MINDFUL
IN MAY

Dr. Elise Bialylew, founder of Mindful in May (mindfulinmay.org) and The Mind Life Project (www.mindlifeproject.com) and author of The Happiness Plan, interviews Frank Ostaseski

Frank Ostaseski

Frank Ostaseski *is the founder of the Metta Institute and cofounder of the Zen Hospice Project and author of the Five Invitations: Discovering What Death Can Teach Us About Living Fully. He is an internationally respected Buddhist teacher who has lectured at Harvard Medical School, the Mayo Clinic, Wisdom.2.0 and teaches at major spiritual centres around the globe. His ground-breaking work has been featured on the Bill Moyers PBS series On Our Own Terms, highlighted on The Oprah Winfrey Show, and honoured by H.H. the Dalai Lama.*

In this interview you will learn:

- What true intimacy is and how this definition relates to meditation
- How we can disengage from our inner-critic in order to grow
- How we can step into our lives more fully when we have the courage to face the subject of death

Elise: Welcome, Frank, to the program. It is such an honour, a privilege and a delight to have you here. I'm so looking forward to this conversation. So, thank you.

Frank Ostaseski: I'm very happy to be with you and to see what kind of mischief we can get up to together.

Elise: I think you saw some of the mischief that I've been plotting for the listeners. I had sent, Frank, literally reams of questions after reading his magnificent book which we will get into. So, and he generously said, maybe we'll need a part II one day, but we'll see how we go. Frank, I wanted you to begin – what struck me really strongly about your story and your work is that you're someone that started off in life with conditions that were quite traumatic, there was a lot of pain, a lot of difficulty in your environment. And yet, you managed to transform your life into this beautiful representation of love, generosity, service. I wondered if you could share a little bit about your background and that trajectory and that transformation with the listeners who may have not come upon your book or your work as yet.

Frank Ostaseski: Thank you. I think we all have our share of suffering and pain. I don't think mine's more or less than anyone else's, but I was introduced to death very early. My mom died when I was 16, my dad just a few years later. So, definitely I became acquainted with it quite early on in my life. But I lost my parents a lot earlier than that. They were both alcoholics and so there was a lot of confusion and chaos around our house, so I had to get comfortable with chaos and confusion. That was difficult but later turned out to be a gift. I was devout Catholic, I loved praying and I loved the church and I loved to be that close to god. And yet also in that time I was subjected to some terrible abuse, sexual abuse by one of the beloved priests in the parish in which I grew up. So, all of those things shaped me. All of us have some things that shaped us. But later what I discovered was those things that were parts of me that I most wanted to hide, they became the thing that enabled me to make an empathetic reach to other people's experience and I found that in a life that had a lot of tragedy in it, service became a vehicle for me to heal and to find the best of my heart.

Elise: Thank you. And we'll go into that where that journey led through the conversation around your book, but I wondered if you could talk a little bit about meditation and how you came to that and how meditation has influenced your life and your work.

Frank Ostaseski: Honestly, I tried everything else to avoid my pain: sex, drugs and rock and roll, you know? And none of it actually worked, for short time, didn't have any lasting value. When I came upon meditation which was in my 20's, when I was travelling in Asia, it just made sense to me and it appealed to my sense of curiosity and my sense of discovery, actually. And it didn't ask me to believe anything. That was really important. It just asked me to trust my own

direct experience. So, meditation practice has been part of my life since my early 20's and I'm so, so grateful for it.

Elise: There are so many definitions of mindfulness around a particular type of meditation. Can you share your perspective on what mindfulness is?

