

Life As It Is

“Breaking Bias”

Episode #35 with Anu Gupta

September 18, 2024



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Anu Gupta: One of the things that's super important, particularly in our times right now, is for us to extend compassion to ourselves, and grace to ourselves, even in moments where we're being a jerk. Because I think underneath that judgment, there's some sort of pain. There's some sort of memory or concept or attachment. And compassion allows us to reach and access that. And over time, if our will is there, to transform it.

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 Anu Gupta. Anu is an educator, lawyer, research scientist, and meditation teacher, and his work focuses on harnessing mindfulness and compassion practices for social change. In his new book, *Breaking Bias: Where Stereotypes and Prejudices Come From—and the Science-Backed Method to Unravel Them*, he weaves together Buddhist teachings and insights from modern neuroscience to lay out practical tools for dismantling bias within ourselves and in the world around us. In our conversation with Anu, we talk about what it looks like to imagine a world without bias, how our fundamental ignorance of our interconnectedness distorts our perceptions, the dangers of getting stuck in outdated stories about ourselves and others, and how we can access and strengthen our innate capacity for compassion. Plus, Anu leads us in a guided meditation. So here's our conversation with Anu Gupta.

James Shaheen: So I'm here with Anu Gupta and my co-host Sharon Salzberg. Hi, Anu. Hi, Sharon. It's great to be with you both.

Anu Gupta: Hi there, thank you so much for having me.

Sharon Salzberg: Hi.

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James Shaheen: So, Anu, we're here to talk about your new book, *Breaking Bias: Where Stereotypes and Prejudices Come From—and the Science-Backed Method to Unravel Them*. But first, I'd like to ask you a bit about your background. You've worked as a lawyer, research scientist, educator, and meditation teacher. Could you tell us a bit about your journey?

Anu Gupta: Yeah, absolutely. Thank you, first of all, for making the time to talk about this important work. My background is, well, first of all, I just love the dharma. I've been in love with the dharma for over twenty years now. I was born in a Hindu family, but in the Hindu pantheon, the Buddha is one of the avatars of Krishna, so I grew up with this idea of Lord Buddha and knew about a lot of the stories. But it was actually in college when I studied abroad in India and traveled across Ladakh and visited some of these really remote monasteries that were falling off of cliffs that really kind of sparked my interest into the dharma.

After college I lived in Myanmar and started a nonprofit there teaching education and teacher trainings for folks in monastic schools. It was there that this idea of bias was first sparked in my consciousness from the external world. Personally, I'd experienced a lot of bias that remained unacknowledged until that point, but when I was in Myanmar, and this was in 2006, so before the pro-democracy movement really took off, and there were a lot of inter-ethnic challenges, which remain to this day. I was teaching in a very diverse community in Mandalay, working with about twenty different ethnic groups, and I began to notice the stereotyping each one of the groups had about themselves and one another. So as I continued to work internationally, I got my master's in international development and then went to law school around international human rights, I began to see that within the academic spaces, this idea of bias was rarely acknowledged.

Personally, I am an immigrant. I was born in India, and my family moved to the US when I was 10. I grew up bicultural, definitely with a lot of biases in India, particularly around gender, caste, class, and religion. But when I moved to the US, I lived in a community where there weren't a lot of Indian immigrants, so I was definitely the other, and I experienced a lot of bullying because of

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my name, because of my skin color, because of my religious background, and I just suppressed all of that for a long time.

When I was in law school, because I hadn't acknowledged a lot of these challenges and kept on receiving the denial of, “Oh, bias doesn't exist, Obama's president, what are you talking about?,” I thought I was crazy. I'd started believing these voices that were external to me and almost attempted my life. I was on the eighteenth story of my building at the time, about to jump off. But it was that moment of grace where instead of falling forward onto the midtown Manhattan traffic, I fell back into my apartment.

