

An Interview with Karen Maezen Miller

Author of *Hand Wash Cold* and *Momma Zen*



Research says the modern woman is increasingly unhappy. Why do you think that is so?

I'm not so sure that unhappiness is increasing regardless of what the research says. I know that research is increasing, and that may be the key to the findings. Research like this shows us how thoughts trigger feelings. If someone asks me how happy I am, I'm likely to give it more thought than I would otherwise give it. I might not be thinking about happiness at all, but if you ask me to evaluate it, I could judge my happiness to be lacking, especially compared to how happy I think I'm supposed to be. The truth is we're all afflicted by the sense of insufficiency. We wear it like a permanent stain.

Happiness is simple. Everything we do to find it is complicated. We try to find more time, more help, more leisure and more reward. We seek ever greater sources of external gratification – a newer job, a newer partner, more stuff, greater status,

and a sense of security – and even if we acquire them they rarely fulfill our expectations. Living this way is a recipe for unhappiness. I know; I tried it and it left me hungry for more.

Some would say your advice in praise of homemaking sets the cause of gender equality back 50 years. How would you defend your view?

Household work is a timeless fact of life. No one needs to defend it and no one needs to praise it, but someone needs to do it! No matter how sophisticated and complicated life seems to be, it still boils down to breakfast, lunch and dinner. We still spend a good bit of our time in the laundry room, the kitchen or the yard. Household chores give us the chance to intimately engage with our lives. They give us the ingredients for genuine fulfillment, because in caring for our homes we are caring for ourselves. Since laundry literally saved my life, I like to take first dibs on it. My husband can change the light bulbs and fix the sprinklers, and I call it even.

You use household chores as opportunities for spiritual practice, but no one likes to do housework. What other activities can bring mindfulness into our everyday lives?

Anything and everything is an opportunity to be mindful: to pay complete attention. So while you're working, just work; driving, just drive; talking, just talk; exercising, just exercise; eating, just eat. When you're with your family, give them your undistracted and nonjudgmental attention (for at least one hour a day). Attention is the most concrete expression of love. Whatever you pay attention to thrives; whatever you don't pay attention to withers and dies. This is true of every aspect of your life and your relationships. It's especially useful to bring your nonjudgmental attention to doing what you don't particularly like. Do it without commentary or resentment and it becomes a pivot point for changing the way you view your whole life. Wisdom subtly guides us in the direction we'd least like to go.

You trace the onset of your spiritual journey to the day that you stopped taking antidepressants. Where do you

stand on the debate about meditation versus antidepressants?

Debates don't serve anyone and so I never take a stand. It can be useful, however, to realize how much power we have in our own lives – the power to step forward and take responsibility, and the power to make choices and change. There is no greater power than your own. When we realize our own sufficiency, we see that we always have the help we need when we need it. At different times, the help may come in the form of a pill, or in my case, a meditation pillow.

You had an encounter with a spiritual teacher that changed your life. Is there hope for people who haven't yet had the occasion to meet a charismatic teacher?

Yes, there's more than hope; there's certainty. Wherever you are when you open your eyes, there will be something or someone to instruct and motivate you. It may be a pile of laundry, a sink full of dishes or the weeds in the yard, but they are teachers just the same.

You left your career to devote yourself to your family and your spiritual practice, but not everybody has the chance to be a stay-at-home mother

or a full-time homemaker. What advice do you offer working women who have to balance competing priorities?

The most important advice I can give is to not judge yourself. Our lives feel out of balance when we think we should be doing something other than what we are doing. Thinking that way makes us feel guilty, overwhelmed and inadequate. So I encourage women to trust where they are and to take care of what is directly in front of them. At work, what matters is work, and not the guilty thoughts or worries about what is going on at home. At home, what matters is what is at home, and not what is back at work. This is difficult since the boundaries between home and work have been blurred by 24-hour technologies, but life is too precious to confuse our priorities. When we trust our lives enough to invest ourselves totally in what is at hand, our work life benefits and our home life benefits. In a sense, our only job is to pay complete attention to where we are.

We must be careful not to live suspended between the what-ifs and the how-comes: devoted to the life we don't have. When we do that, we cheat ourselves and all those we love, and we live in a permanent state of imbalance.

You write, "The search for meaning robs our life of meaning" Are you saying there is no meaning? And if there is meaning, what is it, in your view?

It is the search that leads us astray. The meaning is always at hand in this moment. This moment right now is the fruit of an infinite past and the seed of a limitless future. How can you find more meaning than that? You can't.

A lot of people try meditation and find they can't do it. What then? Is peace of mind available to them?

Yes, peace of mind is always available to us when we attend to what is present instead of to our worries, fears and anxieties about the past or the future. Everyone, and I mean everyone, who tries meditation comes away thinking they can't do it. That's what we're always telling ourselves about nearly everything we do! In a way, telling yourself you can't meditate is the first step in meditation: you notice the things you tell yourself – all the limiting and self-critical thoughts. Meditation is simply the practice of paying attention to yourself, noticing the grip your thoughts have on you, and releasing thoughts instead of pursuing them. When we pursue our anxious, fearful ruminations, we leave the peace of mind that is already present. Peace never leaves, but we leave peace. Bring your attention back to what is in

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front of you and peace is instantly restored.

As for learning to meditate, everything in life takes practice. Everything! What we lack is patience with ourselves, and the grace to keep trying no matter how inadequate we judge ourselves to be.

Is the peace and fulfillment you describe really possible for people who aren't priests or who don't devote their lives to spiritual pursuits?

Being a priest has nothing to do with it. Spiritual devotion has nothing to do with it. All it takes is a change of view. With only a change in one's perspective, the most ordinary things take on inexpressible beauty, and everything you're looking for is right there. I became a priest to make my life more ordinary. When I make my life more ordinary I can devote myself wholeheartedly to the laundry.

You describe the culmination of your journey as trusting the world as it is – trusting our communities, our schools, our cities, and everyone in it. But the world seems to be in a dangerous downward spiral. Is trust realistic and practical in these difficult times?

Trust is not only realistic, it is imperative. We live in a world of our own making. The world is in its current state not because of naïve faith or blind trust, but because of distrust, anger, greed and fear. Trust is the only antidote for distrust. Kindness is the only cure for unkindness. The world doesn't need another enemy or faction, not another wall or barricade. The world needs a homemaker – it needs each of us to make ourselves at home within it. When we do that, at least one conflict – our conflict with the world around us – comes to an end. We've turned our patch of pavement into paradise.

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