

*Life As It Is*

“Everyday Enlightenment”

Episode #33 with Susan Kaiser Greenland

July 17, 2024



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**Susan Kaiser Greenland:** I think everybody's experienced what I'm calling real-world enlightenment, which are those moments, those kind of glimpses, there may be a lightbulb moment, maybe it's an aha moment, those glimpses of when your ego drops, and you just connect to one of these qualities that are with us all the time, whether it's awareness, whether it's love or compassion or wisdom, and everything drops away, and all of a sudden, you feel part of something much greater than yourself. And it's not a conceptual experience. It's not something we think about. You really just feel it. And it's something that usually just comes without training as a surprise, but with training and practice and motivation, we can really nurture our ability to drop into those moments more frequently and for those moments to last longer.

**James Shaheen:** Hello, I'm James Shaheen, and this is *Life As It Is*. I'm here with my co-host Sharon Salzberg, and you just heard Susan Kaiser Greenland. Susan is a mindfulness educator and author based in Los Angeles. In her new book, *Real-World Enlightenment: Discovering Ordinary Magic in Everyday Life*, she lays out practical tools for easing anxiety and tapping into our innate goodness. In our conversation with Susan, we talk about why she believes that we already have what we need to be free, the power of getting out of our own way, and how we can learn to take ourselves less seriously. Plus, Susan leads us in a guided meditation. So here's our conversation with Susan Kaiser Greenland.

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**James Shaheen:** OK, so I'm here with Susan Kaiser Greenland and my cohost Sharon Salzberg. Hi, Susan. Hi, Sharon. Great to be with you both.

**Susan Kaiser Greenland:** Great to see you.

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**James Shaheen:** So Susan, we're here to talk about your new book, *Real-World Enlightenment: Discovering Ordinary Magic in Everyday Life*. Can you tell us a bit about the book and what inspired you to write it?

**Susan Kaiser Greenland:** Well, first of all, thanks for having me. It's just such an honor to be on this podcast and with the two of you, two of my all-time favorite people. Sharon has been an incredible friend and inspiration and mentor and leader and thought leader and beautiful writer since the beginning. I remember one of my very first retreats was with Sharon and Joseph. I don't know if you remember that, Sharon, it was the very first Mind and Life retreat. probably a hundred years ago. So it's just such an honor to be here.

*Real-World Enlightenment* is a book that I've written as kind of a culmination of all the work that I've done over the years working with family systems and working with schools. This one is more oriented toward adults, and it's about finding those glimpses of enlightenment that we can find in every single day, in the moment, and not making enlightenment some far-off thing that is impossible to reach, but it's right here with us every single moment. We can just catch glimpses of it if we're able to get out of our own way and connect with these innate qualities that are inside of us.

**James Shaheen:** So you say that enlightenment can sometimes sound unattainable, and like you just said, you describe real-world enlightenment as an experience we can all tap into in everyday life. So what do you mean by real-world enlightenment?

**Susan Kaiser Greenland:** I think everybody's experienced what I'm calling real-world enlightenment, which are those moments, those kind of glimpses, there may be a lightbulb moment, maybe it's an aha moment, those glimpses of when your ego drops and you just connect to one of these qualities that are with us all the time, whether it's awareness, whether it's love or compassion or wisdom, and everything drops away, and all of a sudden, you feel part of something much greater than yourself. And it's not a conceptual experience. It's not something

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we think about. You really just feel it. And it's something that usually just comes without training as a surprise, but with training and practice and motivation, we can really nurture our ability to drop into those moments more frequently and for those moments to last longer. And those are the experiences that I'm talking about as far as real-world enlightenment.

**Sharon Salzberg:** You structure the book around what you call golden threads, or the universal themes across wisdom traditions that lead to psychological and emotional freedom. Could you say some more about these golden threads?

