

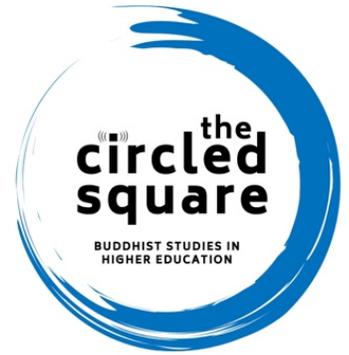
Episode 7: Ellen Katz Embodied Experience Living from the Heart

File Length: 00:48:20

Speakers

Sarah Richardson

Ellen Katz



FULL TRANSCRIPT (with timecode)

00:00:00:05 - 00:00:13:04

Ellen: Mindfulness is something like present moment awareness that welcomes all experience without preconception or judgment, accepts what is with curiosity and compassion.

00:00:19:17 - 00:00:53:03

Sarah: Hello and welcome to this episode of The Circled Square, the podcast where we talk about teaching Buddhist Studies in Higher Education. On this episode we spoke with Dr. Ellen Katz, a professor in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto. This episode is called Embodied Experience: Living from the Heart, and we called it this because Dr. Katz really integrates both her personal practice and her experience in social work to bring her students out of their seats. She teaches both mindfulness practices and Buddhist techniques in her classes in a very direct and experiential way.

00:00:54:07 - 00:01:09:24

Sarah: She takes big risks, embraces vulnerability as a teacher, and as you develop your own teaching practice, I hope you hear some inspiration in this, in how Dr. Katz really teaches her students to develop compassion for themselves through these practices. Enjoy our episode!

00:01:12:06 - 00:01:14:22

Sarah: Hello Ellen and welcome to The Circled Square!

00:01:14:25 - 00:01:17:07

Ellen: Hello, Sarah, I'm delighted to be here.

00:01:17:11 - 00:01:32:09

Sarah: Thanks so much for joining us today. So I wanted to begin with a pretty straightforward question just to ask you to tell us your story. How did you get here to be teaching at the University of Toronto and in the programs you teach?

00:01:33:21 - 00:02:16:16

Ellen: It's a long story that that I will try to make short. I've been a social worker in the community for many, many years, over 25 years, and went back to pursue a PHD because our agency wanted a closer connection with the university, and we needed a PHD social worker. I was able to fulfill that commitment, and at one point it made sense for me to relocate to the

university rather than to stay in the agency. So I've been in the university about five and a half or so years and still have a tie to the agency, in fact, I teach a course there.

00:02:16:18 - 00:02:19:26

Sarah: Great. Right. What agency is this by the way?

00:02:19:28 - 00:02:26:17

Ellen: This is the former Hincks-Dellcrest Centre that is now called the Sick Kids Centre for Community Mental Health.

00:02:26:20 - 00:02:31:22

Sarah: Oh, OK wonderful. Can you tell us a bit about what you teach. What do you teach?

00:02:31:28 - 00:03:28:08

Ellen: Sure. I teach direct practice courses in social work. I teach these courses to first year MSW students, and they are about learning how to do the practice of social work. In the second year, I teach a mindfulness course. It's an elective for students who are interested in studying how to take mindfulness into direct practice. And I teach this undergraduate course that you mentioned at New College for senior students third or fourth year who are interested in learning about mental health interventions that are informed by mindfulness. I also teach a family therapy course that I teach at the agency where I used to work. We take our social work students there to follow a family live and learn about family therapy.

00:03:28:10 - 00:03:30:15

Sarah: Wow. How long do they follow a family for?

00:03:30:17 - 00:03:42:08

Ellen: We follow the family for this semester. It's about a 10 session intervention with the family. The students watch the live work that I do with the family, we discuss it.

00:03:42:16 - 00:03:56:05

Sarah: So to launch in a bit further, I mean Mindfulness is a topic that we hear about a lot now but we don't often get definitions for. But how do you define mindfulness for your students or for the purpose of your teaching?

00:03:56:21 - 00:04:39:18

Ellen: I start out by saying there is no unified definition of mindfulness, and because I come to teach mindfulness from a Buddhist perspective I try to integrate Eastern and Western definitions of mindfulness. So I tell them that mindfulness is something like present moment awareness that welcomes all experience without preconception or judgment accepts what is with curiosity and compassion, and I take that from Diane Gehart's textbook on mindfulness and acceptance in couple and family therapy, and then I say, "but that's not enough".

00:04:40:01 - 00:05:17:15

Ellen: Because from a Buddhist perspective we bring in the concepts of "sati" and "smrti" which have to do with memory, and the the fact that the mind is a very conditioned phenomena. And so as we are engaged in present moment awareness we're doing so through the filter of the past, and we have to keep that in mind in terms of looking at acceptance without judgment with compassion. And we spend the rest of the semester taking that apart and learning a bit about how to do that.

