ideological

is it's like goal orientation. I want this thing. I make a plan for it. I take every step and I go for it no matter what.

Sometimes this is valuable, but in intimacy it's often so much more nuanced and circumambulating that we feel something, we start heading towards it and then more information comes in, a new feeling and experience. And then we say actually I want to go a little bit to the right or like I said, I want to go a little lighter or actually I don't want to do that anymore.

And rather than thinking again, oh, something's wrong with me. Why can't I stick the course? I said this thing. I think there's often times we have this image of women, oh women they're not reliable or these kind of ideas where the truth is it's often that, oh, desires is changing. And it's, like anything in nature, it's not static, it's not linear and so if we stay with it and actually be willing to say, it's OK to change your mind. It's OK to change the course. Rather than having it be about a goal orientation or an obligation.

I can definitely think of this in sex like climax, got to get to the goal, got to make this thing happen. What if the energy ebbs and flows? I'm in bed with a lover and the energy's going up and it feels really good, but then suddenly it pauses and gently ebbs down. And if I can stay with that, rather than thinking I've got to push on or I'm obliged, then I can stay in tune with my desire and the desire between us and see what wants to emerge next.

### **Alex Howard - [00:25:46]**

And there's also, I think what comes to my mind as you're speaking, there's something about also being able to hear no and not taking it as a personal rejection, right?

I remember an experience when I was doing some of my own personal work around desire and I was on a residential retreat and I was being intimate with someone and I said, can I stay the night? And they said, yes. I went to go to the loo and by the time I'd come back they'd changed their mind. In that moment it felt quite crushing. And then in the next moment it was like, this is not actually necessarily a rejection of me. It's an honoring of that desire that their feeling has changed.

And I think navigating that can also be tricky to not put one's defenses up and go into one's reactivity when someone says no.

### **Justine Dawson**

Absolutely.

It feels like we're coming back to this again. If we become comfortable with no. Comfortable with saying no. Comfortable with receiving no. And like you said, not taking it personally, I think in relationships too, how often would we be more comfortable asking for what we want and saying what we want and also receiving that from a partner because we don't have to take it that it's about us.

Now, of course, that's not always easy because we're vulnerable, emotional beings, but that's also where we do that work. I was talking about working with the fear, like, oh, this means something's wrong with me. This means I'm not wanted. And that's real for most of us, is those things that come up and how do we learn to be with that and navigate it rather than having it drive us and our reactions to other people's relationship, to their own desire.

### **Alex Howard**

Right. And how about when there's conflicting desires? Maybe different preferences, but it may also be one person has a lot of sexual desire. Another person has, at that time, lower sexual desire that can be quite difficult to navigate in relationships.

## **Justine Dawson - [00:27:53]**

Yeah, yeah. I have so much to say here. One of the first things I'll say about having conflicting desires is that again, not rushing because we have such an impulse to try to get to resolution, I think in our culture, to want to get to clarity and resolution and have the answer. And if we can stay with, well, I want this and it might be I want this and I also want this. And they don't seem to fit. And so we go, well, I have to discard one.

And instead, like, oh, Carl Jung talks about, he talked about could I stay with the tension of the opposites? And if I'm willing to feel both like, oh, I want this and my partner seems to want something different, can I stay with that and not have to abandon my desire, not have to abandon this other seemingly opposite. And this is where the awareness, mindfulness practice comes in so well, can I stay with this sensation?

Because often when there's that tension or it feels like fear or uncertainty, we want to alleviate it right away. That resolution. I want relief. And can we stay with that tension and then see that maybe something that we never expected arises?

And this is what I see over and over again. Often I talk about can we make our table bigger and make room for all the seats at the table and have many different desires sit and include them all? And maybe some will come to fruition and some won't. But just actually allowing them the aliveness.

I mean, I think actually, I was reading the other day the story of in the Dharma, Milarepa and the demons and how, and this is a classic Buddhist story, in his cave, first of all, he went back one day and there was all these demons and he tried to push them out. I mean, the demons really being his own mind. Tried to get rid of them. And then next he collapsed into them. All these different things that we do. And then finally just being like, oh, OK. It's OK that you're here. I can be with you.

And I think in the same way with desire, if we can make room for what seems like something impossible or so conflicting and stay with it.