**Susan Kaiser Greenland:** Yeah, the golden threads, that's a nod to an educational psychologist named Jerome Bruner, who talked about golden threads being woven in curriculum. And I just loved that term because when I started looking at the material for this book and also as I was teaching, I write my books basically through how I teach, so when I was working in schools or working with parents, always in a secular setting, what would come up were these universal themes that were not just coming from Buddhism, but they were common across all sorts of wisdom traditions. And these themes are things like kindness and patience and how everything is connected and how everything is changing all the time and how something is not hard and solid but it's made up of multiple changing interdependent elements. Some of these have a little more of a Buddhist flavors than others, and some of them truly cut across all the traditions.

So I love the idea of golden threads because they're woven in everywhere. And if we know that these threads are everywhere, we know that we can, even in a chaotic moment, tap into them. And that's the goal with real-world enlightenment: even when we're feeling very chaotic, to have some mindfulness-based strategies to help us settle our nervous system and ground us. And that's where these mindfulness-based strategies are fantastic and life-changing. And then to be able to go deeper just in an instant by tapping into these themes.

**Sharon Salzberg:** So you say that one of the most fundamental principles across wisdom traditions is that goodness is within everyone, and within Mahayana Buddhism, this goodness is

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considered the source of enlightenment. Can you say more about this? How can we build our own capacity to recognize and embody the essential goodness within ourselves?

**Susan Kaiser Greenland:** Well, thank you. I think goodness is a really important quality to think about. And it does cut across traditions, although different traditions think of it a little bit differently. Goodness is available to us, whether it's here from the very beginning or whether there's seeds of goodness that we can nurture and that we can cultivate.

So the idea of getting out of our own way to be able to tap into the goodness or to see the goodness in others is really an essential part of my experience of Buddhist practice, especially with my teacher, Mingyur Rinpoche, and that idea of really seeing that goodness, even in acts or even in reactions that may not look that good on the surface. But if you dig a little bit deeper, you see that it is often coming out of a sense of love and compassion in trying to ease suffering, even if the acting isn't skillful.

The second approach that I think is really important to remember in all of these practices, and it's something that we have really gotten out of the psychologists who have joined our field and are really looking at the Buddhist practices, is the nervous system regulation. It's really, really tough to get out of your own way if your nervous system is ratcheted up. It's really, really tough to get out of your own way if you're activated. So by becoming aware of that activation and using mindfulness-based strategies to help ground yourself and undercut that fight-or-flight response, then we have more spaciousness that then we can start to actually see and analyze and drop into the goodness, the joy, the love, and the compassion that's always here.

**Sharon Salzberg:** Well, you also say that we have what we need to be free, which is a really nice way of thinking of things. What do you mean by that?

**Susan Kaiser Greenland:** Well, what we need to be free are these qualities that are inside all of us. Again, we tend to get in our own way from finding freedom. Speaking for myself, my own

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anxiety, you know, I've suffered from anxiety my whole life. So the anxiety gets in my way and my own neuroses get in my way, and that really limits my freedom, although I think I'm helping myself, but actually I'm not necessarily helping myself. So the idea again of recognizing that all that we need to really be free as far as psychological freedom is to be able to tap into these inner qualities of attention, of balance, of compassion and love, and of playfulness. I think playfulness is really important in that it allows us to be free from our own emotional baggage.

**James Shaheen:** So Susan, one of the qualities that you mentioned that you explore is kindness, and you write that throughout our evolutionary history, humans have relied on kindness to survive. This goes against the competitive view of evolution. So how has kindness supported our survival as a species?

**Susan Kaiser Greenland:** I think it goes back to this idea that's getting more and more traction through psychological research that the number one biohack for longevity and for health is relationship and that by being in a strong, healthy relationship or a number of them, that actually contributes to our overall well-being. So that type of relationship is a survival mechanism too. And when we think of our fight-or-flight response, and we often think of all of these wonderful mindfulness-based strategies to help settle and ground ourselves so that we then can move into a less reactive, more responsive mode, we often forget that one of the greatest strategies is connection, coregulation, regulating one another, finding somebody to help you settle down, your presence settling somebody else down. So those simple acts of kindness are also ways of self-regulation, and also we're hardwired for them so that we can survive.

**Sharon Salzberg:** So you also talk about the quality of love, and you specifically point to the importance of what you're calling purposeless love, which is such an interesting phrase. So what is purposeless love, and why do you consider it an organizing principle of our world?

