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Putting it in practice - Geertje Couwenbergh, Den Haag The Netherlands

Guest: Geertje Couwenbergh

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LILOU: Hello my juicy co-creators! Lilou here. I'm in Holland today, still in Holland near Den Haag, is that right?

GEERTJE: Yes, we are.

LILOU: I'm with Geertje. Did I get this right?

GEERTJE: It's good enough. It's a fairly unpronounceable name in any other language than Dutch, so it's good.

LILOU: But it'll be Ginger?

GEERTJE: Yes. We decided upon that, right? Geertje.

LILOU: Geertje.

GEERTJE: Geertje. Yeah.

LILOU: Beautiful. I'm thrilled to be sitting next to you and we have this opportunity to sit down and do this interview. We were supposedly gonna do it in [??] where you live, is that right? And now we're here in Den Haag, so this is wonderful. When things have to happen, they do come together very easily and effortlessly. I'm very grateful. I heard a lot of people talk about you because you're this young Buddhist practitioner and author. You wrote many books. So I'm really, really excited that you share your own story and how this came about.

GEERTJE: Well, thank you so much for having me and for traveling the world and do what you're doing, bringing all of these people in our life who we normally wouldn't meet. So the pleasure is all mine.

LILOU: Cool. I just love it and I feel that all of us have our calling and this is why I love doing these videos because then people can be inspired by one story and want to practice that or do it or apply it. It might



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be this little thing that there's this special switch that got turned on. What was your switch? Were you always kind of, you felt Buddhist very young, Buddhist at a young age?

GEERTJE: I felt very Buddhist now. I'm thinking what does that feel like? But, well, you could say I was always a little sort of heavy hearted even as a child. I was always thinking a lot and just, I guess, being very sensitive to all kinds of things going around. So I got interested in big questions like why are we here and who are we and where do all have to go from a very young age on. It kind of naturally developed into the choice of study I did. I studied culture, anthropology, and religion studies and gender studies which is all about identity and how to make sense out of life basically. But that was still very much from an academic perspective which I really like. I like to think about stuff. But at one point I also felt that it's not only a question that can be approached from an intellectual point of view. So I developed this interest in practice of meditation and yoga. They really became sort of my source of inspiration and I did feel from a very young age on that I wanted to make this sort of a thread of my life. However, complicated that is on a personal level because it's not really a plan but the inspiration was there very early on. And it also helped that I never kind of envisioned myself in a job that is you know fairly –

LILOU: We couldn't put you in a box.

GEERTJE: Yeah. So I had that advantage of just not having this identity, future for me in a very set up form. So I kind of just rolled into the stuff I did and here I am still kind of rolling. Yeah.

LILOU: But you're a Buddhist. What does this mean? What do you do concretely or in your practice daily? Different traditions I guess in the Buddhism.

GEERTJE: Yes, there are many traditions in the Buddhist traditions. So, it's a funny thing calling yourself a Buddhist, I think. And it took me a long while to identify with that because for me what it says to call myself a Buddhist or to, you know, inspired by these traditions is really saying that you let go of all your reference points and all your markers of identity. So it's a paradox in a sense to say I'm a Buddhist, you say I'm nothing. I'm empty. I'm empty space. I'm formless. I'm not defined by my job, my ideas about myself and ideas about the world. It's much more complex than that. It's much more open. It's more spacious. So, it's an interesting thing and I do tend to go out and call myself a Buddhist or I tend to do that less often because it kind of –

LILOU: It's another label.

GEERTJE: Exactly and it kind of happened because my first book was inspired very explicitly from the Buddhist traditions and my company's called Potential Buddha and I do, I practice meditation, I do retreats, I have strong practice life. But then it says nothing. So I do, like I said when you asked me



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before, are you Buddhist writer or are you a Buddhist practitioner. I would say I'm a Buddhist practitioner because it's just –

LILOU: It's something that you got interested and things unfolded but you do meditate.

GEERTJE: I do meditate but I'm also inspired by numerous other traditions. So it's just, I do have a strong connection with Buddhism but it's not, that's not all. But I'm very grateful to practice in that tradition because it gives a lot of stability to a path.

LILOU: In my understanding, it's a lot for you about the loving kindness.