Now with our partner, the other thing I want to add there is that, I kind of alluded to it throughout the talk, is that we have desire, right? Let's say we have desire for the erotic, for a sexual energy and experience. And then we have the object, how I think it's going to be fulfilled. I want to have sex with my partner. They don't want to have sex right now. So how can I come and get more connected to the desire? I have a desire for an erotic experience. Like what is that? Oh, what are all the ways that I can fulfill that? Like how do I actually stay with the desire itself, the energy, and not get so attached to the object? Which is also natural to get attached to objects. It's not like it's so wrong but there's a practice where we can come back and say it's not like I have to kill this desire, but are there other ways to actually nourish and fulfill it?

And so in partnership to really look at that, and that's where I'll say, actually don't compromise. Don't be like, oh, well. So sometimes we should have sex once a week even if you don't want it or rather than oh, let's actually both really know our desire. And then find ways to actually both have our desire fulfilled.

## **Alex Howard**

Because I think that can sometimes be a very painful thing that ends up eroding the love in relationships is where both parties feel frustrated. There's one party that wants more sexual connection, another that wants less. And whatever compromise, both parties feel frustrated and that's why they're compromising.

And I think that can really erode all of the other wonderful things that may be there in that relationship because this piece doesn't get worked through.



### **Justine Dawson - [00:32:09]**

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. So here's where I'd say, and often I see with couples when it feels like either one or both people, there's a lack of desire, is to start getting curious about desire in general.

So if your partner doesn't have desire for sex, my guess is there's also other desires that haven't been tended to. And so to start being curious, well, what are some desires you have? What do you want in life? What are you wanting in this relationship?

And if we can also then, in connection, be really curious about each other's desire and be willing to not be narrow minded about it around sexuality, for instance. But to say, when we put attention on someone's desire, and this ties back to that question about energy, that energy starts opening up. And so, in connection, when I see that sometimes it is one person and the other, it's like actually being willing to sit down and start getting curious about each other's desire.

Once a day ask your partner, what are some things that you want today? What are some desires you haven't told me? And to make room for the cultivation of desire. And so then that energy can come in. And over time, usually a lot of good things happen.

### **Alex Howard**

Right. Also, I'd love to hear you speak a bit about energy and desire. I mean, physical energy and desire.

So, one of the things that I notice often happens when people have very young children is firstly, they're tired. When people have kids under 2 they're just tired a lot of the time. And traditionally moms, but of course, these roles can be shared in all kinds of different ways, one can spend so much of the day ignoring one's own desire to take care of and be there for others that there's just a shutdown of desire.

So I'm curious as to what helps when there's the physical tiredness, but there's also almost for survival of that stage of parenting. One just has to ignore desire to function.

### **Justine Dawson**

Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think parenting is a good example. I think sometimes, the pandemic for a lot of people who were parents is also an example where, oh, there was these limitations and the frustration and some of the things that we would usually want or we don't have.

And usually where I start there is I'd say, look for where there's the little lights, the small desires that are achievable. And it might be, actually here's something that I often see because I do do a lot of work with moms and women, is that they'll think, oh, I can't even ask my partner for something. We're both exhausted. I just start shutting down my desire.

So, A, be willing to stay connected and even be willing to ask for it or talk about it and to see if there's something like, is there a possibility we haven't seen yet? Could I have 15 minutes where you take the baby? And I have 15 minutes to meditate and be with myself. Little things like that. Or it might be, I'm breastfeeding. Am I willing to ask for a glass of water? And to ask for some nourishment.

And so to notice in the situations where we feel there's very few situations where it's like truly we're so constricted that it's completely impossible. But in a lot of life, where do we just start saying, I can't ask, it's too much, it will never happen? And to even be willing to say it and to acknowledge it and to the little bits of nourishment that we can get in.

And if we start following those little lights, it's like, oh, how when it feels like you're in the desert how do you look for the drops of water? And then those build. And so again, to not abandon it because desire itself, even just thinking of desire has energy. And when we start to feel, and this is also, again,

pretty natural or it's like what happens over time is that, we just start to think it's impossible and then we lose the energy of desire itself.

### **Alex Howard - [00:36:38]**

And say a bit about, because when I opened the interview, one of the things I was saying is I really appreciate how you brought together the depth of meditation practice with this subject of desire.

And it strikes me that desire, and something you've touched on a few times, that desire doesn't always have to necessarily be acted upon or expressed. There's something about staying present to and sitting with the feeling of desire. Say more about that?

### **Justine Dawson**

Yeah, that's it. And so, when I was talking about mindful awareness and being willing to be with whatever is arising and fully feel it and have a nonjudgmental openness towards it. Really noticing, oh, if you start feeling desire, even if you're listening to this call right now, tune into your body, is there any little desire that's there? And it could be as small as, I'd like a glass of water. I'm a little thirsty or it could be something much bigger.

