Mind & Life Podcast Transcript
Dekila Chungyalpa – Human-Earth Connection
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Opening Quote – Dekila Chungyalpa (00:00:04): *The time to stand on the sidelines is long gone—whether it is human rights, environmental issues, climate issues, civil rights. One of the things that I have learned is that my tradition and my lineage is not the only source of wisdom. Being open to understand that there are a million wisdom traditions around us, that should be so reassuring for us. That should be such a source and reason for joy and celebration. That we are in community. And we as a species, we really have to find love for one another to find solutions.*

Intro – Wendy Hasenkamp (00:00:45): Welcome to Mind & Life. I'm Wendy Hasenkamp. Well folks, it's hard to believe, but we've reached the end of the second season of the podcast. We really want to thank all of you for listening, sharing, supporting us. We are continuing to love making this show, and we already have some things cooking for Season 3. As always, we really value your feedback, and we want to hear what you love about the show and what would make it even better. So please take a few minutes to fill out our listener feedback survey. You can find the link at podcast.mindandlife.org/survey. Thanks so much in advance. It really means a lot. So as we wind down this season, stay tuned to your feeds—we'll be back in a couple of months. And we may even drop a bonus episode or two in the meantime. Okay, on to the show!

(00:01:38) Today, I'm speaking with environmentalist Dekila Chungyalpa. Dekila is the director of the Loka Initiative at the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. She also has a pretty extraordinary background, serving as the environmental advisor for His Holiness the 17th Karmapa, who's the head of the Karma Kagyu School of Tibetan Buddhism. And she served as the World Wildlife Fund's director for The Greater Mekong program for five years. Through the Loka Initiative, she now works with faith leaders around the world to build community-based solutions for environmental and climate issues.

(00:02:17) In our conversation, we cover a pretty wide range of topics, including her experience of growing up in the Himalayas and feeling very interconnected with nature. And then contrasting that with moving to New York City where nature can feel very far away. And that led us to discuss the dominance of dualistic thinking in the West. This kind of self-other division that we talk about a lot on this show, and the dangerous separations that it creates. And then importantly, Dekila reflects on the possibilities for embracing an alternate framework—of interdependence. She also speaks about the role of indigenous wisdom in conservation, her own experience dealing with eco-anxiety, and weaving together Buddhist values and activism. She also shares the many ways she's working with faith leaders to move the needle on environmental issues, as well as some challenges that arise in bridging science

and religion. And she concludes by raising up the need for compassion and community in facing the climate crisis today.

(00:03:23) I'm really happy to be wrapping up the season with this particular conversation, for a couple of reasons. One is that Dekila will be joining us in a few weeks for Mind & Life's Summer Research Institute on The Mind, the Human-Earth Connection, and the Climate Crisis, which she helped organize. The event is taking place online from June 6th to 11th. You can check out the lineup at mindandlife.org, just look for the speaker series. And we'll also add the link to the show notes for this episode. If you missed the application window for the SRI, you can actually still register to get access to all the lectures, as well as all the contemplative sessions. It's going to be an amazing event. We hope to see many of you there.

(00:04:08) The other reason I'm really excited about sharing this episode with you is that I feel like it weaves together, on a philosophical level almost, so much of what we're up to at Mind & Life. The knowledge and ideas that Dekila shares speak directly to the problems we face as a result of disconnection—at personal, societal, and global levels. And it also shines a light on ways forward that embrace interconnection and interdependence. There's a lot of wisdom in her words here. This might be a good episode to listen to more than once, if you have the time, or maybe check out the transcript.

(00:04:45) Okay, I really hope you enjoy it. And with that, it's my great pleasure to share with you Dekila Chungyalpa.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:04:55): Well, Dekila, welcome. And thank you so much for joining us.

Dekila Chungyalpa (00:04:58): Oh, thank you for having me, Wendy. It's such a pleasure to be here.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:05:01): I'd love to start just kind of on a personal note, hearing a little bit about your story and background. Can you share some of your upbringing and maybe how that integrated with the natural world, and how that's shaped your viewpoints today?

