

Tricycle Talks

“It’s Never Too Late to Be Happy”

Episode #83 with Robert Waldinger

January 25, 2023



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James Shaheen: Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Today, I’m joined by Robert Waldinger, a psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, and Zen priest. Waldinger directs the Harvard Study of Adult Development, which is the longest scientific study of happiness. The study has tracked the lives of participants for over 75 years, tracing how childhood experiences and relationships affect health and well-being later in life. In his new book, *The Good Life: Lessons from the World’s Longest Scientific Study of Happiness*, Waldinger shares what he’s learned from directing the study. In today’s episode of *Tricycle Talks*, I sit down with Bob to discuss what makes a good life, the common regrets that people have toward the end of their lives, and how his Zen practice informs his work as a psychiatrist.

James Shaheen: So I'm here with psychiatrist Robert Waldinger. Hi, Bob, it's great to be with you.

Robert Waldinger: It's great to be with you, James. Thanks for having me.

James Shaheen: Oh, it's a pleasure. So we're here to talk about your new book, *The Good Life: Lessons from the World's Longest Scientific Study of Happiness*. But before we start with all that, I'm very interested because you're also a Zen priest. I wonder how you came to Buddhism and how your practice informs how you approach these questions of what it means to be happy, what we mean by the good life? How does being a Zen priest shape all of this for you? You're also a scientist, so it's an interesting mix here.



Robert Waldinger: I used to think it was a strange mix. Now I don't think it's so strange. Initially, I was preoccupied with this problem. For me, my problem was clinging to achievement. I've been at Harvard my whole life, and I was raised to think, gee, you know, academic achievement, that's the best thing in the world. Yet I began to have this nagging sense that I think many of us do that the things I was worried about really weren't that important ultimately. Who cares how many academic awards I get? And yet I was worried about this. Everybody I knew was worried about this. It was when I encountered Buddhist thinking that I began to understand more about myself, about my own preoccupations, about my own clinging. It really helped me understand that I had this nagging sense of impermanence. that it was all going to pass away, so what really matters? And so that's what began to draw me toward Buddhism. And then, about 17–18 years ago, I wandered into a Unitarian church just down the street from my house where the minister was also a Roshi, a Zen master. Someone told me about that, so I asked him if I could come meet with him. And I did. I started sitting with his Zen group every week and started studying with him, and this whole world of spiritual practice opened up to me in a way that it had not before. I had already become a psychiatrist, a psychoanalyst, and a scientist, and I began to realize that this was another lens on the experience of being human: sitting on the cushion, learning to know my own heart and mind was another way to know about what it was like to be alive in the world. And so I began to understand that these are not separate. It's not separate from the science that I do. It's not separate from the clinical work that I do seeing patients in psychotherapy every day.

James Shaheen: In the book, we follow people through the course of their lives from early adolescence all the way through their deaths. A recurring question, and one that is being worked out, is what does make a good life? What has the data shown you in that regard?

Robert Waldinger: Well, to put it in Buddhist terms, a good life is made with sangha. To put it in scientific terms, what we learned was that when we studied people throughout their lives, if



we wanted to predict who was going to stay healthy and be happier and live longer, what were the best predictors? One, of course, was taking care of your health, and that was not a surprise. But the surprise was that the people who stayed healthier and were happier were the people who had better, warmer connections with other people. Good relationships really predicted well-being over time and longevity. At first, we didn't believe our own data, because we thought, OK, we know the mind and body are connected, but really? How could good relationships help you prevent coronary artery disease? How could it make it less likely that you were going to get rheumatoid arthritis? How could that be? And so we've spent the last 10 years studying the mechanisms by which our relationships actually get inside our bodies and shape our health. It's hard to determine for any one person exactly what caused what, but when we look at thousands of lives, as we've done, then we can say there are these predictors. And a lot of the prediction is from relationships, from community. There's a developmental researcher, Michael Rutter, who once said that all the data show that what every child needs to grow up healthy is one consistent, caring adult who's crazy about them. If you have that, you've got a huge leg up on a good life.

James Shaheen: You mentioned Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia, or meaning and purpose. Can you say more about what you call eudaimonic happiness, let's say, in contrast to hedonism, the sort of momentary pleasure of instant gratification?