Frank Ostaseski: Well, mindfulness is a term that's been kind of a buzz word now. It's the new black, suitable for all occasions, who think that mindfulness will heal and fix everything, and it doesn't. It's a really useful tool, it's a very good craft. And we don't need necessarily to have a religious foundation to benefit from mindfulness practice. But most of what's been taught out there from mindfulness now has its basis in Buddhism practice. And the ultimate goal if you will, or destination of that practice, which we usually describe as something like enlightenment or awakening or realization. And these are beautiful words but they feel far-off, they feel a little too distant for me. So, people ask me what my practice is. I say intimacy. I'm learning to be intimate with myself and the world around me. And mindfulness practice has that capacity. In Zen practice there is a teaching that says, "Awakening is not far away, it's nearer than near." And so, when I think of intimacy, I think that I'm actually coming close to something that I already have a sense of, that I already know. And the practice is helping to remind me of that, put me in more contact with that. This word intimacy: let's play with it for a second, because normally when we think of intimacy relationshional-ly, with a mother, parent a child for example. And that's a beautiful aspect of intimacy, coming close to someone. But I think there's a challenge to that first of all, because intimacy is what we most want but also sometimes what we most fear. So, it's like that with mindfulness practice too. We most want what it offers us but it scares us, too. There's another level to intimacy that I can think of anyway, which is it's not just coming closer, it's melting the boundaries. You might have with a lover or a mother has when she's breastfeeding her young child. And then there's a deeper level of intimacy where it is not one, not two, where there's this unbelievable sense of non-duality. It's not that there's no distinction, it's that there's no separation at all. So, intimacy is like no distinction between a subject and object, like you can't buy one side of a piece of paper, you have to have both. So, when I think of becoming intimate, it's to become very close and then let the subject and object completely dissolve. That's what happens ultimately in meditation practice.

Elise: How do you see that, like for people that are beginning meditation, who might have a couple of young kids, a busy work life: how does this intimacy actually benefit or enhance or nourish them in life?

Frank Ostaseski: Well, as I say, it's about coming close, about melting any distance really, we could say. It doesn't mean we become homogenized. You still remain discerned, we can discern each of our differences, we can be unique individuals. In the hospice that I started with the very first patient that I took care of, her name was Stella. And we had all these Buddhists taking care of her and she came to me one day and she said, "Some people tell me just to let go, other people tell me to love, which do I do first?". And I said, "Stella, I think you're going to know." I think the experience of becoming intimate is about discovering love. And we forget about that in mindfulness practice. It's really about becoming more loving. I read a beautiful equation once, it said, "Meditation is loving attention, and loving attention is meditation."

Elise: I love that. That sums it up so beautifully. And I think that in some of the teaching that happens particularly in modern secular world it can be the emphasis is on focus and efficiency and productivity, the sense that we're getting our brain and our mind to, put it in some kind of training that helps us stay focused and manage this complex distractible world. But it's so great to hear that loving attention and that emphasis on the attitude that we're actually bringing in this practice.

Frank Ostaseski: Yeah, what's the point of that concentration and that focus if it isn't to develop a real capacity to love? And for me, one of the beautiful things about love is that it's not a gated community, everything is welcomed. Everything is included in a way. And that's the really heart of meditation practice, to include everything that comes and to find oneself in deep relationship to it.

Elise: So, your book is called *Five Invitations: What Death Can Teach Us About Living Fully*. And I just want to preface this by saying that everyone needs to read this book. It is just exquisite! It has so much wisdom in it and it felt like a real privilege to come into the world of someone that's actually spent their life sitting with the dying amongst other things, and having that privileged perspective and then kind of bringing it back to us as the readers. So, it just felt like a real gift. In the book, you talk about how you cofounded this Zen hospice, which is – correct me if I'm wrong – a palliative care centre in San Francisco in the early 80's that was very renowned. And so, in this book, you talk about these five invitations. I'd love you to go over in summary what they are and why you called it invitations.

Frank Ostaseski: Yeah. Good. Well, the invitations first of all are my attempt to share with other people what I learnt sitting bedside with somebody… a couple

of thousand people who died. And I think of them as my teachers. And so, the book was a way of conveying what they taught me, actually. I like the word invitation because it's a request to show up, that's what an invitation is. If I invite you to my house to dinner, your job is to show up. Well, the book is really about showing up with your life, with your whole life, and to recognize that life and death are kind of packaged, in you can't pull them apart. So, I think of them as five bottomless practices. They were our guides in taking care of people who were dying but they also have a relevance for the rest of us in living a life of integrity, purpose and meaning.

