

# Inspiring Women Summit™ 2013

## “Daily Life as Spiritual Practice” with Sylvia Boorstein (Apr. 20)

[0:00:00]

Devaa: So hello, everyone. And welcome back to the Inspiring Women Summit. This is Devaa Haley Mitchell and I will be your host for this next session, really looking forward to this conversation with Sylvia Boorstein, who is a founding teacher Spirit Rock Meditation Center.

Before we get started with Sylvia, I'm going to share a little bit more about her background for those of you who aren't as familiar with her. In addition to being a teacher at Spirit Rock, she's also a psychotherapist, a wife, a mother, and a grandmother who is particularly interested in seeing daily life as practice, which is such a relief. You can do your practice while living your life.

She also has a Doctorate in Psychology and a Master's in Social Welfare and has been a psychotherapist for over 40 years. She's taught in various colleges as a Professor in Residence and has been teaching both vipasana and metta meditations since 1985. She's led workshops in the USA and Canada at centers including Kripalu, Omega, and Garrison and has been doing this for such a long time. So it's such an honor.

She also has a number of books that are out including *It's Easier Than You Think: The Buddhist Way to Happiness*; *Don't Just Do Something, Sit There*; and the list goes on and on. So it's really quite an honor to have such a wonderful and revered spiritual elder with us as part of this summit.

So welcome to you, Sylvia Boorstein.

Sylvia: It's a great pleasure to be here, Devaa. I've looked forward to it.

I thought we might start with a short meditation for everyone who's joining right now at the beginning that will both help, I think, to focus everyone's attention in this moment, settle everyone down for what we'll talk about, you and I afterwards, which also reflects what I think -- and we'll talk about it -- is one of my central hopes for contemplative practice that people will feel less isolated in their lives and in the world and more connected to each other.

So for this next several minutes as you're sitting or actually lying down if you're lying on your bed or lying on the floor on your yoga mat, wherever you are, if you're sitting or lying, actually if you're even standing and walking and listening

on your iPod somewhere, as you take this first minute to feel yourself in whatever activity you're doing, feel your body breathing, feel yourself here.

Just for a moment imagine that there are, because there are, people all over the world who are listening just as you are at this moment. If we had some kind of magical otherworldly vision and a perspective far enough away from the earth, we could imagine seeing little lines of communication from this person here to that person there to that person there and all of them connected to the words that they're hearing. The words that they're hearing together would be an amazing moment of realizing that people far and near, people that we don't know at all, are connected, as the thing, I believe, fundamentally, we all are.

But in those moments that I actually realize that that's actually true, all of us here in the earth are actually connected in very fundamental ways to each other, to how we use the earth, to how we breath the air, through the fact that we are all human beings wending our way through our lives. So to suddenly know that wherever you are, however remote your setting, you're not alone. All these other people are with you.

And all of them, along with you, hope for a peaceful world, a world that flourishes, a planet that renews itself, hope for decades, centuries to come, that the world will be more peaceful, that we'll really actualize the potential of human beings to live together as brothers and sisters, as a large global family.

**[0:05:04]**

So as I'm quiet now for just a minute or so, if you can connect with your own breathing and in your mind's eye connect with all those people far and near who are connecting with you in this very moment through these words.

You continue to sit. If you find that a smile comes to your lips as you imagine yourself companioned by so many unseen, but certainly there, companions, really encourage that smile. The more you smile, the more the muscles in your face relax and the more your body settles down into this moment and your mind relaxes.

And perhaps, just before we come back together as a group listening to conversations, if you imagine all those people connected to you through those invisible threads of shared intentions and shared interests, if we each of us feel blessing in our hearts and minds for ourselves and for each other, imagining that it's a text message that goes out through these invisible wires of communication, everyone feels ding, ding, ding as the texts go off in them that says, "May you be peaceful. May you be content. May you be strong. May you live with ease. May all beings everywhere be peaceful, content and strong and live with ease."

Devaa: Thank you, Sylvia. What a beautiful way to start this session. I can feel my whole being relaxing and opening up, so really grateful to you that you're willing to share some of your practice with us as we begin this conversation today.

Sylvia: Did you imagine, Devaa, if every time people got together in a group, in a school board meeting or a church meeting or a peace alliance meeting or a baseball mothers meeting, if they spent the first three minutes sitting quietly and wishing each other well and the whole world well, all the discourse in the whole world would go differently.

Devaa: Yeah, I think it is really powerful. We definitely do that at our staff meetings. Every call every week we begin with a meditation. And I think it is a really beautiful way. And it has the level of communication really be higher and deeper.

So for those of you listening out there, I just want to recommend that practice of, even if it's in a business environment that seems like it might be risky, even if you're in a position where you can influence these things, just spending a few minutes quietly, or as you said, wishing each other well can really set a different tone. And what unfolds from there can be really a different and more positive outcome.

Sylvia: It does indeed.

Devaa: Well, Sylvia, you've been teaching for such a long time, such a seasoned teacher. I wanted to hear a little bit about how you are teaching today is different from how you were teaching ten years ago or even five years ago.

Sylvia: Well, I think what I would say about myself is that there's a way in which it's the same and there's a way in which I feel it to be different.

