



MIND & LIFE

Mind & Life Podcast Transcript

John Dunne – At the Crossroads of Buddhism and Science

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Opening Quote – John Dunne (00:00:04): *I remember having the conversation at one of the early SRIs, actually, and everyone was talking about meditation, meditation, meditation. And I said, and other people joined in and said, "You know, really, we should be talking about something in the plural." Because it's like saying "sports." It's like everything is the same. That would be ridiculous. Curling is not like soccer, is not like tennis. What we needed was a term that would really enable us to very easily be clear that we're talking about something that is multiple. So that's how we started using the term contemplative, because contemplative practices really emphasizes the plurality of these traditions.*

Intro – Wendy Hasenkamp (00:00:46): Welcome to Mind & Life. I'm Wendy Hasenkamp. My guest today is Buddhist scholar John Dunne. John's work focuses on Buddhist philosophy and contemplative practice, especially in dialogue with cognitive science and psychology. He holds the Distinguished Chair in Contemplative Humanities at the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. As you'll hear in our conversation, John has been involved in contemplative science since the earliest studies. In fact, he worked with scientists to help design some of them.

(00:01:19) Our conversation covers a lot of ground. We start with his path to integrating Buddhism and science, and some reflections on the early days of contemplative research. He also unpacks two common forms of practice that are known as focused attention meditation and open monitoring meditation. We then take a deep dive into meta-awareness, and we get into subject-object duality. And John tries to help me understand whether anything really exists. He also describes the different ways we experience the sense of self, and the possibility of transcending the self through hallucinogens and non-dual contemplative practices. That gets us into ideas of decentering and de-reification, and we end with where John thinks the field should go next.

(00:02:11) This episode is full of references to papers and people that have been central in the development of contemplative science. So please do check out the show notes if you'd like to dig deeper. Also, this conversation, like John's mind, runs at a pretty fast clip. So if you miss something, or you want to spend a little time reflecting further, you can always listen again, and I also highly recommend checking out the transcript of this episode. This is a little bit of an aside about transcripts, but I have to say—I'm the person who has these conversations, and I always listen to them numerous times during the editing process. And I still find that, as I work on the transcripts for these shows, I always pick up new things that I missed. Somehow the content comes through differently when you're reading versus listening. (The mind really is an amazing thing.) So, anyway, I encourage you to check out the transcript for any episode you're particularly interested in. They're all posted in the respective show notes at podcast.mindandlife.org.

(00:03:11) It was a great pleasure to speak with John for this. We sat down last year in Germany before the pandemic, where we were together for a number of contemplative science meetings. I hope you enjoy the conversation. I'm very happy to share with you John Dunne.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:03:29): John, thanks so much for joining us today.

John Dunne (00:03:31): You're welcome. Glad to be here with you.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:03:34): I was really excited to talk to you on the podcast because you are a very rare bird, I think, in this field in that you have expertise on Buddhist philosophy and you're a Buddhist scholar, but you also have spent a lot of time talking with scientists, and cognitive scientists in particular. So I was wondering if you could just share a little bit about the path that's gotten you here.

John Dunne (00:03:52): Okay. Well, I was born in New York City... no. *[laughter]* Although I'd go pretty far back, actually, and maybe say that I've always had an interest in science. I wanted to be an astronaut. So I ended up at the United States Air Force Academy. For some reason, this has become a part of my personal biography when I explain how I got where I got. Because part of what happened is that dream kind of fell apart—I couldn't take it anymore, and I left the academy after two years. And I ended up at Amherst College, where I met Bob Thurman, who was teaching there at the time.

(00:04:30) I was sort of in an identity crisis, I guess you could say, really not sure what my life was about. And that's when I encountered Buddhism, which was really a perfect time. And I tell this story... The way I remember it is, the first class I took with Bob, which was on some aspect of Buddhism. He would say a few things for five minutes, and then he would basically spend the rest of the class goading me by debating with me about whether I really existed or not.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:04:58): Just you? *[laughter]*

John Dunne (00:04:59): Yes! This is what I remember. This might be highly filtered memory. And the rest of the class being very annoyed by this process, I think. (It might be a slight exaggeration.) But because I was interested in science, and I had actually studied a fair bit of science in my two years at the academy, and had an ongoing interest and maybe had a sort of orientation like that, to some extent... But I didn't need to take any more courses of that kind, what we call now STEM courses, when I finished at Amherst. So I didn't do any more, really, formal education in the sciences, ever since then actually.

(00:05:41) What I did become very interested in over time was a key question, because I was especially involved in a style of Buddhism, in Tibetan Buddhism, that's the tradition known as the Gelugpa. That's the tradition that His Holiness the Dalai Lama is primarily trained in. They're very philosophically oriented, and they place a lot of emphasis on analysis, rational analysis, but also on what you can call epistemology: how do you know things? Which means it's all about models of mind, models of inference or rational analysis, models of perception, and that leads to questions around, well, what's affect? They don't even have a category of emotion, actually, but what we call emotions. How do they analyze those? How do we understand what attention is, and how the mind attends to objects? Because all that's relevant to transforming the mind—not just relevant to meditation practice but in general, just: what is the mind?

(00:06:35) So, because I studied all that stuff and then eventually ended up at grad school at Harvard, I really wanted to focus especially on epistemology, and I studied a Buddhist philosopher by the name of Dharmakīrti, who wrote in Sanskrit in the 7th century. And he's really the most prominent Buddhism epistemologist. And that background then meant that when I ended up eventually, after a couple years, at the University of Lausanne, I ended up with my first academic job, or my first job as a professor, I should say, as an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. And pretty soon after ending up there, one of my students, actually, who wanted to do an independent project on Tibetan Buddhism and mental health, a young woman named Erin Ehmen practically dragged me into Richie Davidson's office—I had no idea who Richie was. Then we started to talk, and it was like, "Oh, you know this person, Alan Wallace?"

(00:07:31) "Yeah, sure, I know Alan. Alan taught me Tibetan." When we were together at Amherst, Alan taught me Tibetan. And this and that, and the other thing. So it ended up that he needed help, they were just starting these adept studies.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:07:46): And this was about when?

John Dunne (00:07:47): This is, I think, end of '99.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:07:48): Late '90s, okay. So this is very early days.

John Dunne (00:07:51): Yeah, maybe Spring semester 2000, something like that.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:07:56): So really not much had been going on at all in terms of research on meditation.

John Dunne (00:07:59): No. So it was before that famous meeting when His Holiness came, or what's famous to many of us, because it's the meeting in which His Holiness came to Madison. That's when I met Antoine.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:08:08): Antoine Lutz.

John Dunne (00:08:09): Antoine Lutz, yes. And that's when His Holiness had this really touching last conversation over video, which didn't really exist then. There's was no Skype. But they set it up with Francisco Varela, who passed away not long after that.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:08:25): So you were there for that?

John Dunne (00:08:27): I was there, yeah. It was really quite moving.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:08:29): Did you ever meet Francisco?

John Dunne (00:08:31): I spoke to him on the phone, I think once, because I helped work on this book, *Sleeping, Dreaming, and Dying*. So I once had a brief conversation with him on the phone, but unfortunately never met him. But, in any case, so then, at first, I was just going to translate, literally, the Tibetan language.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:08:52): For the Dalai Lama?