Elise: I'd love if you could share what they are. Obviously, the whole book goes through them in a lot of detail but I was thinking that maybe you could share what they are and I would love to dig a bit deeper into *the welcoming*… I love them all but *the welcoming* got me.

Frank Ostaseski: I think it's not just slogans that you put in the refrigerator and try to remember. But they have to be lived into to really be understood. First of them is: don't wait. Second: welcome everything, push away nothing and we'll talk about these. The third is: bring your whole self to the experience. The fourth: find a place of rest in the middle of things. And the fifth, final one is: cultivate don't-know mind. I felt obliged to think put something Zen-like. So, let's explore them.

Elise: I have to say: I laughed when you said the fridge, because I actually wrote them down and have put them in my study on the wall.

Frank Ostaseski: Yeah, we have to practice them. That's the thing. You have to really use them. Pick one and use them.

Elise: I just wanted to pull something from your book. There are so many beautiful quotes but I wanted to read this as we're moving to maybe the first invitation. So, you write, "When people are dying, it is easy for them to recognize that every minute, every breath counts. But the truth is, death is always with us, integral to life itself. Everything is constantly changing. Nothing is permanent. This can both frighten and inspire us. And if we listen closely, the message we hear is "don't wait"".

Frank Ostaseski: That's again the real gift that people who were dying taught me. Waiting is full of expectation: waiting for the next moment to arrive, we'll miss this one. I can't tell you how many times I've been with a family and they've said to me, "When is Mom going to die?" In waiting for the moment of dying, we

missed all the moments in between. So, what I saw regularly people who were dying, was that what really made the difference in the dying process wasn't necessarily religion or whether they had meditated for their lifetime, but it was really about whether they had they lived into what it meant to be human, the deeper dimensions of what it means to be human. When you're coming close to the end of life, things get really clear. You see immediately what matters most. And you don't want to waste any time. I've seen a lot of folks in the final days, weeks that were left, sometimes final moments of their life, open to knowing themselves to be something larger than themselves that also includes themselves. These were regular people, people who lived off the streets. But they often found a way of meeting what they thought was unbearable or unimaginable in extraordinary ways. Now, we might say "too late" and I would agree: it's too late to do that at that final hour of your life. But here's the thing. That opportunity exists then, will it exist now? We don't have to wait until the time of our dying to distil the lessons it has to teach. So, let's not wait for that. Let's step into our life, with both feet, really tell people you love that you love them. Embrace this life. Live it in a way that's responsible.

Elise: I just recall, when you were talking before we came to the interview, and I was sharing how I worked in palliative care for a short time when I started medicine, and I just remember the sensation of leaving the hospital after spending the week with the dying, and going across the road and seeing the trees and the park and listening to the birds – it was like everything was amplified. And it's just a shame that so many of us lack these reminders and we just feel like we're living this life that is going on forever. It's like we don't have that connection to the immediacy of death, therefore we kind of move through and forget about this.

Frank Ostaseski: Yeah. We think it'll come later. "Death will come later, when we're old." Constant change is not later, constant change is now. This is the thing that mindfulness practice can really show us, that everything is coming and going all the time. It's a bit like when you travel to another country and suddenly your senses are really awake: you smell more, you taste more, see more. Mindfulness practice is like that. It can engage us in life really. And dying is like that. It engages us in life.

Elise: Again, if you don't mind me reading something from your book. The second invitation was: "welcome everything, push away nothing." And you write, "In welcoming everything, we don't have to like what is arising. It's actually not our job to approve or disapprove. The word welcome confronts us; it asks us to temporarily suspend our usual rush to judgment and to simply be open to what is

happening. Our task is to give our careful attention to what is showing up at the front door, to receive it in the spirit of hospitality." I wondered if you could speak to actually how we practically do this.