Dekila Chungyalpa (00:05:16): Of course. Of course, I'm happy to. I come from this tiny place called Sikkim in the Eastern Himalayas. It is now a state in India, but when I was born, it was still an independent kingdom. And it basically is South of Tibet and sandwiched between Nepal and Bhutan. So I grew up in a very, what I realize now is almost an endangered way of being. I grew up in a family that is very strongly Tibetan Buddhist. Our community is Bhotia, which really means "from Tibet" actually, but also is part of one of the three indigenous communities in Sikkim.

(00:05:58) So I was raised in a family that was deeply spiritual and religious. And I also come from a family of female practitioners. My mother took her vows and became a Buddhist nun later in life, just like my grandmother did. And I grew up in some really beautiful wilderness areas inside Sikkim because of that.

(00:06:19) And I think when I look back, one of the things I realize is that there was never a moment where I did not feel as if I'm part of nature, and where I didn't feel driven to want to protect it. That it was always just such a big part of my identity. And a lot of it had to do with how I was raised, and I think what I found joy in, which was being outside, being in the forest, and yeah... So at least until I was 15, I grew up in that kind of environment and that kind of setting.

(00:06:53) And one way to explain to people why it matters is because, I come from a land which is protected by mountain Kangchenjunga. And Kangchenjunga is the third highest peak in the world, but no one has heard of it outside of the Himalayas. And that's because we—the Bhotia people, the Lepcha people, the Tsong and the Limboo—we don't allow it to be climbed. Right? You can imagine how many requests have come in from climbing expeditions, and really trying to make arguments around how lucrative it would be for our people. But we have been steadfast against the fact that Kangchenjunga is climbed because he is our protective deity. And he is alive to us.

(00:07:39) So for me, when I talk about my upbringing and what it was like growing up in nature, I think one of the things I'm trying to be much more articulate about and express directly is that connection that indigenous people have to the land. And how that is directly connected to the fact that 80% of biodiversity today is in indigenous-managed lands. So when we think about these things, it's really easy to romanticize it, and not acknowledge the debt that is owed to indigenous people everywhere.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:08:18): Yeah. I'm curious about your experience, or contrasting your experience—when you said growing up and being so interconnected with the land and with nature, and now living in the states. Can you just reflect on what it's like living in this country, and the way that we relate to nature here? Or don't?

Dekila Chungyalpa (00:08:38): Yeah. So the funny thing is that I knew I was an environmentalist only when I landed in New York City. I didn't know I was an environmentalist until suddenly at the age of 15, I came to New York. My youngest aunt brought me here to study. And I was so homesick for nature. I was just so filled with longing for wilderness that I found, "Oh, that is what I am." The absence of it actually made its presence known, right?

(00:09:12) And I went on to study environmental science and policy. I created my own major in undergrad; I did my research in the Mescalero Apache Reservation. And I always had this very strong sense that what I wanted to do was look at community-based solutions for environmental and climate issues. And for the most part, it was really clear to me that I couldn't do anything else. Even though I had moments where I wasn't sure what that career would look like because in the '90s, there just wasn't that clarity. It was like you had to pick a very specific science, right? And what I wanted to do just didn't exist as a concept, or at least in the schools that I was looking at.

(00:09:59) So I think maybe what made it all possible was that... I feel very grateful and blessed my entire life to have had community around me, even if it wasn't my community. So I did my research in Native American lands. I had a very strong community of friends. And then when I first started working between my undergraduate and my Masters, I actually became a fellow for WWF in Nepal. And the first thing they did was send me out to look at anti-poaching, and do an assessment on their anti-poaching efforts. And filled with zero experience and all the angst and self-confidence that a recent graduate has *[laughter]*, I ended up writing this real critique of anti-poaching efforts, and saying that that particular project was treating the community as the enemy when they should be actually the solution.