John Dunne (00:08:53): Well, no, for the practitioners who were coming into town, because many of them couldn't speak English. But then things developed really quite quickly. I remember Shechen Rinpoche and Matthieu Ricard came. So Richie said, "Hey, you should come to this." And we started talking about, well, how would these practices affect things like habituation, for example, after a startle response? And then we said, oh you know this and that, and pretty soon I was just drawn into that conversation. And then, that was it.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:09:24): The rest is history.

John Dunne (00:09:25): The rest is history, really. It kind of started out with, first, not just linguistic translation but really experimental design. Then it started to get into translating, in a sense, the Buddhist theories about the meditation and the techniques, and then also a long period when Mingyur Rinpoche was visiting, where Antoine Lutz, Mingyur Rinpoche, and I, in particular, and sometimes Richie, would have these really quite long conversations about: how do we do this? Do we have the right design? Are we looking for the right stuff? It was really quite a fun period, and that's what got all this going.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:10:01): Yeah, right. And that was pretty much what broke open—those early studies with Mingyur Rinpoche and Antoine Lutz, and you and Richie were some of the first that were ever done.

John Dunne (00:10:10): Yes, certainly. There were some earlier studies that were done on Zen practitioners way back when, even in the '50s, I think. And then there were some studies, of course TM studies. But these were maybe the most... They were the first fMRI studies, for sure. And also working with meditators who had so much experience. I mean, these are meditators who had been, sometimes, two, three-year retreats. Yeah, it was definitely groundbreaking for sure.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:10:42): So you've then been in dialogue with scientists for 20 years, about, now...

John Dunne (00:10:47): Yeah, I guess that would be... Yeah, about 20 years. Yes. Oh, my god.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:10:51): I know.

John Dunne (00:10:53): Oh, my Buddha, I should say. *[laughter]*

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:10:56): So what do you think, in your experience, what's the benefit or value or importance of having someone like you with a background in Buddhist philosophy and Buddhist studies working with scientists who are doing this research?

John Dunne (00:11:08): Well, I think the thing that's probably most important... It's definitely important to have someone who can speak the language, obviously, so that you can explain. If you're working at all with subjects who don't speak the language, you need to have a translator. So there's that. But there's also... I think the additional aspect of my background is, when I met Bob Thurman way back then, he brought in a visiting professor by the name of Tara Rinpoche. And Tara Rinpoche, who at that time was the abbot of Gyutö Monastery, became my main... I actually started to study with him. And part of what happened with that exposure is that I actually then became really interested not just in the philosophy,

but in the actual practice. He was a remarkable person, really, someone who practiced a lot in his lifetime. And you see that sometimes with these people. Richie talks about this, too. Sometimes you meet these people, and you say, "Wow, I kind of would like to be like that." So I started to also practice Buddhism. I won't get into all the details, but let's just say by the time I was dragged into Richie's office, I'd already been practicing Buddhism for almost 20 years.

[\(00:12:20\)](#) So it's not just the philosophy. I think it's important to have some actual concrete experience with the practices. You don't have to practice every practice, but to have some understanding of how that works on the ground, and also not just the philosophy, but the meditation manuals. Because one of the key things that... The first thing that Richie, Antoine, and I wrote together, one of the points we made is, there are books about meditation, modern books. There are classical texts about meditation. There are oral instructions about meditation. And then there are what people actually do. And those can all be different. So it's good to know that, and to be able to know each of those different phases so that, hopefully, one can negotiate those differences.

[\(00:13:03\)](#) At the same time, both the philosophy and then the meditation manuals... Even though a meditation manual may say one thing, and I've seen this several times, and then you ask a teacher, and they say, "Yeah. Well, it says that, but we don't do that." So it may say one thing, but you do another thing. Nevertheless, even the fact that it says that still has an impact, right? And it's also reflecting some kind of underlying theoretical commitment. Or sometimes there are theoretical commitments you're supposed to keep but you can't really keep them if you practice this way. So there are all these tensions that emerge from that. And those are things that have effects. But then, also, in a more straightforward way, really knowing: what are the models of mind, models of cognition? What are the theories of transformation, either explicit or implicit that are found in the textual tradition? That really helps a lot for just even experimental design, like, "What am I looking for? What's the hypothesis here, and how do I design an experiment to check it out?"

[\(00:13:59\)](#) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:14:26\)](#): So, looking back, what's your take on how the field has evolved?

John Dunne [\(00:14:32\)](#): I think it's amazing. You see those graphs of the number of articles. Antoine, I think, made one of those before. There are others who... I forget the fellow who runs that mindfulness newsletter who made one.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:14:45\)](#): David Black.

John Dunne [\(00:14:46\)](#): David Black, yes. But Antoine made one even before that, and already... I can't remember when it was, some years ago, like 2007 or something. Even then, you could really see some significant increases. So *Mind & Life*, in particular, had this tremendous impact, partially through the great generosity of Barry Hershey, who helped to create the Varela Grants. I remember the day that happened, actually, at the SRI. And it's just had a tremendous impact. So you can just see simply the quantity of research, the number of people that are doing research... It's tremendous to see how much it's exploded. But also, I do think that we collectively, as a community, have really contributed to the quality of research, too.

[\(00:15:28\)](#) One of the aspects of that is, a really simple thing, is that I remember having a conversation at one of the early SRIs, actually, and everyone was talking about meditation, meditation, meditation.

And I said, and other people joined in, or maybe I wasn't the first to say it. I don't remember. But I said, "You know, really, we should be talking about something in the plural." Because it's like saying "sports"—all the same. (Sports, at least, is plural, actually.) But it's like, everything is the same. That would be ridiculous. Curling is not like soccer, is not like tennis. So what we needed was a term that would really enable us to very easily be clear that we're talking about something that is multiple. And so that's how we started using the term contemplative, actually. Because "contemplative practices" is something that doesn't maybe roll off the tongue quite as easily as meditation, but it really emphasizes the plurality of these traditions. So that was actually one of the reasons we started to use that word.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:16:29](#)): Oh, that's interesting. I never knew that.

John Dunne ([00:16:30](#)): Yeah. So then we saw, after a few years, instead of having in the abstract, just, "This is a study of meditation," people started to talk about which kind of meditation, like exactly what are we doing here? And then that led us to, also... Around the same time, actually, we then coined the terms FA and OM.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:16:52](#)): Yeah, can you explain those practices?

John Dunne ([00:16:53](#)): Yeah, sure. I think this is an article in *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* that came out in 2008, I think, or 2007. And it's uh... what is it called?

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:17:07](#)): Attention Monitoring and...? *[laughter]*

John Dunne ([00:17:08](#)): Yeah, exactly. I never can remember the title of it!

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:17:10](#)): I know the paper very well, but yeah.

John Dunne ([00:17:13](#)): How embarrassing. *[laughter]* Anyway-

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:17:16](#)): I'll put it in the notes on the website.

John Dunne ([00:17:17](#)): Okay, good. So, when that paper... When we were first formulating it, we were trying to figure out—okay, we need to help people have some easy, heuristic way of parsing, in some basic fashion, differences between meditations, or styles of meditation. And so we created these terms, focused attention and open monitoring, or FA and OM. And now that paper has like 2,000 citations, literally.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:17:42](#)): It's been a seminal paper in the field, for sure.