00:05:17:18 - 00:05:21:24

Sarah: Is this very new for many of your students? Is this a pretty new perspective?

00:05:22:04 - 00:05:46:00

Ellen: This perspective, yes, because many of our students especially those who take this course are interested in mindfulness, have some exposure to it, although I do get the odd student with no exposure who has just a curiosity. And so this way of integrating the Buddhist concepts is very different for them.

00:05:46:11 - 00:05:57:15

Sarah: So tell us a bit more about your students. Who are you teaching in these classes, who's coming to you mostly, what are they what are they like, what's the experience that you see has shaped them to get into these classes that you're teaching?

00:05:57:27 - 00:06:38:22

Ellen: Well it's interesting because I've been able to have an impact on the curriculum as a whole in social work and I'm very excited about that very happy about it. We now introduce mindfulness at a pre-first year conference that we teach so I give a short introduction and we introduce it to all the incoming first year students who are in our two-year program. When we have a weekly very short mindfulness segment in a course that they all have to take so they know a little bit about mindfulness.

00:06:38:24 - 00:07:19:00

Ellen: We also do a half day workshop on mindfulness and self-compassion. All of this because we have come to know that if we're going to help students be engaged in direct practice they need to learn how to attend, how to be present, how to use themselves, and mindfulness in the western way of looking at it is a wonderful anchor for that. Therefore the students know the basics in that sense. They are more curious when they come to take the mindfulness course. They want more. More knowledge about the theory and how to use it with clients.

00:07:19:22 - 00:07:27:06

Sarah: And is that what direct practise means - is using with clients? Like working directly with people rather than, I don't know, what's the alternative to direct practice?

00:07:27:11 - 00:07:48:13

Ellen: Indirect practice or community work, so indirect practice being perhaps policy work, macro structural work, community practice being the roots of social work - creating change in the community, neighbourhood houses, after school activities.

00:07:48:15 - 00:07:53:18

Sarah: OK OK interesting. It's so different than anything I've ever studied so it sounds really cool.

00:07:53:23 - 00:07:54:12

Ellen: It is.

00:07:54:19 - 00:08:02:15

Sarah: So it sounds like in your teaching of mindfulness with students, especially in social work you're seeing it as a tool that they can then apply and use. Right?

00:08:02:19 - 00:08:34:02

Ellen: Partly, although I don't like the word tool set, and I've had, especially in my time in the community as a social worker. People come to me and say "Can you teach me the technique of mindfulness so I can use it with clients?". And I say "I will teach you the techniques of mindfulness, if you will commit to regular practice of mindfulness, because mindfulness really isn't a technique. It's a process, and you are the tool".

00:08:34:07 - 00:09:17:19

Ellen: The other thing I find with students who come to take these courses whether the New College or the graduate, is that a lot of them are looking for their own way of being present in their own life. And my guess is that most of what they take away is that. From anecdotal feedback it is so touching to hear them say as the semester goes on that "I don't get as emotional, as reactive as I used to be, that I can be much more present and aware in all situations in my life". And you know what, that really is my objective.

00:09:17:29 - 00:09:31:18

Sarah: That's a good objective. So we've heard about how you became a teacher of social work and psychology. How did you, what's your encounter with Buddhism? Where does that start in the journey for you, that brings you to this moment?

00:09:32:05 - 00:10:23:15

Ellen: That's always an interesting story because in the world in which I live as a social worker most people come through mindfulness based stress reduction or mindfulness based cognitive therapy, but I come through Buddhism. I think I've always been a person interested in larger pursuits and meaning - what is the meaning of being a human being? So I started reading about Buddhism. I started actually from a Jewish perspective, reading a book called "The Jew in the Lotus", about a group of rabbis who were invited to speak with the Dalai Lama, who wanted to learn to live in exile. And that really caught me. I knew some of those rabbis, and as I read the book I thought there's so much that's similar between Judaism and Buddhism.

00:10:23:17 - 00:11:07:08

Ellen: I started to read about Buddhism then I thought, this really isn't a reading thing. You have to practice this. Where can I find a place in Toronto that I could try this out? So I looked up and I found the Toronto Zen Center. I went to an introductory workshop there, sat next to the only other mental health professional in the room. We started a wonderful conversation which led to many years of working together on how to use this stuff with clients. And And I spent 10 years studying at the Toronto Zen Center. I'm not a student there anymore, I've searched and found a home in Tibetan practice.

00:11:07:10 - 00:11:15:05

Sarah: Interesting. It sounds like the initial interest then was kind of Tibetan practice, then time with Zen practice and then back to Tibetan practice.