(00:11:03) And I was called in by the head of WWF at the time, who was Mingma Norbu Sherpa. And I thought that was it. I was like, "I'm going to get fired! I've only been here for two months. It's my first real 'grownup job'." And actually, he asked me to write his speech for the next thing he was doing. And he was so excited and happy about what I'd said.

(00:11:27) So I think one of the things for me is that even though... You could say in some sense, I left Sikkim, I went to the US, and I was really displaced. I've talked about this before. There is a type of displacement that happens internally when you are very tied to the land, and you see nature as real and with sacred value. And then you go through a Western education system where it's so binary. It's so dualistic. And there is no space for something that cannot be measured tangibly. Right? And everything, all the value systems are really wrapped around this idea of rationality and objectivity. So what kept me sane and what kept me going was that all along, I had community. And I just feel such gratitude for it.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:12:19): Yeah, yeah. I love that you brought up the frame of dualism and kind of reductionist systems that the Western education brings. I'd love to unpack that a little more from your perspective, and how that then flows into environmental work and climate work. So can you say more about how this kind of separation, and individualism, and... even separation of mind and body—which is the origin of Descartes' dualism—how you've seen that show up, and maybe contrasting that to your experience growing up with a totally different framework?

Dekila Chungyalpa (00:13:08): So I think one of the most harmful things that happens when we introduce dualism into our life and introduce dualism as the framework for seeing the world and seeing ourselves. What we do is we basically introduce hierarchy, and we immediately create this 'us' versus 'other' narrative in ourselves. And whether we do it to ourselves or whether we're doing it to our community, or our friends, or the world, what we end up doing is introducing a hierarchy where there are basically people with more value and people with less value, right? Your ideal of who you want to be, and the person that you actually are. Your idea that some people are worthy, some people are not. That within a community, there are leaders and the others are followers.

(00:14:01) I think falling into that kind of binary is okay, because we all do that naturally and instinctively. But I think thinking that that binary is the only paradigm that works, and that binary is valuable on its own, rather than, let's say, case by case basis. Right? I think that's when we really end up having this really harmful trope. And what happens when we get locked into that, is that we end up creating these in-groups and out-groups. So whether you're talking about racism, or sexism, or environmental issues, what we're doing constantly is now basically having to... In some sense, what we're doing is rationalizing to ourselves again and again why we have value. And in this kind of black and white world, the shortcut to rationalize your own value is to devalue everything else.

(00:15:06) So how does the narrative that man should rule the world show up? He should rule women. A white man should rule people of color, right? Man should conquer nature. All of those things come because we are trapped in the cycle of having to reassure ourselves that we are worthy. If we didn't have this black and white view, if we didn't have this narrative that there are winners and losers, there's us and them, there's me versus everybody else. We wouldn't have this... what I think of as the gospel of scarcity that has been created for so long around capitalism. Which is, things are ending, grab what you can right now. Right? Do not share, right? Don't give into anything. Take as much as you can from it.

(00:16:00) So I think there is definitely a place to question why academia clings to this framework and paradigm so much. Why is it that this is the only framework that's taught to us within the education system. And we are all, whether we want to or not, forced to participate in it if we want to succeed in that system. Right? And I describe it as an act of violence because that's how it felt to me. I was good in school. And thankfully, I was so trained by my mother, who was a Tibetan Buddhist nun and teacher, to examine and observe what was happening to myself and to examine and analyze the world, that I feel I was really protected from being harmed in a deeper way.

(00:16:48) But there is a reason why indigenous people, people of color, international students drop out of school so much. Because what we're being forced to do is to give up our own worldview. We're being forced to select a worldview... We're at hostage, right? It's a hostage situation. You want to do well within this paradigm, you have to accept the paradigm. There's no space for questioning the paradigm. And that's a trap, you know? And so for someone like me, I survived it by what I often describe as saying that I was basically the science-based professional who was really successful at my job by day, and then a practicing Tibetan Buddhist by night. And that's how I did it, but it created a bifurcation. And it took a long time to heal that and bring that together.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:17:39): Yeah, yeah. That's so rich. Can you share from your first-person perspective... I love that you raised up that here in West and particularly in education systems, there is this dualistic framework, and there's no other option. Right? And it's just a given, it's an assumption. And I think that's so much a part of these very large philosophical frameworks and underpinnings that societies adopt. So I'm wondering since so many of us, and I think many listeners, come out of this Western framework, it's almost a little bit like—what would another framework feel like? So can you describe, when you said you were bifurcating your experience, can you just describe that other framework and how it feels?