John Dunne ([00:17:44](#)): Yeah. Because it actually gave people at least some way, obviously a very imperfect way, but it gave them some way to start to distinguish the kinds of practices they're doing. Because even just saying mindfulness... So people would stop saying "meditation," but then they would say "mindfulness." But actually that's not even that helpful, either, because you could be doing a focused attention style of mindfulness, or an open monitoring style of mindfulness. And the way we try to operationalize those is a focused attention style is basically about maintaining sustained attention on a particular object. There needs to be, at the same time, obviously, you have to have some kind of error monitoring, so that you know whether or not you're on the object.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:18:21): You mean, an "object" could also be the breath, is a common-

John Dunne (00:18:24): It could be the breath. It could be a visual object. It could be a sound. So there's some object on which one is maintaining attention. Generally, focused attention styles of practice tend to have a fairly narrow object, meaning there's not a... We wrote a later paper in 2015 that introduced this idea of the aperture. In a sense, how big or small is that focal aperture? In other words, am I focusing very tightly on just the sensations around the nostrils, or do I have a broader focus on the sensations of breathing at the abdomen? Am I looking at a small pebble, or am I looking at a much larger object, or even the whole sky?

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:19:04): So it's like the size of the spotlight, you could say?

John Dunne (00:19:07): Yes, exactly. So the focused attention styles all have a spotlight, basically. And most generally, even when you do that kind of sky style of meditation, it might start out as if you have a spotlight, but then it will often dissipate. Likewise, when you do focused attention meditations, if it's too large an aperture, it seems like it kind of falls apart. So, generally, they have a pretty small aperture. They're focusing on something pretty narrow. It seems like the more one is trying to cultivate sustained attention, the ability to just remain focused on an object, generally the smaller that aperture is going to be. If it gets too small, that's a problem, too.

(00:19:50) But then there's also, simultaneous with that, there's like, "Am I on the object? Am I distracted, or am I starting to lose the object?" We talk about two features in the Tibetan tradition coming from India—we talk about two basic problems in meditation are agitation, which is called, in Tibetan, jing-gö. So jing ba means a kind of sinking or dullness or laxity.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:20:13): Like a sleepiness?

John Dunne (00:20:14): Kind of. It doesn't have to be sleepiness, actually. Sleepiness is a very gross form of it. Then gö pa, which means excitement or agitation or even just arousal, high arousal. That's a scale, and in a way, jing-gö itself is a scale of arousal. Because, in Tibetan, if I want to say temperature, I say tsa-grang, which means hot/cold. There's no word for temperature. You say hot/cold.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:20:40): The endpoints of [the scale]... Yeah.

John Dunne (00:20:41): Yeah, tsa-drang kha tsö ré, how much is the temperature? You say tsa-grang. So jing-gö is really... Probably we should just call that arousal, degree of arousal.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:20:50): Yeah, that's how it would be in cognitive science.

John Dunne (00:20:51): Right. So one end of that scale is where you have very low arousal, and that heads down, eventually, into sleepiness. Then you go higher and higher and higher, and then you're starting to get toward the [gyu pa] end, when you have this excitement or agitation.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:21:06): And what does that feel like, subjectively?

John Dunne (00:21:09): One of the ways that that feels like, and very often a symptom of this kind of arousal, high arousal, or gö pa, excitability is that you just feel like suddenly you have so many thoughts. That would be one of them. Or you try to focus on an object, and your mind goes immediately to

something else, even if it's not a thought, like another sensation or something like that. And sometimes it even involves physiological jitteriness and so on. Just like the opposite end, the physiological expression of really low arousal, of jing ba is you fall asleep. So there can be physiological expressions of really high arousal, where there's muscle tension and muscle tics and stuff like that.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:21:50](#)): Do you think this relates to the actual amount of energy in the body?

John Dunne ([00:21:54](#)): Well, sure. Yeah, the Tibetans would talk about this in terms of lung (which is vāyu in Sanskrit, not prana, actually, but vāyu). But in any case, also, in the medical literature, when you're having a lot of stress or you're feeling anxiety, agitation, that means you have a lot of lung, which is this kind of energy in the body. And if we have too much of that, it can be really quite negative. And you can induce that by meditation. There is a particular kind of "wind illness." So lung means wind. It's a metaphor for energy. And there is something called life wind illness, sok-lung, which can be induced by meditating improperly or meditating too hard, so to speak. And it basically looks like generalized anxiety disorder, pretty much, sometimes with psychotic symptoms.

([00:22:47](#)) Anyway, when we're trying to understand the way in which these practices are working, one of the things that's important about the way those practices are developed is you've got, theoretically, this notion, which seems to be also developed in very practical ways, of this degree of arousal. And then there are going to be techniques to actually counteract that degree of arousal. So that's an example of where the indigenous theories can actually be very helpful for us to understand what meditators are doing, in terms of technique.

([00:23:15](#)) Anyway, to get back to the FA/OM distinction, the distinction between focused attention and open monitoring, when you're doing focused attention practice, one of the things you're monitoring for is this degree of arousal. How much jing-gö is there? And you need to have that. Now, some traditions say that that's an intermittent kind of introspection, or meta-awareness, where you have to actually drop the object and check how you're doing. That's one account. But another account that is favored by the non-dual traditions is that the capacity to notice the quality of the meditation practice... Because you can notice, the claim is, even while you're on the object, especially an expert meditator could start to notice whether they're getting too much arousal or too little arousal.

([00:24:07](#)) So they can notice that without losing the object, without doing an introspection. That means there's this other feature, which you could, in a rough sense, call meta-awareness—but it's implicit, it's constantly running in the background—during that kind of practice. So you're aware of... You're monitoring the quality of your attention on an object. Then what you can do is, you can just drop the object, and now you're just monitoring. That's what we called open monitoring.

([00:24:34](#)) A lot of people, like Matthieu Ricard, really didn't like that, because if you're in a non-dual tradition, the implication of open monitoring is there's something to monitor, which means you're still in a dualistic kind of stance. And of course, beginners are, when they do this.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:24:53](#)): And I want to unpack the non-dual thing in a minute...

John Dunne ([00:24:55](#)): Okay. So beginners are like that. In other words, when they first try to do this kind of work, like in the Mahamudra style, it would be called object-less shamatha, shamatha without a support. So, when you first try to do that, there's still a very strong dualistic orientation. But there are also traditions that do something like this. You find many Vipassana teachers teach something that's

kind of like this, where you develop a lot of focused attention style awareness on, let's say, the breath at the nostrils, but then maybe eventually move to a point where you stop focusing on anything in particular, and you simply attend to whatever arises. So that's another practice, as well, we would put under that rough rubric of open monitoring.

[\(00:25:36\)](#) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:26:04\)](#): So you've mentioned a couple terms that I think it'd be worth just unpacking a little bit. One is meta-awareness, and you described it somewhat. But maybe if you could give a succinct description of what that means, as some people might not be familiar.

John Dunne [\(00:26:18\)](#): Well, there's a little debate about what it means exactly. And Evan Thompson, Jonathan Schooler—who's participated in a number of Mind & Life events, he's at USCB, Evan's at University of British Columbia—and myself just wrote a paper on this "mindful meta-awareness," we called it. And so Jonathan's early work on meta-awareness was really very influential, continues to be very influential. One of the ways he conceptualized meta-awareness is that it's, for example, the moment that you notice that... You've been reading a scientific article or something, and you get three paragraphs, four paragraphs, and then you realize, "I have no idea what those paragraphs meant." Right?

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:27:04\)](#): I've never had that happen. *[laughter]*

John Dunne [\(00:27:05\)](#): Ah, no, of course not. So that moment of noticing is a moment of meta-awareness because, as Jonathan put it early on, around 2000, he says it's basically just noticing the current contents of mind. A very simple definition.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:27:23\)](#): Right, so being aware of what's going on.