00:11:15:07 - 00:11:21:03

Ellen: No it started with Zen, only because that's where I found a place to try it out.

00:11:21:05 - 00:11:37:22

Sarah: Sure, sure. And what what did you feel was the big difference for you? I'm just curious. I mean it's not totally connected to teaching but for what was the big difference for you in practice between Japanese Zen and Tibetan Buddhism when you went from one to the other? What changed?

00:11:39:02 - 00:12:33:18

Ellen: My childhood friend who I've known since we were preschoolers is a long time Tibetan practitioner. When I started practicing Zen she looked at me and said with great expression "but you're practicing Buddhism without the instructions! Zen doesn't have the instructions," which I didn't understand for many years. But I then came to understand that, facing the wall, feeling up against the wall, and even with a wonderful teacher felt that I needed more instruction. So coming to Tibetan practice I have found the instructions, a much more detailed description of how to practice, what to practice, and steps to a very deep level of practice.

00:12:33:25 - 00:12:44:20

Sarah: So in sharing that with your students how do you choose to share it? What kind of like, I don't know, access can you open for them in the context of your courses?

00:12:44:29 - 00:14:01:09

Ellen: It's a very good question and a very complex question. And the more I move more deeply into Tibetan practice the harder it is for me to answer that question. I also realized that students are coming from a Western perspective and they really are coming for mindfulness, and I see more and more the difference between mindfulness and Buddhist practice. I do introduce some Tibetan practices in the lineage in which I practice. I specifically describe them as Buddhist practices that are different from mindfulness practices. I give lots of opportunities for exit - "Don't do this practice if it feels awkward, don't do this practice if you are being very

triggered in a way that is alarming for you. I am very happy and would like to speak with you. If those things happen, feel free to leave the room at any time". And I do some discussion of trauma and how either mindfulness or meditation can bring up traumatic responses which is why we need to be very respectful of what the body is telling us.

00:14:01:11 - 00:14:05:22

Sarah: Of course. And when you say the lineage I come from, is that Dzogcehn? Or what kind of practice lineage?

00:14:06:05 - 00:14:32:05

Ellen: It's Reggie Ray's Dharma Ocean community that originally was founded by Chögyam Trungpa that originally was Shambala but he has added his own, I don't want to say spin, but he has taken it in a different direction that is so helpful for me in both my own practice and in my teaching.

00:14:32:09 - 00:14:45:09

Sarah: So to get back to what you were saying about trauma and the way that mindfulness or and meditation and practice can bring up trauma. Yeah. There's a there's a kind of danger there too, right, for students. How do you manage that?

00:14:45:23 - 00:16:10:12

Ellen: I'm very thankful to be a social worker. I have also taken training in trauma informed therapy, trauma based therapy, and I have studied neuroscience. I am so lucky to be able to integrate all of this. I, in both courses, the mindfulness graduate course, and the undergrad New College course, I teach a segment on neuroscience and the structure of the mind that I am able to wonderfully integrate with the Buddhist concepts around the structure of the mind. I find this so exciting. So we talk about from a Western perspective, trauma, and a phenomenon called "the window of tolerance", where from a mindfulness perspective, the window of tolerance is being able to mindfully report our experience whether that is joyful or distressing or traumatic. And I teach about defenses and how we leave the window of tolerance we may become fearful, we may become closed down. We spend quite a long time talking about neuroscience and its integration with the Buddhist concept of the mind. So I tell them when the responses they're experiencing are outside the window of tolerance, that's a signal to stop.

00:16:10:14 - 00:16:20:02

Sarah: When you say the "Buddhist concept of the mind", how do you explain that to them? Because there are also sort of different approaches.

00:16:20:04 - 00:16:27:21

Ellen: Yes. And I will not claim to be an expert, I will claim that I am still learning and studying myself. We talk about the five skandhas.

00:16:29:11 - 00:16:37:09

Sarah: Great, and the five skandhas are? For for my, for my sweet Aunt who's probably listening. What are the five skandhas for you?

00:16:37:11 - 00:17:14:27

Ellen: I hope I can get them right. Contact, visceral feeling, perception, volition, and a very rudimentary form of consciousness. And we talk about how there is, from a Western perspective, the opportunity to bring in mindfulness around the area of perception between perception and volition. It is a very simplified look at it, and my plan for the fall is to enhance this even more, to be able to to speak to it more and in greater depth.

00:17:15:10 - 00:17:22:07

Sarah: I like teaching the skandhas too. I do it in art history and religion classes but I also I do it... Do you know what I use for teaching the skandhas?

00:17:22:09 - 00:17:23:05

Ellen: What do you use?

