If in rush-hour traffic, you can remain perfectly calm; if you can see your neighbours travel to fantastic places without a twinge of jealousy; if you can love everyone around you unconditionally; and if you can always find contentment just where you are, then you're probably ...a dog. (Laughter)

Right? We hold ourselves to these unrealistic standards of perfection, and then we judge ourselves when we don't live up to them. The thing is, we're not supposed to be perfect; perfection isn't possible. But transformation is.

All of us have the capacity to change, to learn, and to grow, no matter what our circumstances.

As a professor and scientist, I study how people change, how people transform, and one of the most effective vehicles I've found is: mindfulness.

My own journey into mindfulness was unexpected. When I was 17, I had spinal fusion surgery, a metal rod put in my spine. I went from a healthy active teenager, to lying in a hospital bed, unable to walk. During the many months of rehabilitation, I tried to figure out how to live in this body that could no longer do what it used to.The physical pain was difficult, but worse was the fear and the loneliness, and I simply didn't have the tools to cope.

So I began searching for something that could help, and eventually, this search led me to a monastery in Thailand for my first meditation retreat. At the monastery, the monks didn't speak much English and I didn't speak any Thai, but I understood mindfulness had something to do with paying attention in the present moment.

My only instruction was to feel the breath going in and out of my nose. So I began: one breath, two breaths - my mind wandered off; I brought it back. One breath, two breaths, it wandered again, sucked into the past or lost in the future, and no matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't stay present.

This was frustrating because I thought meditation was supposed to feel like this, and instead, it felt more like this. (Laughter at the slide she shows)

Being present isn't so easy. In fact, check it out for yourself. I've been speaking for about three minutes; have you noticed your mind has wandered? All of our minds wander. Research from Harvard shows the mind wanders, on average, 47 percent of the time. 47 percent.

That's almost half of our lives that we're missing, that we're not here.

So part of mindfulness is simply learning to train the mind in how to be here, where we already are. Like right now; let's practice together. Allow your eyes to close, and just feel your feet on the floor. Wiggle your toes, and sense your whole body sitting here. Softening the face; softening the jaw; and notice that you're breathing. Feeling the breath as it naturally flows in and out of the body. Just being here. And as you're ready, taking a deeper breath, in and out, allowing your eyes to open.

So ...back at the monastery, I was trying hard to do just this, to just be present. But no matter how hard I tried, my mind kept wandering off. And at this point, I really started to judge myself:

"What is wrong with you? You're terrible at this." "Why are you even here? You're a fake."

And then not only was I judging myself, I started judging everyone, even the monks: "Why are they just sitting here? Shouldn't they be doing something?" (Laughter)

Thankfully, a monk from London arrived, who spoke English, and as I shared with him my struggles, he looked at me and said,"Oh dear, you're not practising mindfulness, you're practising judgment, impatience, frustration."

And then he said five words that have never left me: "What you practise grows stronger.", "What you practise grows stronger".

We know this now with neuroplasticity. Our repeated experiences shape our brain. We can actually sculpt and strengthen our synaptic connections, based on repeated practice.

For example, in the famous study of London taxi drivers, the visual spatial mapping part of the brain is bigger, stronger. They've been practicing navigating the 25,000 streets of London all day long. When you look at the brains of meditators, the areas related to attention, learning, compassion,grow bigger and stronger. It's called cortical thickening: the growth of new neurons in response to repeated practice. What we practise grows stronger.

The monk explained to me that if I was meditating with judgment,I was just growing judgment; meditating with frustration, I'm growing frustration. He helped me understand that mindfulness isn't just about paying attention, it's about how we pay attention: with kindness.

He said it's like these loving arms that welcome everything, even the messy, imperfect parts of ourselves. He also pointed out that we're practicing all the time, moment by moment, not just when we're meditating, but in every moment; we're growing something in every moment.

So the question really becomes: what do you want to grow? What do you want to practise?

When I left Thailand, I wanted to keep practising mindfulness,and I wanted to understand it scientifically. So I began a PhD program, eventually became a professor, and I've spent the past 20 years investigating the effects of mindfulness across a wide range of populations,

including veterans with PTSD, patients with insomnia, women with breast cancer, stressed out college students, high-level business executives, and over and over, the data showed two key things.

First, mindfulness works; it's good for you. It strengthens our immune functioning, it decreases stress, decreases cortisol, helps us sleep better. When we published our first research, back in ’98, there were only a handful of studies. Now there are thousands of studies showing the beneficial effects of mindfulness. It's good for us.