How does it feel when you allow yourself to feel desire? What happens in your body? What happens in your genitals? What happens in your mouth? What happens in your chest, in your hands? Start to notice.

And then you could even try this, tell yourself, not right now. It's not possible. Can't have it. And then notice what happens. And this is even a little experiment you can do is, you can walk around the world noticing desire and allowing yourself to feel the possibility of desire, like, oh, that's beautiful. I want to smell that rose. Oh, the sun on my face. I desire to feel it. Whatever it is, and allow yourself to feel it and feel the possibility. Or take a walk and just go can't have it. Nope. No way. Not going to do it. And just again notice how it feels.

And that I think can be a really great little mini research into how simply even allowing yourselves to feel desire, to feel that aliveness of, when I really think of desire, I think it's life calling through us. It's life calling us into connection, into experiencing.

I read a story recently about a woman was writing about desire and she used the analogy of bees and how bees have this natural impulse where they're going from flower to flower and essentially they're following their natural impulse, their natural desire. Oh that color. Oh, I'm drawn here. I'm drawn there. And they're not thinking, am I really doing the right thing? They're not even thinking like I hope I'm pollinating right.

They're just following this energy. And then all of this amazing good comes of it because they're willing to follow and be deeply aligned with the natural impulse because they don't have the mind we have that gets in the way. And I think they can be a really beautiful teacher of if we do the work to lift the shame and the fear and all of those things that distort our desire, and then have it maybe come sideways or out of our shadow because we're not in direct intimate relationship with it.

But if we're in that direct intimate relationship and we allow it to move us, it's like, oh, sunlight on my face, the smell of a rose, the touch of my partner, even just feeling that and allowing ourselves to feel right with it and allowing ourselves to feel some possibility and to stay loyal, that even if it's not possible right now, that I can say like, oh, it's still a true desire.

### **Alex Howard**

Yeah. And there's an inherent pleasure in desire separate from the object that satisfies that desire. I don't know why, but the thing that comes to my mind is I bought a new car last summer and I was desiring this car. And the researching and the thinking about it was in many ways far more satisfying

than the actual experience of buying the car, which is a serious side story. It's an electric car and drove to pick up my nephew, so proud of this Tesla that bought. I couldn't start the bloody thing and had to leave it there overnight.

But looking back, the actual object to the satisfying of it was quite miserable ultimately. But that longing, desire and the anticipation was such a joy. I think we can get so fixated on whether or not we get the thing that we desire and how that goes, as opposed to just enjoying the nourishment of the desiring itself.

### **Justine Dawson - [00:41:21]**

Yeah. Let me take a little spin on that experience. Let's say, if we have desire and we don't get it. I had an experience in the past where I was dating someone and I was like, oh, I wanted to really be intimate and open my heart. And this person was still healing from a past relationship. So they were closed and it just wasn't possible. And I could feel all of that energy of but I want it. I want it. I want this thing.

And it was so attached to them it's like the idea of who they were needing to get it from them. And so what I did, I sat with it. I sat and meditated. I sat, I walked through my days and I could feel the desiring for them and then the slow return to just desiring and oh, I want this intimacy. I want to allow someone to be deeply inside of me. Oh I want this connection. And then suddenly it was not about them anymore. It was about my relationship to this desire. And actually sitting with it felt so alive, so beautiful, so intimate and like a sweetness of the longing but without the pain of the grasping.

And then I could open and I could walk out on the world and be like, oh, here's some of that. Like it's possible. And I could actually find where it was available. But that meant not being like, oh, it's impossible, I'll never have it, or clinging on to the object of my desire forever. But returning to the source and sitting with it and being able to go through the grief of the letting go of the object, but then knowing the desire itself can still live and is actually really beautiful and alive.

### **Alex Howard**

That's beautiful. And what comes to my mind is the difference between a desire when we are connected to ourself and a desire when we are disconnected from ourself.

### **Justine Dawson**

Yeah, yeah. 100 percent. Because that's where it often becomes an object. And it comes from I mean, how many people have I talked to and many people have I worked with and said, wow, you know, I went through my entire education thinking I wanted this degree. I wanted to be a lawyer. Usually it's like some big something. And then I realized it was the idea of the title or because my parents wanted that for me, but it wasn't actually what I wanted. And so I went through all of this and then I got it. And then I never wanted to do it. It felt really empty.