00:17:23:15 - 00:17:47:22

Sarah: Mr. Potato Head. So I have a toy that I bring to class and I pull his bits off, and say like this is the aggregate of, you know, form. This is the aggregate of... Now of course they always struggle though, and I do too, actually understanding how one of them can be consciousness or something like it, right. But still, we play with Mr. Potato Head in that class.

00:17:47:24 - 00:17:51:02

Ellen: Right, So they're not sure how Mr. Potato Head can embody consciousness?

00:17:51:18 - 00:18:14:06

Sarah: They're left with the potato at the end too. This is a problem. The potato itself is a problem. Then we have to you know just, you know, hold it on its side and say no it's just a piece of plastic, and, yeah. So in your teaching of neuroscience... So what does neuroscience add to? As someone who really doesn't, who likes the sound of that word and thinks it sounds very smart but I don't know what it means.

00:18:14:08 - 00:19:34:13

Ellen: Again I won't claim to be an expert. I've taken a neuroscience course as part of my doctoral work which required a lot of long hours of learning. However, I've learned a lot about emotions and feelings and what I've learned is that emotions play out in the theater of the body, that they are physiological responses to a very rudimentary contact experience, that we have a visceral response to - you can see I'm trying to integrate here the skandhas - and we have a very quick perception without, it's not in the mind it's all in the body about whether we're safe or whether we're in danger. And then from that come feelings, and feelings make sense, feelings have some what we call "cortical contents", something coming from intelligence, from the mind, and so feelings make sense of emotions, feelings play out in the

theater of the mind and they aim to process a very quick emotional response. Feelings get us into so much trouble because mostly they're inaccurate.

00:19:35:01 - 00:19:36:26

Sarah: And yet we often act on them don't we?

00:19:36:28 - 00:19:37:21

Ellen: We do.

00:19:37:29 - 00:19:39:15

Sarah: And react, I guess, with them.

00:19:39:17 - 00:19:52:20

Ellen: We do. So actually, my own dissertation was in this area of attention and the process of being able to accurately perceive our attention.

00:19:52:26 - 00:19:55:09

Sarah: And "accurately perceive our attention" means what?

00:19:56:03 - 00:20:25:03

Ellen: From a mindfulness perspective, because that's who I interviewed I interviewed social workers and mental health professionals who used mindfulness in their work. Accurate perception comes with the ability to be very present to our experience and as soon as it's unfolding to know whether we are having a visceral emotional reaction, and how to manage that reaction.

00:20:25:16 - 00:20:44:26

Ellen: When we manage it, we can accurately say "this shape I'm in contact with... Is it a snake, or is it a stick? Am I in danger of being bitten by a snake, or is this a stick that I can pick up and throw out of the way?"

00:20:45:04 - 00:20:48:09

Sarah: Do we have the power to change snakes into sticks?

00:20:48:11 - 00:20:49:18

Ellen: We do.

00:20:49:20 - 00:20:51:27

Sarah: Do we? I need that lesson.

00:20:52:06 - 00:20:57:04

Ellen: Metaphorically, not reality. But we often think we see a snake.

00:20:57:06 - 00:21:02:12

Ellen: Right. So that's part of the idea, is halting yourself from reacting to the snake.

00:21:02:14 - 00:21:25:15

Ellen: That's right. I like to look at a continuum between reaction and response, that when we can be mindfully present we can respond rather than react, or we know we're having a reaction. We can temper, through working to bring ourselves back into the window of tolerance, our response, and shift it to responding.

00:21:25:17 - 00:21:36:18

Sarah: Tell us a bit more about how you do this. How do you structure your undergraduate class meetings, like what would an observer who'd never been to your class, what might they describe or see?

00:21:37:00 - 00:22:38:04

Ellen: This is fun for me. These two classes in that way are my favorite classes. They're three hour classes, I divide them up into thirds. The first third is practice. We do a mindfulness practice, we don't practice for an hour, we practice for maybe half an hour. Every week is a different practice, and I'm teaching them how to learn to accurately reflect on their experience, so they complete a structured reflection, four questions based in the four foundations of mindfulness. What was their experience in the body? What was their visceral feeling experience? What was the state of their mind, and what thoughts were happening? And we discuss this in great detail. Then they talk together in dyads about the experience, sharing what they want and not sharing what they don't want. Then we talk as a large group. All of that's about an hour. Then we have a theoretical discussion, where I present some theory, we talk about it together.

00:22:38:06 - 00:23:22:25

Ellen: All of that takes another hour, and the third hour are small group practices where they learn how to read each other. They sit opposite each other, starting with how do you breathe with another person. What does it feel like to sit and breathe with another person? What's it like to watch that person, to be watched? And we do some talking exercises as well. This comes out of what Gregory Kramer wrote about called "relational mindfulness" so it's about learning how to be really present to another person, whether you use this as a direct practice tool in the field of social work or whether you just learn how to do this for yourself.