It was that day that really began my breaking bias journey in committing really deeply to the science of bias and understanding what that science is at a professional level but also on a personal level, really dedicating myself to a serious dharma practice. Little did I know then in 2009 when I began that journey that it would become my profession five or six years later, where my passion for social justice and human rights would coalesce with a lot of the teachings of the dharma, which is what the book is really about.

James Shaheen: Well, you say that In a moment of grace, you suddenly saw that the stereotypes that you felt trapped in were just thoughts. I take it that was a turning point for you when you were actually contemplating ending your life, and yet you had this moment of clarity. Can you say more about that?

Anu Gupta: Yeah, basically, when I think about that moment over and over again and reflect on what happened and what my mind was going through, it was racing really quickly. I started noticing in my mind a lot of the stereotypes, a lot of the slurs that were directed at me, from being a terrorist to being a faggot to XYZ, a lot of just expletives one after another. And as I was listing them off, there was a space in my mind between those ideas and who this I was, what I now begin to understand as the awareness behind the awareness of these concepts and ideas. And yet there was this urgency of there's just too much anxiety, there's too much sadness, there's too

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much unacknowledged grief that I'm carrying, so let's just get out of this because it's too painful. The *vedana* of it is too painful. And yet, the moment of grace was really falling backwards and what ensued right after that.

Sharon Salzberg: So you've said that this experience led you to seek answers in a variety of spiritual traditions. Can you say more about that and the role that Buddhism played in that?

Anu Gupta: Yeah, I think it's really interesting. I've always been a seeker. I was born in a Hindu family and initiated into a tradition known as Kriya Yoga with Paramahansa Yogananda in college. It's not something that I deeply practiced back then. In college, because of the Islamophobia that I experienced because of my appearance in the aftermath of 9/11, I ended up majoring in Islamic studies. Those were the root traditions that I really started to learn more and more about. But it was 2009, this turning point that really made me more curious about the dharma itself. I'd been to a few Vipassana retreats at that point, day-longs in the UK and in the US, and when I was in Myanmar, I was working at a Buddhist monastery, as well as in South Korea, where I was teaching at a Zen school.

But I was like, “I really want to understand what my mind is about.” And so the following summer, I ended up going to Taiwan on a month-long retreat where I actually took vows. I lived as a monk in the Chan order, Pure Land Buddhist order, and that's where I began to really sit. This was an extended silent retreat, and I really began to sit with the discomfort of a lot of the pain and the suffering that this body had undergone.

It was just a lot of stories, a lot of noticing, acknowledging, and then feeling the sensations and then complementing that experience with meditation and being taught the dharma by these wonderful Taiwanese nuns who were leading us through Tai Chi but also teaching us the basics, the 101 of Buddhism.

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Upon returning to New York, I found a wonderful community, New York Insight, in New York and started going there for quite some time and started attending long retreats and really studying the dharma more seriously.

Sharon Salzberg: So when you were in that monastic program where you temporarily ordained, you say it was on that retreat that you had your first encounter with the luminosity of mind. I'm wondering if you could say more about that.

Anu Gupta: Yeah, this was toward the end of the month. There were about eighty-five or so of us from around the world, mostly young people under 30. Many of them were scholars or studying to be scholars of Buddhism. As one of our last ceremonies, we had to actually walk about half a mile from our retreat center to the temple—there was a huge Buddhist temple on the complex—while we bowed. We'd take two steps, do a full body prostration, and we'd stand up, do a full body prostration, and we did that for half a mile to the steps of the temple. It was a whole retinue, and it probably took several hours.

When we walked in, there were about a hundred Taiwanese nuns singing the *Heart Sutra* and ten thousand buddhas lit with candles. And in that moment, of course, the body is tired and the mind is actually still by that time. And that was when I was like, “Whoa.” It was something so much more than this being and the attachments I had that felt more real. And I wasn't the only one that was just flooded with this idea of interbeing that moment. All of us felt it. It was deeply, deeply profound.

James Shaheen: You mentioned the luminosity of mind, but even so, we spend most of our time trapped in delusions, particularly the delusion of separateness, which you define as “our human tendency to forget, misunderstand, or misconstrue the big picture.” Can you say more about this fundamental ignorance of our interconnectedness and how it distorts our perceptions of ourselves and the world?

