

**Shrink Rap Radio #222, October 29, 2009, Wise Mind, Open Mind
David Van Nuys, Ph.D., aka "Dr. Dave" interviews Ron Alexander,
Ph.D**

Excerpt: *In Buddhist psychology, the emphasis is, it's not just on what's called wholesome experience like, for example pursuing joy, bliss, states of ecstasy, states of numinosity, and oneness. But Buddhist psychology says all experience can be divided between wholesome positive, neutral experience and negative painful, reflective or unwholesome experience. An in this continuum in Buddhist psychology, there is an emphasis that what you want to do is like a gardener who is weeding weeds from his garden or collecting the manure from his cows. You want to till it all into the soil so that next year, you're the farmer or the gardener who has the best crop or the greenest grass, because you've embraced and you've incorporated your own manure which is your shadow experiences. You've looked more deeply at your own tendencies to have emotions that if not mindfully worked with can cause you a lot of pain and a lot of suffering.*

Introduction: That was the voice of my guest, Dr. Ronald A. Alexander. Ronald A. Alexander Ph.d is author of the 2009 book, "Wise Mind, Open Mind, Finding Purpose and Meaning in Times of Crisis, Loss, and Change". Dr. Alexander practices mind-body psychotherapy and leadership coaching in Santa Monica, California. And he specializes in the practice of somatic psychology, creative and leadership training. He teaches clinical training groups for professionals in somatic psychotherapy and Ericksonian mind-body healing therapies and the art of mindfulness meditation. He leads workshops in growth centers throughout the U.S. and abroad. He was also a guest on Shrink Rap Radio number 29 back in 2006 when I interviewed him on mindful leadership, mindful living. Many years ago, he was one of my masters student at Sonoma State University. And now I regard him as both colleague and teacher. Now here's the interview.

Dr. Dave: Dr. Ronald Alexander, welcome back to Shrink Rap Radio!

Alexander: Thank you. It is a delight to be back, David.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. Well, now you and I are long-time friends so I'm going to drop the Dr. Ronald Alexander and call you Ron, okay?

Alexander: That's fine David.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. And I'm welcoming you back because I did a podcast with you, oh boy, it's been a couple of years ago at least and it was one of the early podcasts. I've should have looked this up a head of time but I think, it was either number 29 or number 30.

Alexander: You know, it's very early on in your uh, development.

Dr. Dave: Right. And in fact right now, you're on the Hawaiian island of Kauai and I'm in northern California and I was going to be joining you there on Kauai but my plans changed and so I'm not making it this time.

Alexander: Maybe we'll have a road trip to Europe in the next year.

Dr. Dave: That would be great. I'll look forward to that. Well, I wanted to focus today on your new book, "Wise Mind, Open Mind, Finding Purpose and Meaning in Times of Crisis, Loss, and Change". I received a, an advanced copy and friendship aside, I have to say that I'm really impressed.

Alexander: Well, thank you, I really appreciated that, that means a lot uh, to me.

Dr. Dave: Now this book has been a long time coming hasn't it? It , it . . .

Alexander: Probably about 30, 34 years coming.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, right it embodies the past 30 years of your work. Now your book has a very strong focus on mindfulness meditation. And it seems like mindfulness meditation has really emerged as perhaps the leading approach in this country with lots of research studies on mindfulness, a variety of psychotherapies that incorporate mindfulness in one way or another. Why do you think that is?

Alexander: Well, I think, um, mindfulness has become mainstream and has really caught fire um, in both uh, academic and research settings. For example, you have Richard Davidson, Dr. Richard Davidson at the University of uh, . . .

Dr. Dave: Wisconsin, I think.

Alexander: Um, yes. Um, there is his own brain-mind research lab doing, uh, cat scans and cat scan studies, and uh, we have other researchers all around the country, and so I think um, signs has come onto the subject of mindfulness, uh, as well as the psychotherapeutic community and I think some of that is a result of the Dalai Lama's uh, public teachings . . .

Dr. Dave: . . .umm. . . .

Alexander: . . .as well as his private meetings with the uh, the mind uh, life institute where a group of uh, physicians uh, neuroscience brain researchers, noted psychologists in the transpersonal psychology movement, uh, cognitive behavior psychologists, uh, neuroscientists and psychiatrists like Dr. Daniel Siegel from UCLA, in uh, mindfulness awareness research center. And they have been meeting over in about the last 14 years, and one of their topics has been, how to apply mindfulness to the field at large of uh, mental health, uh, behavioral, holistic, and integrated medicine as well as psychotherapy. And, I think with the Dalai Lama really um, being the uh, locomotive that has been pulling this train. A lot of people have gotten on

board and he has been encouraging for in, at least the last 15 years, for there to be a more active research into, does mindfulness affect changes not only in one's consciousness in one's awareness but does it also make changes in the brain. And that is one of the most significant things that we've recently uh, come to discover.