00:23:22:27 - 00:23:27:21

Sarah: It sounds like hard work though too. You must meet resistance in students?

00:23:28:00 - 00:23:28:15

Ellen: Fear.

00:23:28:21 - 00:23:34:24

Sarah: Fear. Yeah fear. That would take a lot of openness, or risk.

00:23:34:26 - 00:24:09:03

Ellen: Yes. And again, it's "stop when it's not comfortable. There is no judgment in this class. Leave the room whenever you feel you need to. I am always ready to talk in break, after class, before class, during office hours." I'm not there to do therapy, but I am there to talk about unfolding of emotions, how to recognize emotions, how to work with feelings that arise. Because from a Buddhist perspective that's a lot about, for me, what Tibetan practice is about. One of the reasons I moved to Tibetan practice.

00:24:10:00 - 00:24:12:04

Sarah: The observation of emotions or the?...

00:24:12:08 - 00:24:25:16

Ellen: The greater interest in working with them. I can only speak to my experience, but from a Zen perspective I didn't get that training, but I get it so much from the Tibetan practice I do.

00:24:27:00 - 00:24:45:03

Sarah: We've seen, we've had a hard year here at U of T where we've seen a real rise in student anxiety and depression, and, do you find that your students know of this, reflect about this, want to talk about this? Are they ready to talk?

00:24:45:12 - 00:25:22:00

Ellen: Yes they're hungry to talk. They're hungry to talk about suffering - their own, people they know, their families. I'm amazed at what unfolds in their life. And they're hungry to learn about how to manage this for themselves, because it's overwhelming. I again feel so fortunate to be a social worker in this area and I feel so fortunate to also be a Buddhist practitioner because suffering is the root of Buddhist practice and I'm so lucky to be able to integrate both.

00:25:22:02 - 00:25:41:27

Sarah: It's one of the things I feel least equipped for actually, because, I mean I teach about Buddhism, but not with practice right. It's not sort of how we do it in Buddhist Studies. So sometimes we speak about suffering but we don't engage their experiences of it as much as I think they probably would like to. But I don't feel equipped to either. So.

00:25:42:05 - 00:26:02:19

Ellen: Well the irony for me is that I went into social work to work with human suffering and I've acquired the tools from Buddhism to know more about it, and a different set of practices to work with it. It is so rich for me, the combination of social work and Buddhist practice and Buddhist theory.

00:26:04:00 - 00:26:22:11

Sarah: And of course it makes sense. I mean social work would be one of those domains where the where the work is to address the ongoing, continuing, real, lived experiences that are largely suffering of marginalized people, or you know, disempowered groups especially.

00:26:22:13 - 00:26:28:19

Ellen: Right. From a Buddhist perspective, it's the practice of bodhicitta.

00:26:28:21 - 00:26:33:29

Sarah: What's that? Can you explain bodhicitta for my sweet Aunt who's really listening.

00:26:34:01 - 00:27:12:09

Ellen: Sure. It's the helping to work with suffering, helping to cultivate compassion, helping people to awaken their hearts, and especially in this culture. Many of us live with very closed hearts because suffering is overwhelming, and in order to cope we close our hearts. And again the paradox is that we're best equipped to experience our own and to heal others sufferings by opening our hearts. So bodhicitta practices are a set of practices that open the heart, awaken the heart.

00:27:12:17 - 00:27:14:23

Sarah: Bodhicitta, like seed of enlightenment?

00:27:14:25 - 00:27:15:10

Ellen: That's right. Awakened heart.

00:27:16:07 - 00:27:24:21

Sarah: I like the physical description of it that I get sometimes through art reading, there's like a kernel or sesame seed, it's inside you.

00:27:24:28 - 00:27:29:27

Ellen: We do some heart focused practices in the course. Very powerful.

00:27:29:29 - 00:28:27:21

Sarah: So I'm gonna switch gears a little bit. How do you deal with the kind of colonial relationship and history that the Academy has to Buddhism as a construct? What I mean by that, is, the rise of an academic discipline like Buddhist studies, which I know is not exactly what you're doing, but what what we're doing over here sometimes, arose in a context where Buddhism was this object that was the opposition to, you know, its imagined other kind or Christianity or Judaism or that kind of those kind of other religions, and and the discourse around it then was informed by these divisions right, that are that are of course also hierarchical power structures laden with serious baggage. All the serious baggage that we're still trying to disentangle in our world, right. How does that inflect your understanding of the topic when you're dealing with Buddhism with students?