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Anu Gupta: A few things. First, the way I define bias is really that it's a learned habit. There are two types of biases. There are conscious biases, which are learned false beliefs, and there are unconscious biases that are learned habits of thoughts. Both of these types of biases really distort how we perceive, reason, remember, and make decisions.

Now, for me, the concept of karma is something I was contemplating on early in my journey, and my understanding of karma is that whatever we experience in our thoughts, words, and deeds are a consequence of various causes and conditions. So when we see bias within ourselves and our society, they too are a consequence of various causes and conditions. And that's the starting point for me to really understand and begin this work of breaking bias: to begin to unearth what those causes and conditions are.

The deeper I went into that, I began seeing that a lot of the causes and conditions of bias are rooted in what's known as the three root defilements in our minds of greed, hatred, and delusion of our separateness. For example, the delusion of race is a concept. Where did it come from? How did our human species get infected by this idea in less than four hundred years? This word itself didn't exist in the English language until the 1580s. And then once these ideas start percolating in our consciousness, we start attaching ourselves to them and they become real for us—real but not true. And that's delusion because we forget that at the absolute level we are these human beings, these bodies with the five aggregates regardless of our color, our gender, what have you. That's, for me, the hopeful aspect of breaking bias is to not forget the relative reality but also to really remember with mindfulness the absolute reality and to bridge the divide between the two, particularly when it comes to alleviation of suffering that so many beings experience due to bias.

James Shaheen: You know, it can be so easy to get stuck in our own stories, and you say one source of suffering is that we only see our ideas of others rather than truly seeing them. Can you

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tell us a bit about how we can get trapped in *sankharas*, or mental formations? How can meditation interrupt these conditioned patterns and harmful narratives?

Anu Gupta: So *sankharas*, or *samskaras* in Sanskrit, basically my understanding of this word is that these are habits, habits of thoughts, habits of mind, mental habits, which include concepts, ideas, attachments, and emotions. It's basically the stories we play over and over again in our minds. A lot of times it's due to not something that we've done but we've been conditioned by our society, by our surroundings.

There's a riddle I share in the book: A father and his son get into a car accident. The father dies on the spot, and the son is taken to the emergency room. The surgeon walks in and says, “I can't operate on this boy. He is my son.” How could this be?

I shared this riddle with my mother, and she basically gave me, “Oh, because the surgeon is an adoptive father or a grandfather or a Catholic priest who was a father,” but in her imagination, the idea of a surgeon was so deeply tied to someone who was a man. And this is despite the fact that my mother, who is a woman, is a surgeon herself.

This is a micro example of *sankhara*, just those habitual patterns of association to concepts and emotions that get so deeply tied and then have consequences in our mind. The way to interrupt them is literally, as you said, become aware of them. When we think of surgeons, when we think of teachers, who are the humans that come to mind? Really bringing them to awareness.

James Shaheen: You know, I hadn't thought of this question before, but earlier when I asked about your background, I mentioned that you were also a research scientist and you study bias, and I wonder about the nature of bias because sometimes it's a heuristic. It's a shortcut. It's something that we rely on in our everyday lives. Where does it go bad?

Anu Gupta: Yeah, it's interesting because in our everyday language, we use bias more broadly, particularly in the context of the book around our interactions with other humans. A classic

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example is, “Of course I’m biased. If I’m being attacked by a lion, I need to make a decision.” Yes, that’s true. That’s something that we’re wired for. But if, for example, most recently there was another murder of an innocent Black person. A police officer walked inside Sonya Massey’s home and she was holding something in her hand. She happens to be a Black woman, and she was shot dead in her own home. What’s going on in the nervous system, in the mind of this police officer when he sees another human being who happens to have dark skin? And that is where bias is harmful. And it’s not just in our heads; it’s really a somatic experience. This is where sankharas are so important because when we have these false concepts attached to human identities, they also have accompanying them a vedana, a feeling tone, an affect. They have accompanying them emotions that manifest somatically in our bodies. So for me, the process of breaking bias is really releasing these biases and really decolonizing ourselves, neuro-decolonizing ourselves, as Dr. Bonnie Duran says.