**Susan Kaiser Greenland:** It's basically love without an agenda. And not many people, honestly, I don't know anybody who thinks that they're loving with an agenda. I think we all think that our

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love is purposeless. But sometimes when we settle in and take a look, we realize that we do have a hope or expectation for an outcome from that love, just like we have hopes and expectations for the outcome of almost everything that we say and do, unless we start looking a little bit deeper.

And if we start thinking of just loving for the sake of loving and learn to pay attention to the goodness of that and learn to acknowledge or be aware of our hope for outcome but also to let it go, that again creates a whole different energy around the love, and it's more consistent with our practice goals. It changes the reaction that we get back, and it changes the way we feel. So when I talk about purposeless love, it's really without an agenda, and that agenda or purpose is more often than not unconscious. Through meditation, we can dig a little bit deeper and take a look at what's driving some of the things we say and do and feel that we may not be aware of right away.

**Sharon Salzberg:** So you say that this type of love can lead to relaxation. Can you say more about that feedback loop between love and relaxation?

**Susan Kaiser Greenland:** Yeah. Well, I think all of us have felt it. When we really do let go of expectations, then all of a sudden there's a tension that goes away, and a relaxation can naturally emerge. So when we're able to relax, often, then we're able to feel love, and sometimes when we feel loved, then that helps us relax.

I think I talked about that in a story. I had to have some surgery recently while I was writing the book, and I went in and I had to go under anesthesia. I was a wreck, and the person who was trying to get my blood was a wreck, too, because he was young and he couldn't get a vein and I was tensing up but I didn't realize it. And in came this fabulous doctor, and she just started a conversation. She just held my hand. She started to help him by passing him instruments. He couldn't believe that the surgeon was helping him, and all of a sudden her agendaless love, her ability to come in and be in relationship, in a loving relationship, that settled both my nervous

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system and the nervous system of the guy who was trying to get the blood. And that's the kind of thing where love can lead to that kind of relaxation because it's a grounding strategy.

**James Shaheen:** Susan, you also explore the role of renunciation, and you say that it's the first step toward freedom from suffering. So how do you understand renunciation, and what does it look like for a layperson?

**Susan Kaiser Greenland:** Renunciation sounds like you're giving something up, right? Who wants to renounce, who wants to give something up? But actually renunciation is one of the greatest forms of relief that I've experienced in my practice. And again, it's this idea, this is one of Mingyur Rinopche's teachings that I really appreciate. It's this of letting go without giving up. So it also dovetails with this idea of being able to act and speak in a way that is skillful and well thought out, but really mostly letting go of the expectation for outcome. So that idea of renunciation, the idea of letting go, allows us to be much more open to experience and start to see experience in a different way and start to see cause and effect a little bit differently than when we see it when we are limiting our perception by a hope of an expectation for outcome.

There's all sorts of other kinds of renunciation too though. I think one of the beauties of getting older, we all learn it for better or worse. With a decrease in energy, there's just some things we have to let go of, there's some things we have to drop that we may not have wanted to drop before, and the effect of that, at least for me and for many of the people I know, is the letting go of things has just been also an enormous relief and a surprise, hard to do because it is contrary to habitual patterns, but if you can undermine those patterns or uproot those patterns, or, in the alternative, if life puts you in a situation where you have to let go, we sometimes see the benefit.

**James Shaheen:** You know, you also mentioned inner renunciation, and you say that inner renunciation is less about giving up worldly things than changing how we view and prioritize them. So how do we do this?

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**Susan Kaiser Greenland:** I talk in the book a lot about takeaways, simple practices that you can drop into every day. But this is also where practice really comes in not just handy but is really important. If we allow ourselves the time and the space to practice, all of a sudden we start to have different insights into the activity of our minds and our hearts. And with that comes a letting go. And sometimes this can take quite a while. Sometimes it happens in an instant.