Frank Ostaseski: Yeah, that sounds crazy. Welcome everything, push away nothing. That doesn't even sound intelligent. But actually, like I say it's not that you have to like it, you don't have to agree with it. You just have to be willing to meet it. James Baldwin the great African American writer, he said something beautiful. He said, "not everything in life that we face can be changed, but nothing can be changed unless it's faced." That's what this is really pointing to. It doesn't mean that we lose our capacity to discern and to skilfully say no when that's appropriate. But when we're open and receptive, we have more options, more choices. We're able to respond skilfully to whatever it is that emerges. To me, it's about being human. And to be human is a lot more than getting a good education and finding the right partner and getting a nice house on a nice street and getting good jobs, you can go sleep at night, wake up at morning and do it all over again. That's not being full human to me. To be fully human means embrace all of it, the beauty and horror of this life. The fact that there are children like my granddaughter who are born into the loving arms of her mother who kisses a bright future into her cheeks every night. And there are kids crying in refugee camps or there's children like my friend Caroline whose mother left her in a trash can when she was born. And there's other children who were making tents out of bed sheets and couch pillows tonight. All of that's happening in a way and I think our work is really to embrace all of it, all the beauty and the horror. That's what it means to be human. And when we try to incline ourselves to one without including the other, we're having half a life really. So, the "welcome everything, push away nothing" is to really be willing to meet what's here. There's a story I share in the book. It's sweet. A man who was the head of the California psychiatric association, he developed Alzheimer's and he began to not remember people's names and he couldn't recognise faces. So some friends went to his house to dinner, rang the doorbell, he opened the door and he stared at them. And he looked and he said, "I'm sorry, I just can't recall faces anymore." He said, "But I know this is my house and my house has always been a place where people were welcome. So, if you're standing in my doorstep, I know my job is to invite you in. Please, come in, you're welcome." That can only come from a whole lifetime of really welcoming this life. It confronts our notion of judgement. It asks us to temporarily set that aside. So, we can actually see what's actually here. And that's again what mindfulness practice does. It invites everything in, nothing's

outside the sphere of meditation, and then it discerns, it sees which things cause suffering, and which things lead to wholesomeness.

Elise: I think the interesting thing about this "welcome everything, push away nothing" is that to me it's not about the judgment, it's also contra to our wiring as humans and this always fascinates me, that this wiring of survival that we are, just at a very basic level, wired to push away, move away from unpleasant and move towards pleasant. And so, this invitation is really an invitation to kind to just radically go against this survival reflex in a way in order to meet…

Frank Ostaseski: I think it's a good point. I think understanding we're more than our instinctual drives. Said in another way, suppose these instinctual drives were really freed up, suppose they were really liberated: the survival, sexual, social drives. What would they be like, what would the other end of the spectrum be like if they were completely liberated?

Elise: You mean if everyone was acting purely from that reflex place?

Frank Ostaseski: No, I mean just the opposite. I mean we think of these instinctual drives as being that which shapes our animal soul, we could say our animal nature. Well, one of their purposes is to help this human being live. But suppose they were in the service of our awakening also. I mean, what would the other and of the spectrum be from the social drive? Maybe it would be some sense of unity. What would the other end of the sexual drive be, wouldn't it just be procreation and pleasure, it might be bliss. What would be the freedom if the real the freedom of survival was absolutely liberated? What would the other end of it be? I suspect it would be something like the deathless, experiencing ourselves as being eternity. So, I think that we can know ourselves to be more than our instinctual drives. And I think this invitation is aiming us at that. Through welcome all of it.

Elise: On a level of when meditating and breathing, so this invitation is obviously for life, but when we're meditating, on the ground, and I'm just thinking about the experiences that I've had particularly when I was starting and it was like, that sense of physical agitation and itchy and just couldn't sit still really, needing to move and all of that kind of stuff, and even like boredom. I remember one of my first retreats: the boredom just nearly killed me, and I just really thought I was going to die from boredom, it felt that strong. "Welcome everything, push away nothing" can be helpful actually in the meditation practice to kind of…