James Shaheen: Yeah, you know, you mentioned somatic experience. The delusion of separateness can also contribute to a sense of disembodiment, where we’re separated from our own felt experience. So how can meditative practice bring us back to our bodies?

Anu Gupta: Yeah, I’ll just speak for myself, because it’s really different for different people, but I think for me, you’re absolutely right. We are living in an age where so many of us are completely disembodied. I’ll just speak for myself: That’s who I was fifteen years ago. I lived completely from the neck up. Of course, I worked out, I ate healthy and did those things, but I relied on my mind, and I actually also falsely believed that I was because I thought, this Cartesian lie that I think, therefore I am. But I and most humans are so much more than just what we think, right? So I think what meditation helps us do is, the four foundations of mindfulness, for example, really help us become intimate with the fullness of what it means to be a human being. The Buddha in all his wisdom said the first foundation is the body. It’s really knowing what’s happening in the body, the fullness of the body, not just the head. And then we move deeper and deeper into the vedana, the feeling tone, concepts, and the various lists that come up,

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and that's basically that expansion of awareness is what allows us to then see the nonself, the *anatta*, the interbeing, that we're all a part of.

Sharon Salzberg: So when we're stuck in our own sankharas or assumptions, or sometimes we just say stories, we also tend to isolate ourselves and contract. Let's talk about how meditation can help us move from contraction to expansion, which is one of my favorite topics, of course.

James Shaheen: A huge part of your last book, Sharon.

Sharon Salzberg: That's right.

Anu Gupta: Yeah, I feel like I've learned that from you, Sharon. This is where practices of loving-kindness, compassion, the brahmaviharas, and what scientists call prosocial behaviors, really cultivating these skills that help us be prosocial and find connection. And for me personally, one of the things I did for a while in the beginning of my healing journey was practice loving-kindness meditation every day.

I mean, I still do. It's become a habit, and it's every day even now, but for the first two years, twenty minutes, just for myself: May I be happy, may I be healthy, may I be safe, may I live with ease. And then just changing up the words: May I be free from anxiety, may I be free from depression. Just really beautiful well wishes. Sometimes it became *mudita*, or sympathetic joy meditation. At first, it felt very automatic and plastic even, but over time there was a softening that created for me this possibility to see the fullness of who I was and this being that I am, which simultaneously allowed me to be more present with others, to be able to share who I am and what I feel and not be afraid.

So James, you had asked earlier about all these stories that I was living with in my own head. I was afraid of acknowledging them and sharing those stories because just as they were denied in my immediate circles in academic and professional settings, I didn't bring them into my friend circles. I didn't bring them into my familial circles because I was too afraid. But then I started

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feeling a sense of self-confidence, and the more I shared, the more others shared with me, and that's where that really would fuel this work: for me to feel that, “Oh, I'm not alone, this is a human challenge that so many of us are experiencing.” When I gave my TED Talk in 2017, I was so scared to have my story be out there in such a way. And I had hundreds and hundreds of people reach out sharing their own story, people from around the world, from the Middle East to Latin America, whose backgrounds are completely different from mine, and yet that experience of bias, that experience of marginalization, that experience of thinking that one is crazy for feeling a certain way was so pervasive. And the antidote that I always ask them to use is loving-kindness.

Sharon Salzberg: I know it's also really common to get stuck in shame through things getting revealed through meditation or through introspection of any kind, actually, where we're confronting our own biases or coming to terms with very outdated ways of viewing the world. So how can we learn to work with that kind of shame productively rather than further contracting into it? And please feel free to talk more about loving-kindness, which is certainly my favorite topic.