As we get more insight into the ways that we get caught inside of ourselves or the ways that we get into in our own way, that creates an inner kind of renunciation, an inner kind of letting go, that honestly, I don't know if you guys have had this experience because you've been practicing for a very long time, sometimes we have that inner renunciation, but yet our habits are so well formed, we find ourselves doing things that we don't know until after we did it, “Oh, that's one of the things I'm trying to interrupt.” So we have to work between the habitual patterns and the insights that we have through our practice.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah, it can be very simple. For instance, I think of something very clever to say, but it's unkind, and it's so tempting to say it, and sometimes I'm even aware of it, but letting that go, just that little thing go can precipitate a change that is unexpected and for the better,

So you say that one of the Tibetan terms for renunciation can be translated as the determination to be free. Can you say more about this term? What is it that we are determined to be free of?

**Susan Kaiser Greenland:** Well, I think what we're determined to be free of, again, are these habitual patterns that get in the way of our seeing things as they really are, these habitual patterns that get in the way of our seeing the world as a much vaster, much more interconnected, much more constantly changing, much more mysterious, and much more joyful place than sometimes we see things as.

So our perspectives are so narrow, even under the best of circumstances. I mean, if we look at what dogs and cats and bats and dolphins can pick up in our environment that we completely



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miss, it leads just to this sense of humility about what we can really perceive or pick up with our all-too-limited human perceptions.

So this idea of being determined to be free of whatever it is inside of us that makes us so absolutely certain about things, determined to be free of a limited perspective so that we can break open our perspective and start to feel a little bit differently and start to see things a little bit differently.

**Sharon Salzberg:** So one of the things you discuss is our search for meaning and belonging, and you quote Salje Rinpoche in asserting that our true home is inside us. So can you say more about our tendencies to reach for lasting joy outside of ourselves?

**Susan Kaiser Greenland:** I love that quote. It's fantastic. And the quote is from a story from Mingyur Rinpoche when he was a young boy and he was in a three-year retreat. And if I remember correctly, he went a little young to be in a three-year retreat, and he was very homesick. And that's where that quote came from. That sense of longing and that sense of yearning that so many of us have and that actually inspired us to sit on cushions for an awful long period of time that was often fueled by some kind of a yearning, there's some kind of a longing that we don't really know what that is. And from this tradition, that longing is a homesickness. It's a longing to get back to your true nature.

And there's a great story that not just is the true nature always with us, but the true nature is always under our feet. In the story, and I'm sure I will get it wrong, but very quickly, the story is that people are looking for treasure, looking for a way to find riches, and it turns out it was always under the home. They just needed to dig down to find this treasure. So the idea that the treasure is always under our feet, we just need to connect to it, to settle down. And again, that's where all of the stress-reduction strategies, mindfulness-based strategies that our friends in psychology have really helped us develop, are so important because it's very tough to connect to

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these innate human qualities. Mingyur Rinpoche calls them awareness, love, compassion, wisdom, and joy.

And those qualities, it's tough to connect with them and stay with them when our nervous systems are ratcheted up. So that's why sometimes we talk about mindfulness first. It's mindfulness-based practices that help us ground ourselves so that we have the mental capacity and the physical regulation to be able to take a deep breath and tap into these qualities. And when we do, that's where the yearning starts to ease.

**Sharon Salzberg:** So it seems that if we're always looking, in effect, in the wrong place, if the treasure is within us, the home is within us, and we're looking outside of ourselves, that we continually feel impoverished, we feel depleted, or we feel we don't have enough. So I wonder if you could go into some more depth about how do we return to that true home within ourselves.

**Susan Kaiser Greenland:** Yeah. I mean, well, Sharon, you do this so beautifully in all of your work. So the first thing we need to do is find ways to help us get more grounded and spacious. And that's where these very simple things like relationship, like connection, interpersonal connection is an important one that's often left to the side in meditation circles, where we're moving our attention away from what we're thinking about into a present-moment experience, into an image. Perhaps we're visualizing an image. Perhaps we repeat a word or a sensory experience, like the feeling of our breathing, the sound in the room. That'll help us ground ourselves.

At least for me, what I have found I really needed to do was just keep reminding myself over and over again, really set the intention to remind myself to take a moment and to interrupt something I was doing and look for where is the attention here, where is my attention, or where's the balance, where can I find the Middle Way, or where's the compassion, or can I bring more playfulness and joy to this?