**[0:10:05]**

The way in which it's the same is I have always taught about spiritual development. And we can talk in a minute about what is spiritual development. Anyway, but I've always talked about it as being the stuff that daily life is made out of.

And my teachings stories when I teach are mostly stories out of my life, how in this predicament of feeling challenged or this situation of feeling ill at ease or this situation of being worried and how I was able, what resources I was able to marshal to deal with the situation because fundamentally, I think we're all interested in how we're going to live this life comfortably in such a way that we

do good things for ourselves and good things for other people as well because that, in the end, is what makes us feel better. So I've always taught that.

What's different now is that I think when I began, I was more influenced with traditional teachings because that's of course, the text that I studied with. And of course, what I'm saying is fully respecting those teachings, but the language that they were taught in was generally a linear language. Many of us have used that language. We said, "I'm on the spiritual path or the path of my spiritual journey." And there's a sense in a path that has a beginning and an end.

And then you might be able to talk about, "How far along are you on the path?" If you graduate from fourth grade then you're in fifth grade. Or are you on the sixth grade on the path? And what's the end of the path? And journeys have beginnings and ends.

And what I've come to really trust much more is that I think that what we're really journeying to is a closer relationship with our own self and a more awakened sense of our own selves in this moment right now.

I want to use the same journey about getting somewhere. I think I'm getting from distracted to present so that actually has a sense of moving closer to me where I am now than me now moving somewhere. I think wherever I am there I am. I think actually Jon Kabat-Zinn wrote a book once with that name, *Wherever You Go, There You Are*.

But that's it. Wherever I go, there I am. But what I want is for the I am to be really there. I think just to explain that so it doesn't sound so weird. Of course, when I'm here, I'm here. But I think that a lot of the time for me, and I think for other people, there's so much of the territory of my mind that's occupied, that could be occupied at any time with worrying about tomorrow or reflecting on what happened yesterday or nursing some old grudge that happened two years ago, that I'm really not altogether here.

Part of me is here. My body is functioning and my impulses and my reflexes are functioning. But they're not functioning with the complete clarity that could be mine if I hadn't mortgaged away some bits of my awareness and maybe some substantial parts of my awareness to business that isn't right now.

I'm thinking how much if my mind is not filled up with all the opinions about what I used to think about this or that or the other, I might actually meet people without all the opinions I've already formed about them and discover lo, and behold, that I like them all a lot better than I thought I did. Or, that the opinion that they're proposing now sounds a lot different than the last time I had an

opinion about it. I might find I was a new person in every moment, less encumbered by old the ideas.

There's actually in old line from the faith verses of the third Zen patriarch that says, "To know the truth, only cease to cherish opinions."

So frequently, I go into a situation where I've had an opinion for a long time maybe about, "Oh, so and so is going to be there. I actually don't like them so much" based on something that that person said when I last met them six years ago or something. And then when I meet them, they're actually really not bad at all. And I've been carrying along an old idea about them. And I'm quite exulted to find out they're people that I resonate to.

**[0:15:04]**

And I think to myself, "How many other opinions and judgments and prejudices do I have lurking in my mind active all the time behind the scenes clouding the business that I'm doing at this moment?" So I think of the enterprise of spiritual practice as keeping my mind clear moment to moment so I can be fully present now.

And I think that everything I know really both in the Buddha and from modern neuroscience we need to feel very confident that human beings, in their own hearts and minds, are very trustworthy and potentially very wise. When we're not confused, we see what can be done and we operate out of kindness.

I think that's just the structure of human beings that even before we start to practice, what I think practice is. I think my spiritual practice is paying attention to recognizing and maybe seeing through those clouds that keep us from seeing clearly so that our own natural essence and our own natural good will and our own natural peacefulness can manifest itself. Don't you think?

Devaa: Well, I love hearing this. And as I'm hearing this it's really resonating with one of the first spiritual books that I read way back, I don't know, maybe more than 20 years ago which is by Ram Dass called "Be Here Now."

Sylvia: Oh, yes.

Devaa: And it's so funny that to me just the paradox of this spiritual idea that I think probably many people subscribe to of being fully present, being here now but then at the same time we're in this world that is moving faster and faster. Multitasking has become something that most people are doing at some point in their day, multiple things at the same time. So inherently, you're not fully in any

of those things that you're doing because you're doing a couple of different things simultaneously at times.

And so it feels like this real paradox of the speeds and what it takes to be really present, so what guidance do you give people or what practices, speaking of spiritual practice, do you even offer to people to get to that space of being fully present, of letting go of the judgments and the past and the stories?

Sylvia: Oh, I think as for three different things that I could say as you were saying that but we'll start with one and then maybe add another.

First of all, maybe we'll talk for a minute about the general definition of mindfulness. When you introduced me you said, "Sylvia teaches vipasana," which is actually the polyterm for what we've come to call mindfulness. And actually, the direct translation of vipasana is seeing things clearly and really seeing things clearly.

Sometimes, when I'm teaching a class, I take off my glasses and I wipe them on a tissue and say, "Okay, you might imagine that when I put these glasses back on, I'll see more clearly. And in a certain sense, I will. But the kind of seeing clearly that I'm talking about is seeing clearly without internal prejudices. That's cue."