Dr. Dave: Well, you know, I think you're right. I hadn't connected it to the Dalai Lama and his growing importance and the public awareness of his work but I think you're right about that. And you mention uh, Dr. Richard Davidson and actually I've been, we sort of had to reschedule an interview with him a couple of times and right now I think, I think he's scheduled for November so that's an interview I'm really looking forward to. Now, you've explored a number of spiritual traditions and practices over the years. How did you find your way to the mindfulness approach?

Alexander: That's a great question. When I did in my first two years of college in Boston, I was still living close to home and um, all of my friends from high school and I grew up in a Irish-Catholic family of 10 kids so close uh, well-knit family. And in my junior year, I transferred to the University of Massachusetts in Amherst because they had a psychology program called the Bachelor's Degree in Individual Concentration and part of what attracted me to uh, decide between going to the University of New Hampshire uh, which I think you were a professor, a visiting guest, distinguished professor at for a few years, weren't you?

Dr. Dave: Yes! That's right. You have a good memory.

Alexander: I had a scholarship there and a scholarship to UMass Amherst. And what attracted me to go to Amherst was the psychology program which gave me the opportunity to minor in Buddhist studies at Smith College and at the same time study consciousness studies in the field of altered states at a very small creative college called Hampshire College. And so, uh, while I was there, we had a kind of ongoing correspondence

and uh, co-visitation; uh, I invited Dan Goldman uh, the noted author of today of "Emotional Intelligence" to actually give his very first public talk uh, in his entire life which was at the University of Massachusetts; he gave a talk of the Tibetan view of uh, life, birth and death. And they, him and Richard Davidson were working at Harvard in the school of social relationships and they were doing a research study on meditation and altered states of consciousness and myself and Alan Como, who who you may remember. . .

Dr. Dave: . . .I do . . .

Alexander: We were doing . . .

Dr. Dave: . . .yeah . . .

Alexander: We were doing research study at the Meninger Clinic and the Veteran's Administration hospital at Topeka, Kansas. And at that time I was involved in the study of Kundalini yoga and Kundalini meditation.

Dr. Dave: Right, I remember that.

Alexander: And we actually brought some of that to Sonoma State University where um, we came out to study with you and Eleanor Criswell and **Stanley Krippner**. As a result of that, I got extremely interested in Dan Goldman's research on Buddhist meditation. And actually found that that was more compatible uh, to me, it kind of uh, there was more a sense of an atunement to Buddhist meditation than actually to yoga by itself. And then shortly after being there for a year, my grade point average was about 3.85 and around mid-terms, at times senior year, I started having panic attacks. Because I had all this pressure about getting into graduate school and I didn't even know what anxiety was at that point in my life let alone what a panic attack was. And so a young doctor uh, I went to the student Mental Health services and a young doctor named Kentoly was referred to

me to be my therapist. And in the first 10 or 15 minutes of us talking, he described to me that he had taken the last year off on a sabbatical where he had spent almost the entire time in India uh, studying meditation, Buddhist forms of meditation, uh, various forms of yogic practices, and he said, um, something that is really seminal which is called in the cornerstone to why I have devoted so much of my life to being involved in mindfulness meditation, and um, Buddhist studies and that was, he said, well, I can give you medication or I can teach you meditation, which of the two would you be the most interested in? Medication or meditation? And medication kind of frightened me, I didn't know much about that. So I said, "I think I'll take the second choice on the menu." So he gave me a prescription to come to the next 6 weeks and that we were going to ah, do meditation practice from the Buddhist perspective which he had recently learned in his trip in India, which he had studied and had taken a series of courses on mindfulness meditation. And so I began to uh, practice mindfulness and he suggested that I do it twice a day and usually I recommend 20 minutes twice a day but he suggested that I actually sit for 45 minutes and if possible, longer. And so I had so much anxiety back in those days, that I remember sitting sometimes for 2 hours at a time; in the morning and 2 hours at a time in the evening.

Dr. Dave: Wow.

Alexander: And then he mentioned to me about in our sixth visit, that a very well-known Franciscan um, monk was going to come and teach a course at the Spencer Abbey which was a Trappist monastery, a couple of hours outside of Amherst uh, on Buddhist meditation and Christian contemplative meditation. So of course that really uh, sounded exciting and so I headed off and spent a week in silence at this Trappist monastery and having been raised Catholic I was uh, very used to and drawn to the Gregorian chanting, and uh, vespers, and the Mass, uh, once a day. And during the day, we were instructed to meditate uh, an hour on and then an hour off we were to go out to the fields and to work. But the work and all

the eating was in silence. And so this was a way of developing of a course of a week, very strong and steady mindfulness practice. And a mindfulness both on the question, as well as mindfulness in each of our daily actions, brushing our teeth, combing our hair, uh, cutting our food, chewing our food, uh, painting a fence, building a rock wall.

Dr. Dave: That really fascinating background. And then later on, you actually got ordained as a Zen monk, isn't that right?

