

TRANSCRIPT

Learning Unboxed

Episode #295.

Ishan Shivanand:



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Annalies Corbin:

Welcome to Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I'm your host and chief goddess of the PAST Foundation, Annalies Corbin. We know the current model for education is obsolete. It was designed to create fleets of assembly line workers, not the thinkers and problem solvers needed today. We've seen the innovations that are possible within education, and it's our goal to leave the box behind and reimagine what education can look like in your own backyard.

Annalies Corbin:

Welcome to today's episode of Learning Unboxed. As always, I'm excited to talk with another great innovator in the transformative education space. And today, we are going to be talking about building resilient minds and how inner work shapes the future of learning. And joining us today is Ishan Shivanand, founder of Yoga of Immortals and author of *The Practice of Immortality*, now an international bestseller. So, Ishan, welcome to Learning Unboxed.

Ishan Shivanand:

Thank you so much for having me.

Annalies Corbin:

I'm very excited to have this conversation with you. Let's set some context for our listeners. As we get started, Yoga of Immortals is a research-backed mental health program based on ancient yogic systems curated by Ishan for holistic wellbeing. Based on breathwork, meditation, and cognitive yogic modalities, Yoga of Immortals is clinically proven to alleviate mental health conditions and improve quality of life.

And this is so desperately needed, especially in the world of education. We have so many kids that are struggling. So, I'm super excited about this conversation. Can we start Ishan with the, sort of, big picture? Your journey has been quite remarkable. Talk to us a little bit about why you feel like this is so critically important.

Ishan Shivanand:

So, where I come from, I started my journey in a monastery. We look at meditation as a tool to enlightenment, and that is what my understanding was. And when I came out into the world, I started travelling. I realized that there are some low-hanging fruits as well because if you are looking at meditation just for enlightenment, it's a long journey. It's a dedication of a lifetime. But today, people don't want enlightenment because they don't even have a good night's sleep. They don't have the ability to process fear, a constant state of anxiety.

And then, I started to look at it in a much more deeper level to try to understand on what are the other things meditation could help us with because I'm sure, from now to enlightenment, there are a lot of milestones. And in that overcoming your fear, becoming resilient, peace, happiness, relaxation is all part of that journey. So, why should we aim just for the end goal, why not everything else?

And so, I started researching in 2019. I partnered with various universities, multidisciplinary doctors, physicians, and we made a few protocols that we wanted to test. And we applied them in various settings, healthcare professionals, students, victims of trauma, veterans. And each time we applied these protocols, we got phenomenal results. And these protocols are non-pharmaceutical, which is very important because when we look at mental health, the current way when we approach mental health is quite expensive, and we don't have enough trained individuals, we don't have enough therapists. So, we have to find out ways that are non-pharmaceutical, that are low cost to no cost, that can be easily implemented, that are evidence-backed and that can bring some form of behavioral modification.

And then, that's what my journey has been, to bring out these modalities and take them to the most vulnerable parts of society, which right now, I believe, are the students.

Annalies Corbin:

And I would agree with that very much. And one of the things I really love about your work is the fact that it's research-based. That is one of those elements that we don't see all the time. And so, the fact that you and your colleagues spent so much time, energy and effort to develop the appropriate research protocols, so incredibly meaningful.

I want to dig in a little bit about some of the findings that you had with students. I hear from educators on a regular basis that their students are in crisis, that between social media, COVID, the influences of technology on young people at earlier and earlier ages, one of the things that we are collectively seeing within the field of education is a disconnect that students have with their peers, a disconnect that students have with their families. Sometimes, this disconnect is so incredibly powerful that it's even with themselves. And so, kids are struggling to find meaning in the world and meaning for education within their collective and collaborative experiences. So, I'm really curious about some of the insights that you found when you were working with students.

Ishan Shivanand:

So, the students that I have till now researched upon, they would be tech graduates. So, I worked a lot with IIT institutes. They are known as the CEO factories of the world. If you look at Fortune 500 tech companies, so many of the CEOs today come from those institutes. I work with medical students as well.