The second thing we learned was quite unexpected. Almost all the people we were working with, regardless of their age, their gender, their background, were talking about the same thing.

This underlying sense of "I'm not good enough,” "I'm not okay," "I'm not living this life right."

This tremendous self judgment and shame. And we all know what they were talking about

because shame is universal; all of us feel it. And worse, we have this mistaken belief that if we shame ourselves, if we beat ourselves up, we'll somehow improve. And yet, shame doesn't work. Shame never works; it can't work. Literally, physiologically, it can't work because when we feel shame the centers of the brain that have to do with growth and learning shut down.

This fMRI shows the brain on shame. What happens is the amygdala triggers a cascade of norepinephrine and cortisol to flood our system, shutting down the learning centers and shuttling our resources to survival pathways. Shame literally robs the brain of the energy it needs to do the work of changing.

And worse, when we feel shame, we want to avoid it, so we hide from those parts of ourselves we're ashamed of, the parts that most need our attention. It's just too painful to look at them.

So what's the alternative? Kind attention.

First, kindness gives us the courage to look at those parts of ourselves we don't want to see.

And second, kindness bathes us with dopamine, turning on the learning centres of the brain

and giving us the resources we need to change. True and lasting transformation requires kind attention.

The monk's words echoed in my ears: mindfulness isn't just about attention, it's about kind attention. This attitude of kindness wasn't just a footnote or something nice to have, it was an essential part of the practice, a part of mindfulness that's so often overlooked. So my colleagues and I developed a model of mindfulness that explicitly includes our attitude and our intention, as well as our attention. All three parts working together synergistically.

Put simply: mindfulness is intentionally paying attention with kindness. We used this model while working at the veterans hospital for a group of men with PTSD. I was shocked to learn that we lose more veterans to suicide, each year, than to combat. Our soldiers carry so much pain and shame.So the intention of the mindfulness group was to cultivate this kind attention, even for the seemingly unforgivable parts of ourselves.

There was one man in the group who never said a word, never looked up. Two months passed, he seemed unreachable. And then one day he raised his hand, and he said: "I don't want to get better. What I saw in the war, what I did, I don't deserve to get better." He then looked down at the floor and proceeded to tell us in great detail what he had seen, and what he had done.

And I can still feel the horror of what he shared and how his shame filled the room.I looked up to see how the other men were responding, and there was no judgment, only compassion on their faces. I invited him to look up and to witness this compassion and this kindness.

As he slowly looked around the room, his face began to soften, and in his eyes there was hope, the possibility that he wasn't just his past actions, that he could choose differently now, that he could change. This may be one of the most

important things I've learned. It's that transformation is possible, for all of us, no matter what. And it requires kind attention, not shame.

And this kind attention takes practice; it takes lots of practice. I want to share with you a simple practice that continues to help me. Some years ago, I was going through a difficult divorce, and I'd wake up every morning with this pit of shame in my stomach. My meditation teacher suggested an explicit practice of kind attention. She said, "How about saying, 'I love you, Shauna,' every day.” I thought to myself, "No way;" it felt so contrived. She saw my hesitation and suggested, "How about to just saying, 'Good morning, Shauna.’ Oh, and try putting your hand on your heart when you say it; it releases oxytocin, it's good for you, you know."She knew the science would win me over.

So the next day, I put my hand on my heart, I took a breath and said, "Good morning, Shauna,"

and it was kind of nice. I continued to practise, and a month later when I saw her, I admitted how helpful it had been. "Wonderful. You've graduated," she said, "Now the advanced practice: 'Good morning. I love you, Shauna.'"

So the next day, I put my hand on my heart, anchored myself and said, "Good morning. I love you, Shauna."

I felt nothing, except maybe a little ridiculous, but definitely not love. But I kept practising because, as we know, what we practise grows stronger. And then one day, I put my hand on my heart, took a breath, "Good morning. I love you, Shauna,” And I felt it.

I felt my grandmother's love, I felt my mother's love, I felt my own self-love. I wish I could tell youthat every day since then has been this bubble of self-love, and I've never felt shame or judgment again, and that's not true. But what is true is this pathway of kind attention has been established, and it's growing stronger every day. So I want to invite you tomorrow, to put your hand on your heart and say, "Good morning,” and if you're really brave, "Good morning. I love you.” Thank you.

(Applause) (Cheers)