Frank Ostaseski: Yeah I think so. I think it's a good instruction for meditation actually. I mean, let's take something as simple as you have an itch on your nose, and the knee-jerk reaction is to scratch it of course, and there's nothing wrong with that, we don't want to make that wrong. But suppose we stay with the experience and see whether it's pleasant or unpleasant. And then we get to see all of our habitual patterns to go with when something is unpleasant. All of our tendencies to push it away, to push away whatever is unpleasant in our life. And that's just an itch on your nose but imagine if you have bone cancer. How are you going to meet bone cancer if an itch on your nose is driving you wild, crazy? So, it's not about macho, it's not about enduring things, but it is to see what's the complex of activities that occur when something unpleasant happens, when the sensation happens in the body, what happens in the mind and what happens in the heart? How do those experiences complete into the experience of suffering? So, when we welcome them, then we can see them, we can discern what it is that supports us and what it is that makes it difficult for us.

Elise: So, it's not just about the macho thing. It's not just about "welcome everything, push nothing", by staying with what's difficult because we're trying to be some kind of, like, strong macho. It's actually because this is offering us a greater insight into the experience and perhaps even greater resilience to be with the things that we can't change.

Frank Ostaseski: I think so. I'm going to come back to this word intimacy that we used earlier, that for me meditation practice is a practice of intimacy. And part of what has to cultivate is our ability to tolerate the intensity of intimacy. So, it's not about being macho and fearlessly enduring various kinds of discomforts. It really can open your heart fully and completely to what's in front of you, to what is pleasant but also what is unpleasant. Or does it always shut your heart down? That is the choice that we're being asked. That's the courage being cultivated, the courage of an open heart.

Elise: I think that just clarified it so beautifully. Can I ask you still on the welcoming, you can tell I just really got stuck into this "welcome everything" invitation. It just really speaks to me. One thing I wanted to ask you about is, what's the difference between welcoming – but not falling into – the quick sand of obsessive thinking and rumination. So, in other words, how do we welcome but then not get stuck in that? I'm thinking about my own personal experience. When we face a fear or there's something on the horizon, there's uncertainty and it's creating an anxiety or fear, and you can welcome that and you can feel that fear is here and getting intimate with fear, then how do you kind of balance almost

like a skilful redirection or attention. Can you speak to that? Sort of balancing of opening and kind of recognizing. Maybe it's more skilful to not pay attention to this and to consciously…

Frank Ostaseski: Sometimes it is. Sometimes there is some skilfulness to redirecting our attention to something else. But of course there are situations that we can't live with and welcoming isn't about simplicity, isn't about being stupid. So, for example, being emotionally abused or physically abused is something we shouldn't tolerate. And so, we have to make a stand there. But let me ask you a question. Do you get afraid sometimes?

Elise: Yeah.

Frank Ostaseski: Okay. How do you know you're afraid? What happens?

Elise: For me it's a mind thing, so I notice the mind gets caught in circles on the same theme. There's worry and then sometimes there can be a physical sensation as well.

Frank Ostaseski: What sort of physical sensation?

Elise: Well, depends how severe the worry is but it could be like tightness of breath, or it could be up at night. It's not physical, it's more of the thought.

Frank Ostaseski: But it can be kind of worry and anxiety accompanied by physical sensations: Tightness of the chest or shallow breathing, etc… Beautiful! So, you do actually know a lot about that. You know a lot about the experience. Beautiful. So, I just want to remind you and the viewers of this: that the part of you that knows you're afraid is not afraid. And when we recognize that – and that's what mindfulness practice helps us to do – then we have choice. Part of you can choose to function from the fear or fuctions from the part of you that knows you're afraid. That's the choice you have. It's not like the fear has to go away, it's not like you're going to get rid of the fear or banish it from your life. Good luck with that! I mean, who's going to do that? Awareness doesn't need to get rid of the fear. It isn't just the only thing in the world, you see. I mean, one of the most helpful meditation instructions that I use is: what else is here? When there's fear, when there's anxiety, for example, ask the question: what else is here? Well, one thing we just discovered is awareness is here, knowing is here. And we can again orient toward that. We can use that as a matter of fact, everyday practical way. We can make airline reservations from that, we can raise our children from that. We have a choice. When your three-year-old is driving you absolutely batty, you can call on that and then you have a choice. So, the knowing of it is really

what gives us a choice. But you can't know it until you accept it in, until you welcome it in. Then, you can study it, you can know something about it.