John Dunne [\(00:27:23\)](#): But it's an explicit judgment about it, like, "Oh, I am not paying attention," or, "Oh, I am daydreaming about a beach in the Bahamas right now." So that is an explicit moment. That happens at a moment, and part of what... In a series of conversations that Jonathan and Evan and I had a little while ago, and we may pick up again at some point, we were saying, well that seems to be only capturing part of what's happening when you do certain kinds of practices. So, even in a focused attention practice, you're focusing on your breath or some object. And then, at some point, you notice, as inevitably you do, "Oh, I'm planning my lunch." And that moment is a moment of explicit meta-awareness where at a particular moment, I make a judgment like, "Oh, I am doing X." And it's often in a linguistic form, actually.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:28:14\)](#): Yeah... sometimes. Although sometimes I feel like it can just be-

John Dunne [\(00:28:18\)](#): It could not be, but some of Jonathan's work suggests that it's often got a linguistic... It presents itself subjectively in a linguistic way. The phenomenology of that moment often involves a kind of inner vocalization. But of course that has to come from somewhere.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:28:34\)](#): The ability to detect it?

John Dunne [\(00:28:35\)](#): Yeah, unless you're just constantly switching and monitoring inward (which means you're dropping the object constantly), unless that's the model, an alternative model is that there

is some kind of capacity to be aware that is giving us information about, in a sense, not just the current contents of mind, but the current processes. Like, what's going on, not on the object but more generally? So, for example, as I'm talking to you right now and I say, "Boo," and then I ask you, "When I said boo, were you sitting down?" You say, "Yes."

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:29:11](#)): Yes, I was.

John Dunne ([00:29:12](#)): And is that an inference, like, "Oh, well, I don't remember getting up. Then I would I remember sitting. Last time I checked, I was sitting down..."? Or that moment—almost still in your working memory maybe... I mean, it's right there for you, available—but that, encoded with the memory of the sound, which is what you were attending to, is your body position.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:29:36](#)): That's right.

John Dunne ([00:29:36](#)): So that's being presented to you in your experience, but you're not attending to that. Right? But that's constantly being presented. So that's this idea of what we call "implicit meta-awareness" that we think is not intermittent. It's sustained.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:29:50](#)): So that's always happening, ostensibly for everyone?

John Dunne ([00:29:52](#)): Right. Yes, in a way. There is one position which says this is actually an ongoing feature of every moment of consciousness. But whether that's the case or not, when we're doing these kinds of practices, the idea in open monitoring style of practice is that when you drop the object, which is what you do in the open monitoring... So the monitoring's always going on, this background, sustained, implicit awareness that's presenting to you things like your body position but also the state of your awareness, your affect, and that's how we get the signal, so to speak, to then make a judgment, "Oh, I'm distracted." That's the theory here. This is presenting information about the quality of our awareness, and sometimes that becomes salient.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:30:36](#)): Right, that was going to be my question. So if it's always going on in the background, but certainly, at least as an early meditation practitioner, you're not aware of it for a lot of the time, until that moment when you somehow become aware...

John Dunne ([00:30:50](#)): But that moment comes from somewhere. So we have various kinds of competing streams for our explicit or conscious attention, or a kind of attention that we can report about. So there may be a kind of attending... That's a little bit of a difficult term because it means we are focusing on an object, but sometimes we talk about the distinction between phenomenal awareness—Ned Block, the philosopher, developed this idea—phenomenal awareness and access consciousness. And a very simple way of putting it is, when I'm doing something that has the level of access consciousness, I can make an explicit judgment like, "Oh, I see that."

([00:31:27](#)) But I can still sense things. There's a literature on noetic feelings, for example, that's about this. I can sense things, and not (in a sense) even know that I'm sensing them. So part of this is probably the way we would account for the fact that if we show you a face and it's too fast or it's masked in some way, even though you can't explicitly report on whether it looked angry or not, it still affects your behavior.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:31:51](#)): Right, you've somehow encoded that information.

John Dunne ([00:31:52](#)): Yes, so that when we ask you... we show you a neutral face later, and we just showed you an angry one (that you don't know you just saw it), you still report the neutral face as being less pleasant, for example.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:32:03](#)): Right, because it's like "contaminating" the moment of experience.

John Dunne ([00:32:05](#)): Yes, which means that, in some sense, you were aware of or your system-

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:32:09](#)): Yes, not consciously.

John Dunne ([00:32:10](#)): Right, or, well... But that word conscious is really tough. Maybe if we did train you, maybe you-

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:32:16](#)): You could become...

John Dunne ([00:32:18](#)): Or maybe if we did a microphenomenological interview on you, we'd discover that actually you were aware of it. So maybe. Yeah. So who knows?

([00:32:27](#)) But in any case, there's something that's presenting that information. The way that works, and this is a good example of meta-awareness, is what's really being presented there is not the face. It's our emotional response, our affective response to the face. So that affect... On this theory, affect is part of what's being presented by meta-awareness. For example, let's say I'm having a conversation, and this is an academic danger. And I'm sure I used to be more like this when I was younger... Like, you're in a conversation that's getting really heated, debate about something. And people are getting more and more irritated, and I'm getting more and more like argghhh, grrrr... Then, finally, I realize, "Oh, I've won the debate, but I've lost a friend." Why? Because this channel that was presenting my affect to me, the signal wasn't strong enough. So part of what meditation practices can do is, in a sense, improve the strength of that signal, of that meta-awareness signal.

([00:33:23](#)) So when I use that metaphor, what I mean is this. If we're sitting here and suddenly there's a loud sound, that's going to capture our attention. It's going to become salient. Why does it become salient? Because one of the ongoing tasks is what David Meyer calls the task of life, meaning you're going to survive. Or at least that's part of the task of life.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:33:44](#)): It's the primary task, yeah.

John Dunne ([00:33:44](#)): Yes, right. So a loud sound is this anomalous thing that we got to pay attention to. It becomes salient. Whereas there are other soft sounds that our auditory system is actually detecting, but they're not salient. We can't report them, and they don't capture our attention. But that information's being processed to some level, anyway. And in any case, it's got to be available there for it to actually become salient at some point, right?

([00:34:14](#)) So likewise, we have information from our senses, but we also have information, in a sense, from the mental channel, so to speak, meaning there's all of that information about affect. It may actually be something you could decompose into more than just one thing. We could talk about proprioception and interoception, and this may all be bound together into what we're right now calling

meta-awareness. In any case, that's the concept, at least as I understand it, is that all that's also constantly being presented. But then there are times when it becomes salient.

(00:34:44) And why would it become salient? Because it's important. So, if my task is to stay on my breath, then that's going to prime that particular... I'm holding that task. That's the task set that I'm retaining in that moment. And then there's information that's relevant to that task. And when that information becomes strong enough or clear enough, then it's going to become salient. And I'm going to go, "Oh, I'm not on my breath anymore."

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:35:11): So whatever becomes salient is determined by your intention in that moment, or what you just called the task set.

John Dunne (00:35:17): Right, exactly. So the task set of your meditation probably doesn't include the sensation in your right big toe, most of the time. That information's available, but you know, it's like, "when your right big toe moves slightly, please stand on your head." That's the new practice that we're developing to save the world. *[laughter]* No, probably not. So then it would become relevant. And that might be something that: watch your breath, but if your right toe... or if you feel movement in your lower body, then do something.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:35:53): So, normally, it's: watch your breath, and if you realize your mind is somewhere else, then come back to the breath.