Alexander: Yeah, and in 1999, one of the senior teachers from the San Francisco Zen Center who is a Zen priest and also has dharma transmission, who is a follower of uh, Suzuki Roshi who was the founder of the San Francisco Zen Center and Tassajara and the Green Gulch farm. The Zen priest's name and uh, dharma holder is Ed Brown who is also the well-known author of all the cookbooks, the Tassajara cookbooks.

Dr. Dave: Oh.

Alexander: So I spent a number of summers studying with Ed at Tassajara and then in 1999, after probably about 30 years of seriously thinking about um, did I want to take ah, the the vows; there are seven vows. I chose to take 5 of the 7; that's the good thing about Zen, you don't have to take them all.

Dr. Dave: (laughs). That's great! (laughs again)

Alexander: So you can uh, ward off disappointment and uh, any guilt that you may experience in case you go all to the wall and break your vows. So I chose to take the 5 that I thought I could fulfill. I did that in 1999.

Dr. Dave: Okay. Well, let's uh, focus on your book. You've got a chapter on the basics of mindfulness meditation. Uh, take us through that. How does a person get started?

Alexander: Well, the very first thing to do is, to understand that there's probably 3 or 4 basic points of attention in any kind of mindfulness practice. And the first point of attention is to link attention with intention. And the intention that one needs to have when they're practicing or developing a mindfulness practice is the intention to develop concentration. And for all of us even after 35 years of practicing, we all really suffer with what's called "monkey-mind". And monkey-mind is uh, a simple way of saying that, the mind has a lot of chatter uh, the small self, the small mind in Zen we say is constantly talking, it's constantly creating hindrances, and distractions to being able to sit relaxed rest freely and, at a more advanced level, to drop into what's called wise mind and I write a lot about it in my book. So the first point of intention uh, is to focus intention with attention. The second point of a mindfulness practice is, what do you do in order to do that? What you do is you need to have a breath practice. And in order to have a breath practice it means you need to begin to start focusing one's awareness on whether you're breathing in on the in breath or out on the out breath and mentally repeating that or another style of that that some people find much more conducive is to say rising so that as you breath in and your lungs fill with air and oxygen, and then when you breathe out, you say falling away. So rising on the in breath, falling away on the out breath. So breath practices is the second point of attention and it's really essential if you are going to build uh, concentration over time in a mindfulness practice that you have a breath practice.

Dr. Dave: OK, those are the first 2 points of concentration and I think you said that there were 4. What are the next two?

Alexander: Uh, the third point of attention is what is called a mudra, and that's what you do with your hands. And easiest thing to do this, probably a thousand and eight different mudras to use in any kind of meditation practice but the most simple and basic one is to take your thumb and your very first finger and lightly touch them and then place them

together with your palms facing upwards on your left thigh and on your right thigh. And then the next point of attention is to sit up straight and slightly turn your chin forward and looking down and that's the point of attention for one's eyes. And it's best when we're practicing mindfulness is to usually close your eyes and focus on either on the tip of your nostrils or the space between your eyebrows which is oftentimes referred in yogic literature as the third eye or the mind's eye. And then the last point of attention which one would say um, number 4 or 5, is, what do you do now that you have all these points of attention in place. So while you are breathing in and you're breathing out and you're saying in and out or rising and falling and you have your eyes focused either on the tip of your nostrils or the third eye and your thumb and first finger together in a mudra, in order to develop concentration, you have to do something with the mind and the last point of attention is called the development of the "witness" and what we call we refer to as the "witnessing awareness". And that is something that you do by training the mind to note and to take notice and as Suzuki Roshi, the great Zen teacher taught, to learn about the self, you have to study the self. And to know the self, is to look more deeply into the self. So the last point of attention really is that we cultivate a witnessing mind. The witnessing awareness that begins to observe, note, comment, and then let go of everything that it is noting, everything that it is observing, everything that it is commenting on, and to simply be still. And that's a tall order.

Dr. Dave: Yes, it is (laughs) in my experience! And you also earlier suggested two 20 minute sessions a day and I think for many people that might seem like a tall order.

Alexander: I do. I agree with you David. I think my sister who is in uh, in nursing administration in Boston just bought the book and uh, she started out and said that she found it was utter agony to get to the first 5 minutes.

Dr. Dave: Oh my goodness.

Alexander: She Facebooked me and she said, "How can I ever get to 20 minutes or an hour?" And I said just to add a minute a day, get a food timer. Ah, or get a timer, use the timer on your iPhone uh, and add a minute a day and just gently push yourself up to the next level of time but once you arrive at 20 minutes, get comfortable, get easy with it and so that you are actually resting and relaxing in the meditation rather than trying to do a lot of effort. And then always if, for some people, very highly fast-paced um, businessmen, business executives, who will find that 5 minutes is more than enough of what they need either at the beginning of the day, at the end of the day, or even the middle of the day. So there are a couple of people that I coach who were executives in Manhattan, and I tell them, close your door and tell your assistant, you aren't going to take any calls for 5 or 15 minutes and to some people they are able to do that. And then other people who don't have their own private office, I say well, go into the stairwell and then just start very slowly climbing the stairs in a mindful meditation or climbing down the stairs then climbing back up the stairs in a mindful meditation and use that as your coffee break. Use that as a mindfulness break.