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So the idea of learning these strategies to ground ourselves, reminding ourselves to interrupt ourselves when we get on a trajectory and just look and look for these qualities and see if bringing those qualities into what we say and do is going to give us a little bit more ease.

And also, there's always a ripple effect. The minute we become a little less neurotic, the minute we become a little bit less reactive, a little bit more patient, a little kinder, that ripples out in the world.

And the last thing I want to say about that is I just love the phrase “I remind myself” or “We remind ourselves” because it is a nod to the remembering function of mindfulness. One of the translations is to remember. So the idea of don't expect yourself to always be connected to these qualities, but the more that we can remind ourselves to take a look, the more that we can remind ourselves to settle in, the more that, that pattern becomes developed.

**James Shaheen:** Susan, you also explore how we can work with stress effectively, and one method you suggest is to focus on what's good. So how can we learn to counter our negativity bias and actually take in the good?

**Susan Kaiser Greenland:** Yeah, that's so important. And I've got to tell you with the work that I do with teachers and with parents, just helping them understand that there is such a thing as a negativity bias is huge because we all know we focus on the bad, but we don't really often know why. So understanding that we are hardwired to pay attention to what scares us because by paying attention to what scares us, we're able to take care of business and keep ourselves and our families safe, for evolutionary reasons, to reproduce or whatever. So the idea that we are hardwired to pay more attention to what scares us is really helpful to people because then when they leave a party and they're thinking they generally had a good time, but the only thing they're remembering on the drive home is that snarky comment somebody made to them, and they're

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thinking, “Why am I doing that? Oh yeah, that's this hardwired survival mechanism.” So then we can offset that.

And I've read different studies that say that it takes five positive inputs to equal the weight of one negative; I've read studies that say it takes ten positive inputs to equal the weight of one negative one. Personally, I tend to always wonder how accurate those numbers can be. But the general sense that it takes more positive than it does negative to offset this hardwired survival mechanism is really, really useful. So a practice is you acknowledge what's lousy that's going on in your life right at that moment, “Oh, I spilled the orange juice, and it was the last glass I had and kids are going to school,” and then immediately go, “But what are three good things?” So we don't take the bad thing and sweep it under the rug. We don't pretend that whatever is scaring us or bothering us or worrying us didn't happen. But then we try to broaden our perspective to include the good that is happening now too.

**James Shaheen:** You know, it can be really a challenge to focus on the good. We look around, whether it's social media or on television, online, YouTube, wherever, and we see such cruelty in the world. And it's easy to lose faith in the good, and it can feel very hopeless. But you quote the writer F. Scott Fitzgerald, who once wrote that one should be able to see that things are hopeless yet be determined to make them otherwise. So what does this look like in practice, in the face of these daunting negativity bias odds?

**Susan Kaiser Greenland:** It goes back to something we were talking about earlier. You do what you can with what's in front of you, and at the same time, we need to let go of hope for specific results or expectations, or not let go of hope, let go of the expectation for specific results. Certainly we still hope, certainly we still have the aspiration, but we do what's in front of us. And then we know that there will be a ripple effect from that. It's just plain old cause and effect, one of our many universal themes that cut across all these traditions. So we do what we can to the best that we can, recognizing, again, the limitations of our human understanding, because we

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can't possibly know all the causes and conditions that are going around the specific decisions we make.

When I look back and realize how often I've been wrong, how often I have stepped in trying to help people or fix something because I assume that some specific cause or condition had happened and it turns out I was wrong and I actually just made matters worse, it's unbelievably humbling. So that doesn't mean I shouldn't try to make things better. It doesn't mean I shouldn't do my best. It just means to do so with a good dose of humility and with a letting go of the expectation for what it's going to actually accomplish and just showing up, doing it again and again and again to the best of our ability,

**Sharon Salzberg:** So when we are talking about these ripple effects, we're really talking about the relationship between inner and outer transformation. So I wonder if there's anything you would like to say more about that topic.