I'll tell you a side story and maybe make that a little clearer. A week or two ago my husband and I were watching a movie that we got on Netflix. It was Rex Harrison and Audrey Hepburn in My Fair Lady. And it's an old movie and it's very good. And we were enjoying it so much. The music is great. And he said, "It must have won an Academy Award."

So I said, "Well, I'll just look it up on my phone." I have a smart phone so while watching and tik, tik, tik, tik, I look it up in my phone. And it says it indeed won the Academy Award, the Oscar, that year. But then it goes on to say, "But Audrey Hepburn didn't win anything. Her performance wasn't especially good. It should have been Julie Andrews. And besides, the filming was a bad idea. It was filmed in a studio, not on a London street which made it very unreal."

And then I put down the phone, and I looked at the movie. And I wasn't enjoying it anymore. I thought, "Well, Julie Andrews is not bad. Audrey Hepburn is not nearly as good as Julie Andrews would have been in this role. And look at this, it's so fake. It's in a studio."

Nothing that I thought two minutes before I've looked on the phone that told me, "You can't enjoy. This is not really very good."

I think my mind is full of opinions like that that if I could recognize them as opinions I could decide on my own.

[0:20:09]

But most of the time we don't recognize that as opinions we take them as truths. We hear Pauline Kael said that or somebody said that and then you take it to be gospel.

Is that a good example? I've never used that before.

Devaa: I think it is a good example how we're so influenced by the things that we see and we hear. And the very thing that you were enjoying a few minutes ago suddenly has become fake and unenjoyable. That's a great metaphor I think for life. And so I often think of the essence that we are where we see clearly and we're fully alive, fully radiant, it's like this bright light and it gets covered over with these different veils just like the opinions of people and what you hear that takes you away from being fully present and seeing clearly, as you stated. So how do we get back to that place of seeing without the filters?

Sylvia: You know, this would be one of the tips or ideas for how to know that I'm seeing through a glass darkly, that I'm not really present. If I were really present there'd be a kind of buoyancy in my -- or I wouldn't always like what I was seeing, but I'd be connected authentically to what I would see.

There's a kind of dreariness in the mind when it fills with the haze of opinions. When the opinions fall away and what's there is how I am seeing and feeling and reacting in this moment without opinions, then it's just that and it's not complicated. And there's a kind of genuineness of the moment that makes a certain buoyancy in the mind and a buoyancy which I would contrast with constriction in the mind.

If I'm going along the day and I find that my mind had become, for some reason, embittered probably. I started to use that word recently. It's not one used normally in spiritual textbooks. But there really is a kind of a grumpy mind that's embittered. It kind of finds fault with stuff in saying, "Ha, I could have told you the bus was going to be late. Everything is going wrong today." Embittered mind, you know.

Devaa: I like grumpy mind. It makes me kind of laugh. The inner subpersonality. And I think many of us have them. In the work that I do we name some of the different ones. And I definitely have a part that's kind of a grumpy older woman who really sees things with the glass half empty as you're saying.

Sylvia:

Yeah, but the thing is that when I see that my grumpy mind has, for some reason, taken up residence, as I see, it's not my grumpy mind. I like to think my mind is fine. It's the grumpy filter that's in place and so it sees everything off and then reacts "Ugh" about it.

It's like a bad hair day. If I recognize that grumpy mind is in place, now let's think about it. Am I hungry? People themselves they have a four-point checklist. Am I hungry? Am I lonely? Am I angry? There's one other that I don't remember. But there are four things that you really need to take care of yourself. Otherwise, grumpy mind, indignant mind, any kind of negative aversive mind takes over. I don't think it's our natural nature, my natural good will.

I think most people if they are reasonably healthy and have had some reasonable amount of nurturance in their upbringing are amiable and companionable and interested in each other.

We're herd animals. We like to get together and go to a ballgame or go to a ballet or go to an opera or go to a cub scout meeting. We like to hang out with people. And we care about them. And when somebody gets tackled in a football game, it's not our child, we feel bad for the person that got tackled, that had got hurt. And we look around in the stands to see where is this person's mother or father.

We actually are wired, I think, for compassion and connection. And we do it very well. I do it very well except when I'm absorbed with my own personal drama.

**[0:25:00]**

So I think about the things that I do as labeled spiritual practice. I think of my life as spiritual practice. Can I go to a football game and really be looking out for everybody else and not be planning what I'm going to go do later or planning how I'm going to get back at so and so for saying something that hurt my feelings that morning? Can I go to a football game and be there and manifest myself in my most loving and connected way?

If I do that that's a spiritual practice. And when I finish the football game, watching it, I will not be so mad at the person that morning who irritated me because that irritation, that mind crumpling up and resisting hearing something unwanted, is just a transient state.

I could sit and do meditation and just breath and relax. I could go to a yoga class. That would be good for me. I could also go to a football game or a spelling bee or a ballet performance and really get involved with the people there and think



about them and love them and care about them and feel like how does their mother feel now.