Robert Waldinger: You've just named the two big buckets of happiness that researchers have identified. So hedonism is the judgment of "Am I having fun right now?" So I'm really enjoying our conversation right now. Hedonically, I'm happy right now. But something upsetting may happen an hour from now, and I won't be happy. The other form of happiness, the eudaimonic happiness, is really a sense of basic okayness, that life has meaning and purpose and life is basically good. I'll give you an example: the mother who's reading to her child to help the child go to sleep. The mother's reading the book, *Goodnight, Moon*, and the mother has read it seven times. The child is saying I want one more time, and the mother is exhausted and she doesn't



want to read *Goodnight, Moon* one more time. Now, is she having a good time? Is she hedonically happy? No. But eudaimonically, is there anything more meaningful and important than reading to your child one last round of *Goodnight, Moon*? No, there's nothing more important than that. And so that's the distinction between hedonia and eudaimonia.

James Shaheen: There is a difference between happy and content. I think eudaimonia we'd associate more with contentment, and happy we associated with a kind of high. Yet you keep the word happy for reasons maybe you can explain.

Robert Waldinger: We wondered about that, James. It's a really good point. Because we thought the title should be about well-being. The title should be about thriving or flourishing. But everybody wants to be happy. In fact, the Dalai Lama says the purpose of life is to be happy. And so we decided that we would use the word happy because we all recognize something about what that is, and then we break it down in the way that you've just asked about and we've been talking about, so we say, OK, happiness includes all these dimensions. So yes, in fact, happiness may not exactly be the right word for what we're trying to point to, which is really about human thriving and flourishing. And that's what the book really is about.

James Shaheen: I was thinking with the kind of happiness that you call eudaimonia in the book, I think of more of a cooling of pressing desire, say. This is very Buddhist, I suppose. And when we talk about hedonism, I think of its extreme in addiction, this repetitive attempt to please oneself in the moment.

Robert Waldinger: I learned about this in my meditation practice. I have these wonderful highs, these moments of elation. Sometimes when I'm on a retreat and I do walking meditation and I look at a flower, I am just blown away with joy. But I think the other thing that sitting and watching my mind tells me is I'm also going to have lows. They're going to happen within



minutes of each other, ups and downs all the time. Not that there's anything wrong with that. It's just that that's one particular dimension of my life and my experience. Underneath all that is this fundamental okayness that we can cultivate, and I think we can cultivate it through practice. Our data show that you can cultivate it through actively nurturing and building relationships with other people.

James Shaheen: You've again identified healthy relationships as one of the most important predictors of happiness. What types of relationships can support us long-term?

Robert Waldinger: Many people think that when we talk about relationships, we talk about intimate relationships, romantic partnerships, and some people ask, "If I don't have an intimate partnership, am I out of luck?" And what we find is absolutely not, you're not out of luck. There are so many relationships that nurture us and that give us this benefit of well-being: relationships with friends, relationships with relatives, family, work relationships can be hugely important, and also more casual relationships, like the person who delivers your mail or the person at the grocery store who you see every week who checks you out, the barista who you get your coffee from at Starbucks or Dunkin Donuts. Research has shown that all those relationships give us little hits of recognition, little hits of well-being that brighten our day that actually energize us.

James Shaheen: We've all experienced broken relationships. What factors make a relationship successful?

Robert Waldinger: Boy, if I really knew the definitive answer to that I'd win the Nobel Prize. I think what we see is that people who feel like they can be themselves in a relationship. They are not having to stifle, suppress, hide away parts of themselves, that those relationships where you feel you can be authentic are the relationships that people identify as the most important and most impactful in their lives. And that means they don't have to be smooth all the time. In fact,



you can have a very argumentative relationship with somebody, but if you feel you can be yourself and that you're fundamentally respected, and that you respect the other person, those are the relationships that seem to be particularly impactful. I think the other thing that people have identified is the idea that there are people who will just be there for you no matter what. We asked our original participants at one point, "List all the people who you could call in the middle of the night if you were sick or scared." Some people could list several people. Some of our participants couldn't list anybody, not a soul in the world. We think that having at least one relationship, one person to whom you feel securely attached, securely connected, that that's an essential component of what keeps us healthy.