**Susan Kaiser Greenland:** Yeah, I just think that in my experience, and I'm getting a little bit older now, so I've got some years of experience there, the real, meaningful transformation that I've seen take place in the world in small ways—I'm not talking about societal changes; I'm talking about changes in human beings that I have worked with or that I know—that kind of transformation that stays and that sticks usually starts with something internal, usually starts with some kind of inner work, whether the inner work is formal work through therapy, formal work through meditation practice, or whether it was forced upon somebody by life circumstances. But that kind of inner work, that kind of inner transformation just naturally leads to changes in the world, and those changes in the world have a quality of easefulness and effortlessness that's really quite beautiful when they spring out of this inner transformation.

**James Shaheen:** Susan, you also discuss the importance of finding a sense of balance and preventing burnout, which is something that we've been exploring a lot on this podcast. So what

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are some of the methods you've developed to counteract burnout? I know Sharon's done a lot of work there too.

**Susan Kaiser Greenland:** This is something that I first learned about in Ruth King's “Mindful of Race” course. I took that yearlong course for her first cohort, which I would strongly recommend anybody take. It's just a really transformational course. But she talked about safety needs in the context of group dynamics, and then I did a deep dive into researching them because I found them so helpful. And one of the things that I think really helps with burnout is recognizing, what are our unacknowledged safety needs? What are the things that we are acting on that we may not be aware of because we want to feel safe?

So the idea, if you want to connect that to burnout, it's again doing what Sharon was talking about a minute ago, the inner transformation to lead to the outer transformation, really looking to see, what are your unacknowledged safety needs?

How are the ways that we can tap into the joy and the playfulness that are around us all the time? Another great way to deal with burnout is to get out in nature. Just a change in your physical environment will lead to a change in your mental state, or becoming absorbed in music. So those are ways, again, to tap into the joy and the playfulness that's within and around you all the time. And then the last thing for burnout, I think again, is to really, while lowering your shoulders and relaxing, try to become more and more open to the idea of change and this idea we've talked about before, a little bit of intellectual humility on the capacity of what we can actually know. So the burnout sometimes comes from our trying to control things, and being a little bit more comfortable with not knowing and how everything is changing while still again doing the best we can in the circumstances. Those would be my burnout tips.

**James Shaheen:** You know, a few times in the book you mentioned you're sitting at your desk and diminishing returns set in and you go out and take a walk. So you go on a bit about taking walks, and I thought about it, and I thought, I don't take enough walks. Aside from going to and

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from work or running to the subway, I should just take a walk. That was really nice advice. So you say that the promise of meditation is not enlightenment, it's awareness. What do you mean by this?

**Susan Kaiser Greenland:** Awareness comes first. Really becoming aware of what's happening within and around us is the first step to any kind of transformation and any kind of change. The promise of that type of practice really is the development of awareness. We will become, by taking the time and being open and looking at what's happening within and around us systematically with a set motivation, we will become more aware. And that kind of awareness can lead to insights. And without awareness, it's almost impossible to achieve transformation, that kind of outer transformation that Sharon was talking about.

**James Shaheen:** So you say that awareness can help us to view our mind's activity as empty, like a dream or a reflection in a mirror. So how can awareness help us relate to our thoughts the way we relate to dreams?

**Susan Kaiser Greenland:** Well, I think it starts again with an understanding of three aspects of existence, and they are multiplicity, interdependence, and change. And I can tell you my own experience and the experience of so many people that I've worked with, there's a tendency to think of what's happening as being hard, as being solid, as being fixed. How do we change that perspective? It's again by looking and looking through either formal or informal practice and identifying that all of these things that feel so hard are actually made up of multiple changing interdependent elements. And when we start to see that, things start to get teased apart, and then they start to loosen up a little bit, and then it starts to feel a little bit more empty.

And then how that really connects with the dreamlike state is, this is really helpful when we're trying to explain to people who are not necessarily meditators and trying to understand these ideas for the first time, how many times do you wake up from a dream and think it happened?

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“That's absolutely true. I did that.” It actually made me a little worried, “Oh, no, did I do that?”  
And then, “Ah, no, it was a dream.”