John Dunne (00:36:00): Right. So the idea is that there can be this information that's often (I would think it's probably also interoceptive and proprioceptive information), but it's definitely what we could think of as affect and other features of cognition, that are being presented to us as a feature... Just like your sitting position was presented to you as a feature of your memory of me making that sound. So constantly, this is being presented to us.

(00:36:28) And then there are kinds of meditation that are really trying to "up" that signal, make it stronger. Because it's a really good signal—like, if you want to do emotion regulation, you need to notice your emotional state. And that's not a matter of constantly looking inward because if you had to do that, you would...

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:36:43): You couldn't do anything else.

John Dunne (00:36:46): ... you couldn't do anything else. The styles of practice that do that are... All mindfulness practices do that because they emphasize, to some degree, this kind of monitoring. But then there are styles that do it even more, because what they do is they drop an object. And now you're just trying to sustain that meta-awareness without focusing on any object.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:37:06): So, just monitoring whatever's happening...

John Dunne (00:37:08): Right, but then, at some point, you even drop that attitude of monitoring something. And now you're into... A term we could use there is open awareness. That's a very particular kind of practice that you only find in traditions that are trying to cultivate a non-dual state—meaning a state in which there's no structure of a subject focusing on an object.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:37:32): Right. Let's talk a little bit about the non-dual. Can you say a little bit more about what it means to be in a dualistic experience?

John Dunne (00:37:40): Actually, this starts to get into the idea where we're not just talking about meta-awareness. We're also talking about something that's more like a feature of consciousness, which is reflexivity. But obviously, because of the way I think about these things, and I think the way probably both Evan and Jonathan, but maybe especially Evan thinks about it... We had a debate like, "Should we try to get into this or not?" And when Antoine, Amishi Jha and Cliff Saron and I wrote that paper in 2015 in the American Psychologist that we called the Cube Paper because it's got that cool cube diagram.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:38:17): Figure one, it's great.

John Dunne (00:38:18): Yeah, we also thought about, do we want to get into reflexivity when we talked about meta-awareness? There we didn't even use the implicit [angle]. We just used like, it's a judgment, it's a moment of noticing. But anyway, reflexivity is important here because it is... When you hear that sound, or if you just look at something here, have a look at the microphone or something like that, when you do that, you have a sense of it being "over there," which means you have to have a sense of also there being "in here."

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:38:50): Yes. I'm over here. You are over there.

John Dunne (00:38:52): But you're not focusing on the you in there, are you? That's not an object, is it?

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:38:56): Nope.

John Dunne (00:38:57): I hope not. That would be kind of weird. *[laughter]*

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:38:58): That would be weird.

John Dunne (00:38:59): That would be quite a trick, actually, if you could do both of those. So you have an object focus over here on a visual object, but at the time, precisely even that sense of it being located somewhere means that there's a sense of the in-here-ness. Which is a sense of subjectivity, like there's a seer, the agent, the apparent agent of the moment of seeing something. So that's also being presented, but it's not being presented as an object.

(00:39:27) When I teach this in class, I'll make a sound or something like that. And I'll say, "Oh, were you sitting down?" And people say, "Oh, yeah, obviously." And I'm like, "How do you know that?" And then they go, "Oh, yeah, I guess it's just part of the experience." And then I do it again, make another sound. Then I say, "Were you the one hearing the sound, or was it somebody else?" And they go, "Huh, what?" Because, you know, it's so obvious.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:39:50): Obviously it's me. Yeah.

John Dunne (00:39:51): Yeah, of course, unless you have certain kinds of psychopathologies. But, yeah, obviously, in our ordinary experience, there's just this sense of being the hearer of a sound. But we're not focusing on that as an object. We're focusing on the sound. So that means that that's constantly being presented. Both the object and the subject are being presented.

(00:40:12) And in the non-dual traditions in Buddhism and actually outside of Buddhism, too, but we'll just focus on Buddhism, and these would basically be... In Tibet, the ones that I know best and that we've done some research on in terms of contemplative practices are Mahamudra and Dzogchen. The style that I'm most familiar with, actually, combines both of those. So the main feature of these non-dual styles—and Zen tradition, Chan, Zen, Seon in Korea, and so on, they are also non-dual traditions—but the main feature of these traditions is that, without going into a huge amount of detail, is that suffering is caused by a fundamental cognitive defect. Early Buddhism says the fundamental cognitive defect has to do with the way we conceptualize our own personal identity. Then Buddhist philosophy develops, and eventually we get to the point at which, well, actually, no, the fundamental defect is deeper than that. It's the mere fact of there being a structure in consciousness or cognition that presents objects and subjects.

(00:41:13) So, to see what's really going on, you have to see the moment of consciousness or experience consciousness without that defect. Which means you have to experience it without subject-object duality. So there's a whole story about why that makes sense. Just saying it right now, like, "What are you talking about? Why would that follow?" So there's an argument—we could go through it, there's a condensed version we could go through... But basically, very briefly, I will say this much. When you look at a visual object, even as a scientist, you know that the color red of this object over here is not outside of your mind. Because color doesn't exist in the world. Even if we would be very physicalist about it and say, "There are photons. There's some substance here."

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:42:00): A certain wavelength of light...

John Dunne (00:42:02): Yeah, and photons aren't red.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:42:04): Right, the red is the construct in my mind that corresponds.

John Dunne (00:42:07): Exactly. Right, and that's the way your visual system encodes photons at that particular frequency, right? So where's the red?

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:42:15): In the mind.

John Dunne (00:42:15): Yeah. Right, it's within your consciousness. Therefore, that means that it seems like we're always seeing stuff outside of our mind, but actually we're seeing the effects of the interaction of our visual system with that stuff, when what is actually presented and experienced is in consciousness. So that's just presumably, every scientist of vision would accept that. There are philosophers who really don't want to believe that, Western philosophers. But pretty much, I can't imagine a cognitive scientist who would say otherwise.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:42:45): Yeah. No, that's pretty dogma.

John Dunne (00:42:46): Yeah, it's pretty straightforward. This is the same kind of position, actually. Which is that there's a cause for the visual cognition, but what you actually see, so to speak, in your experience, like the color red, is not a thing in the world. It's a product of the interaction of your sensory system with some causes, and you see red as a result. So, really, the thing I'm beholding in my mind is not "out there." It's encoded as being out there.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:43:17): Right, but there are things out there...?

John Dunne (00:43:18): Well, it's encoded as being out there. So, at one level of Buddhist philosophy... Buddhist philosophy has these levels of analysis. We kind of lead you along the primrose path, so to speak. At one level, we say, "Yeah, of course, it isn't outside your mind. But the reason it looks like it's outside your mind, and therefore you have out-there-ness and an in-here-ness, even though both of those are just in your mind... The in here and the out there are nothing other than just that moment of consciousness. But there looks to be this differentiation of in here/out there because the cause of this red image I'm seeing is outside my mind, or was. Because I was-

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:43:59): It's something in the world.

John Dunne (00:44:00): Yeah, something in the world that interacted with my sense. So that's why it looks... It's just an accurate representation, in a sense, of the features of the cause. So this stuff outside my mind that causes me to see blue or red or whatever, it's outside my mind. So that's why, even though what I'm actually seeing is inside consciousness, within the field of consciousness, it looks like it's out there because it's just faithfully encoding the fact that the stuff that caused it is out there. But on this level of philosophy, there's no stuff out there.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:44:33): Oh, no...