James Shaheen: You mentioned three important factors in maintaining mutually fulfilling relationships, and they are curiosity, generosity, and what you call learning new dance steps. Can you say a little bit more about these?

Robert Waldinger: Curiosity is really bringing what we call in Zen beginner's mind, putting aside all your preconceptions and bringing a curiosity even to the person you feel you know everything about. And this might be very useful, like if you're thinking about going to a family gathering where you know all these people, you know which jokes they're going to tell. One of my meditation teachers gave me the instruction once to ask myself, what's here that I have never noticed before? I find that extremely useful when I am coming into relationship with somebody who I feel like I've known a long time or I know so much about, to really bring that curiosity. You can also bring it to meeting someone you don't know because one of the things we all like to do is talk about ourselves, particularly when we feel someone else's genuine interest. You're asking me questions now, and that's so encouraging and affirming. You're saying, "I recognize you, I'm interested in you." So if we do that for other people, if we offer that, you will be amazed at how people will light up in response to that kind of curiosity.



Then there's generosity. One of the things that meditation practice shows us is our judging minds. One exercise that I love that's really painful for me is counting how many judgments you make in these 10 minutes of meditation, for example, and I lose count. My mind is just filled with judging all the time. What generosity is is a reminder. Our minds are going to judge. That's part of what the human mind does. But we can hold those judgments lightly. We can set them aside and just be with this person. And so that generosity can be generosity toward the other even when we find ourselves picking and choosing this and that. Of course, there's also generosity of our resources, time, attention, money, and physical help. All of those are relationship builders.

Then learning new dance steps. I started thinking of it this way when my wife and I took a dance class. We had a date night, and we took a beginners dance class and a lot of the people in the dance class were learning to dance before their wedding because they wanted to be able to dance at their wedding. And we could see that some couples were great. They would learn new dance steps together and they could really move and adjust to each other. And some couples just had a terrible time. What I began to understand is that we're always having to adapt to each other in relationships. We're always having to learn new things. My wife and I have been married for 36 years. We thought we were signing up for particular people when we committed to each other, and then she and I have both grown and changed a lot. So can we change in such a way that we adapt to each other? And that's what I mean by learning new dance steps. We thought we knew how to dance well together when we first got together, but our dance moves have changed with each other. Can those dance moves be somewhat harmonious even as we're both developing into different people? And that doesn't just happen in intimate partnerships. It happens in long friendships. Lord knows it happens in family relationships: that older sibling who's always been so bossy or that younger sibling who's always hogged all the attention. You need to allow each other room to have grown out of those patterns.



James Shaheen: You also mentioned the dangers of isolation on the other side of things, and you express particular concern for the people who are "more isolated than they want to be," and I should also point out in the book there's someone who's far more isolated than he knows.

Robert Waldinger: More isolated than they want to be is the best definition I know of loneliness because loneliness is in the eye of the beholder. You can be lonely in a crowd. You can be lonely in a marriage. Loneliness is that subjective experience of "I want more, I want more connection, and I don't have it," which is different from social isolation. Social isolation is literally being separated. In COVID, many of us were physically separated and had to be. That's social isolation. I think that many of us find that we just want to stay away from connecting with people because we're afraid it's going to be awkward. We're afraid we're going to feel anxious, maybe not know what to say. Or we're afraid someone's not going to want to be with us or talk to us. And sometimes those worries just get buried. They're just subliminal. And so I think the person you were mentioning in the book who didn't even realize that he was so disconnected from the people in his life, when you scratch a little below the surface, he was anxious about that. He was worried. And so it just felt easier not to connect.

James Shaheen: It was heartbreaking. He was learning Italian to go see his daughter in Naples, who was a musician there, and then he didn't go. You can just feel and even understand and identify with a certain anxiety. You prepare for something but then you feel the awkwardness or messiness of the connection or the relationship is more than you think you can bear. So in that sense, if relationships make us happy and all of us have been in places where we want to avoid them, it kind of makes clear the fact that we're poor forecasters of what will make us happy. I've many times not wanted to be in a social situation, I feel some degree of anxiety, I go because I must, and I end up having a wonderful time and my mood is immeasurably improved and my sense of connection is solid. If I had given into that anxiety, it wouldn't be because I chose

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solitude, it would be because of fear of connection. In fact, the very thing I fear is what's going to make me happy. Why are we such bad forecasters of what will make us happy?