Anu Gupta: Yeah, well, I think that's so true. And that's the background I came from when I was in the academic environment, studying as a social scientist and then in law school. The structure of that world even to this day is really right and wrong. You can't say, think, or do anything wrong. If you do, you have to suppress it.

But the nature of bias is that it's conditioned. These are learned habits, learned false beliefs. Of course they're going to arise. So for me, it's been really important, particularly as I've been doing this work, that we have some shared agreements in the work of breaking bias. One of the most important agreements is using “I” statements, so really owning our experience: I think, I believe, in my experience, what I've been taught, I thought. I give a whole explanation of this in the book and why it's so important, particularly in building psychological safety and trust across differences. The other is really commitment to dialogue, which to me has two wings,

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understanding and compassion. For understanding, it's really important to extend ourselves and one another the benefit of the doubt. Bias is a challenge that has afflicted human beings for millennia, for thousands of years.

So for us, for me, that extension of grace and benefit of the doubt that we're all in this human soup together and that we're all struggling is so important. And when shame arises, when guilt arises, when blame arises, really holding that and, with mindfulness, noticing that, oh, this is shame, oh, this is blame, and holding that with compassion. This is the work. Neurons that fire together wire together, so really rewiring our ways of being with ourselves and with one another and moving beyond these destinations of right and wrong to a place of unknown. Part of it is like, who would I be, who would our cultures be, our workplaces be, if there was no bias? We have to really give ourselves permission to feel and experience that within our own bodies.

Sharon Salzberg: So what does the world look like if you're imagining a world without bias, and how can mindfulness help us in that process of imagining such a world?

Anu Gupta: Yeah. What do you all think? I mean, I'll start off, and I'd love to hear your reflections on this too. I'm a big fan of Dr. King's. If I think about three people, Gandhi, Dr. King, and Thich Nhat Hanh, and for all of them, this idea of a beloved community was really important. And Dr. King said that our goal is to build a beloved community, and this will require qualitative changes in our souls and quantitative changes in our lives. For me, he's really talking about breaking bias, making those qualitative and quantitative changes, and it really came from a place of, oh yeah, breaking bias is really spiritual work. It's because bias is a crisis of the spirit. We have to see what our society tells us to ignore so we can alleviate suffering. And I think for me, when I look at the communities that Thich Nhat Hanh built, it was really rooted in those truths of building beloved communities, communities of presence, of compassion. And I think there are a lot of similar micro communities around the world, whether they're attached to a faith tradition or not. And I feel that a world without bias is something like that at a meta level. They are societies of deep care and deep concern where if someone is hurting, they have places to go

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for help. People show up to serve them. But yeah, I'd be curious to hear what else, what other images come for you both.

Sharon Salzberg: I think that is very beautiful, and you know, I think we see it not just in large-scale ways, but we see it when somebody has a bias against somebody or is making a certain assumption, and then somehow it's dropped, and there's this moment of coming together, which is like pure learning. I have a colleague who used to say all the time, “Everyone's just doing the best that they can,” and I would kind of grumble inside like, “I mean, I think surely we could do better.” But then I read the quotation from Maya Angelou, where she said something like, “When you know better, you do better.”

Anu Gupta: Yeah. It's so true.

Sharon Salzberg: We have so much potential, even the most narrow-minded of us, in a way. Not that they will necessarily unleash their potential and actualize it, but it's there, and that potential, that capacity is in all of us, and that, I think, is a breathtaking view of possibility.

Anu Gupta: One thing that's so interesting, because I think for me, the deeper I go into my own spiritual practices, into the dharma, the more I realize that, for me, this idea of justice, right, social justice, and that it must happen now, it was oftentimes, particularly going to law school, held with a very clenched fist, like it must happen in this lifetime. And practice has shown me that, oh, I can actually release that attachment to that end, and, with that said, really align my thoughts, words, and deeds with that aspiration. As I was doing research for my book, I came across this powerful book called *The Holy Science* by Swami Sri Yukteswar Giri, who is an Indian monastic from the late 19th century. In the book he really talks about ancient Indian Vedic wisdom and basically calculates time through various yugas. That really helped because he talks about the cycle of time and what's been phrased at the Kali Yuga, the age of darkness. But he said that the age of darkness actually ended in the year 1700 AD, and since then, the age of morality or the Dwapara Yuga really began. I really feel a sense of truth in what he's saying, and

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so many others do too, because so much has changed since the 1700s: the ending of slavery, women's rights, more acceptance of queer people, and a lot of the challenges that blighted human societies prior to 1700 AD.

