



Karen Liebenguth: Mindfulness in nature

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Karen is a qualified coach, a Focusing practitioner and an accredited mindfulness teacher. She works with individuals and organisations to foster personal development and specialises in working with clients outdoors in London's parks and green space where she believes insight, change and creativity can happen most naturally. Karen regularly runs mindfulness courses, workshops and walks. Her joys in life are being in nature, Buddhist practice, living simply and communally and friendships. Karen is German and has lived in London for 15 years.

Serge Prengel is the editor of Active Pause® project.

For better or worse, this transcript retains the spontaneous, spoken-language quality of the podcast conversation.

Serge: *Karen, you've had a long standing interest in nature and in mindfulness.*

Karen: Yes, it actually goes back to my childhood. I'm very grateful to my mother - who's still alive - who would take us out, my sister and I, every weekend on our bike, on foot, looking at flowers, looking at trees - we still go out together when I visit my mother but less now – and then when I was a little older, I would spend a lot of time in the stables with the horses.

We lived on the outskirts of Hamburg, a big city in the north of Germany, so I feel very fortunate that I lived in nature and surrounded by nature. I actually think it's helped me stay well and resourceful when I was young, because it wasn't always easy at home with my mother working full-time, and my sister and I not getting on so well.

Spending much time outside helped me stay connected to myself, helped me through some difficult emotional times. The outdoors, nature, were like a safe container for me, holding me in a certain kind of way that I didn't know consciously at the time. Intuitively, unconsciously, I could sense it.

Serge: *Yes, that sense of feeling held by nature, even though at the time you may not have been able to articulate it ...*

Karen: Yes, I can see that so clearly now. Now I have the awareness and thanks to my mindfulness practice I know that I am held in nature. The knowing that nature is there, always, in any weather and throughout the seasons. I also know that nature is able to hold any of my moods, my mental states, my stories, my ups and downs. And my joys too.

Nature is a very reliable companion that I can go to whenever I want, that can help me come back to myself, come back to my senses when I feel lost or unsettled or disorientated.

Serge: *You're talking about being able to come back to your senses in these difficult moments. Do you want to describe a little bit what happens, what's the inner experience before, after, during?*

Karen: That's a lovely question, because that's more about the how. How do I come back to my senses when I go into nature and feel so different afterwards? What I normally do is - I'm very fortunate by the way, I live in London and have a very beautiful big park on my doorstep - when I feel upset, or unsettled, or restless, or a bit stirred up by life, I would go for a walk in the park.

Sometimes just for twenty minutes or half an hour, I go to the park, into nature, and slow down. To help me I would usually do an enjoyable exercise that helps me come back to my senses. It's called 4-3-2-1. I see four things, so I look at four things, one at a time, and really look at each one. For example, I look at the sky, and really see the clouds, the shades of blue and grey and give myself a little bit of time to really look. Then I say to myself with a little nod, "Ah, yes, the sky, clouds, some blue...."

Then, what else do I see? "Oh, that tree there in front of me", and I look. I really look. Then, I might see some geese. I love when they fly in a small flock, so I would say to myself: "Oh, there's some geese." Or I would discover some beautiful blossom or flowers that I would look at next. Four things I see.

And then I would go to hearing sounds, three sounds I hear.

That might be the geese, or it might be a plane in the air that we sometimes get here, or the children, the birds. Lots of sounds, generally, and I would let each sound that I hear and focus on come to me, to really let that sound land in my ear.

Then I move on to two things I feel, and that might be internally how I feel in that moment, or feeling my feet on the earth, or I feel my clothes on my skin, or maybe if it's windy, I feel the wind in my face.

Then finally, I focus on one thing that I smell or touch. There may be a smell in the air. Usually there is some smell, which is a lovely thing to do because that's not often what I tune into. That's the 4-3-2-1 exercise.

Serge: *You know, I couldn't help having a big smile as you're describing this. In a way, I'm curious what the smile is about, and it has the quality of reading a children's book, and I see a child, going and saying, "Hello Mr. Tree, Hello Mrs. Cloud." It has that quality of wonder, and especially the way you describe this, that in moments when you're upset, you're having all these difficult feelings or the kind of nervousness we have in city life, and that shift to getting outside of these, maybe your head, into encountering the world and greeting it, and interacting with it. That's what probably gives me this big smile.*