And those moments of connection would be as life-saving to my mind, perhaps maybe more, than meditating or taking a yoga class. It is anything that pulls you out of the mind imploding into itself in self-absorption which leaves us feeling lonely and depressed and isolated and separated from everyone.

Does that make sense to you?

Devaa: Yeah, it does make sense. And as you're speaking about it too, I'm remembering an experience of my own life. I spent some time in Nepal at Kopan Monastery, a Buddhist monastery there. And I found this place of being so peaceful and so relaxed. And I was like, "Wow! I'm really getting 'somewhere' on my spiritual path."

And then I remembered going back down into Kathmandu with all the people and the craziness. And those moments of feeling inner peace saturating my being felt like they were lost in the chaos of Kathmandu and as I interacted more with people.

And I really had this kind of revelation about it's so much more challenging actually to live as what I call a "modern-day mystic" where you are not just in the monastery or only sitting in your meditation practice and that's where you find peace but to actually find that inner peace, as you're saying, in the middle of a football game or when you're doing your daily life. It's much more challenging.

I feel like that's really the call for those of us in our day. Yes, it's helpful at least for me to have a spiritual practice that brings me back and anchors me in that truth of my being. But the real test is then how am I interacting with my colleagues or how do I respond to a situation that's maybe challenging or when there is something going on that I don't agree with? And in those moments, how do I find that space to, as you say, really see things clearly and maintain my sense of my open, loving heart in the face of that? So I think it is the challenge of our day. And it's not so easy.

Sylvia: No. Actually the name of my first book is "It's Easier Than You Think." And I wrote every word of that book but I didn't write the title. The publishers, business office, usually writes titles because they know what's attractive to people. And because it was my first book I didn't challenge it.

But I've thought many times since then that I feel like writing a truth and advertising coda to it. The title of it is It's Easier Than You Think and then it says

in small print, "It's Also Harder Than You Can Imagine." So that would be the whole story.

But it's easier than you think. It is easier than you think to explain the possibility of peace. And it's harder than you can imagine to really manifest it over and over and over again because life, by its very nature, is annoying.

I was teaching a class the other day in New York City. So this is a class at New York Insight. And they're all dedicated to meditation practice. They all think of the idea of practice.

By the way, I want to go back and say that your practice in your Nepal monastery, no matter that profound calm and serenity that you had there was ruffled when you came down into Kathmandu, those periods of profound calm do the nerves and the nervous system and the spirit and the soul a tremendous amount of good I think.

**[0:30:02]**

First of all, I think it does every time we sit down and meditate quietly, I think we smooth out our neurology so it's less jumpy. And for every moment that we experience profound peace, we have installed in our inner compendium of wisdom the truth that peace is possible and that it's possible in a monastery, it's possible in a market place. It's an inner position anyway. It can be anywhere. And so it's a little harder because the marketplace startles the nervous system so much.

So anyway, here I was several days ago teaching for an afternoon to a fairly large group of people who are dedicated practitioners of the dharma, of cultivating a good heart, of meditation. And after some meditation period -- we sat for maybe 20 minutes -- we're talking about people's experience. Everybody feels good, more peaceful than when they walked in.

And I said, "How many people, during the course of the 20 minutes that we just sat there, became annoyed at anything?" And maybe at least half had their hands up.

And when you think about manifesting --

Devaa: Interesting.

Sylvia: -- it's a quiet room on the tenth floor, you can really hear traffic down in the street but not that much. People come and go a little bit. Maybe somebody banged the door. The person next to you breaths a little too loud. We all have

minds that are just easily moved to not liking something, if not all out anger, annoyed. The room got too hot or the room got too cold. Or, the person next to me fell asleep and is snoring. They're actually not major problems in life. But when our minds don't like anything they growl a little bit.

I think about the fact that I have a dog that's about half terrier and half Bichon. And the Bichon part absolutely sits on your lap for hours and licks you hand and is completely loving and serene. And the terrier part is the part that suddenly imagines or actually does hear a deer go by in the backyard and has a fit of barking about it.

Devaa: Right.

Sylvia: And I think my mind is just like that. Mostly it's a Bichon, and it's got a terrier in there that suddenly says, "What are all these people doing on the highway, clogging up the highway? One person in a car. Why are they here?" And I could have a thought like that, an annoyed thought, not thinking about the fact that I also am one person in a car.

We have annoyed thoughts that are frequently idiotic, annoyed thoughts but they're reflex annoyed thoughts that just were built that way.

Devaa: So if you're really advocating for people to be what I would call these "modern-day mystics" to treat your daily life as a practice, what tips do you have for people if we were going to offer a few juicy nuggets for people of how to really live this, how to live more in the part of ourselves that you call "the Bichon part" so that when whatever it is, we're in a traffic jam or whatever happens to annoy us in life comes up that we can kind of go back to that other place? Or how do we strengthen the part of ourselves that's not the grumpy mind part?

Sylvia: Yeah, I think that's really fun. Before we finish this conversation, we'll talk about having a really contemplative practice built into your life some time every day, not on the highway and the DMV.

But let's talk about in the highway and the DMV because we're there more than we are on our contemplative corner of the sofa sitting quietly. We'll talk about that in a minute.