For me, these meta ideas are what practice in the dharma really provides, a sense of comfort and the importance of keeping our eyes on the prize, as a lot of civil rights leaders said, because ultimately the arc of the moral universe is long and it bends toward justice, and we keep on doing what we need to do to move there.

James Shaheen: Anu, you asked us how we see this, and my first response was I thought of idealism. I thought this was a bit idealistic, and I immediately felt a kind of cynicism, like really? And I wonder, in your work, since this is what you're focused on, what do you find is the biggest cause of resistance when we talk about bias?

Anu Gupta: I think it's misinformation and disinformation. In the book I talk about what's needed to break bias as a PRISM toolkit. These are the five tools. Mindfulness is M. Stereotype replacement is S. Individuation is I. Prosocial behavior and perspective taking are P and R. And I think the biggest cause of resistance is lack of imagination and fixed views. So I think this is, again, one of the stories we've been fed by the causes of bias. There are five causes of bias, story policies, social contact, education, and media. We've been trained to be cynical. We've been trained to be doubtful. And I was one of those guys. I was one of those people who was trained until I went out into the field, until I interacted with people.

I worked at the UN for CEDAW, the Convention for Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and basically worked with women's rights groups from thirteen different countries, Botswana, Laos, Japan, Mozambique, Brazil, you name it, being with these incredibly powerful female leaders who are working in horrific conditions with next to none resources serving hundreds of thousands of people, sometimes millions of people. We just don't know their

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stories. But just because we don't know it doesn't mean it doesn't exist. They are running and are part of thriving communities. I would say thriving beloved communities.

So part of it is that the cynicism is there because we haven't been given alternative realities, or we haven't sought them out ourselves. I grew up in India for the first 10 years, and I grew up on stories around Indian independence and what it took for my ancestors to rid India of probably the most atrocious and extractive regime ever known. Basically, it was a widespread boycott that was rooted in spirit that brought people together, hundreds of thousands of people from all different backgrounds. That was the Gandhian movement that survives to this day. So if we go to a Gandhian ashram today, we see people actually making their own clothes and people serving food and there isn't an exchange of money sometimes even, because they're operating on different forms of currencies.

So I think for those of us who feel cynicism, the first thing is just to, like you did, James, bring that to mindfulness, bring that to awareness using mindfulness, and then we move to the second stage of stereotype replacement. If we can't imagine ourselves, let's do some research and find alternative communities because they exist out there. There's so many people doing incredible, amazing, brave work, just being in this world that are holding this vision.

Sharon Salzberg: So you've described breaking bias as a process of unlearning and relearning, which feels linked to this process of rethinking our own cynicism and doubt. Could you say more about the power of unlearning?

Anu Gupta: I'm alive, that's the power of unlearning. Yeah, I think it's really just unlearning a lot of these stories, right? And one of the stories, actually to James's point, because it's such a poignant point, because a lot of people feel this cynicism and doubt, and it's so pervasive because our media is rooted in those defilements.

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And that's what we take in through our consciousness oftentimes, our education system, even the people we surround ourselves with oftentimes. But if, for those of us who are practitioners of the Buddhist path or any path, the comfort that we get from possible liberation is what keeps us on the path. So I really think that unlearning these habits of thoughts through practice gives us that opportunity, but also relearning. And for relearning, I think community is really important. We have to practice these tools with one another, and we are going to make mistakes and we might feel discomfort in the body. And that's how we grow, slowly.