And in my findings, one of the things that we saw was very prevalent was burnout. The students did not know how to cope with the extended pressures of higher education and, also, cope with the unrealistic expectations they put upon themselves, their family put upon themselves, and we are seeing more and more rates of absenteeism, burnout, lack of motivation.

And this burnout can lead to a plethora of other mental health crises. It can lead to substance abuse, it can lead to chronic anxiety, depression. This is where I believe resilience training is something very useful because we did that. We did four to eight weeks programs where one hour per week, we would teach all these youth the resilience training modules and very simple things like how to relax, how to shut down, how to shut down through meditation without medication. So, using breath, using awareness, using meditative tools.

And we found that it had a profound impact on their sleep patterns. We even published some of the findings in peer-reviewed journals. And if anybody is interested, they can read in Frontier Psychiatry etc. You just have to Google Yoga of Immortals research and all the findings will be there. But just one hour a week can have such profound impact. And what we saw was once we started to give this to the students, there was a very high return rate because many times, we start a program, and we think kids will drop out. It's very difficult to motivate them. But what we found was completely different, that if there is something that's genuinely helping them, they seem to come back, they seem to enjoy it and benefit from it.

And that's where I feel that the program should not just be focused on the students, it should be teacher and student because the same burnout rates we saw in the

teachers as well for, again, a plethora of reasons – under appreciation, underpaid, overworked etc., etc.

So, when these models are presented to both is when we have the most profound impact. And I'm talking about a 72% reduction in anxiety. I'm talking about an 80% reduction in severe insomnia. I'm talking about a reduction in depression, etc. So, this is the work that needs to be looked upon and it should be part of the curriculum. Resilience training is important.

Annalies Corbin:

It is very important. And if you're getting those types of results, I can't imagine being a school leader or administrator not grabbing the phone as quickly as possible saying, "How can we bring this here?"

So, I want to talk a little bit about the ways in which your work and your program is informing those systems. So, whether it's students in medical school or students in secondary school or primary school, across the sort of spectrum, part of the issue is the systems in which these students are trying to learn and be productive and operate within are also causing some of the anxiety, the stress, the dysfunction that's happening.

So, how can your work then inform the systems to, sort of, right themselves or retool? We have to do the individual work, and we have to recognize that we need the work to happen amongst the educators and the students at whatever level we're talking about, but the systems themselves are playing a role in this. How do you think about that piece?

Ishan Shivanand:

Well, that is absolutely right, because even when I work with tech, it's like if you are in a profession that causes burnout, then there has to be some form of safety protocol. For example, if you are working in construction, by law, you are supposed to wear hard hats and steel-toed shoes, because we know there is going to be injury. And the trouble is when it comes to mental health, there are professions that lead to high levels of mental attacks, but because it is not tangible, not researched upon, there is no sort of mental hard hat that we are providing. And that's where these mental resilience tools are very important.

And many times, I used to see when I would work with colleges, they would say that, "Okay, train the kids. And then, expect the kid to work on himself on downtime." And the crazy thing is the kid doesn't have a downtime.

Annalies Corbin:

That's right. They're so overwhelmed.

Ishan Shivanand:

They're on all the time.

Annalies Corbin:

All the time, yes.

Ishan Shivanand:

And that's why we started to come up with systems where we started to create processes where the course itself will be a reward. So, a credit system. So, if a kid does resilience training, it would add two extra credits, which I deem is fair because if they are learning anything, and it comes under life skill.

Annalies Corbin:

And it should count, right? Everything we learn should count for them, right?

Ishan Shivanand:

Precisely. And this is something that will help them in the future.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely.

Ishan Shivanand:

Because today you're doing whatever you're doing in mathematics. Tomorrow, AI will make it redundant. But what you'll be learning in resilience training will be as applicable in your marriage to dealing with kids. This is a very important life skill. So, we realize that if we make it a credit system, and the kids can get like three credit per semester or something like that, then kids see this as a low-hanging fruit, and then they start to come to the classes. And when they come, then they participate. When they participate, they benefit. And then, it becomes part of their life.