But especially the two examples that you gave, you're on the highway. When I'm on the highway it suddenly clogs up with people. And my mind says, "Grrr, I didn't expect this. Now I'll be late for the dentist. And it uses up so much fuel. And people should be carpooling," and whatever other opinions that I have that reinforce and that validates that my mind got annoyed for me. The minute that I notice that I've done -- because it's uncomfortable to feel annoyed actually. You

feel like your mind just got wrinkled up. Probably if I had sensors attached to my brow they would start to ding, ding, ding as the brow furrows. Mmm, this shouldn't be happening.

**[0:35:08]**

I try to think to myself, first of all, I need to be grateful to all these people. All around me are hundreds and, if you count forward and back, about thousands of cars. And so far no one has banged into me. No one is causing me to be in an accident. Everybody's cruising down the highway 60 or 65 miles an hour. And everybody's being responsible. So praise be for all these people. May they all safely get to where they're going. They are all currently preserving my life. So that's a very big thing to think about.

Sometimes I think on the highway, I see someone zoom in in front of me. And I think, "Rrrr," another terrier moment. I think to myself, "I have no idea whether that person has just gotten a phone call to say that their elderly mother in the nursing home in San Francisco is suddenly gasping her last. And this person is rushing to say something to her. I don't know where they're going in that hurry. So may they get there safely and may it work out okay."

I think changing the mind so that it relaxes around doesn't stick to it, doesn't keep on validating its angry point of view, okay, this person could have just been a nasty person grabbing the place in front of me, but it could have also been someone running to something very important, the birth of their first grandchild. I don't know if I'd cut in from of somebody but I'd be rushing too.

In the DMV, we go to the DMV, you've just stood in line half hour with you papers. You come up to the window. You're missing one crucial piece of information and you're going to have to go get it.

Devaa: How many people can relate? I'm just imagining. Raise your hand. This is you having some grumpy moment at the DMV. I know I can certainly relate myself.

Sylvia: And you're going to have to get off the line. And then you say, "Well, can I come back in?" No, you have to stand at the end of the line. And your mind is making a scene already. You so far I haven't said anything.

If I say to myself, "Hey, this person sitting here on the stool in the DMV has been sitting here for God knows how many years and probably going to sit there all working life right here in the DMV. Thank goodness, I don't have to do that." I really have compassion for that person. It's not the best job in the world in the DMV. And I'm surprised that they're there at all. In any kind of a move may be peaceful and happy.

Actually, I look at them and I smile and I say, "Thank you really very much." I say something good, not in a facetious way, because it sweetens up my own mind and it sweetens them up, too. And then I feel good because they probably have a whole day of people snarling at them. And if I'm again somebody who doesn't then I feel myself to be that Robin Hood. I did something really good. So it picks me up.

Devaa: Gold star.

Sylvia: Really. We all like the gold stars. All the day there's a way to turn around.

Somebody told me recently, I said though in some careless way, "Well, I need to leave now because I have to X or Y or Z," I don't know whatever I had to do but some chore. "I have to go to the dentist" maybe that was it. And the person corrected me and said, "You know I don't say that in sentences anymore. I use a different construction even if it means, for instance, I'm leaving something pleasant and I'm needing to go now to -- it's time for me to do something less pleasant." She says, "Instead of saying, 'I have to go to the dentist,' I say, 'I get to go to the dentist' because if you think about it most people in the world never get to go to the dentist and I have good teeth that are in a good shape. And I can even afford preventive dentistry so I'm extremely lucky to get to go to the dentist, never mind have to go to the dentist."

The less things I think about that I have to do and contextualize them in I get to do them, the more happy my life will be. It will be all a gift. So I think it's actually paying attention to the ways both culturally and linguistically my mind trips itself up and starts into a free fall. So it's going to continue to do that. Maybe as I practice it'll do it less.

**[0:39:56]**

But to be able to notice when it does and then say, "Whoops! I took the wrong turn there. I don't mean to do this." I'm getting more and more incensed about this. Let me not throw fuel on the fire. Let me think about either what's valuable in this situation or what valuable thing I can bring to this situation or the fact that this is only one situation in my whole life which is mostly good situations and I can dilute this situation that I really try not to let my mind -- oh, this is using a phrase of a friend of mine -- I try not to let my mind marinate itself in bitterness.

I have a friend who says, "The mind is something like tofu. And it doesn't have much of a taste by itself. But what you marinate it in is what makes the

difference. And if you marinate your mind in bitterness like if you marinate tofu in bitterness, it's going to come out tasting bad. And the same with the mind."

So to notice and really you can change the marinade towards that end. I really think it's wonderful that some period of time a day for a contemplative quiet practice. I don't think it has to be sitting with your eyes closed and attending to the breath but that's the simplest way. You can do that wherever you like.

You do that in a subway commute train. You can do that. It's not quite. If you close your eyes and you concentrate on your breath, that's enough and that's good. It's nicer if it's quiet.

If you have a job where you can close your door at lunch time and sit for 20 minutes and just resting in your breath; if you can eat your lunch at your desk at work and chew it slowly and really not be clicking your computer at the same time or reading or listening to headphones, just eating the food thinking about who made it or that you made it or that someone who loves you made it; really taste the food; feed your body well, probably digest the food better, it's more restful, as you pointed out earlier, not to multitask. When you eat, you eat.