James Shaheen: Anu, in the book you cite the story of the Buddha's encounters with Mara, and you say you've returned to this story hundreds of times. So can you tell us the story and what we can learn from it, particularly in the context of breaking bias?

Anu Gupta: Yeah, absolutely. So I first learned the story in Myanmar. A few hours before Buddha was enlightened, he had a showdown with Mara. Mara sent him beautiful maidens and threats to his family, to his own body, a whole host of things to trigger in him various derivative states of fear and anger and hatred and lust. And what the Buddha did was bring every single one of those states, mental states, emotional states to awareness. Once he became aware of them, they couldn't intoxicate him any longer. After doing this for a long time, presumably, Mara was tired because whatever Mara threw at him, Buddha was able to vanquish.

So then Mara asked the Buddha, “Well, great, I see that nothing that I'm doing to you is going to work, but who is going to bear witness to your enlightenment?” So again, asking Buddha that, “OK, you can be enlightened, but who's going to bear witness?” And that's when the Buddha actually touched the earth, and the earth shuddered, as it's said in a lot of these mythologies.

For me, that's the point of the story that I really love that touches on this idea of interbeing. I feel that one of the biases that oftentimes we are trained in is bias against our earth, this earth that provides us food, this earth that shelters us, this earth that we're a part of. We share all the elements of our bodies with the earth, but we forget that there's the earth, and she's a living

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being. And in my understanding of the story, what he's saying is, oh, the earth is a living being, and he acknowledges that he needed her acknowledgement to vanquish Mara. And I think that's something that I found so profound and beautiful.

James Shaheen: You also say that the story speaks to our capacity to be more than the worst things we've done. Can you say more about that?

Anu Gupta: Yeah, I mean, I think the first story that comes to mind is another Buddhist fable of Angulimala. He was basically this dude who terrified a lot of people in ancient India by cutting off their fingers and putting them around his neck as a mala. So he basically wore fingers and he was a criminal. It's said that this criminal, after becoming a disciple of the Buddha, was enlightened. So this person who had committed a whole host of awful things could still find forgiveness, could still find reconciliation, and could move on from those atrocious acts. And I don't know if this story is true or not, and it doesn't matter ultimately if it's true or not, but it speaks to our ability to overcome and to heal from the worst things we've ever done. I think that's what gives me comfort, particularly when you think about systemic biases, institutional biases in our society. We can overcome them once we acknowledge them, accept them, and commit ourselves to repair the consequences of those harms. And that's, I feel, the work of our century moving forward.

Sharon Salzberg: We've all taken comfort in the story of Angulimala, and I've actually taken a lot of comfort in the story of the Buddha touching the earth. It's been very important, and in some ways, in both stories, there is also a kind of subtheme that kindness and compassion are inherent to our transformation. They're almost like prerequisites for transformation, whether it's transforming stereotypes or assumptions or our mental afflictions or whatever it is. Let's just talk about how we can access and strengthen that capacity for compassion.

Anu Gupta: Yeah. I think the Buddha really did that, right? If we think about that story, every time Mara threw something more at him, he didn't react to it. He became mindful of it, and with

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compassion, he was like, “OK, this too is rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion. This too is rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion. This too is rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion.” And this act of mindfulness and calling things as they are, without the affect of reactivity, is the effect of compassion. And for me, the practice of compassion is one that really begins with self. There's a phrase that I love: We can't give to others what we don't have for ourselves. One of the things that's super important, particularly in our times right now, is for us to extend compassion to ourselves and grace to ourselves, even in moments where we're being a jerk. Because I think underneath that judgment, there's some sort of pain. There's some sort of memory or concept or attachment. Compassion allows us to reach and access that and over time, if our will is there, to transform it.

Sharon Salzberg: And one last question, maybe we can go back over the PRISM toolkit and you can repeat what those elements are and say a little bit about them.