Robert Waldinger: We're bad forecasters in part because of those fears that are subtle, sometimes even unknown, outside of our awareness, but they're driving us. So they are holding us back. And so I think part of what we're hoping people will do is check in with themselves. What's making me not want to go to this party? What's making me not want to go to this sangha or this community gathering? To just check in with ourselves and say, OK, actually, I'm afraid, I'm worried. Once you know what you're worried about, then there's the possibility of doing something about it. So for example, asking a friend to go with you for a little courage. There are all kinds of ways, but the first step is really knowing what these worries are. And for many of them that involves a process of discovery.

James Shaheen: A friend of mine who follows all of the latest psychological trends told me the more social you are, the longer you'll live. But it's encouraging when I read it's the quality of the relationships, not their number that really matters.

Robert Waldinger: Absolutely. The danger of our work is that we can give the false impression that you need to be an extrovert, you need to be a party animal in order to have a good life and a long, healthy life. That is so not true. We're all somewhere on a spectrum between shy introverts and party animal extroverts. Being shy is not a problem. It's not abnormal. And it doesn't mean you're going to have a shorter life or a less happy life. Being shy just means that you need fewer people in your life and that actually being with a lot of people could be a source of stress. It could be exhausting. The important thing is to discern for ourselves, what kinds of connections and how many connections are energizing? And what sort of connection and what level of connection is exhausting or depleting? Find your sweet spot if you can.



James Shaheen: Something in the book I found compelling was your drawing from the work of Erik and Joan Erikson in laying out the stages of life. Can you walk us through the stages of what you call a lifetime of adult relationships? How do our relational needs shift as we get older?

Robert Waldinger: Stages are helpful frameworks, but we don't all fit particular stages. I start with that just as a kind of caveat that none of us perfectly fits these stages. Erik Erikson and Joan Erikson were wonderful thinkers about adult life. I used to think that when I got to my 20s, I was done. If I was lucky, I'd find a partner, I'd find a profession, I would just live out the rest of my life. There wouldn't be much development, much growth and change. There wouldn't be stages. The Erickson's were the first to say that there's a whole path of development in adult life. That's been the focus of the study that I direct. Erikson's idea was that young adulthood is a challenge of achieving intimacy versus isolation. His idea of young adulthood is that the big challenge is: Can I find someone to love? Can I find someone to love me? Or am I going to be alone? Many of us do work out that challenge in young adulthood. Some people work it out in their 70s. That's his first stage.

Then there is a stage in middle age of generativity versus stagnation. Generativity is the Eriksonian term for fostering the welfare of the next generation. What Erickson said was that we all get to a point in our adult development where we really want to further the lives of who comes next. It could be raising children. That could be mentoring people in our work lives. It could be mentoring younger people in a hobby or in a volunteer activity. It's a concern beyond the self. And I think we know from Buddhist teachings that when we move beyond the small self, the I, me, mine self, that we grow, that we thrive, and that it's a very important contributor to well-being. And then old age, Erikson said, was the challenge of integrity versus despair. So integrity is the ability to look back on your life and say, "This was a good enough life. I've had a decent run of things" as opposed to despair, the sense of "I've wasted my life." Sometimes when we talk about paying attention in meditation practice, we say: Don't miss your life. Don't be so lost in your head that life goes by and you're not even here for it, you're not present. What

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Erickson said was, we all want to be able to look back and say not that I had the perfect life, but that it was OK. It was good enough.

James Shaheen: Optimistically, you say it's never too late. So somebody in their 70s can turn. How does that work?

Robert Waldinger: Well, we found that there were people who were sure they weren't any good at relationships. They'd live pretty isolated lives. They would say things like "I'm not good at making friends." One man in the book in his 60s, when he retired, started going to a gym and found this whole community of people at his gym who became his besties. They hung out together. They did social things together. They were at the gym together. And he said for the first time he had a sense of community that he had never had. And this is where studying so many lives is helpful because we can say based on good data that it is never too late for these things to develop.