00:28:28:03 - 00:29:42:18

Ellen: In terms of colonialism, we teach at the Faculty of Social Work we definitely look at colonialism and neo liberalism, not within a Buddhist context, however the Buddhist literature is is very interesting, because we talk a lot in social work about the community, about working together, about countering oppression, dismantling oppression, we talk about what we call

"anti-oppressive practice". Now from a Buddhist perspective there is a growing literature, some of it in social work, that is saying that social work is not radical enough, that social work is still focused on identity, and still focused in that way on duality and division, and that Buddhism actually can take social work farther. That Buddhism can take social work past duality at looking at what brings us together, how are we all humans and what do we share as human beings. We have to be very careful about, I'm kind of quoting indirectly the literature, at reinforcing identity.

00:29:43:17 - 00:29:48:13

Sarah: And by identity do you mean individualistic identity?

00:29:48:15 - 00:30:17:11

Ellen: Individualistic identity. We talk a lot about that in social work and in other mental health professions. So it's a very paradoxical discussion. It catches students by surprise because they have spent a year and a half in social work learning about identity and neo liberalism and colonialism. But from a different perspective. And I'm saying you need to go farther, you're not far enough yet.

00:30:17:13 - 00:30:56:26

Sarah: I mean I can see what you mean by the potential of Buddhism to try to disentangle kind of the roots of oppression, and yet, the other thing that I have to, you know, I consider and teach when I teach about Buddhist studies is that, I mean, what we see in practice in the world so often fails to do so right, humans have managed to mess it up not because there's something, some inherent flaw in the religion, except that maybe there also is or, But I know what we're seeing is also that you know some of the most brilliant masters were also abusers of power systems and people

00:30:57:08 - 00:31:10:25

Ellen: I come back to the mind, that kind of hard wiring of the mind and how do we constantly use our practice to try to temper the mind.

00:31:10:27 - 00:31:28:28

Sarah: I wanted to get talking a little bit more about somatic experience and trauma because I know that's also a big part of your work and your teaching. So can you tell us a bit about what that means even what what is what is the somatic base of your approach?

00:31:29:12 - 00:32:32:21

Ellen: When I started out in social work fairly early on one of the books I read was called the talking cure and mental health work has been a lot about talking. However when we bring neuroscience back into the discussion, and Buddhism, we know that all experience arises in the body, and we know that there are somatic markers of all of our experiences that remain in the body, especially when those are traumatic experiences. In this case defining trauma as an event that the mind could not make sense of and that is stored in the body, we now know that looking at mental health work as a talking cure is only partly the work, that we need to start

working through the body helping people who have come to us to understand the body to experience the body, touching into the body.

00:32:32:23 - 00:33:10:02

Ellen: I'm not necessarily talking about manually working with the body that tends to be a territory that we don't go to in social work in mental health disciplines. There are other disciplines, body workers, who do that kind of work, but we talk about becoming more aware of the body, we talk about educating clients to know what's going on in their body to help them to process, label and manage their experiences, starting with the body and then bringing in the mind.

00:33:10:04 - 00:33:11:26

Sarah: So like talking would not be enough?

00:33:11:28 - 00:33:33:15

Ellen: No, well it would be talking, for instance, as we're sitting here, talking about what are we experiencing in our bodies. What kind of bubbling or pressing or rising or falling sensations are we feeling as we have this conversation.

00:33:33:19 - 00:33:40:21

Sarah: Trauma, And when you say trauma is encoded or trauma's in the something we store in the body, do you mean that like physically? Like is it somewhere?

00:33:40:23 - 00:34:17:10

Ellen: I mean that I mean that physically, yeah, it's stored in our right brain in terms of a neural response the right brain is the part of the brain that just stores a lived experience, and we will feel it in the body. We may feel it in certain tensing up of the body, in the way we hold our body, do we collapse our chests, do we push our chest forward without even being aware that this is how we hold the body, and the way we hold the body is partly the result of all of our past experience.

00:34:17:23 - 00:35:01:25

Sarah: So you're unique in that you teach your students both about their emotions, and about their bodies. This this is often, these are domains that are obvious of course when we meet people but that are so often ignored from an academic focus right. So often we we ask our students to relegate or describe their learning experiences as not particularly emotional and not particularly bodily. So what kind of, is this, I mean this is clearly something you're choosing to do consciously, but you must have also encountered resistance to this form of emphasis?

00:35:02:16 - 00:35:36:08

Ellen: But it's so easy to bring out the neuroscience literature. Forget about the Buddhist literature which is also there, but the neuroscience literature and the mental health world is in love with neuroscience. So it's so easy to say these studies, these articles justify what I'm doing,

and not only do they justify, they they urgently propel us to rework education into working through the body.

00:35:36:25 - 00:35:53:25

Sarah: And can you give us some anecdotes then, I mean how do students react to this, because it's got to be a very different kind of class than they're used to, and it's asking them to stretch different muscles, So what have you seen in them? What has happened for some of them?