John Dunne (00:44:34): [laughter] Yeah, I know. Well, there you go.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:44:37): There's other levels, though, where there is stuff out there, right?

John Dunne (00:44:39): Yeah, you can just stay at the *lower* level if you want. So this doesn't mean that everything-

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:44:44): We don't exist in a vacuum.

John Dunne (00:44:46): No, no, no. There's still causes.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:44:48): Right, there's a physical reality.

John Dunne (00:44:50): No... It looks physical to you. That's a model you bring to it. There are causes for your perceptions. But the stuff that make up the causes is not matter, on this level of analysis. So it gets complicated, but one way of thinking about the major influence on this kind of non-dual approach and the styles of practice that are non-dual styles of practice is their influence, especially by a form of Buddhism called Yogacara, which literally means practice of yoga. And that style of Buddhism says that those causes are actually... The kind of stuff that your mind seems to be made of—there's the inside and the outside—they're actually made of the same kind of stuff.

(00:45:36) So it doesn't mean that everything gets sucked into the subject side, like everything is just... your sense of subjectivity is the reality. No, because if there's no outside, there's also no inside. So the subject and the object both have to go. But whatever's making... all the stuff, all the causes of our perceptions and our mental experiences are all made out of the same kind of stuff.

(00:46:00) So, in Tantra, that will then move to models where you say it's made out of energy, and it gets a lot more complicated. And some of the traditions kind of hem and haw about this, and so on and

forth. We don't need to get into it. But in any case, that's just the metaphysics. There's a basic claim. But you can do this practice, whether or not you can drop that kind of subject-object duality, even if what's causing the sense impressions are external.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:46:29): So how do you drop that sense?

John Dunne (00:46:30): Well, that's... Yeah, how do you do that? And it could still be very useful, especially therapeutically, because part of what happens is we get really fixated on the sense of subjectivity, and we think there's no way we can change, or we can have a very negative sense of ourselves, or we can have a very inflated sense of ourselves, or whatever.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:46:49): When you say the sense of subjectivity or the subject-object division, to me that sounds really exactly like the sense of self that we talk about in psychology.

John Dunne (00:46:57): There are two ways of talking about self, though. One of them is self as a kind of object, like a character in a story. When I think about myself. So, a lot of the time, when we have self schemas, like I have a schema where I'm a jerk, and I'll always be a jerk. But those models are really like I'm looking at myself as if I'm looking at somebody else. So I'm turning myself into an object and describing myself.

(00:47:23) But there's also another, arguably subtler and maybe more important and therapeutically more important sense of self as the one who's doing stuff, the one who's seeing stuff. The seer, the hearer, the feeler. And that, also, we can have a sense that, "Well, I can't change." So we have a story about ourselves, and we feel we can't change. But that also can be rooted in a sense that that subjectivity also doesn't change.

(00:47:50) So having an experience in which it radically changes or even disappears, and this is one of the hypotheses about what happens in psilocybin and other psychedelic experiences, why they may be helpful for people who have treatment-resistant depression is that they kind of hit, as Robin Carhart-Harris who's worked a lot on this says, it's like hitting the reset button. Ego dissolution is a hypothesis that's relevant here. That you kind of fall apart, and you realize, "Wow, all this BS I'm telling about myself is radically wrong, because not only does the story disappear, I disappear. My sense of being the one thinking or the one seeing, even that falls apart." So that can be really therapeutically powerful even if you don't have the metaphysics like, "Oh, there isn't really stuff out there and mind in here." So it can be a powerful moment.

(00:48:43) And also you can do practices that induce that kind of a moment. Those are the practices you find in the various non-dual traditions. And they often involve, like a very beginning style of that is it starts with what we call shamatha, which is stabilizing the mind.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:48:59): Like an FA?

John Dunne (00:49:00): Right. They would start with an FA style very often, like in Mahamudra, anyway. (Actually, you find this in many of the non-dual traditions, even when it's not explicitly discussed.) You'll focus on some object initially, and then you start to develop that monitoring capacity. And then you slowly let go of the focus. Alan Wallace has this nice metaphor that maybe he found in some text somewhere, which is it's like you have your hand on a buoy in the water, and then you slowly pull it back, and let go. So the breath, for example, if you're using your breath as a focus, it's you first focus on

the breath and then slowly, slowly, slowly just release, lighter and lighter focus on the breath or attention on the breath. And then you just stop attending. What's left is that so-called monitoring.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:49:46): Mm-hmm (affirmative), meta-awareness.

John Dunne (00:49:47): Which still is probably very dualistic because it's kind of, "Well, is there something? Wait, where did it go? Where'd it go?" But then eventually that dualistic sense of it starts to dissipate, and it becomes a truly non-dual awareness, so they say, which you could call an open awareness. So that's a way of trying to describe that truly non-dual state, which is really beyond the open monitoring state. Remember, open monitoring is not a Buddhist term, nor is focused attention. They are just heuristic terms that are meant to roughly categorize different kinds of practices, so we at least could start saying not, "This is a meditation study." Like, "Oh, okay, you mean like a sports study?"

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:50:29): Right, yeah. They were developed to help researchers get some idea of how to describe it.

John Dunne (00:50:32): Yeah, to at least a little bit, start to parse different kinds of practices.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:50:37): And they've been super helpful. I feel like most papers-

John Dunne (00:50:39): Yes, a lot of papers refer to those. And Richie and Antoine and Cortland Dahl at our center, they wrote another paper, kind of a follow-up to that paper, that introduces some additional categories like a deconstructive practice and the constructive practice. And our Cube Paper was also intended to try to give people the tools to maybe specify in a somewhat more finely-grained way what kind of practices they're looking at because that's really important.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:51:09): Yeah, you have to be able to compare apples to apples.

John Dunne (00:51:11): Yeah, and it's still the case that a lot of time... I was just involved in a research conversation in which we were talking about "meditation."

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:51:18): Yeah, writ large.

John Dunne (00:51:20): Yes, and it's very rarely the case that that makes sense, actually.

(00:51:23) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:51:49): You were talking about this experience of self, or the subjective side, dissolving. What do you think are the impacts of that in terms of one's experience in the world or one's struggles, maybe, with... you mentioned clinical relevance?

John Dunne (00:52:05): Well, I think one of the things... Again, if you're thinking of a psilocybin experience, people fall apart in that way, also, but this is induced by the medicine. Hypothetically—and I don't think anyone really knows this yet, but people are really working on this—hypothetically, that experience and the memory of it, and the retelling of the story of the self that's made possible by that, that is the therapeutic secret ingredient of psilocybin. So that it basically wipes out the story, and even the self who could tell the story. And then, when it comes back, it's like, "Oh, man, that wasn't true. That

whole story about myself was just a story." And even the sense that there's a fixed self in there who can't change, even that feeling is not true, because it just went away, the whole thing!

(00:53:00) So you could therapeutically also, maybe not go all the way there because that's pretty hard to do in a meditation practice... It can happen to people. One of the issues with this style of practice is it can sound like a dissociation in a way, right? And it's a target, a dissociative state is a kind of target. But what's important is that you have to contextualize that state. So, in psilocybin, when people are using psilocybin for therapeutic treatment, the key thing is the interviews, the integration sessions that are done after the dosing.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:53:34): Yeah, you create a framework that's helpful.