James Shaheen: You just mentioned attention in our practice, and you also talked about it in terms of generosity. It is one thing that runs through the book: how we can learn to pay attention and appreciate the people around us. You cite the philosopher and mystic Simone Weil who writes, "Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity." Can you say more about the gift of attention and how you view the connection between attention and love?

Robert Waldinger: Yes. And then I'll quote John Tarrant's paraphrase of that wonderful thought. John Tarrant is my dharma great-grandfather. He is a Zen teacher. He wrote, "Attention is the most basic form of love" after the Simone Weil quote, and I think that what it reminds us of is that giving each other our full undivided attention is the most precious thing we have to give. What else is more precious than that? And the fact is that our full undivided attention is harder and harder to give. We are so often distracted. In fact, one of my colleagues who writes about



technology talks about this as an age of continuous partial attention. She says that we are so often distracted, or at least partially distracted, by screens that we fail to really be there for each other. My wife and I will come down in the morning for breakfast to the kitchen, and she'll be checking her email and I'll be looking at my phone, and then we'll realize we haven't spoken a word to each other. So what I've had to do is realize, OK, we need to turn, face each other, make eye contact, and talk. When my wife comes up to me and I'm working on my laptop, I have to really make myself stop what I'm doing, turn toward her, look at her, and shift my mind so that I can give her my full attention. It sounds silly that this is such an effort, but I find that it's a real effort and a real practice for me. I think that that's what we are asking people to pay some attention to in their own lives: Are there ways that you can start giving your full attention to the people you most care about?

James Shaheen: One of the nice things about meditation is the stark contrast between the level of attention while sitting and the continuous partial attention when you get off the cushion that's possible. That stark contrast makes us aware that we're not really paying attention. How does your Zen practice relate to carrying this kind of generous attention into your life?

Robert Waldinger: The Zen practice is fundamental to carrying this attention into my life. Of course, I'm not always giving my full attention. Nobody is. We're not always fully present. That's just not possible, I don't think for any human being. But meditation practice allows me to be more present, and I think it allows me to notice sooner when I'm on automatic pilot. You know that automatic pilot sense of I'm just floating through my life and daydreaming while I drive my car or brush my teeth, whatever. My practice reminds me I can drop into being present right now, and when I remember and do that, everything changes.

James Shaheen: Yeah, there's that sense sometimes at the end of the meditation session that OK, I'm done, I'm going to get up, and, in fact, as soon as we get up, we forget ourselves. So it's really



interesting, that difference. You write that we typically use attention in two different ways: amount of time spent and how we spend our time. Can you say more about these two meanings of attention? How can we learn to direct our attention in more fulfilling, life-giving ways? I like the example you gave of you and your wife saying, OK, we got to do this.

Robert Waldinger: Well, first, there's the amount of time spent. There was a fashionable school of thought for a while that said that it doesn't really matter how much time you spend with your developing child, it's really just the quality of the time. When you're there, be very present. And we know that's not true, that face time really matters, the amount of time matters. One of the things we know is that we can lose perfectly wonderful relationships by not spending enough time. I used to think my friends would always be my friends, and yet perfectly wonderful relationships can die away if we never call, if we never make time to see each other. The amount of time matters. What that does for me is it makes me be much more intentional about reaching out to people in my life who I want to see regularly. So it's not just paying full attention when I'm there. It's making it happen in the first place. And then there's the other side of it, which is when I'm there, are we going to go to a coffee shop, have coffee together and spend the whole time on our phones, or are we really going to put our phones away, put our screens completely away, and just be there with each other. That's a different quality of interaction.

James Shaheen: The next question is about particular patterns. Especially I think in middle age you discuss feeling like you're in a rut, and this is a common feeling that people have, and you propose that we ask of our experience, "What's here that I've never noticed before?" Can you say more about that question and how it can guide our interpersonal relationships?

Robert Waldinger: I'll tell you about a research study that's relevant. They studied couples, and they studied how tuned in people were to their partner's feelings. They studied them early on in their relationship, like when they first started dating, and then 10, 15, 20 years into a relationship.