00:35:53:27 - 00:36:46:28

Ellen: I lay a foundation in the first class whether it's the undergraduate or graduate class. I talk that this is going to be different, that this is experiential learning, it's transformative learning. We're talking about this kind of learning in higher education. There is literature that supports that as well. But I present that to students, I provide them with readings. One of our colleagues Renata Wong at York University has written a wonderful article called "Knowing Through Discomfort" that I assign as a reading. I talk about, you know, this is not the course for everyone, feel free to withdraw. No judgment. And if you stay we will be engaged in experiential learning both in mindfulness practice and in dyadic or triadic work.

00:36:47:17 - 00:37:08:18

Ellen: We talk about the discomfort of that and some people do choose to leave. Some people stay with some misgivings, and as the semester goes on I find that they are so engaged and again so hungry for this knowledge theory and practice.

00:37:08:20 - 00:37:22:07

Sarah: Do you then, though, so you have some, you do this also through some written reflection work, group work. Assessments, tests, are those part of, and how do they look when the work and the teaching looks so different?

00:37:22:09 - 00:38:15:06

Ellen: Yes. I'm constantly working on that. In social work I've been lucky enough to be part of the development of an objective standard clinical examination where we train an actor to play the role of a client and we have students who interview the client. So in the social work class that is the final evaluation. Students are demonstrating three advanced practice competencies that have to do with using mindfulness. Working with the body, working with difficult emotions, and providing psycho education to clients. In the New College course for the first time I changed the evaluation and I had them, throughout the semester we watched different videos for the final assignment.

00:38:15:12 - 00:38:42:20

Ellen: They watched a video that I posted online and they had to describe, using all of the Buddhist concepts that we discussed, what the practitioner was doing and the concept of the mind as the client demonstrated it, how did the skandhas unfold for this client, how did the social worker cope with that, manage that, assist the client in processing their experience?

00:38:42:23 - 00:38:46:13

Sarah: And what kind of videos are these, you mean they're videos of a social worker interacting with a client? A challenging experience or something like that.

00:38:50:00 - 00:39:10:07

Ellen: Yes, I'm going to have one made for the next year's course, this year I used online available videos. The situation was a client who had been suicidal and the clinician was working with this client's suicidal thoughts and feelings.

00:39:11:15 - 00:39:17:18

Sarah: And then the one that you want to produce, what's the missing video for you that you're going to commission?

00:39:17:20 - 00:39:37:29

Ellen: I want to produce a video that is more explicitly grounded in body work in the sense of the clinician working with unfolding emotions and feelings in the client's body, helping the client to be aware of them, to process them, express them, manage them, talking about the window of tolerance.

00:39:39:04 - 00:39:51:01

Sarah: So Ellen, I was wondering if you could give me one or two concrete examples of the kinds of Buddhist practices that you use with students and what you do.

00:39:51:04 - 00:40:24:02

Ellen: I'm happy to do that. I teach a practice that's informed by my work with Dharma Ocean. Not only those practices, but in terms of our discussion and the integration of Buddhism, mindfulness, social work, it's probably useful to talk a little bit about a practice called the "ten points practice" and that's a practice I learned through Reggie Ray and his work, and that he supports me in teaching.

00:40:24:06 - 00:41:34:15

Ellen: So this is a practice that deliberately works through the body to release tension. It's done in a lying down position initially, and there are 10 points that touch the ground when we lie with our feet flat on the floor. The 10 points are the two feet, the two buttocks, the two elbows, the two shoulder blades, the mid back, and the back of the head. And this is unlike a body scan in the sense that it's not just about awareness, it's about releasing tension, actively releasing tension precisely because there is so much that is stored in the body, so many memories and experiences that are stored in the body and in order to be fully present to our experience we need to metabolize, digest those experiences by releasing them, and feeling them as we do that. So, we learn how to release tension through the body right into the ground, knowing that the ground holds us, supports us, and cradles us.

00:41:34:17 - 00:42:02:11

Ellen: In working with our clients, many clients have not had that experience of being held, supported, and cradled. I'm not necessarily suggesting that social workers do this with clients, but I'm suggesting that those of us who do the work learn how to feel supported and cradled by the ground, so that we can take that awareness into our work because we are the tool.

00:42:03:00 - 00:42:11:11

Sarah: So in the ten points practice you lie on your back on the ground and you start to, is the goal to recognize that experience?

00:42:11:13 - 00:42:42:08

Ellen: We start with a big toe and we feel the tension in the big toe and we slowly release that tension as much as we can into the ground. We work through the rest of the toes. We work through the legs from the knee down through the ankle, the knee down through the buttocks et cetera. Being aware of the physical tension and slowly releasing as much of it as we can. And we work up to the head.