Elise: It's profound. I'm just sitting with that. Cause I've worked with this before, but it's great to hear it again. It's such a powerful help. But I know when you hear that for the first time, you mind kind of goes, "huh?". Because it's a completely new paradigm, it's a completely new relationship that you can have with your emotions and with your thoughts, right?

Frank Ostaseski: Right and you don't have to get rid of any of them. That isn't the object of the meditation, to banish them from your experience. It's to get to know them, really. To become intimate, again, with them, so that they're not slapping you around and pushing you around in your life. So that you have some choice. I want to be free. That's what I want. And so, to do that, I need choice.

Elise: And so, to continue on this thing that you're talking about of "when you're fearful, what else is there" and then understanding that you are aware of the fear and that's not the fear, it's a different place in you, and so by having a knowing of that awareness you're not fully the fear and therefore that opens up possibility to make decisions that you might not have been able to make.

Frank Ostaseski: You go into your child's room, and your child is scared, but you see that there's more to it than his or her fear. And so, you have a bigger perspective, and so you can make, as an adult in the room now, as an adult making a decision. It's kind of like that in our own everyday life. You need an adult in the room.

Elise: I really like that, I'm going to remember that. That's really helpful.

Frank Ostaseski: And ask the question: isn't there an adult in the room somewhere?

Elise: That's really great. Well, speaking of the adult in the room, we've got lots of adults in the room in our head, like all the different voices and one of them that you talk about in the book is the inner critic, which I think is a great theme to bring up because most of us can relate to it, and it can really just create so much extra suffering and imprison us so much. So, can you speak a little bit about what you see this inner critic is, where it comes from, and maybe what you've learnt about how to manage it.

Frank Ostaseski: This could be a whole interview.

Elise: I know, it was a big chapter in the book. But maybe to refine that: speaking to what it is and how meditation specifically can help us develop a different relationship to it.

Frank Ostaseski: So, first of all, the critic is kind of our internalized parent. It's the inner regulator that tries to keep status quo. That's what it's trying to do all the time. And it was created by our parents who told us to look both ways when we cross the street, they gave us all kinds of rules and guidelines that we needed in order to grow. But along the way, we also internalized their biases and their fears, etc. And all of that comes to shape, this psychological structure – we can call our inner critic or the judge – which Freud called the uber ego, the super ego. So, the inner critic is kind of shorthand for that. But here's the thing that's really important about it. It's that the inner critic is always trying to keep everybody safe. And so that means that when new things are trying to emerge, new ideas, new kinds of growth, anything that challenges the status quo, when that emerges in your mind and heart, the critic comes in and tries to crush it in some way. So, no new growth can happen unless we wrangle with, learn to disengage from this inner critic. That's why I think it's so important. And I would see it regularly at the ends of people's lives and how it'd play out even around how they were dying. So, when we're little, we have habits about how we deal with our parents' authority. If your mother says you couldn't go to the dance because your grades weren't right: what did you do? I'll give you three choices: one is you negotiated with her. You said, oh, but you know, Sally is going, why can't I go? Or I'll do my homework on Saturday! That's one. Two is you collapse in some way, you say: you're right, I should've done better. Or three, you rebel: you go to your room, you slam your door and you sneak out of your window. I don't know which one was true for you but pick one. What was your favourite?

Elise: I wish I was more number three but no. That wasn't me. I'll leave a bit of mystery there.