Or, go for a walk at lunch time and go walk around the block. Even if you work in the middle of midtown Manhattan or midtown San Francisco or midtown Paris, you go out and walk around the block for like 15 or 20 minutes and don't talk to anybody but look at everybody. And you see the multitudinous different forms in which life is unfolding. That's an extraordinary uplift for the mind to think of. The world is so full of people going about their business. All the young and healthy and the infirm and everybody coming and going and doing. It's an extraordinary thing this thing called "life."

And here am I also, one among all these millions of people on this whole world coming and going and coming and going for the rest of my days. We're all doing it together.

It's an extraordinary movie this movie of life on earth. It's a cast of billions really and everybody going around doing their thing, everybody looking remarkably like their parents. Genetics is amazing.

It's a very good chance if you go walk around the park that you'll be amazed. An amazement picks up the mind.

I think about the spiritual -- not tricks -- but techniques I have as I'm trying I think all the time to pick up my mind especially if I notice that it could use a little picking up, that it's dragging for some reason or it's gotten mired in its own sad story of "Poor me, look what's happening." And if I can move it from "Poor me,

look what's happening" to "Wow! Look around, look what's happening." This is an amazing thing this thing called "life." This moment I'm still living.

I have a friend who died a few years ago, my friend, Tamara. And she was a mindfulness meditation teacher. She was one of the founders of New Your Insight Meditation Center. And she moved with some partner to Florida. And she died there. She died there after a few years of being sick with ovarian cancer. And I talked to her about how she was managing the fact that she was becoming more and more frail and in pain and clearly nearing her death.

**[0:45:00]**

And she said, "Well, you know, it's really hard, Sylvia." She said, "From time to time I become so despondent I really can't do very much of anything." She said, "When I'm really despondent, I go into my meditation room. I go into my study and I sit there quietly. And I try to meditate." She said, "Sometimes it's hard because my mind is filled with thoughts about I'm dying and I have ovarian cancer and I have children and I'm looking forward to grandchildren and I'm not going to see them and I think all those thoughts."

And she said, "By and by the thoughts quieted down. And then I just feel myself breathing. And I'm sitting there and I feel myself breathing. And after a while I really appreciate that I'm breathing and so I'm still alive. Then I realize I'm still alive. I think to myself, 'Okay.' And then I go out of the study and I go into the living room. And I sit with Jim who is watching the Marlins play baseball on TV. And I watch the Marlins' game with him. And it's okay."

And I love to tell that story because it's not like we get to fly over our troubles or that they don't bother us or that life or death, living or dying, it's all the same. And some of the stories that I used to be very moved by about the potential of great spiritual teachers is that they could move through the great losses of life with tremendous equanimity.

I think Tamara moved through the losses of her life with really tremendous equanimity and that she felt them. It doesn't mean that she doesn't feel sad or feel disappointed or wish she had a longer life.

I think that maybe when I started my own practice and maybe when I started teaching, I thought that I would have a different experience of the pain in my life. But I'd realize, "Well, pain is part of the whole drama." I do realize that pain is part of the whole drama but it's still painful. And when things happen to me or to my family or to the people I know, I feel badly about them.

And so it's really important because I think at some point when I was younger and more frightened of the pain of life, I imagined that somehow meditation and spiritual vision lifted you out of it, and you didn't have that anymore. I think you have it, but I think it's much more manageable. I have a much bigger space of mind to move around.

And there's always a way to make the mind bigger than you can, at the very least, watch the Marlins' game or go outside and watch that once again there's a full moon once a month or that once again it's the vernal equinox or that once again babies are born and starting a life that they'll end after we've ended ours and who knows how they'll be.

There's so much to stay amazed about in this life. That's the tremendous pick me up for the mind.

Devaa: Yeah, so what I'm hearing kind of in summary for some of the people who have been listening is you first suggested that we really notice our mind's state, where are we at. Are we in that just open, fully present space? Are we somewhere else? Are we grumpy? Notice where we are first.

Then consciously change your perspective if you feel like you're somewhere, like especially in that grumpy mind state, looking for what can I be grateful for if it's in a traffic jam? Or, what can I be amazed about in terms of I have this challenge in my life, but wow, babies are being born, there's a full moon tonight, so looking for those moments of amazement.

And then you also shared about contemplative practice. So those are kind of three tips just summarizing again, for people who are listening, of ways to move to your everyday life as spiritual practice. And a contemplative practice can be part of that, but you don't have to save it for when you're on your meditation cushion or on your quiet walk in nature. It's how can you look for those moments and have every moment more and more be part of your practice.

Sylvia: Oh, you did it very well, Devaa. That was a lovely summary of what we talked about.

Devaa: Well, yeah and just trying to -- I know there are so many nuggets of wisdom that you're sharing. And if people want to write down those takeaways that they can say, "Okay, I heard all these great stuff from Sylvia. How can I really put this into practice in my own life?"

**[0:50:01]**



I just want to see if there's anything I left out. We haven't talked about yet you had had of that picture.