GEERTJE: Yeah. That's a main practice. Yes, I think, well in my personal life, I found that that's the most important practice to do to really open yourself up to the idea of caring for all sentient beings basically because I don't think we have a problem with love or loving but that just our scope of who we love and what we love is just too limited for the amount interdependence we are in and that is just becoming more and more clear. It's hard to keep up this kind of narrow circle of what you care for and what you reject. So, it's really, the way I see it, it's really like a fitness, a gym for your heart and for your mind to just expand more and more which is really what I feel what is time on earth is asking of us to just have a bigger mind and a bigger heart. Which is actually very natural to us but we just kind of, I don't know, we kind of lost it somewhere.

LILOU: How do we practice that? Is it just by changing your thoughts? Because once when there are challenges in our face, we can be very angry and all kind of emotions come, we could be confronted, we could suffer. So how can we flip that around towards loving kindness and compassion?

GEERTJE: Yeah, good question.

LILOU: Because that's really what, [??], we ought to do it. I think more and more of us are confronted these days and we really, this is a beautiful practice.

GEERTJE: Yes, it's easy to be loving, kind here on the sofa where there's nothing going on. Yes, we will get triggered everyday a lot of times. I really believe in the principle of having a practice. So, whether it's yoga or whether it's meditation or whether it's running or whatever kind of practice you do, whether it's writing, you have some kind of relationship with your own mind, with your own heart that just creates this stability in a way. So, for example, to answer your question, you can do a compassion practice that say everyday you take 5 minutes out of your day and you do some kind of practice where you just open your heart to yourself first of all, of course, but also people who you love but also people who think differently, there are all kinds of practice for this. And then when you're in the heat of the moment or like my children calls it, we're on the spot, which is always the hardest part, you know, when somebody



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cuts you off in traffic or worst things, of course, maybe you forget and you blow your cover and you shout at them. But my experiences if you do these practices everyday, at one point, you will remember your practice and you will remember the possibility that there's another reaction you can engage in instead of being reacted. So, I think what practice does, it creates this relationship with your own mind and it creates the possibility of having a gap or a pause which is actually can make a decision how to respond. But it's a practice, it's not something like you, because we all know this intellectually, we all know responding with anger just escalates the situation. But we have to cultivate it, we have to water it everyday and just plow the soul and then something can grow out of it. But it's a very soft practice but it's at the same time very courageous.

LILOU: And another of your favorite practice from my understanding because you have a book about that is to write. Writing can also be a very good practice?

GEERTJE: Yes. Also my personal experience is writing is a beautiful way to literally create that conversation which arrives. This writing isn't kind of the conventional writing, you know, I'm gonna write something good and inspiring and share this immediately. It's more, it's closer to journaling but it's also a little bit different, it's about writing everyday, like I say the practice element is showing up whether you like it or not, whether you're inspired or not and just doing it even if it's 2 minutes a day. You write and then you can write about anything basically because everything is just such a doorway to your life. So, there are no sort of heightened subjects or lower subjects. So, I think writing has this advantage that it's very common already in our culture. Like writing is something we all do, we do more than ever actually with all the texting and with all the social media, we're all writers. So, it has this threshold to use writing as a practice. It's much lower than starting a meditation practice which is, actually I have a lot of interest to develop that in a way. It's not something that's for everybody. Writing is so accessible and so down to earth in a way. It's physical.

LILOU: You do encourage to write on a piece of paper instead of typing it?

GEERTJE: Well, that depends. For me, it works better on paper. I feel more intimate in a way with my own mind and I have this funny thing like when I switch on the computer, it makes like this Tanana sound and that just excavate my inner critic. So I have to feel like, I have to do something. But I know a lot of people who don't have that, who really enjoy the freedom of writing and this sort of stuff, many writing teachers say no, you have to have paper and pen and old school, but I don't know. I do think it activates different part of your mind but you should definitely experiment with that.

LILOU: I do believe that through practice and regular practice, our brain reshapes itself and there's neuro pathways that are being created. Did you some change throughout the years? I mean of course, you're growing, you're evolving as we're all, but you have regular practices which is a little bit different



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than most people. Did you see some changes or some moments where it was really like poignant, that you had this practice and thank God there was this practice?