John Dunne (00:53:38): Exactly. Also, very often, either explicitly or implicitly, they set people up, too.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:53:43): Yeah, beforehand, before the [dosing]...

John Dunne (00:53:45): Yeah, exactly. And the same is really true in meditation. We could talk about technique, but there's also all the context before and after meditation sessions, and whatever experiences might arise. One of the issues, I think, when we sometimes people encounter certain kinds of problems with meditation, sometimes they have these dissociative experiences, but they haven't been properly contextualized. And they don't know what to do with them. But if they're properly contextualized, where your sense of self begins to dissolve, and you're not sure where you begin and the world ends, or where the world ends and you begin. And are you the other person, or is the other person you? And all this becoming somehow just completely interpenetrated and-

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:54:37): Right, which could be really scary.

John Dunne (00:54:39): Which could be really scary, if you're really clinging very tightly to the self. And of course, people in psychedelic experiences often have fear. But if you're prepared for it, and it's said, "This is going to happen, and this is a way of just seeing that there's a plasticity to your own identity. Things might start to dissolve a little bit." And often in meditation, it's not a matter of complete dissolution into a non-dual state. That's relatively rare, especially in people who haven't meditated a lot. But there can even just be a little bit. I've been in a context where... I can teach a style of practice called objectless shamatha, as I described. And when I sometimes teach that to people, there are people who occasionally say, "Oh, I started to disappear!" And you have to be sure you intervene and make them feel comfortable, but they're also prepped ahead of time. And even if that prepping is really a priming for them to start to notice a little dissolution, nothing wrong with that. We're not doing an experiment here like, "Does this technique work?" Like, if all we need to do is prime people, and they just conceptually have an experience of dissolution, that's just fine.

(00:55:48) So the point is that there needs to be, again, not total dissolution, which is rare. But this sense, like the assumption that there's this fixed subjective standpoint, starts to fade a little bit. And when that fades, obviously the story of the person is going to fade. Because the story's about somebody. But if that person... You know, like if we're telling a story of Frodo Baggins, but Frodo Baggins keeps flipping in and out existence, it's like, "Wait a second. Where'd Frodo go? What's the story about now?"

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:56:20): The story's not so powerful, yeah.

John Dunne (00:56:21): Right. Well, there isn't a story, because there isn't a Frodo to talk about. So that's the idea there, that it actually, at a very foundational level, gives one a visceral experience—even not necessarily of just these techniques, of inducing really non-dual, where the subject-object structure totally collapses—but even it just weakens a little bit. And there's this sense of things becoming... a little dissolving, or the sense of subjectivity not being so sharp and clear anymore. And that can be very powerful, if it's contextualized in the right way.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:56:54): And so having that lessen or dissolve or destabilize a little bit, the idea is that that would reduce suffering, because the suffering is coming from the original clinging to that?

John Dunne (00:57:04): Well, yes. In the Buddhist world, the suffering is certainly coming [from] clinging to a sense of a fixed identity, which is certainly caught up in a fixed sense of subjectivity. But then, the non-dual traditions will say that even just this idea that there's a real world, objective world out there... Not only is there no fixed subject in here, there isn't a fixed objective world out there, either. And that belief is also part of the stew of suffering. I mean, that's also what is producing suffering. But as I said before, those metaphysics, those accounts of what the ultimate nature of reality might be, are not necessary in order to do the practice, or to have therapeutic results from that practice.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:57:50): Right. And this also feels like the concept of decentering, which is related to mindfulness. It's a less extreme form of this, maybe.

John Dunne (00:57:57): It is related. Well, decentering is an extremely ill-defined term, as far as I'm concerned. There are two separate features that are really, I think, important to separate when we talk about this kind of phenomenon—because this is not decentering, what we're talking about, on my view.

(00:59:16) So one aspect of decentering is something that's more like psychological distancing, like Ethan Kross's model where you, instead of being so completely involved with your mental content, it's like you step back like you're a fly on the wall. And you try to see it in an objective way. And often, even the phenomenology of that is actually... you feel a kind of mental distance, like you just step back—metaphorically, mentally—and you sort of look more objectively. And he and his people have done some research which suggests that also has really useful therapeutic outcomes. Is that what decentering is? Some people seem to think that's what decentering is.

(01:00:03) But then there's also a very much more specific event, and a skill involved in this event, which is tied to this moment of dissolution in a certain way. Which is, being able to recognize that a thought is a thought. So John Teasdale, I think in a 1999 or '97 article, referred to this as... I think metacognitive insight, I believe, was the term that he used. And we decided to use the term de-reification because we thought it was much more... It actually described what was going on. Because something that's reified is made real. So, if you de-reify something, you make it unreal.

Wendy Hasenkamp (01:00:46): So you realize that the thought is not real.

John Dunne (01:00:48): Yeah. But of course, our cognitive system has evolved so that thoughts seem real to us. So, if I think of a strawberry... I often use that illustration. (Everyone seems to think I really love strawberries now. I like them, but not that much. Oh, I shouldn't say that—now they won't give me strawberries anymore!) *[laughter]* So you're thinking of it, and you can make your mouth water. And that's because we have this amazing capacity, which probably is pretty rare out there in the world of mammals, that mammals can do mental time travel, probably-

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:01:19](#)): Yeah, we're very good simulators.

John Dunne ([01:01:21](#)): But we're really good at it, and we do it to this incredible extent. So when Robert Sapolsky wrote his book *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*, it's because they can't mental time travel to that extent, with that vividness of what Larry Barsalou calls subjective realism. You can't just be immersed in this memory, or anticipation of a really difficult argument... So much so that I have a stress response. I get a big inflammatory response, and I've got muscle tension everywhere, and I can't eat. So, because I'm not in the stressful conversation, but I am as if in it. You know this very well because you've done work on this kind of thing. Right?

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:02:05](#)): Yeah. The basic idea is that when you are simulating an experience, for example an experience of a stressful argument or something, your body responds as if you are actually in that experience. And that's because our thoughts seem real, in that way.

John Dunne ([01:02:19](#)): Right. So, when you're thinking of a strawberry, if you do it well enough, and if you like strawberries, and if you haven't just eaten, your mouth will water. But then if I just say... And the technique is, in a certain way, it's just like, "See it as a thought." And when I teach this, I demonstrate this to people, I get them to... Their mouths water, and then, "Okay, now do it again. Visualize it. And now see it as a thought." And when you do that, for most... It's interesting. I'm really curious about how people react to this. So for most people, it just goes poof.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:02:53](#)): Disappears.

John Dunne ([01:02:53](#)): Some people, it kind of fades into the background. And generally, those people seem to be the ones who also say that they're disappointed.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:03:03](#)): They were clinging, maybe, more.

John Dunne ([01:03:04](#)): I guess. I don't know. It's really... That's an-

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:03:06](#)): It's really interesting to think about individual differences in how we let go of thoughts, and how easily we can let go of thoughts. That's the stickiness concept that Richie has talked about.

John Dunne ([01:03:16](#)): Yes, exactly. So, when it goes poof, actually, that is a technique also. The poof moment can then be used to a non-dual kind of meditation, because you can still... What are you paying attention to then?

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:03:27](#)): Right, the emptiness that's left, yeah.

John Dunne ([01:03:29](#)): There isn't anything there. But you're attending. You're aware. So then that subject-object kind of structure can then attenuate a little bit. That even can be used, it is used as a technique in Chagdzog, Mahamudra, Dzogchen traditions, that particular kind of moment. But also it's really powerful as a means of just helping... as a trick or a skill for people who are really getting caught up in their thoughts. Just look at it directly. It's just a thought.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:03:57](#)): Poof meditation.