And that is again, I think that's because we are so conditioned around goal and achievement. And there's a place for that. I mean, there can be that motivation to do great things and to build great things. But then when we get fixated on it and then often in the end, it can be like, oh, wait, what was actually even motivating me? Because it usually isn't desire that's motivating us then, it's more like, again, an idea, an identity, an obligation and again, that's our consciousness work to look. What's actually motivating me? Is it this deep alive desire? Or is it a number of other things that end up kind of taking me astray?

### **Alex Howard**

Right. And actually perpetuating our suffering as opposed to the idea is I get this thing and it's going to alleviate my suffering. And that's obviously very painful. And we've all had those experiences of we

caused suffering to get somewhere thinking it's going to make it better. And then we realized we just got more suffering to deal with.

### **Justine Dawson - [00:45:09]**

Exactly. Exactly. And that's again, where it's like, oh, if you stay with the aliveness of the desire and then it might even take you on many experiences.

And here's where, actually honestly I'll say, in the deepest work, even if it takes us to suffering, there's likely a lesson that we had to learn there and that there's a wisdom of the unfolding of all of it. If we're willing to learn, if we're willing to say, oh, OK, I needed to have this experience with my electric car. There was something for me to learn here. And then it's like, oh, and then I have that and then I can still kind of staying with this underlying river of desire that there's lessons and then there's also the aliveness when we stay with it.

### **Alex Howard**

And just to bring it full circle, what really helps us stay with it is that depth of meditation practice. It's that ability to stay present despite all of these distractions and urges and instincts.

### **Justine Dawson**

Yeah, yeah. I mean, this is what I'd say it would be, well, instincts is interesting because I think sometimes it's actually we need to get closer to a visceral instinct where desire is. But developing our awareness and I found meditation really helpful for that. It also can be inquiry, like I can do a lot of inquiry with my students and it could be written. 12 step is amazing for clearing up the spider webs inside our consciousness.

So there's a lot of tools we can use. And when we apply those and here's the other thing. I don't think it's a one stop shop. Because I'll say I remember the very first three month retreat I went to and I thought, I must have been 28 or something, so almost 20 years ago. And I walked up to the building and I thought, this is so great, I'm just going to get this handled in three months I'm done and dusted, I'm great for life.

And of course, what I learned was no it's this ongoing new process of learning to untangle these things. And that practice gave me a depth of ability to focus my attention, which that's why I still meditate and why I still teach it.

And then can we direct it? Because again, and we can meditate and then keep it in a narrow, it reinforces our identity or keep it in your area. But are we willing to turn it towards shame, towards sexuality, towards these deeper, sometimes scary impulses and actually get to know them and have intimacy with them so that we can engage and be enlivened by them. Rather than them running us from the sidelines or us being constricted by a certain identity or belief.

And so, yeah, the desire practice, I often say sometimes people think of desire and they're like, oh, it's so selfish or it's just greed going for what you want. I was like, oh my gosh. I would say desire practice when you're really working with it is so the opposite because it works you. It works you to look at the fear and the motivation and all of the entanglement and actually to do that work and get closer to something that's true. It often has you go much more beyond like the kind of self consumed identity and to something that's much deeper.

And so, that's why I say no. Desire is quite the opposite of lack of consciousness. It requires so much, this cultivation of awareness and really works together with it so that we can have access to this deeper real freedom and aliveness.

**Alex Howard - [00:49:17]**

Yeah, there's so many more questions I'd like to ask you, but I'm mindful of time.

Justine the people that want to find out more about you and your work, what's the best way for them to do that?

**Justine Dawson**

Well, so I teach quite a bit at InsightLA, which is a meditation center here in Los Angeles. And you can look up their website. You can also go to my website, which is I believe in the notes for this interview. It's [justinedawson.com](http://justinedawson.com) and you'll see all of the classes at [insightLA](http://insightLA) and otherwise.

Also the work that I do one-on-one and with couples, the small inquiry groups that I run regularly. So if you just go to my website, you'll find everything there and don't hesitate to reach out. I love engaging with people around these questions. So if you have a question that comes up from this dialog that Alex and I have had, please don't hesitate to send me a note. I love hearing from people and I'd love to hear about your own path of desire and what you're working with and what you're discovering.

**Alex Howard**

Amazing. Justine, thank you so much. It's always such a pleasure to connect and to hear you speak. Thank you.

**Justine Dawson**

Thanks, Alex.