And that is where I saw that until and unless some reward is attached to it, just to get the kids in because these are the same kids that are brilliant. And in their hierarchy, they are very unconditional to everybody else except themselves. They are ready to work for their family, not ready to eat healthy. They are ready to do everything for everyone, but in their priority, self-help sometimes is less. And that's where we have to help them because these people are the future nation builders.

Annalies Corbin:

Yes, I agree 100%. I want to talk a little bit about the resilience training yourself. So, give the listeners of Learning Unboxed just a, sort of, sense of what does that look like or what does that entail? And really, what I'm trying to get at is based on what the program is and the training, how does an educator reasonably insert it into their daily classroom practice?

Ishan Shivanand:

So, there are a few skills we are trying to teach. Number one is awareness. If you look at any Eastern theology that is meditation-based, enlightenment-based, that talks about transcending your animal nature and reaching to higher states of consciousness, and the ones that talk about philosophy, it doesn't matter if it's from ancient Greece or Southeast Asia, awareness is a very important factor that is overlooked. So, being in the moment, being present, being focused.

So, awareness training is extremely important. And how to reach to that state of awareness is you have to master a few things. The first thing you have to master is your breath. So, awareness training through breath, awareness training through thought and body consciousness. So, selective awareness of thoughts because thoughts are so very random, chaotic. We gradually teach the child how to isolate certain thoughts, how to have non-judgmental awareness towards unnecessary thoughts, and how to flow in the chaos of the mind to achieve your goals because the mind is not an enemy. You just need to learn how to cope with it in a better manner.

And then, finally emotional regulation. So, that is probably the toughest part of the course where we are teaching the kids how to deal with their own emotions as they come, how to respond to them in a healthy manner, and how to heal wherever there is a need. And the beauty is these are all processes that we are not taught. We are taught to run, we are taught to swim, we are taught to look sideways when we are crossing through traffic, but we are not taught that when we will go through overwhelming loss, when someone dies what to do with it. We don't know.

So, that is where this preventative modality is taught as resilience training, which is yoga-based meditation protocols. And as a student starts to reach to that level of awareness, he starts to master his breath, his thoughts, his emotions, life becomes a bit easier. And I think we deserve that. We deserve that shade as we walk under the sun.

Annalies Corbin:

Yes, I love that. So, then, how does the traditional state of education, I guess if you will, take this and really make use of it, again, in that – I'm thinking about that individual teacher that's out there listening to us have this conversation and saying, "My school, my district, my community doesn't necessarily embrace these ideas as a way to really help my students center and find themselves and really understand their place in the world. And yet, I know my students will benefit tremendously from this opportunity." So, how does that educator reach out and bring something like this to their classroom?

Ishan Shivanand:

That's why in my journey, I went from monk to chaplain to researcher because,

especially, in America I don't understand this. A science is a science. You don't look at Newton's background, and you don't look at his religious inclinations when you are looking at the laws of gravity because that is a science. In the same way, when we are looking at yoga, I don't understand how suddenly it becomes religious.

Annalies Corbin:

It's science.

Ishan Shivanand:

Precisely. Science is a science. The same is when we look at Algebra, "al" comes from Middle East, the mathematicians that worked on it, but we are not giving it a religious connotation.

Annalies Corbin:

Correct.

Ishan Shivanand:

But this is a problem that happens. Many times, the educators will feel it, and that's why when we started research, it was our effort that we make it completely non-theological because we must also respect people's faith and people's cultural sensibilities. And that is why we developed Yoga of Immortals as a completely non-theological tool that can be implemented, keeping into account such sensibilities because everybody deserves to be on their own spiritual journey.

And it is a family decision of where they want the child to be. But one thing is for certain that if the child is peaceful, then even he will pursue that spirituality; whereas, if the child is in a state of complete utter chaos, then you can make him sit in any church, he will run away, he will rebel.

So, yoga and meditations bring peace. And that is why the science-backed, evidence-based protocols where we make it completely non-theological, so that we start to look at the precise points that can be implemented. Maybe they are not as completely beneficial as they would be if we look at yoga in totality, but 70% benefit is still better.