- Karen: I think what's really powerful about this exercise is to really look and to really see. We can often just live in our head, with so many distractions, particularly in city life, and look at the sky but not see it, or look what's around us; maybe there are beautiful trees and there's blossom, but we can't see it because our mind is so cluttered.
- Serge: *Yes, so I want to maybe underline this. If we just go and say, "I'm going to look at four things," we could be doing it in a checklist type of thing, "Okay, I've seen the one thing, I've seen the other one." You introduce the question of "What do I really see," so it helps focus your attention to "What am I seeing," as opposed to just, "Okay, I've seen one thing. Done."*
- Karen: That's so important, isn't it? That really is at the heart of mindfulness, paying attention. Paying attention to what I see, to what I feel, emotionally or bodily. What I hear. Paying attention, that quality of paying attention to what is there in this moment, and to let that come to us and have an effect.
- Serge: *Again, I want to highlight as you're describing it, in some way, it would be a standard description of mindfulness; just paying attention. What you're emphasizing is also the relationship that happens, what effect it has on me, so that instead of just looking at something outside, you are allowing yourself to actually experience a relationship that is happening.*
- Karen: Yes, absolutely. I think that it is the very process of seeing that helps me come back to my senses, through paying attention to what's there, through allowing myself to be in nature and to see what's there, to hear, to feel, to touch and smell.
- Serge: *Yes. At the risk of repeating, when you say "Be in nature," and you add, "To see, to feel, to smell," the "Be in nature" is an active being. It's a creative interaction. It's not just, "Oh, I happen to be there." You're allowing yourself to interact.*
- Karen: Exactly. To be touched, and as you said, to be in relationship with nature, with what is there, and to come into relationship through the senses, and through that, coming back into relationship with myself, because there's a grounding and a coming into the present moment happening when I enter into relationship with nature, that I think is so impactful and powerful, and that brings me into contact with myself again, and that is what helps so much with any difficult feelings.
- Serge: *As you enter in a relationship with nature, it helps you get into relationship with yourself, and you're more in relationship with yourself in the present moment, as opposed to being in a relationship with the clutter, the chatter of your mind.*
- Karen: Yes, that is, I think, what I described earlier, that I feel held by nature. Of course, it's not nature doing something to me; nature is there as it is, and it's through me entering into nature and into relationship, so it's an active coming into relationship with nature through our senses: seeing, feeling, hearing, touching, smelling and by doing that, feeling part of nature as opposed to apart from nature or disconnected.

- Serge: Yes.
- Karen: That feels so holding and healing, if you like.
- Serge: *Yes, and it feels very, very nice to hear the how, as you said it happens. It's not just, "Okay, I'm going to go out and nature will hold me," but it's your entering into a relationship, an active relating.*
- Karen: It's active, yes. It's an active thing. It's an active coming into relationship. It's not passive as you say, and that can happen even without doing this exercise. I find this exercise particularly helpful when I feel stirred up, or angry or upset, or whatever runs through my mind and body because it gives me a little tool to connect with nature, that which is bigger than me, that can be a safe container and help me hold whatever is there.
- Just by mindfully walking around the park without necessarily going through the exercise, but by paying attention to our surroundings, can be very helpful as well, to ground ourselves, to calm down, to feel more spacious inside by opening up to nature and the environment we are in moment by moment.
- Serge: *As you say, it's not always necessary to do the exercise; the exercise is going to be more helpful the more stirred up we are, the buzzier we feel, because it's hard to get out of doing mode.*
- Karen: Yes. Sometimes just changing environments helps very much, so I often recommend to people who work in an office all day to step outside for ten minutes mid morning or afternoon and to just walk around the block to clear their head, to take a fresh perspective, to breathe and slow down a bit. It may not feel like being in nature but nature is everywhere, we live in nature.
- Serge: *Even in a way, when there is so very little it becomes more precious. It's almost like the flower of the Little Prince.*
- Karen: Yes, exactly. Such a symbol, isn't it? Just changing environments, just stepping out of our usual environments and outside can make a huge difference in how we feel.
- Serge: *In a way, that's like that expression of the cliché: "Creativity is thinking out of the box," and so that's literally you take yourself out of the box, you see things in a different way.*
- Karen: Yes, that's it. And it really can change our perspective. It's my own experience and I see it all the time in the people I work with. When we feel stuck, when we feel sort of empty, when we feel closed down or tired, when we step outside, something always shifts, something always clears, something feels more open and forward moving again.
- Serge: *In your work, do you actually work with your clients outdoors?*

Karen: I do. I take all my clients into the park, into green spaces in London, particularly into the big park near where I live and work, but I also take organizational clients out into their nearby green space. We have so many green spaces in London, so I feel very fortunate.