Dr. Dave: That's interesting. One of the other things you write about is resistance and of course you are also a psychotherapist and resistance is a big topic in psychotherapy and it seems like anytime we set off on a self improvement or change project, resistance crops up. What sorts of resistance do people encounter in this practice and how do you suggest that they deal with them?

Alexander: Well, that's a terrific question. In Buddhist psychology, the same, it is that whatever you run from, will chase after you. (laugh) You chase will run away from you. And that really is a good way to lead into that in meditations, a series of what we call uh, and they were articulated first by the Buddha in the very first uh, treatise and discourse that he gave on uh, **Satchibatana**. In **Satchibatana** in Pali means insight and wisdom. And

in this discourse the Buddha talked about there are a lot of hindrances that emerge in the mind, hindrances of distraction, of ill-will, of sluggishness, or torpor, of desires, of lusting, of wanting, of being in desirous mind, desirous mind by wanting uh, something different than what you are experiencing, or something wanting something more. And in western psychology we often say that resistance is, whenever you resist will really continue to persist until you soften the defenses and go and penetrate your deeper level of affective and emotional experience. And I think that really carries over to mindfulness and mindfulness practice really is a very good tool particularly to help people who have very strong defenses and those defenses sometimes have very useful purposes and other times they have interfering purposes, interfering without being able to feel your feelings more fluidly or more freely. And so the sim; there is a great similarity in what we do with these resistances of these hindrances in both Buddhist meditation practice and western contemporary psychotherapy and that's the very first and foremost thing is where we always want to identify what the resistances are. And second, what are the functions and then third, what are their structures? And then finally fourth, in both practices, you want to dismantle the hindrances or resistances so that then the psyche has a more fluid exchange with the body and the body has a more fluid exchange with the psyche and then one is able to tap into their creative unconscious as well as into their affective experience. In simple terms, one is able to feel their feelings more fluidly and freely. And the more that we are able to feel our feelings more fluidly and freely, the more vitality, the more passion, the greater sense of well-being, we begin to cultivate in everyday life.

Dr. Dave: I would think some of the resistances that might come up would be, I don't have enough time, my body is uncomfortable, this is boring, this isn't going to work for me...

Alexander: Right, and those are uh, very well articulated. Just this morning, I woke up and I had an interview uh, on a radio program from Boston, and so they called at 5:30 because it was 11:30 in Boston; they

didn't know that I was in Hawaii. And then I got a call from a colleague at 7 o'clock and I was already pre- thinking that you and I are going to be doing this podcast at 10 o'clock. And uh, my mind started to say , well, maybe you meditate later in the day uh, because you really need to prepare and um, sort through a variety of things so that you you give the podcast a hundred percent focus. And then I saw that and I looked at it and said, is that a resistance? And I identified it and yeah, that was a resistance so then I went and sat down and I meditated for 21 minutes. And in the first few minutes what emerged was, oh, I should be doing something more important like perhaps doing morning pages or writing in my mindfulness journal, so that I'm really empty and free by the time I get on the podcast. So that is resistance. I went through a series of all these distractions that were trying to prevent me from just sitting. And after about 5 minutes, of distractions that really kind of calm and spacious, and delicious place where I really wasn't thinking about anything. And I think that is the core of mindfulness which is a eventually mindfulness practice whether you are a beginner or you're an advanced uh, practitioner, will eventually just drop you into that place of a quiet, empty stillness. You may continue to have thoughts but they will recede to the back of your mind like kind of subtle uh, talk but what comes forward into the foreground of your conscienceness and awareness. The pervading in uh, all-abiding sense of stillness, equanimity, peacefulness, and harmony. And in that state, then I think as I write in the book, you move from wise mind which is, that is the state of wise mind, into what I call open mind. And open mind is when you really enter into the opening in your conscienceness where you can tap directly your own conscience mind and especially the creative resources that are involved in tapping into your own internal creativity. One of the things that I hear in my private practice and I hear all along the country and the world wherever I'm teaching, in all walks of life, all forms of business, is everyone says , how can I become more creative at what I do? Even mothers and fathers who come in from Australia, they're living up in the Gold Coast say I really wish I could, I'm a farmer but I really wish I could really feel creative in my life, like gifted painters, or musicians, or uh, artists. And I tell them that, all

they have to do is to learn to get quiet and still within themselves and that inside of everybody, there is this enormous pool of creativity. Now, not everybody's going to become the next Mark Rothko or be a prolific uh, songwriter like Joni Mitchell uh, but everybody does have inside of themselves that same pool of creativity that needs to be tapped into. That people are thirsting and really searching to tap into. And the road in there, is the key is to guide oneself in mindfully through a mindfulness practice which is the first door that opens into the room where there are many different rooms to the house of self. And one of the rooms very, very spacious and special rooms is the room of open mind.