Annalies Corbin:

Oh, absolutely. And we work with a number of schools around the country and other parts of the world who have really embraced this work. Yoga is now a part of the classroom. I have an elementary school that I work with, every morning, starts with a yoga session. Every single morning. And every kid participates at different levels. Again, there's a lot of self-awareness. How do you want to opt in? But they have found that it just helps the kids start the day from a better place.

Ishan Shivanand:

And that's where one more thing that needs to be understood is, low impact to no impact. When we are talking about yoga as it's traditionally perceived in the West, it is a much more physical activity.

Annalies Corbin:

That's true.

Ishan Shivanand:

But whereas if you look at the traditional aspects, it's much more cognitive activity. It is a breathwork-based activity. So, if we are talking about implementing evidence-based resilience training modules into the classroom, they would be much easier for the educator because it just requires five minutes or even a minute of awareness.

So, the kid closes his eyes, we focus on the breath, we center down. These are modalities, we implement them, and they're very easy to implement and let the educator themselves be a researcher because yes, we do research in a clinical setting and we have all this evidence, but the educator themselves will have that evidence that if they do these activities, the children respond much better to the classes.

Annalies Corbin:

And that is so necessary. It's so necessary to help kids be centered in terms of the work that they're doing. As we wrap up our conversation, Ishan, what are you thinking about, or what are you working about or wondering in your work now? I always like to ask my guests, sort of, what is the next thing that you have decided to tackle for the benefit of the world or society, or what keeps you up at night? It's your choice, but I'm really, really curious about the way you're thinking about the next thing.

Ishan Shivanand:

Clinical testing.

Annalies Corbin:

Okay.

Ishan Shivanand:

I feel clinical testing, many times, doesn't have taken into account cultural sensitivity.

Annalies Corbin:

Yes, agreed.

Ishan Shivanand:

Because like I did that, we were working in Jayadeva Cardiovascular Research Institute in Bengaluru, India, one of the biggest institutes related to heart health in

Asia. And we found out that many times, a person will be under all the correct parameters but they will still suffer from fatal heart attacks. And we realized that the parameter itself is incorrect based on the South Asian population group because there was no smoking, no red meat, no alcohol still.

Why? Then, we understood that we have to have another parameter of testing for that specific subject. And if I look at chronic anxiety, sometimes, forms like GAT-7 do not take into account a South Asian cultural training because if I take GAT-7 and I start to, let's say, do research on all the mothers or students in South Asia, then everybody is suffering from chronic anxiety. So, misdiagnostic leads to mismanagement when it comes to care and that is highly problematic.

So, what I'm trying to do now is trying to find out better ways of testing for mental health that take into account these sensibilities because one of the parts of the world where I see people suffer the most are where mental health is still in its infancy, especially South East Asia and Africa. And I would love that through my work, somehow, if we can have that correct diagnostic tool, and we can help people in a correct manner and in economical manner because places like those in the world, they don't have the luxury to have a 10-year therapeutic plan because we don't have that money we have to have correct diagnostic correct implementation of the correct protocol that can bring that help. So, misdiagnostic is not an option and that's what I'm working upon presently.

Annalies Corbin:

All right. I love that and so needed. So, thank you for that. And Ishan, thank you so much for taking time out of your day to have this conversation with us on Learning Unboxed. We will make sure that your information and the links to your new book and website are all in the show notes and really encourage our listeners to do a little bit of investigating and really embrace the opportunity to bring this type of mindfulness into your daily practice in your classrooms. It will make so much of a difference. So, I'm super grateful for you making time in your day to join us.

Ishan Shivanand:

Thank you. Pleasure is all mine and my regards to all the listeners. And I hope you had a few important takeaways from this.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely. And last, thank you to our host that made it possible for Ishan and I to actually be in the same space together because, usually, the guests come in remotely. So, a giant thank you to Legacy Jets, Speaker Life Magazine, and Broadcast Your Authority for bringing us together today.

Ishan Shivanand:

Yes, ma'am.

Annalies Corbin:

Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guests and encourage you all to be part of the conversation. Meet me on social media, @AnnaliesCorbin, and join me next time as we stand up, and join me next time as we stand up, step back and lean in to reimagine education.