Frank Ostaseski: So, whichever one we did, and we probably did all three at some juncture, that tends to be the same way we deal with our own inner critic. When inner critic emerges, we tend to still behave with it in a similar way. So, what we have to learn to do is disengage from that conversation with the critic. Some people think they need their critic, that without it they wouldn't progress. I disagree. I think the critic can deliver some truth to us which we need to listen to. But we do not need the delivery system. I've been with a lot of wise people over my lifetime, beautiful teachers, and they never transmitted their wisdom to me with meanness. And that's what the inner critic does. It tries to manage us with

meanness. You listen to the tone of voice of the inner critic and you can really distinguish what's criticism, what's wisdom. We've began to think that the critic is wise. The critics are a bit like our appendix. We needed it at one point in our evolution but we don't need it any more. We have an ability to discern, to make wise decisions. And so, our work is to disengage from the critic and we do that by becoming mindful of it, we do that by confronting it, by stopping the conversation. Sometimes what we have do is to find a kind of assertiveness, a strength to stand up to the critic, act on their behalf. Frequently that's tied up in people's anger. So, sometimes when I'm working with people, I have them get really angry at the critic and scream and yell at it. And then I say, stop right there! And they feel their strength in the body and they feel the strength of their back, for example and I say, that's what you need. You don't need the anger, you just need the strength that's tangled up in the anger. To break habits, we need strength, we need the ability to persevere. And that's one of the qualities we need to disengage the inner critic. Or the other is to have the strength to tell the emotional truth. 'That hurts when you talk to me that way: don't talk to me that way. I won't hear it anymore." So, those are some of the ways that we can disengage. Become mindful of it, realize it's not the voice of wisdom, find a new way of disengaging from it than what we're used with our parents or our children, and have confidence in our ability to discern.

Elise: Thank you. I've got so many questions here.

Frank Ostaseski: Let me just add one thing: there's a story I tell in the book. My daughter and I love to go shopping, and one of the places we shop is in consignment shops, used clothing stores. You know how it is, you go in, you find a great paisley blouse or cool pair of boots, and all of those things have a little tear or stain on them, or they're missing a button, for example. So, she picked out a blouse, she goes into changing room to try it on, and I look around for other things. And on this one particular day I remember finding this great blouse for her and it said $9.95 as is. And I thought, that's great, we should get those tags for each other, for ourselves. *As is.* I mean, what a beautiful gift to give to ourselves and to each other. I mean, Christmas is coming up, we should give this to each other: as is. I'll take you as is. This was actually the vow to my wife when we got married: I'll take you as is. And imagine if we extended that kind of welcoming to ourselves and to each other.

Elise: I'm giggling about it cause I'm just reflecting on some conversations I always have with my partner, but I think I'll take that one to him and I'll just clip

it on him and he can remember it. And he can clip it on his T-shirt so I can remember.

Frank Ostaseski: It kind of goes both ways, that's the thing.

Elise: Maybe I'll put it on my daughter as well. I love that. That's great. You've shared lots of stories and your book is filled with these rich stories which really point to so much of the wisdom. Is there a story that comes to mind from the ancient teachings that has particularly resonated or stayed with you over time, that speaks to something about meditation?

Frank Ostaseski: I think of a number of things. One is the best teachers that I had were the patients that I worked with and so, I can speak from them. But there is a famous story in Zen about a Samurai warrior who's taking over the village and eventually climbs to top of the hill where there's a monastery. There, on top of the hill in this monastery is a monk. He's sitting cross-legged. And the Samurai comes up to him and says something like, "Teach me heaven and hell" – like they always say in these Zen stories. And that monk says to him, "You, filthy, useless, ignorant man, I can't teach you anything!" And this samurai bursts and pulls out his sword and says, "I can slice you in half," or something like that. And then the monk says, "There, that's hell". The samurai puts his sword back in his case, bows, and he says, "There, that's heaven". It's a beautiful story about learning to work with our states of mind. We keep thinking our suffering's always coming from the externals of our life. And of course, there is those influences but how we respond, but that miracle that can happen between stimulus and response, that pause, that's so beautiful.

Elise: It's a great story.