Dr. Dave: I think that's one of the things that really distinguishes your book is that there are two primary themes that weave throughout it; the one that we've been focusing on is mindfulness meditation but also there is a second thread of releasing creativity and I think that's really a unique um, contribution of your book and your approach.

Alexander: Yes, um, part of what my book is about is helping people to learn mindfulness meditation to enhance their sense of well-being and to calm their thoughts into work through crisis, pain, and loss. But the second part has much more to do with the emergent new field of positive psychology. And that field is really lighting a fire under all of us clinicians worldwide to begin to start focusing on the same way that when I was a student of yours at Sonoma State University and you first introduced me to the field of humanist and existential psychology where the teachings were about Abraham Maslow and to focus on self-actualization and Sidney Jourard authenticity. Is this field of positive psychology similar to humanistic existential psychology is really trying to say instead of focusing on what isn't working, and what is pathologically wrong and not right in trying to go out in the therapeutic or transformational process trying to fix it or change it. The field of positive psychology and mindfulness is a part of that field. It's almost an emergent new force I think is saying, let's focus on people's creativity. Let's focus on what makes people thrive, what brings people's

passion and creativity alive inside of them. And to then notice and study how, when you help people to focus on what's good, and on what's creative, and what they are passionate about, help by tapping into those energies, they can both navigate through some of their problems. At times they will be able to transform their problems into creative works of art or in more creative in a passionate way of being in the world. Now I think this is the wonderful uh, new road that's been opened up.

Dr. Dave: Well, I agree with you and, uh, it's great to hear that you're as excited about positive psychology as I have been. At first I was offended I guess because the positive psychologist didn't seem to give much credit to humanistic psychology and to people like Maslow and other pioneers in that area as if not that it ever happened uh, and in fact, both sets of people were coming from the same basic impulse I think but what the positive psychology movement has brought to it is a much stronger commitment to empirical research into really exploring these ideas as much as possible using research. And the other thing though that I want to mention here is, it's interesting that just; you know, I've been interviewing a lot of people and reading a lot of books coming out of the positive psychology movement and almost every one of them lists mindfulness as, you know, one of the maybe 8 or 12 things that really characterize being on the path towards some kind of quote, "happiness".

Alexander: Yeah, and I think it's a mistake that the field of positive psychology doesn't, ah, provide more um, respect and give more credence to the enormous effect that the field of humanistic existential psychology had as a forerunner to positive psychology especially because mindfulness actually is not the fifth force in psychology which cognitive behavior, dialectical behavior therapy, EMDR, postmodern narrative, positive psychology. They articulate themselves and they put mindfulness into that field which is the fifth field, um, just for the listeners I'll reiterate the chronology: the first force in psychology is Freudman, Freud Freud n ...

Dr. Dave: Freudian. (laughs)

Alexander: Freudian, sorry. Second was behavioral, third was humanistic existential, and then the fourth was the transpersonal psychological movement which mindfulness and Buddhist and meditative practices and the study of altered states of consciousness, they grew out of the effect that humanistic and existential psychology created in the field. A whole new pathway was opened up. And mindfulness really fits into the fourth field uh, fourth force of psychology and the fifth force. So um, I think the field of positive psychology should be more a witness and more acknowledgment and provide more thanks to the third force which is the humanistic existential field which you and myself both came out of.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, and I hadn't necessarily plan to go down this direction although I would to characterize this fifth force as I never had never thought about it as a fifth force but I think maybe I would characterize that as the cognitive revolution because it seems like cognition which can also embrace mindfulness. That seems to be the big, the big, shift.

Alexander: Yes, yeah. The whole shift in the cognitive behavioral therapies, the dialectical behavioral therapies, Marshall Linahan's work in um, CBT has embraced mindfulness. So I think we are in amidst of a revolutionary uh, development in a more cognitive uh, approach to dealing with um, psychological problems. But the piece that I think the cognitive people miss is the body piece. And that's why I think we still have to keep cycling back and re-unifying ourselves with the third and the fourth uh, forces of psychology because the third and fourth humanistic existential was really the first force that said, let's not be atomistic and split the mind from the body, let's be holistic and think about such as a therapy as gestalt therapy, let's be holistic.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Alexander: Gestalt means whole. Um, and some in state university, I took my first course with uh, Dr. Larry Horowitz an old colleague of yours, . . .

Dr. Dave: . . . right . . .

Alexander: . . . and teach faculty and it was in Gestalt therapy ...

Dr. Dave: Yes ...