That kind of insight can also happen when we start looking at our thoughts and our emotions. They feel very real. This is one of Tsoknyi Rinpoche's, one of Sharon's teachers and Mingyur Rinpoche's brothers, wonderful pith instructions: it may feel real, but it doesn't mean it's true. So the feelings are real, but it doesn't mean what's actually happening is true. So the dreams, they feel real, but they aren't actually true.

**James Shaheen:** So you mentioned this a little bit earlier, you addressed this a little bit, but how can awareness help us interrupt harmful habits?

**Susan Kaiser Greenland:** Oh, well, awareness is key for that because we just notice we're doing it. It's that simple. We notice that we're doing it, and then we try to interrupt it. And remember again, so many people beat themselves up about these harmful habits. But if these harmful habits are often coming from a nervous system reaction, we can't necessarily stop that from arising, or certainly we can't stop it from arising after it has risen. But what we can do is notice it and interrupt it and have a lightness of touch around it, have a sense of playfulness, “Oh, that's happening again,” have a sense of humor around it. And then over and over again, the solidity of that will start to ease.

**Sharon Salzberg:** So you also explore the principle of *wu wei*, which Thomas Merton called perfect action. How do you define *wu wei*?

**Susan Kaiser Greenland:** I like the backwards law, which is what Alan Watts called it, the backwards law. If you want to talk about a theme that really has applied to my life, the recovering workaholic that I am, the idea of pushing through can often be counterproductive, and perhaps the most productive thing to do is sometimes to ease back, to lighten up, to do less. So the idea of *wu wei* is the idea of the best quality of effort is an effort that is relaxed and that is as



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little as you need to get what you need done. And by doing that, again, going back to the idea of burnout, if we're able to accomplish our tasks in a relaxed state, not a tense state, with as little effort as needed to get the job done, that's going to lessen the effects of burnout and lessen the buildup of the stress that leads to burnout.

**Sharon Salzberg:** You compare it to learning to float. Can you walk us through or float us through this comparison?

**Susan Kaiser Greenland:** I was trying to teach this concept to a bunch of teachers, and it was early on when I was trying to figure out, How do I describe this? And I thought, it's like floating. And I Googled instructions to float to see if that would help me. The instructions to float, if you Google it, are almost lined up identically with the instructions to meditate.

What do you do? You know, you try to keep your posture upright. You imagine there's a string like this holding you in air. As meditators, we do it sitting up, and the string comes from the head. Keep centered, relax. The more you struggle against the water, the more likely you are to drop. The more we struggle against our thoughts and emotions, the more likely we are to get caught up in them. And then, of course, when we do find ourselves not floating, it's time to begin again. And the last instruction for floating was find yourself a buddy, find yourself a friend to take you in shallow water to learn to float. And I thought that's a fabulous instruction for meditation. Find yourself a wonderful teacher. Find yourself a community, other people who are interested in the same, and some meditation buddies to help you begin again and again and again.

**Sharon Salzberg:** Can you speak a little bit about how we can find a balance between allowing and action?

**Susan Kaiser Greenland:** Yeah, I mean, that's tricky. Certainly it's something that I struggle with most every single day. And again, it comes with awareness. We become aware of what our habitual patterns are. My habitual pattern, for example, would be to get tense. My habitual

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pattern is to do the opposite of minimal effort, to do twice as much and try to get it done, three times as much.

So you become aware of that and you allow these old patterns to be as they are. You keep your sense of humor about it. You keep being kind to yourself, so you allow them, but at the same time, by becoming aware of them, you're able to interrupt them and then maybe get the job done in a slightly different way.

**James Shaheen:** You know, you mentioned a sense of humor, and one of the lessons of the book is learning not to take yourself so seriously or too seriously, and one of your unexpected mantras is “Who gives a shit?” So could you say more about this mantra? How can we learn to take ourselves less seriously?

**Susan Kaiser Greenland:** Yeah, well, that actually emerged on a meditation retreat with Tsoknyi Rinpoche up at Mount Madonna years ago. I was going through a very challenging situation, and I had a lot of retreat experience, so I was very surprised that I couldn't settle on this retreat. And we have a friend, his name is John Romano, I name check him in the book, and he tells this story, which I will spare you, but it's a crazy story about a circus act and all sorts of crazy stuff happens, and at the end of it, the punchline was, “And who gives a shit?” And I was sitting there meditating exhausted. I hadn't been sleeping. And all of a sudden I heard, the voice in my head was John Romano saying, “Who gives a shit?”