Frank Ostaseski: Yeah, it is. But it isn't down-to-earth one. There was a woman that I worked with at the hospice and her name was Adelle, and she was this 87-year-old Russian-Jewish lady, I mean tough as nails. And we knew each other pretty well and we got to know each other over a couple of months. And the night she was dying, they called me and I went into her room. When I entered the room, she was sitting on the edge of the bed with her feet sort of dangling off the bed in her night dress and I sat in the corner. That's my way. Don't jump in and help unless you know there's something that's really needed. And sitting next to her on the bed was the nursing assistant. And in a very well-meaning way, she turned to Adelle and she said, "You don't have to be frightened, we're right here with you". And Adelle said, "Honey, if this was happening to you, you'd be frightened." So, I stay in the corner. And a little while later, the attendant again

in a very well-meaning way said, “You look cold, would you like a shawl or a blanket on your shoulders?” And Adelle shouted back, “Of course I’m cold, I’m almost dead!” So, I watched this from the corner of the room and I saw two things. One was that Adelle didn’t want any nonsense, she didn’t want to talk about tunnels of white or any of this stuff. And the second was, that she was suffering, it was a labour to die, just like it’s a labour to getting born, and her case was manifesting in her breath. Every inhale was a struggle, every exhale a struggle. So, I pulled up my chair close to her just you and I are looking and I said, “Adelle, would you like to struggle a little less?” And she said, “Yes”. I said, “Okay, it’s right there, at the end of the exhale, before the inhale there’s a little gap, and I wonder what it would be like if you could put your attention there, just for a moment. I’ll do it with you.” I remember this is this 86-year-old Russian Jewish lady, she doesn’t care beans about meditation, but she'd highly motivated in this moment to be free of suffering – and that’s what gets most of us to sit down on a meditation cushion. So, there we were breathing together, she would breath in and I would breath in, she would breath out, I would breath out. And I noticed over time, without any guidance, she brought her attention to that gap, that nanosecond between the end of the exhale and the next inhale. That’s a moment of fear or faith, right there. Do we trust the next breath will come or do we try to micromanage it? And I noticed that as she put her attention at the fear that was characterizing her face, just drained away. And after a while she said, “Frank, I think I’m going to rest now” and she put her head back on the pillow and in a little bit later she died – very peacefully. That’s the same story as the samurai story, but much more easily relatable. That moment between stimulus and response. How do we meet that? That’s really a place where miracles can happen, I think.

Elise: Thank you so much. I feel that’s a really beautiful place to end the conversation. I wanted to offer you a space to share anything that we haven’t – I mean there’s so much we haven’t covered but anything that feels, that you’d like to share about your work, about meditation? Anything that comes up?

Frank Ostaseski: Well, one of the things that I’ve learned in being focused at the end of life is to really keep an open mind, to have a sense of curiosity and discovery. That’s been invaluable to me and being a carer and also being a parent, being a teacher. When I started teaching, one of my guides said to me, “Here’s a 46:56 practice. I might be wrong.” And so, every day I practice that “I might be wrong”. That’s a good one to really work with. But the other thing I want to say to the listeners and to the people that have been watching this is: the whole world

is running in the other direction, away from the subject of death. For one reason or another the folks that are listening came toward this. We don't know exactly why. But I really want to applaud their willingness to do that. I think the world needs this actually. I think when you sit on the precipice of death you learn things that are valuable that the whole culture needs. And so, I want to encourage the people that have been listening to study it. Not to prepare for the moment of dying, but to study death to show us how to step into our lives much more fully and completely. And I want to thank you for having the courage to actually do this, to have this conversation. I hope there's been something in my words and presence that's been of some small value anyway.

Elise: Absolutely. And your book for all the listeners that want to go deeper.

Frank Ostaseski: We didn't tell the people the name of the book, did we?

Elise: I did mention it: The Five Invitations: What Death Can Teach Us About Living Fully.

Frank Ostaseski: And let people know that I'll be there in September in Perth to speak at the national Hospice of Palliative Care Association and then I'll probably be doing some programs in Sydney and Melbourne.

Elise: And I'll make sure that I share that.

Frank Ostaseski: Thanks very much. I hope it's useful.

Elise: Thank you. It was a wonderful conversation. Thank you so much, Frank. It's been a pleasure.

Book recommendations

The Five Invitations: What Death Can Teach Us About Living Fully