Alexander: . . . and I remember him saying, at his home, that is where he taught the seminar up in Santa Rosa up in the hills, that if you just focus on the mind, you deal with one pathway. But if you unite the mind, with bodily felt experience in bodily felt sensation, then you are opening up the third pathway a third pathway that unifies psyche and soma and soma psyche.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Alexander: And I think cognitive behavior needs to kind of circle back a bit and pick up the mind-body connection and then and I think mindfulness helps you to do that because you can not uh, override or exclude what goes on in your body as well as in your mind when you're practicing mindfulness because you have to pay attention to everything that comes up; positive, neutral, and negative experience.

Dr. Dave: Well, that's a good point and partly you are paying attention to an integrating bodily experience. That's what you are saying, right?

Alexander: Yes, yeah, because mindfulness has you pay attention to what you think, what you feel, sensations in the body pleasurable or painful, what you hear, what you taste, what you smell. And so it is a very holistic and that's why I love it.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. Now another place of crossover between uh, cognitive psychology and mindfulness and your writing, is attention to destructive and unwholesome beliefs and emotions that come up and also unwholesome self judgments. So how does one deal with these and why are they so universal?

Alexander: Well, they're universal because I think within us all, there is what Robert Bly refers to in his book, "The Little Book of the Shadow", is in, he really developed his way of thinking from his readings and study of Carl Jung. And I also have studied a fair amount of Jungian psychology and I know you have, David.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Alexander: I think you studied or were part of a group with Mary Merrill? Was that her name?

Dr. Dave: Yeah, yeah. Mary Merrill.

Alexander: And what I've learned from Jungian psychology in addition to all of its positive attributes specially being um, focused on the spiritual and the archetypal, and the transformative and unifying experience, it is that we have got a shadow, you know, we all have a shadow side. Um, and Robert Bly talks about in his Little Book of the Shadow, that the shadow's kind of like a little bag. And what we attempt to want to do is most of us tend to want to put all of our destructive, lustful, desirous um, angry, rageful, uh, envious experiences, secretly we want to sweep them out of our awareness and put it them into this metaphorical bag and kind of stuff it inside of our psyche. And, lo and behold, it always comes flying out in one way or the other. And in Buddhist psychology, the emphasis is, it's not just on what's called wholesome experience like, for example, pursuing joy, bliss, states of ecstasy, states of numonousity of oneness, but Buddhist

psychology says all experience can be divided between wholesome positives, neutral experience, and negative, painful, reflective, or unwholesome experience. And in this continuum, in Buddhist psychology, there is an emphasis that what you want to do is like a gardener who is weeding weeds from his garden or collecting the manure from his cows. You want to till it all into the soil so that next year, you're the farmer or the gardener who has the best crop or the greenest grass, because you've embraced and you've incorporated your own manure which is your shadow experiences. You've looked more deeply at your own tendencies to have emotions that if not mindfully worked with can cause you a lot of pain and a lot of suffering. Just take for example, uh, people who struggle as many people do, with some form of an addiction and in mindfulness, we teach people how to work with and be mindful and to live through and navigate through those powerful forces of anxiety, and desire, and greed, and hunger, that are often the sources or the primary sources of an addiction. And as we embrace what's in our shadow self, we are then far more able to organize the closets of our own internal self experience and to be able to put the shirts where the shirts need to go metaphorically in terms of feelings, the socks where they need to go, pants where they need to go. We need to over time to help get the closets in the house itself in much more organized and contained order.

Dr. Dave: I like that, the closet, the shirts, the socks. You mentioned addiction; maybe you can talk a bit about how you use mindfulness meditation in your therapeutic practice and perhaps a case example or two of come to mind.

Alexander: Well, I recently was working with um, a gal who had had uh, two forty day stints in a drug rehabilitation uh, center outside of Los Angeles in Malibu. And she came into my office and she was referred by the center and we sat and we talked and we talked about her long history of abuse um, and childhood sexual abuse and violence, her long history of neglect from both her, primarily from her mother; she had a very loving

father. And um, she had a very long history of having been um, abused and used by famous and uh, powerful men which lead over time to many heartbreaks and lead, uh, over time to the cultivation of a series of different addictions. And as we were talking and I was gathering all this information, what, I closed my eyes for a couple of minutes and I just went inside which is something I often times do, and I said, I asked my intuition, what would be most helpful, put this being on a better path? What would really help to assist her and to give her some skills rather than just talking about the addiction? What could I give her that she could take home and she could start to practice and apply? And so I told her, I'd like to teach you mindfulness meditation and I did and I suggested she that she practice it 3 times a day. And at first she kind of looked at me in total abject horror.

Dr. Dave: Yeah!

Alexander: She said, you don't understand. Um, when I'm free of drugs and alcohol, um, my mind is so active and I have so many painful feelings in my body, I can't even sit still uh, let alone sit and close my eyes and you want me to do it 3 times a day? And so I said, yeah, let's do it 3 times a day but as I said earlier in the interview, let's start out at 5 minutes and build up to 20. And over the course of the next couple of months, she actually put this into place. And she said she had as major a breakthrough as she'd had at the rehabilitation center when she had discovered as most people who are going through twelve-step recovery, uh, have which is the experience of the higher power . . .