Serge: *When you were talking about what you do on your own, you very beautifully described your interaction with nature. Now what happens when you actually work with a client outdoors, when there are two people interacting with nature. How does it work?*

Karen: When I take clients out into the park, I always walk on the grass; I never stay on the path. When we enter nature, green space, and we walk on the grass, immediately there is a slowing down happening. Then we start talking, and sometimes, naturally, we would stop, because my client is processing and reflecting, and because there's lots going on inside.

Sometimes when clients stop, in those pauses, I would suggest: "What about having a look around and noticing what you are seeing?" I often see when people have their heads down and looking at the grass in front of them and being a bit bogged down.

Sometimes I would suggest to take a few deeper breaths and invite clients open out their gaze a little - then we would continue to walk and talk or maybe we would be walking in silence for a while. Being in silence works well outside too, better than sitting opposite each other inside; walking next to each other in silence can be very enjoyable and helpful.

That's how it works: we walk alongside each together, we talk, stop, look, feel our feet on the ground, stop again, be silent, talk again...

Serge: *It gives in a way, a rhythm, or a different rhythm or an expansion; that the relationship is not just with the problem, with the issue, or just with the two people, but that larger container is there.*

Karen: Yes, the larger container which is nature and which holds all of us. I think that's why I do what I do: nature offers such conducive conditions. It's supportive, connecting and reassuring.

Serge: *You know, as I'm listening to you, I get the idyllic version of green, an ideal temperature, and so on, but what happens when it's really cold, or it's rainy.*

Karen: Well, I can reassure you, it doesn't get as cold here in London as it does in New York or in other places. I get asked this question all the time, and I always delight in saying that I work in any weather and in any temperature, and in any season, because all of it is part of nature. The weather is part of nature, the rain, the cold, the wet, the heat, the mud, and it's rather wonderful actually, to do that, because it's uncompromising. It's clear. It meets us where we are at moment by moment,

day by day, month by month, season by season.

Serge: *It's also requiring us to meet nature where it is at that moment.*

Karen: Yes, that's right and that's why I say to my clients to wear sturdy shoes and a raincoat if need be. In the winter I say: "Bring a woolly hat and gloves." In the summer I say: "Bring plenty of water and a sun hat. Having said that, in my local park where I do most of my client work, there are many trees that give shade in the summer and shelter when it rains.

Serge: *In a way, as I'm listening to you, I'm having also a vision of how just doing this slows down the process, because it's not about, "Okay, let's go into this room, and in the limited amount of time we have, we're going to be as efficient as possible." In a way, there's already that sense of, "We're going to include the walking, we're going to include the looking, we're going to include maybe the occasional shivering, or dealing with, oh, there's too much sun; so we're going to include what could be perceived as distractions into this larger process of digesting issues."*

Karen: Yes. That's actually lovely, the way you describe it. I think that's spot on. It's all part of it, of being outdoors, finding a way of meeting ourselves and nature, and then doing what needs doing so that we can be comfortable outside. If we need to put our sun hat on, we do that.

I have a client at the moment who's been coming all summer, and the first thing he did was take his shoes off, and walk barefoot. So that's what he was doing in every session. He just loved it; it slowed him down, just doing that, something so different. We did a lot of mindfulness work together because he's someone who is very much in his head, and so he's benefited greatly from being in nature.

Serge: *What's interesting is shifting the notion of who or what I am, in that we tend to identify who or what I am with occupation, with our thoughts, all kinds of internal things, or relationship to some social norms. What you're describing is actually a moment where experientially, we perceive who we are in relationship to our physical interaction with nature.*

Karen: Yes, exactly, and when we enter into physical interaction with nature and enter into that active relationship, active relating to nature, rather than just taking nature for granted and as result separating ourselves from it.

I think in nature our narrow sense of self or over-identifying with ourselves or with a certain role, can loosen up so that we can feel a little bit more spacious inside, and are able to review certain views of ourselves or certain beliefs we hold about ourselves and others etc.

Serge: *Yes, because it's a different experience of who we are, and so then we get to see that side which we normally don't see as much.*

Karen: Exactly. I think that again comes back to physically relating and through our senses

actively relating with nature. Again, it allows us to sense that we are so much more than what we think we are.

Serge: *This sounds like it might be a good place to stop. Do you have anything that you would want to add?*

Karen: No. That feels like a lot.

Serge: *Thank you very much, Karen.*

Karen: Thank you very much

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