And what they found was that couples who'd known each other 10, 15, 20 years were way less tuned in to their partner's feelings than they were when they were dating. When we're dating, we hang on this person's every look and word. Is this person into me? You get to a point where you feel like, "Oh, I know everything about them." My wife and I've been together 36 years, and I can lapse into that sense of "Oh, I know her. I know how she's going to react." That's the place to bring this beginner's mind. Suzuki Roshi has this famous quote, which I love. He said, "In the beginner's mind, there are many possibilities. In the expert's mind, there are few." So if I'm an expert on my wife, then I think I already know everything. If I can bring beginner's mind to having dinner tonight, then I can look and say: What's here that I haven't noticed before? What's she talking about? Or what's changed about her appearance or how she moves through the kitchen, whatever it might be, just to get myself to pay careful enough attention to find what's changed. As Buddhism tells us, and we know from our experience, everything is always changing. So what's here that I've never noticed before is actually asking us to pay attention to the process of continual change.

James Shaheen: So you distinguish between empathic accuracy and empathic effort and note that often, effort actually makes more of a difference than accuracy, although we seem to be obsessed with accuracy, especially nowadays. Can you walk us through the distinction between effort and accuracy and how we can learn to make an effort rather than strive to be right?

Robert Waldinger: Empathy is really just tuning into what someone else is feeling. And so empathic accuracy refers to getting it right. If I look at you, if we're speaking, and I get that you're feeling upset or scared, I'm accurate in my empathy. We did a study in which we asked couples to have an argument on videotape, and then we got them to watch those tapes and say, "What were you feeling? And what do you think your partner was feeling at that moment?" And we also asked, "Do you think your partner was trying to understand what you were feeling?" And what we found was that getting the right answer, knowing that your partner was feeling



angry or happy, was less important than thinking that at least your partner was trying to understand you, which is great because we're not always good at knowing what somebody else is feeling, but if we really show that we're making an effort, like "Just help me understand here, how are you feeling right now?" or "I really want to understand what this is like for you," just making the effort and showing someone else that you're making the effort goes a huge, long way to helping somebody feel more connected to you.

James Shaheen: Yeah, it's interesting. When I was reading that I was thinking it's often accuracy that gets in the way of the effort because I think I know and so I'm not trying. In other words, I'm not allowing for the possibility that they may actually have something to say about how they feel. You quote George Vaillant, who wrote that the Harvard study reveals two pillars of happiness: love and "finding a way of coping with life that does not push love away." So can you say more about each of these pillars?

Robert Waldinger: Yes. Love doesn't just mean romantic love. Love means that affection for each other, and that can happen in all kinds of relationships. It's the pushing love away that we see a lot in our study. So we see people who, out of fear or out of anger or out of a sense that it's hopeless, will push love away. You gave the example of the man who was studying Italian so he could go visit his daughter in Italy, and he said, "I don't want to be a bother to her." That was a fear. She had never said he was going to be a bother. He just made that up, one of those stories we all make up all the time in our heads. And what he was doing in that moment with that story was pushing love away. So what we want to get better at is catching ourselves when we start pushing love away, when we start telling ourselves stories that make us disconnect.

James Shaheen: You know, a lot of people see themselves as damaged. They have a particularly traumatic childhood experience, and they think, "I had such a difficult or traumatic childhood that I can't be happy." You focus a lot on finding ways of coping, particularly in those situations



where there has been childhood trauma. Can you say more about how we develop emotional habits in childhood and how we can change them?

Robert Waldinger: When we're young, we see the world as basically our family life. We all grew up in some environment, even if it's not our family of origin, and that's the whole world. We come to think that this is how life goes. This is how relationships with other people go. So if we're lucky enough to have caring people around us who are predictable and help us weather the challenges of life, then we think the world is a pretty safe place and there are people in the world who will help me when I need help. But what if you have people who aren't like that with you? What if you have people who betray your trust, who you depend on but then hurt you or disappoint you in major ways? Then it's easy for children to grow up believing that the world isn't a safe place, that there aren't helpful people out there. Does that mean you're done for? Does that mean your life is ruined? No, not necessarily. We studied many people who had very difficult childhoods. And first of all, they may have had someone in their childhood who was reliable, a safe haven, so that even though others betrayed them, there was a good safe person somewhere steadily in their growing up, or some people found that safe person later on. It could have been a coach or a teacher. It could have been a romantic partner. Particularly, some of our men who came from really disadvantaged, chaotic households found partners who were steady and loving and sensible, and those men grew into an expectation that those things were possible for them to find and to have in their lives. They could become better parents and better friends because of a kind of corrective experience with a good relationship that wasn't like the relationships they'd come to expect from childhood.