Dr. Dave: Umm umm . . .

Alexander: . . . which is called the first step. She said it was almost as if she had a first step to the second level where there was an experience where she said, I can really now understand what many of the older people in the program are talking about when they say you really have to surrender to the higher power. You have to surrender to an acceptance that this

addiction is greater and far more powerful than yourself. And she said, I was able to actually get a first-hand glimpse into that experience of surrender from the mindfulness meditation. She said, I actually experience my small self or my ego-mind that's totally wrapped up with my sense of self, and my self image, all of my destructive emotions that feed into that. I was actually was able that separate from it in the mindfulness meditation and I was able to sit and I think I sat, I think she said for about an hour or an hour and a half. As for the first time in her life, she said I was just sitting and I wasn't trying to be anybody, and I wasn't trying to get away from my pain, I wasn't trying to transform my pain. As a matter of fact, I experienced right before my awareness in my eyes; it was as if the pain in myself had drained out of my body, went down into the feet, and Mother Earth was absorbing it and I felt free for the very first time in 40 years.

Dr. Dave: Wow, that's a great story. And mindfulness got used in two different ways that I wasn't expecting it but the first way that got used when you tapped into yourself and kind of went into your still place and ask for your intuition to suggest to you the right approach and of course, and then the second one, of course, was giving her to assignment to get involved with it herself.

Alexander: Right, and so one of the things that I teach for therapists and mental health professionals is, I teach a segment of a course called transforming the self and it's called, How to Become the Mindful Clinician. And I think it's really important and I've discovered naturally that after all these of years of sitting and meditating, that I feel a great sense of freedom both to be artistically creative when I'm sitting with my patients, but simultaneously to drop into the deeper intuitive wisdom inside of myself by going into a mini-mindfulness meditation when I'm sitting with various patients, and particularly when I'm um, searching or looking for something that's going to have a more diamond-like ah, tool to help them really transform or turn around uh, the problems that they are suffering with. I had uh, another interesting anecdote and I write about it uh, in the book

but um, in the book, it's written about a little differently but a woman once came to me and she came to my home office up in Topanga Canyon which is a tiny little village, enclave of uh, **yuppies**, uh, holistic doctors, musicians, artists, poets, um, and in this place where I live, and she came to my home office and sat down and she was extremely well-dressed and finely appointed and she was working for a Fortune 500 company out of Manhattan and they had an office uh, in Los Angeles. And the presenting problem was that she had a family of four back in, I'll just make up a state, but let's just say, New Jersey, and she was struggling with having an extra-marital affair in uh, the Los Angeles office. And she said she'd been to see a variety of therapists and um, but she still felt that she couldn't let go of this and that it was very odd for her because she said she loved her husband, she loved her children, she loved her family, she loved her job but it was almost as if something was pulling her apart, pulling her down under. And she said she had seen a variety of therapists but that she was still feeling stuck so I just had a natural intuitive uh, feeling to say, let's close our eyes and just sit quietly and go into mindfulness for 10 minutes. And we did and about 5 or 6 minutes into the meditation, I was seeing in my mind's eye, I was seeing the image of a boat. And the boat was her and her friend and it was heading onto a lake. And it was sunny out and it was a beautiful uh, cloud-free day. And then, about a minute later, I saw the boat and there was this huge storm and the boat was turned upside down and there was all this screaming. So I held and to contain that then at the end of the session, I said, um, would you like to share with me what you experienced and then would you like to share what I experienced? So she shared with me what she experienced which was a lot of obsessively going over and ruminating; should she stay in the marriage, should she leave the marriage. And I said, would you like to hear what I experienced and so then I shared her what my internal visualization was. And like a ripe peach, her chest just opened up, she burst out crying, and for about 45 minutes, uncontrollably she was just sobbing. And she was in that kind of inaudible state where, as a therapist you really tell you know if something very deep and profound is going on but I can't quite tell quite what they are saying because it's so regressed. And

then when that e quieted and calmed down, I asked her, what were you experiencing that seemed so profound and she said, what you saw I have never spoken about in my entire life. When I was 15, my girlfriend and I, we went out in this boat and out of nowhere this huge storm came up in about an hour later, and the boat capsized and my girlfriend drowned. And I was able to swim back uh, to shore and when the lifeguards came and the police came, they discovered her body. And I was taken to the police station and my parents picked me up and then when I was taken home, my father said, you will never discuss this with anyone ever, ever again. And so when she to school, the teachers had been instructed also to have all of her friends and classmates, no one ever discussed this. For her entire life, she had forgotten about it, she'd repressed it, as a repressed memory and it came up in the session. So this is an example of, if a therapist will allow themselves to mindfully metaphorically mind down into their own unconscious experience and to listen to their own intuitive mind, it can be extremely helpful and useful in facilitating someone else's process.