GEERTJE: I had that, that's just so often. The funny thing is I don't realize it as much when I do it, I realize it when I don't do it. It's like when my practice gets a little sloppy or I don't do my yoga, I just feel like I have a hangover or when I don't sit on my cushion enough, I just become this egomaniac. It's really, how do you say that, again it's like going to the gym. If you go to the gym and you pump up your muscles, they form really quickly. But also if you stop going, they deflate really quickly. So, they do, they really are part of sort of like inner hygiene, so when I don't do them for too long, I really feel that I, like I didn't brush my teeth for 2 weeks, which really wanna do that. It's funny. What motivates me more is not maybe even doing it but not doing it and the result of that really like brings my attention back to these practices. But maybe also, I think I'm hard headed, maybe I'm more hard-headed than other people so I need a lot of practice and grounding to keep sane in a way. Yes.

LILOU: Buddha, is that something you can relate to or something you feel we should all, be more Buddha-like in our lives?

GEERTJE: We should all be more Buddha-like. And if not, no. yeah.

LILOU: Divinity in us.

GEERTJE: Buddha means awake. I can think of a better way to spend your life than being present for it, being awake for it. The wonderful thing about it is it's not something we actually do, we don't go out and become present or become awake. It's something we allow. That's my experience. It's just much more relaxing and dropping back and just letting things unfold. So it's such good news. We're awake already and the only thing we have to do is just realize it. And also seeing that you're not awake is a form of being awake and this comes back to the loving kindness practices. I mean you see many people who are in a spiritual journey or people who are activists who are very doing something really good than being unkind to themselves because they see I haven't reached complete enlightenment or saved all sentient beings, but just realizing that, realizing your limitation sand the places where you are stuck is the path, is being awake and this is something the meditation practice really taught me. All these moments when we realize I'm thinking, I'm thinking, that's not bad news, that's wakefulness.

LILOU: So when that thought emerges, what can we say to ourselves?

GEERTJE: We can say thinking. We could realize that we are thinking and just pay attention to it, not suppress it, but also not take it too seriously. Just thinking. We don't know yet what that is thinking. I don't believe any scientist has discovered the source of our thoughts. We can see them in our brain but we don't know where they come from. So it's just this mystery we engage in but take so seriously. That



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kind of drains out a lot of energy from other life forms and other processes that are going on at the same time because we're so caught up in our stories, I think.

LILOU: I love that you're wearing American flag. Yay! All Americans out there.

GEERTJE: I know, I did, I actually did. I was like, yeah, looking at my clothes and I thought you know with all your American viewers, I have to represent, yes.

LILOU: [??] America.

GEERTJE: Exactly, yeah. I was just there earlier this year. I just love it. I think it's such a fascinating country. Yes.

LILOU: It feels very free there to speak about all these things, too. I'm very happy to have this conversation also in Europe but there is this effortless about it in the US, too, that is very inspiring and very vivid.

GEERTJE: I know. What do you think is the main difference between the Americans you speak to and the Europeans?

LILOU: Now, I'm being interviewed. No, it's really, we're all awakening and I see that Americans are really there and they are younger, just less history. So I feel there is less resistance to grow but it's beautiful what I'm witnessing right now in Europe. I'm so happy. I really didn't think it was that big and that happening. I thought it was 2 different worlds but no, it's happening globally.

GEERTJE: Yeah, great.

LILOU: You're here. Look at, to have this conversation here in Holland and with you. You're 29 years old. I think it's super inspiring like how you just get it and how there is not so much resistance in our generation and this can be showed throughout the world.

GEERTJE: Yeah. I think what I would really want to share is that because I get all that like you're 29, you've done all these things and tadadada. The thing is I'm no different than any other 29 year olds. But I didn't let my thoughts hold me back about what I should do and what I shouldn't do. So I kind of stumbled into doing what I do, writing books and teaching in my workshops, and having a lot of doubts about that and fears. But just, I don't know, maybe from my practice, just the amount of courage or naivety to just do it. So I think this whole notion of just stepping into this conversation with your life, whatever conversation that is, is just so essential and so important that we all do that and engage and step forward and not wait until we think we have a clear message or until we're developed enough or we haven't our stuff together. Just do it now and do it wholeheartedly and just stumble and step again.



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It's just very much I think the way you do the work you do. You just go out there and you went out there and you had like you told before, little resources but just a lot of heart and a lot of vision.

LILOU: That's hardcore.

GEERTJE: That's hardcore. Definitely.

LILOU: Thank you so much for this juicy conversation and this time spending together. Thank you.

GEERTJE: Thank you. Thank you.

LILOU: Much, much love my delicious co-creators! Love US and Holland and everybody.

GEERTJE: Yes, the whole world, all sentient beings. Bye.

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