Sylvia: Well, there would be only one word of that end of it which you really covered in all of those that looking around saying, "What else is true?" that one of the ways to really pick up the mind that really encapsulates feeling grateful, feeling delighted, feeling amazed is the practice of gratitude and the practice of generosity.

And the generosity that I think about is -- normally we think of generosity in terms of giving away things. I think about giving away blessings, giving away, first of all, giving blessings very freely. That's a very generous thing to do.

Here comes maybe my sister-in-law that I'm not so crazy about. I'm fine with my sister-in-law by the way in case she listens to this tape. But here comes someone, someone could say, "Here comes my sister-in-law. I'm not so crazy about her. But she's a wonderful mother to her children or she always dresses so beautifully or she's a really wonderful poet" that I could clothe my truth with something really positive about that person and to be able to say, "May you thrive with your family. May your wardrobe increase and you continue to present yourself beautifully. May you thrive in your business" that the more I am able to bless somebody else for their beingness, the more I erase any antipathies I have towards them in my own heart and mind.

So the practice of blessing is a way of purifying your own heart, and it immediately feels better in your own self. If you're so generous, it doesn't cost anything to -- well, it does. It costs giving up old prejudices and views. That's what you have to pay with your old prejudices and views. You can't have them anymore once that you decide that somebody is marvelous in their own way, not in the way you wanted them to be but in their own way, which is the only way that anybody can be anyway.

Deva: Yay. Thank you for that. And just breathing that in, breathing in that generosity of spirit, so no matter how much money we have in our bank account or how little, that generosity in spirit is something that we can offer to everyone and, I would add, to ourselves.

We're often so hard. The hardest person that we judge is ourselves. So how can we apply that same generosity of spirit?

I had a mentor have us do an exercise of asking ourselves looking in the mirror, "What are you proud of in yourself today?" And very simple but very challenging exercise for many people, including me at times, of like, "Wow!" I can always say all the areas that I can improve, but what are the things I really want to own as,

"You know I'm really proud of this. I'm really great at certain things. Or, I want to own that yes, I have this talent," and offering that same generosity of spirit to ourselves and looking for even if we did something that we don't consider A plus in our book, what did we do well about a certain experience?

My brother just released a movie. And it was a big movie that just came out, Incredible Burt Wonderstone. And it's a really funny movie. I went and saw it and I enjoyed it. But it didn't do as well at the box office in its opening weekend.

And so we were just having a conversation about that. And he was kind of down in the dumps about it didn't do what it was supposed to do in terms of the financials and all these stuff. And so we had that kind of reframing conversation about what really did go well about the movie?

"Wow! You had all these amazing actors." He's my younger brother. So I'm like, "You pulled together Jim Carrey and Steve Carrell and Olivia Wilde, all these amazing actors, into your movie. And the whole thing even got filmed. It even was widely released. That's such a huge accomplishment for someone who's under 40 years old," to really reframe what in his mind was, "It's a disaster at the box office."

And I was just like, "You know it wasn't a disaster at all." I went, "I brought ten friends. Everyone laughed and had a great time," and so giving ourselves that generosity.

**[0:55:02]**

Sylvia: That's right. You make a bigger frame.

Devaa: Exactly. So there's just one topic that I hope we can talk about for just a couple of minutes. I know our time is coming to a close. But the way that I recently connected with you was at a peace event. And you were really talking about living a life of service and passionate service.

And passionate service is one of the themes this summit as well as soulful presence. And I feel we've really gone into the soulful aspect. Let's talk a little bit about this service because I know that's something that's very alive in your heart and in my heart as well.

Sylvia: I'm happy to do that. It seems to me that it goes without saying that I believe this that to any degree that people become more aware moment to moment of what's really true, not only in their little personal world, personal relationships, but what's going on in the larger world, in our community and the planet, these are very, very amazing times.

I think the world has always been filled with difficulties because people have always been confused by personal passions and fears about groups not themselves. But now because there's so many people in the world and the planet itself is imperiled and if we're not careful we'll run out of clean water, we'll run out of air, we'll run out of food stuff that are healthy, and we'll continue to fight wars, that degrade the planet and destroy so many lives.

So it's imperative that people wake up and get over the illusion that things are okay. They're not. They have to get fixed. And that the not okayness is man-made, person made. And the getting better could also be, is therefore, person remediable seems to me so impossible to pay attention to what's going on, enough clarity of intention without seeing, "Wow! Look what's going on in the world. I have to do something about this."

And I think that in myself, I grew up in a family of new immigrants to the United States who arrived not being able to speak English, who came because they really want to live in a democracy and vote. I grew up with passionate people who felt a lot of enthusiasm and trust for the democratic process. Everyone in my family went to the polls and voted. It was like a religious act. Making your voice heard was most important. Respecting workers' rights was tremendously important. I have never in my life missed an election. I have never crossed a picket line. And I really grew up with people saying, "We have to look out for each other."

I would have said for a long time that was my spiritual practice. In the 1960s, I was very active as we really marched and manifested for civil rights and women's rights and the end to the war in Vietnam and, we hope, the end to all wars. Nobody said, "What your spiritual practice?" But I would have said, "My spiritual practice is social activism."