It broke things through. I just thought it was hilarious. And all of a sudden it broke open my perspective, and I realized all these things I was worried about that were going on at home would still be there when I got back and right now, I just to let it go. So it didn't stop these stories from coming in my mind, but it interrupted them with this mantra.

I'm sure Sharon will recognize this. I don't think it's a coincidence that this came up at Tsoknyi Rinpoche's retreat because he says, “So what?” That's his mantra, which is a little bit more polite,

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and so the idea is just you can really let this go and do it with love and compassion and a sense of humor.

**James Shaheen:** Susan, anything else before we close?

**Susan Kaiser Greenland:** Just thank you guys. I really appreciate it. We've known each other for years. I appreciate the relationships, and I appreciate all the good that you guys put out in the world and all that you guys do. So thank you.

**James Shaheen:** Well, many thanks to you, Susan. So Susan Kaiser Greenland, it's been a pleasure. Thanks so much for joining us. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *Real-World Enlightenment*, available now. We like to close these podcasts with a short guided meditation, so I'll hand it over to Susan, who may teach us to float.

**Susan Kaiser Greenland:** Ah, right. Well, let's see what we can do about that. All right. So find yourself, if you like, if you want to join us and stay with us, please find a comfortable place where you can relax. You could be sitting, you could be standing, you could be lying down. This will be short, only a couple of minutes. And let's start by just doing a quick scan through our body, starting with the crown of our heads. We'll end with our toes. And see if you see any tension, feel any tension. If you do, just see if you can bring some softness to that tension and relaxation. So let's start with the crown of our head. Imagine you have a woolen cap, the kind you wear in the wintertime, and that you're pulling it over the crown of your head. See if you can feel that cap come down over the back of your head, the side of your head, your forehead, and your ears. Now bring that same warm attention down into your face and notice the area around your eyes. Sometimes we hold tension there. If you're holding tension, see if you can just soften your cheeks and the area around your mouth and jaws. Soften if you feel some tension. Your neck, your shoulders, and often our shoulders are up. See if you can just lower them a little bit and relax. And now bring this warm, friendly attention to your upper arms, to your elbows, to your lower arms, to your hands and fingers. Bring warm and friendly attention to your torso, to

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your middle area. If you're sitting or standing, see if you can pull your shoulder blades back a little bit and see how that shift feels. Can you stay upright like that and still relaxed?

Now bring that warm and friendly attention to your upper legs, to your knees, to your lower legs, your feet, and your toes. Now, if you're standing or sitting, feel your feet against the floor. If you're sitting cross legged or on your back, just bring your attention to the soles of your feet.

Now, for the last beat of this practice, just bring your attention to some sensory experience either in or around you. It can be sounds, it can be the sensation of breathing, it can be the feeling of your body against the chair or the floor. And see if you can relax into that experience. You don't need to chase that experience. Just let it come to you. See if you can stay with it with a little bit less effort than you usually do. See if you can stay with your experience with a little more playfulness and joy and relaxation than perhaps you usually do when you meditate.

And if you're one of the lucky ones who always feels relaxed and joyful and playful when you meditate, just soak it up if you want to. Just drink up that experience.

If your mind wanders or isn't sure what to do, that's OK. Perfectly natural. Just bring your mind back to a sensory experience and rest.

When you're ready, you can open your eyes. If it's helpful, you can wiggle your fingers and wiggle your toes. I hope that this experience was helpful.

**James Shaheen:** Thank you so much, Susan, and thank you, Sharon. You've been listening to *Life As It Is* with Susan Kaiser Greenland. Tricycle is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to making Buddhist teachings and practices broadly available. We are pleased to offer our podcasts freely. If you would like to support the podcast, please consider subscribing to Tricycle or making a donation at [tricycle.org/donate](https://tricycle.org/donate).

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