James Shaheen: So what is the corrective experience then? A relationship that runs counter to the person's patterns in the past?



Robert Waldinger: That literally runs counter to. Often, it's walking the walk. It's not just talking the talk. It's not just saying, "I'm here for you." It's being there. It's being the reliable person who always does what they say they'll do, who never leaves you stranded, to live through with someone in a new way, in a more healing, helpful way, the things that they'd come to expect were going to be unreliable or hurtful. I've seen this in the psychotherapy work that I do, that it is living through much more than just talking that heals this kind of childhood trauma.

James Shaheen: You suggest another tool. The stoic Epictetus talked about understanding that there are things we can change and there are things that we cannot change, and making that distinction is hugely important. In other words, often we fall into the trap of trying to correct a past not through corrective experiences but actually repeating the same thing hoping it will come out otherwise or that we can fix what has happened. It turns out that's something over which we have no control, and that's where that statement seems so important.

Robert Waldinger: Absolutely. Think about how many times you look at someone and say, "I want you to be different from who you are," and how well does that work? I often say to people who are going into a marriage, for example, saying, "Well, I think I can change him for the better." Well, good luck with that. It can happen, but chances are we just are who we are. The Epictetus quote is really important in relationships to say by and large, let's assume we are not going to change each other.

James Shaheen: One of the remarkable things about a longitudinal study is that you were able to see how people's appraisals of their lives changed over time. What were some of the common regrets that people had toward the end of their lives?

Robert Waldinger: Well, there were two big ones. When we asked people in their 80s to look back on their lives, many people said, "I wish I hadn't spent so much time at work and instead



that I'd spent more time with the people I care about," you know, that old cliché, nobody on their deathbed wished they'd spent more time at the office. It's a cliché because it's true. And then another big regret—this was more common among women—was when they said, "I wish I hadn't spent so much time worrying about what other people thought. That sense of just being able to be one's authentic self is something that many people look back on and say, "Oh, I wish I had done more of that.

James Shaheen: So how did the study affect the subjects themselves?

Robert Waldinger: We asked them that question: How has being part of the study affected your life? Some people wrote back saying, "It hasn't affected it at all." Some people wrote back saying, "Your questions are annoying, and it's been a big nuisance." But many people said, "This has really changed my life because it made me tune in to my life. I knew that I was going to get another questionnaire from you where you were going to ask me to think about where I am in my life, and it made a huge difference in how I thought of myself and what I decided to do going forward." So many people said this mattered a lot. Now, of course, as researchers, the cleanest research is research where you don't have that effect, where you don't change the people you're studying. But we knew that that was impossible, that the very act of studying people was going to change many of them. And it did.

James Shaheen: You write that the study has taught you that it's never too late to be happy. Has the study changed how you live your own life?

Robert Waldinger: It has. Here I am, this Harvard professor and a workaholic. I could work nonstop. And what it's made me understand is that I absolutely don't want to do that. I will feel like I missed my life. Fortunately, having kids helped that. I spent a lot of time with my kids because I realized I didn't want to miss this. That was the first part. And then I've come to realize

Tricycle Talks

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Episode #83 with Robert Waldinger

January 25, 2023



if I'm sitting there looking at the weekend and saying what am I going to do, I have to literally say, "Who have I not seen? I need to call up this person. I need to go see them. We need to get together." And so I have been more intentional about keeping up with the people I care about and nurturing those relationships than I would have been if I hadn't been the director of this study.

James Shaheen: Well, that's a nice way to close. Robert Waldinger, It's been a great pleasure. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of Bob's new book, *The Good Life*, available now. Thanks, Bob.

Robert Waldinger: Thank you so much, James. This was a pleasure.

James Shaheen: For me too. You've been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Robert Waldinger. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. If you enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a review on Apple Podcasts. To keep up with the show, you can follow *Tricycle Talks* wherever you listen to podcasts. *Tricycle Talks* is produced by As It Should Be Productions and Sarah Fleming. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!