Dr. Dave: What, what a marvelous story. I really felt very moved by it as you were telling it. Are there cases or situations where you feel mindfulness meditation would be contraindicated?

Alexander: Yes. And I'm really glad that you brought that up uh, for a variety of reasons. Back in the uh, late seventies, I was practicing at the Center for Health and Healing which was at the Cedar Sinai Medical Office tower it was a center, a holistic center that I founded, and I was studying as a student, uh, mindfulness meditation with uh, the renowned Buddhist American teacher, Jack Kornfield. And from time to time, he would refer me uh, from retreats up in Joshua Tree, different students who were members of the Zen Center or various Buddhist centers in Los Angeles. And this young woman came to me and she was crying and she was in tremendous despair and she said, the more that I practice, and the more sesshins that I do; a sesshin is a long-term Zen retreat, it's kind of like a uh, the Army rangers, the Zen Army ranges version of boot camp. It's quite an ordeal to

sit through a sesshin and she said, everyone seems to be progressing, but I seem to be getting more depressed, more frustrated, more enraged, and feel really badly about myself as a result of practicing meditation. So I suggested to her, and this was uh, long before the development of the design of medications like Prozac. I said to her, well, why don't you try something that has to do with walking meditation? Or riding your bike meditation? Or playing tennis meditation? Something that actively gets you out of your head and then and into your body and creates more endorphins, creates a greater sense of vitality. And then, again, just trusting my intuition, I said to her, you know, if the cosmos created chamomile tea, maybe someday it's going to create a medication or a series of medications that are going to be ones that make people feel good rather than the old-school psychiatric medications that, like the uh, amo uh, inhibitors and the old-school anti-depressants. I just had a feeling that, geez, you know, maybe something's going to come along in a few years, or 10 years, and it might completely alter and change how you go about meditation. And lo and behold, over the course of years, she'd come in and we'd do therapy, uh, I would discourage her from practicing Zen as it is traditionally practiced, had to do what I would call more meditation in action. And around 1989 when 1999, Prozac came on the market and my colleague, the esteemed colleague Mark Epstein, uh, he's a practicing Buddhist psychiatrist wrote "Thoughts Without a Thinker" and "Going to Pieces Without Falling Apart". You had an article in Tricycle Magazine that's called, "Listening uh, Awakening to Prozac", I'm sorry, "Awakening to Prozac". And I gave her the article and gave her a referral and she went on Prozac and then she began to go back and to start attending sesshins, and long-term meditation retreats. And in the last 20 years since then she comes occasionally to see me and she tells me, now she can actually meditate. Now she can feel what other people are feeling because her brain chemistry is balanced. So this is a long a way around the bend of saying, for some people, internal meditation is contraindicated. The whole idea of closing your eyes; let's say for example, you don't have stabilized brain chemistry or you've come from a family where you've experienced a great deal of abuse whether it was

physical, sexual, mental, emotional, or spiritual. And you have post-traumatic stress disorder. One thing that we know from dissociative disorders, is that when you close your eyes, instead of seeing the white light, you often times go into bad memories and or you go into what are called trauma pockets and trauma pockets are, if you would think these, you're walking down the road and all of a sudden you fall in a hole, metaphorically, that's a trauma pocket. And people who have post-traumatic stress disorder, pretty much throughout the day, are going in and out of their own trauma pockets. So I always suggest, don't practice internalized meditation, practice a form of mediation were you open your eyes like Zen or where you **Zho-Chen** which is an advanced form of Tibetan Buddhism where you open your eyes and you look out at the blueness of the sky, the vastness of what we call big sky mind. Or you go and you sit in the forest and you look at the trees. So that meditations that take you out of the self rather than inside of the self. For example, people with depressive disorders, who fit in the category of minor depressive disorders, gain great benefits with practicing mindfulness meditation but people who are undergoing a major depressive disorder and have any kind of uh, suicidal ideation or harmful thoughts of hurting themselves, it's contraindicated. I think it's better to get them out and active and doing meditation in action rather than having them sit and go inward.

Dr. Dave: Well, that certainly makes a lot of sense to me and I'm glad I asked you about that. Well, we're uh, been going on for awhile here so I think we probably should begin to wind down. I'm wondering if there is anything else that you'd like to say before we close.

Alexander: Well, I would just like to suggest to all of the listeners to experiment with what method of meditation works for them whether it's an inward one or an outward one or a combination of the two, there certainly there doesn't have to be any kind of rigidity. And um, to, if they get a chance to pick up the book, "Wise Mind, Open Mind, Finding Purpose and Meaning in Times of Crisis, Loss and Change", by Ronald Alexander, Ph.D.

And if you'd like further information, you can always go on my website which is, openmindtraininginstitute.com or ronaldalexander.com. And this has been a terrific day that I'm very uh, pleased and blessed that you had me on the show again.

Dr. Dave: Well, my good friend, Ron Alexander. Thanks so much for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

Alexander: You're very welcome.