Anu Gupta: Yeah. So one of my goals with the book was really to simplify this concept of bias, which can sometimes feel very overwhelming and so all-encompassing. There are five causes of bias and there are five solutions to it. For me, the five solutions that I've seen that I'm presenting are of course rooted in ancient Buddhist wisdom but also have been shown by neuroscientists through experiments to work. That's what's known as PRISM, what I call PRISM, which is an acronym for perspective taking, prosocial behavior, individuation, stereotype replacement, and mindfulness.

The way we practice these five steps really begins from M, and then we move our way up to P. Mindfulness is, as both of you know and our world knows, present-moment awareness. For me, around breaking bias, it's really becoming aware of the experience of bias in our minds, noticing the stereotypes, noticing the associations, not suppressing them, really becoming mindful of them, very much like the Buddha did with Mara, with compassion, with understanding, not needing to know, just noticing them as they are.

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Once we notice them, then we move to the second step, which is stereotype replacement. So when we have these stereotypes come up, these prejudices come up in our mind, this is the wiring of our brain, consciously, unconsciously, because of the five causes of bias. We then actively replace them with real examples. So when you think of a leader or an entrepreneur, who comes to mind? Well, what if we were to think of Oprah Winfrey or Malala Yousafza? Folks that we wouldn't otherwise associate as first things, a Black woman, a Muslim woman. So that's where we're beginning to create alternative mental models in our mind.

Moving to individuation, which is just curiosity, decoupling group-based associations from the individual, which requires a mindfulness practice. So if I'm with James, I'm with James, the person who James is versus my ideas of him.

And then we move to the heart practices, prosocial behaviors. These are the tools like compassion, loving-kindness, generosity, gratitude, forgiveness that we can cultivate. So much research has been done around them.

And then lastly, perspective taking, which is the tool of imagination. We've touched on this quite a bit. Can we even imagine a world without bias? But when it comes to breaking bias, it's really imagining what it's like to be in the shoes of another, and it's breaking the boxes all together. This is what good actors do, really. That's why we feel what we feel when we experience good acting. But we have that capacity in ourselves too. One thing I'd say here is that if we can't imagine what it's like to be someone else, we can actually practice perspective taking for someone we admire. And that's been really helpful for me. Like, what would Sharon do if she was in this situation, for example, right? And it really helps because it allows us to root ourselves in our deeper values.

James Shaheen: So, Anu Gupta, thanks so much for joining. It's been a great pleasure. And for our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *Breaking Bias*, available now. We like to close these episodes with a short guided meditation, so I'm going to turn it over to you, Anu.

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Anu Gupta: Thank you so much. I'm just going to invite everyone to just come to take a comfortable seat. Wherever you are, you can bring your eyes to a gentle close, or you can place your gaze at a stationary point in front of you. If you're driving or if you're outside, you can pause now and return to this exercise later.

For the first few moments, just become aware of your breath, noticing the breath entering the body, noticing the breath leaving the body, and finding a sense of relaxation and release in your body, from the top of your head to the bottom of your feet. Breathing in, breathing out, and just finding a sense of gratitude for this body that you inhabit, this body that's your home, this body that you've had since the very moment you were born.

Bringing to mind any changes this body has gone through, this too, this too, this too. And yet, this body's still here, different now than it has been. Just feeling that sense of gratitude for the life this body has helped you have with its ten thousand joys and ten thousand sorrows.

Now, as we root ourselves in our bodies, see if you can share a few well wishes with this body, with this being that you are. May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I be safe. May I live with ease. May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I be safe. May I live with ease.

And really feeling the impact of these words on your body, the impact of these noble aspirations for your being, noticing the somatic experience, the feeling tone, and holding that just as it is, the sense of gratitude and love for this being. As we close this meditation, just extending these same well wishes to all beings everywhere. May all beings everywhere be happy. May they be healthy. May they be safe. And may they live with ease.

And after your next exhale, you can bring your chin to your chest, stretching the back of your neck. If your eyes were closed, you can open them and return to the space you're in.

James Shaheen: Thank you, Anu, and thank you, Sharon.

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Anu Gupta: Thank you, James. Thank you, Sharon. What a gift to be with you all.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, thank you.

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