00:42:43:05 - 00:42:46:04

Sarah: I'll try to do that when I go to sleep. I'll try to do something like that.

00:42:46:06 - 00:42:48:05

Ellen: It can be very useful.

00:42:48:19 - 00:42:49:07

Sarah: Yeah, Interesting

00:42:51:00 - 00:42:56:01

Sarah: And do you mean that, so when you do this with students in class do you actually, they lie on the ground?

00:42:56:03 - 00:43:13:03

Ellen: They all lie on the ground. That's a different way of teaching isn't it? And then they write about it, and then they talk to each other about it, and then we talk as a group in a 'share what you want to share, don't share what you don't want to share' way.

00:43:15:22 - 00:43:18:11

Sarah: So do you have students who just won't lie on the ground?

00:43:18:13 - 00:43:53:14

Ellen: Well again we start the course by saying this is a different kind of learning. This is the way the semester is going to go. No judgment if you decide to withdraw, and yes, you don't have to participate, but they all do. We do, again, we talk about a reading, we do it through here's a reading about knowing through discomfort, let's talk about this reading. Let's talk about what's going to happen in this course over the semester. When we feel uncomfortable, what are we going to do? How are we going to navigate that? How can this be a safe space?

00:43:55:23 - 00:44:02:09

Sarah: It seems though that that's, you then really built a trusting community amongst them that they can feel safe to share those things.

00:44:02:11 - 00:44:03:16

Ellen: Yes. Yeah.

00:44:03:18 - 00:44:09:28

Sarah: So is there an example of another kind of practice that you teach with students related to using the breath?

00:44:10:13 - 00:45:01:28

Ellen: Yes, In the final hour of the course where we do experiential dyadic or triadic work, they begin by sitting opposite each other and simply breathing together. First they just breathe without watching each other. Then we move into another exercise where they gently lift their eyes to feel themselves breathing and to be aware of their partner breathing. And of course they talk about what an intimate experience that is, and also what a privilege it is to get to know another person in that way without even talking. We then move into talking exercises. But simply to be present with another person in the breath is incredibly intimate.

00:45:02:00 - 00:45:04:10

Sarah: Does breathing together mean breathing in unison?

00:45:04:12 - 00:45:26:06

Ellen: Not necessarily, no. No that's not the instruction. It's simply sitting opposite your partner, being aware of your breath, and then in the next segment, being aware both of your breath and your partner's breath and feeling their presence as you do this and feeling your own presence.

00:45:26:17 - 00:45:29:27

Sarah: Yeah I can imagine it would be very very intimate.

00:45:30:03 - 00:45:30:22

Ellen: it is.

00:45:31:13 - 00:45:56:27

Sarah: My final question, I think, will be about kind of the intimacy and the heartbreak of teaching. How do you, you've obviously often brought students then in a journey with you that is probably pretty transformative for them, and that also must lead to a really different kind of like community and intimacy created, so how do you say goodbye? How do you close?

00:45:58:06 - 00:46:33:15

Ellen: So one could say, one of my very early early learnings in doing psychotherapy was that all of psychotherapy is about learning how to say goodbye. That all of psychotherapy leads to the

end, and I view that as so coherent in terms of Buddhism, impermanence. Very few people have the opportunity to learn a good goodbye. I find both in my clinical work and in my teaching that this is central and that it's so infused with Buddhist concepts of impermanence.

00:46:33:17 - 00:47:34:26

Ellen: So there is an intimacy in this course, and there and the students do talk about the sadness at the end. Some students stay in touch either with me or with each other. I always tell them that I'm happy to hear from them, that I'm happy to listen to their plans for the future, provide any support in terms of guidance, applications for graduate school or jobs. So I'm a resource. I'm happy to be a resource. I find that that's a very big reassurance for students, and sometimes they take me up on it sometimes they don't. But it's knowing, I think, it's knowing that there is a community, whether you tap into it or not, a group of like minded people. So it's acknowledging the sadness, acknowledging the excitement of the future, holding all of that in a larger context of suffering and the human journey.

00:47:35:04 - 00:48:12:23

Sarah: Thanks so much for listening to my conversation with Dr. Ellen Katz. You can find more information about Ellen's publications on her profile page at the Faculty of Social Work. We'll post a link in our show notes. Remember that show notes and transcripts are available on our Website at teachingbuddhism.net. We invite you to subscribe to this podcast through Apple or Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts. A very special thanks to the multitalented Dr. Betsy Moss for recording, editing, and producing this podcast. This podcast was produced by the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Center for Buddhist Studies, at the University of Toronto. Thanks for listening and be well.