Then as I became interested in meditation, it didn't stop that. But I got very involved also in spending a fair amount of time training sometimes in retreat centers, sometimes for extended periods of time, which I had the possibility of. I also was very involved in raising four children and keeping a psychotherapy practice. So I was not, for some period of time, as out actively championing the visible protests and rallies and political activities.

And then as I got older, I really began to come around the other little spiritual practice where it becomes not only clarified in my own mind, but out of that clarification, really redoubling my sense of what's going on here. We really have to do something. So I think I have the same feeling that I had when I was eight or ten or 15 from my family about if there are people in trouble, we really have to do something.

[1:00:06]

But I have it better now or more. We really, really have to do something. It's dismaying to see the planet about to destroy itself up about because it can't learn to be friends with each other and cooperate with each other.

And the more I am grounded in the notion that people have their potential, we could as a planet all text each other and say, "Listen, peace if possible. Let's not do this anymore." We've been hoodwinked into thinking we have to fight for the American way of life. We have to educate and hope and pray and convince people to join us and having not the American way of life but the human way of life and that we can have it on this small planet while cleaning up the water and the air.

We could just stop killing each other and start cooperating with each other and start farming with each other and trading with each other and listening to each other and being less frightened of each other.

I think all the great religious traditions that I know about begin and end services with the invocation, "Peace be with you and also with you" in different languages, sometimes with different invocations. But that everybody knows that that overcoming of xenophobia, really stop seeing the other person as other and start seeing them as ourselves, as our kin, is really the point, the deep point of spiritual practice.

We come to the place where we really not only realize that we are all connected but that our futures are all vitally connected to each other and that there's no other way but to behave like family.

So I think I started out with social activism, but I think I reemerged now more committed to it out of the really not so much out of following my family's commitment but out of the internal awareness that this is the only thing that's going to do it for the world and out of the sense, daily growing sense, of the imperative that we make a difference right now. I don't think that there's anything about contemplative practice that's not involved in an awareness of saving the world.

And unless that sounds too weird, if I'm sitting here on a sofa this moment and I am breathing in and out a long pleasant breath of fresh unpolluted air, I'm doing that because my lungs are still viable and because the biosphere is still viable. And that as I enjoy this breath and I rejoice in that mutual viability I think to myself, "Boy, I have to keep myself healthy, not forever because I'm old. But as long as I can I want to keep my lungs healthy. And as much as I can I want to

keep the biosphere healthy. So I have to be sure to recycle. I have to tell other people to recycle."

I think that contemplative practice, even when it's sitting still all by yourself resting in your breath, is two thoughts away from saving the planet with conservation, with environmental measures, with stopping wars, with all of that.

Devaa: Well, thank you, Sylvia, on that note of keeping the spiritual and the social activist part of your alive simultaneously. I know we need to bring this conversation to a close. I want to thank you so much for being part of the Inspiring Women Summit and for really offering your deep wisdom and humor and your teaching stories. It has really been quite a delight. And I wanted to see if there's a way that people want to learn more about your work, what's the best way for people to get in touch with you or follow what you're up to?

Sylvia: Oh, that's a great idea. Thank you very much. They could go on the web and look at [www.spiritrockmeditationcenter.org](http://www.spiritrockmeditationcenter.org). They could Google it and they'd find it.

Devaa: I think it's just there. It looks like it's just [spiritrock.org](http://spiritrock.org) is what I see.

Sylvia: It is [spiritrock.org](http://spiritrock.org). If they Google it then you Google Spirit Rock Meditation Center. The website is [spiritrock.org](http://spiritrock.org). They can Google me, [sylviaboorstein.com](http://sylviaboorstein.com), which will tell you just a little bit more about the family I grew up with, the books I've written, where they could get them.

**[1:05:11]**

As soon as I update my calendar with this year's places where I'll be teaching, that'll be up too. So they could look at my website.

They could look at Spirit Rock but when they look at the Spirit Rock website to be sure to look at a subwebsite that's the website for the Sangha of Thousands of Buddhas.

And the way you can get it directly is the website is [thousandsofbuddhas](http://thousandsofbuddhas.org), that's one word, [thousandsofbuddhas.org](http://thousandsofbuddhas.org). And it's a website that describes of a capital campaign that's being run at Spirit Rock to build a new community meditation home.

And the main reason I want people to see that page -- although I'd be happy for them to join in any way to support that effort, you can look at it for free -- and every single day there's a five-minute video of a dharma lesson, a meditation tip. And every day they change. And there are different teachers, all of the Spirit Rock teachers. And they're wonderful. It's like a five-minute uplift word for the

day. So thousandsofbuddhas.org will get you five minutes of maybe 30 different dharma teachers teaching. And they change every day at 4:00.

Devaa: Perfect. All right. Well, it sounds like that's a good way to keep your spirit lifted through time. And again, just thank you so much, Sylvia. It's truly been a pleasure to have you with us here today.

Sylvia: It's been a pleasure for me as well.

Devaa: All right, all. Stay tuned for our next upcoming sessions with the Inspiring Women Summit. We will be back with you here shortly.

**[1:07:21] End of Audio**

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