John Dunne ([01:03:58](#)): Yeah, poof meditation. It's called the self-liberation of thoughts, when you put it in a traditional context. In some ways, that's an advanced practice, but as a technique, it can be very therapeutically useful. So, when people talk about decentering, sometimes they mean that. Sometimes they mean psychological distancing. Sometimes they seem to mean something entirely different that I haven't figured out yet, like some of just reinterpretation of experience.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:04:25](#)): Reappraisal or something, mm-hmm (affirmative). It's all a bit messy.

John Dunne ([01:04:26](#)): Yeah. So I think there's more work to be done on that construct. So decentering is not really about non-dual experience. De-reification can be, could be a technique for it.

([01:04:42](#)) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:04:55](#)): Well, I know we're coming up on our time. Just given your experience in the field, where do you think the field should be going now? Or what's the most important thing that we should be looking at?

John Dunne ([01:05:06](#)): I think that we need more people like me, and I wish there were more people like me...

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:05:13](#)): We all do. *[laughter]*

John Dunne ([01:05:15](#)): Yeah. That was a pretty egotistical thing to say, wasn't it?

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:05:20](#)): I know what you mean. I also wish there were more people like you! *[laughter]*

John Dunne ([01:05:22](#)): But all I mean is that I get called a lot because there are not that many of my Buddhist Studies colleagues who really seem to want to engage with this kind of work...

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:05:31](#)): And there aren't many humanities scholars and religious studies scholars who are able to. It's difficult to speak both languages.

John Dunne ([01:05:39](#)): Yeah, it's true... As I say, but I haven't had any formal education since an undergrad. I've done a lot of informal education, and my scientific colleagues... But part of it is I've just gotten used to not knowing, and realizing I don't need to know. Like, I'm terrible on brain anatomy. I have no idea. Like, the amygdala... is a little bit behind the occipital lobe. Is that it? I think so. Right? *[laughter]* I'm not quite that bad. But I don't even want to know.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:06:08](#)): And you don't need to.

John Dunne ([01:06:09](#)): I have deliberately... I've had moments where I think, "Oh, I should really learn more brain anatomy." And then I go, "Nope, don't do that," because I'll never be an expert in brain anatomy, and I don't need to be, because I can ask you.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:06:18](#)): You don't need to. Yeah, you can look it up. It's not that important to memorize.

John Dunne ([01:06:20](#)): I don't even have to look it up. I wouldn't bother to look it up. I'll just call you up, say, "Hey, Wendy, you know the nucleus accumbens?" Yeah, so I don't need to know, and actually part of it—and this is the thing about interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary work—is really getting used to being comfortable with not knowing. You don't need to be an expert.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:06:38](#)): And you're also very skilled at translation. Literally language translation, but this is another kind of translation.

John Dunne ([01:06:43](#)): Yeah, that's part of it. Also, maybe the personalities. Richie and I hit it off right away, and that helped a lot. And when Antoine came, we also became friends very quickly. So maybe that's part of it, but I also think that it's tough when you're an academic. You're not really supposed to not know things.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:07:01](#)): Yeah, I know what you mean.

John Dunne ([01:07:02](#)): And PhD means "piled higher and deeper." *[laughter]* So you think you know everything, right?

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:07:08](#)): About the tiniest window of things.

John Dunne ([01:07:10](#)): Yes, how much poop you can produce is piled higher and deeper. Yes, just more and more of it. But that's one obstacle, I guess, for people. So I do wish there were more people. And there are some people who've been engaging.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:07:24](#)): Students who you've trained are good at this.

John Dunne ([01:07:27](#)): Yeah, some of them, definitely. And some of them, like one of my students, David Saunders, is actually a psychiatrist. So that's a totally different kind of context. And there are other people like Bill Waldron and some people who've been involved in Mind & Life, definitely people out there. But it'd be great to see more of that. Evan is actually an example of someone, too, Evan Thompson.

([01:07:47](#)) So I think, actually, that's one thing, is getting more people like that involved. But even just those people, regardless of whether they want to directly engage with scientists, doing more anthropological work on not what the texts say, not even what the teachers say, but what do practitioners actually do when they do retreats? I think it's so important. What is just a good ethnography of meditation communities, and what they do? There are a few things out there that are kind of in that direction, but not quite really that finely-grained yet, as far as I know. Maybe I'm ignorant. Undoubtedly, I am. I'm ignorant of something written, but nothing's crossed my desk yet. So that's a biggie, really getting better at describing what people are doing.

([01:08:41](#)) Another biggie is really getting better at trying to understand individual differences, and why some practices work for some people and they don't work for other people. And what is it about those people? I think some of that is about statistical power and having big enough studies. But I think some of it is also getting better at really hypothesizing what's going on.

(01:09:01) And that's the next one, which is getting... there's been more attention... When I first got involved in this field, meditation was just a black box, like, "Meditate. Something happens."

Wendy Hasenkamp (01:09:12): Right, stick you in the scanner.

John Dunne (01:09:14): Yeah, whatever, it's just a meditation. It's not even FA, OM, leave alone something more finely grained. It's just like, "Oh, meditation, put someone in the meditation box, and they come out the other side... With horns on their head." *[laughter]* So, we're much better than that, but still we need a lot more work on mechanisms, and really being very clear about the constructs of different styles of meditation and that kind of thing. That's another really big place.

(01:09:44) And then there are very specific capacities that seem to apply in many different styles, maybe even all styles, but certainly many different styles that we need better measures of. So de-reification, Esther Papies and Larry Barsalou have done some great work there that you know about, you've even been involved in. But I think those measures... They're good, but I think we can get even better ones. Also, another biggie is meta-awareness. Even the explicit moment of judgment, we could probably get better at that. But if somehow we could more at this implicit metacognition, that background awareness that's presenting affect and so on, it would be finding a way to drill down into that. Or just to assess, just to measure it would be good. I don't think we have any measures at all of that. So we're trying to... I think these are the kinds of things at the Center for Healthy Minds that we're definitely thinking about. And our old friend and colleague, Christy Wilson-Mendenhall, is actually working on some ideas for measures right now. So we'll see where that goes. But, yeah, those are, I think, really important, just a few of the really important things.

Wendy Hasenkamp (01:10:59): Great. Well, we didn't even get to touch on a bunch of things I wanted to talk about like concepts, and free will, and prediction and all these. But maybe we can have a Part Two sometime.

John Dunne (01:11:07): Okay, sure!

Wendy Hasenkamp (01:11:09): Well, thank you so much for joining us today. It's been great to talk with you.

John Dunne (01:11:12): My pleasure, Wendy.

Outro – Wendy Hasenkamp (01:11:19): *This episode was edited and produced by me and Phil Walker. Music on the show is from Blue Dot Sessions and Universal. Show notes and resources for this and other episodes can be found at podcast.mindandlife.org. If you enjoyed this episode, please rate and review us on iTunes and share it with a friend. If something in this conversation sparked insight for you, we'd love to know about it. You can send an email or a voice memo to podcast@mindandlife.org. Mind & Life is a production of the Mind & Life Institute. Visit us at mindandlife.org, where you can learn more about how we bridge science and contemplative wisdom to foster insight and inspire action towards flourishing. There, you can also support our work, including this podcast.*