Dekila Chungyalpa (00:18:28): Well being a Buddhist, you won't be surprised to hear me say that the other framework for me, of course, is one of interdependence. Very early in my life, I was taught to understand that I didn't exist as an independent entity. And there are all kinds of cultural ways of reinforcing that, including the fact that in my culture, it's very common to rename children again and again. We sometimes end up having four different names by the time we become an adult. And that is just such a big part of our culture. It's happened to me, it's happened to so many kids I know. But I think there is a whole cultural mechanism in place to remind you, again and again and again, that you don't exist by yourself. And therefore, you have to be thankful to everything and everybody. Starting with your parents, right? But going on to their parents and their parents. And then you're made to look at the food you eat. Where did that come from? Who grew it?

(00:19:36) And over time, my own reverence for nature... I obviously moved more and more into understanding the interdependence with the natural world. Looking at the oxygen we're breathing, you know? So for me, often the question I ask when someone pushes back about this kind of narrative is, "Okay, so you feel yourself, that you are this independent self, and you don't rely on anyone in anything. So can you tell me where the self begins and that oxygen in your lung ends? Tell me that moment, tell me that exact boundary where you are a self without the oxygen that's in your body right now." And the fact is that oxygen was not self-generated, right? It came from outside.

(00:20:21) So I think having this framework of interdependence, and understanding that the self is so completely dependent on all these different variables means that that idea of a self and other is much weaker, the boundaries are much more porous and thinner. And I think it allows hopefully, for a much more meaningful conversation around... the gospel of plenty, right? And the idea of being able to place ourselves in other people's shoes. Being able to thin that layer enough that we understand that actually, we are all part of the same in-group. And there is a very clear physical reason why—a scientific reason why. And that is that, the earth is a closed loop system. All the material things on this planet are in a closed system.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:21:21): Yeah, can you describe just for the listeners what a closed loop system means?

Dekila Chungyalpa (00:21:25): So putting aside energy, when you think about what the earth is, and you think about it in material terms... Well, what is the earth? It's made up of soil, right? We have water, we have soil, we have atmosphere. All of these things are part of our planet, which we take for granted for the most part. None of these things, including now vegetable matter, animals, fish, insects—I'm trying to describe basically everything that we think of as life on this planet—are part of that system. None of us survive leaving the planet. And the planet in itself is like a circle. It's a cycle, right? We have all these different cycles that are happening that are all material, that are bound to each other within this closed loop.

(00:22:18) And we can recycle as a cell and an embryo that was born and lived a life, let's say a great long life for 95 years, and then died and became part of the matter. In one form or the other, whether as ashes, whether as worm food, whatever that might be. But it never leaves the earth. And the fact is that that means we are all actually feeding into one another, and we are all participating in a system that is one unit.

(00:22:52) So if we want to talk about identity, well actually if you can take a few steps back, the earth is its own identity. All of us individually, seven and God knows how many billion people of us, all the insects, all the animals, all the trees, all the plants, all of us are participating and interacting with each other as if we are part of one big organism. And that's just biology. That's just scientific fact. How is it that when we can understand this intellectually, it doesn't actually change our behavior towards one another? And I think for me, working with faith leaders was the way I could reframe and understand how we can get people to see that, and then actually create a sense of belonging. And then do something to protect our larger organism that we're all part of.

(00:23:50) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:24:08): Yeah, this is great. This is the next place I wanted to go is, I know you've been working recently with faith leaders, and that's also through the Loka Initiative that you founded and direct at the Center for Healthy Minds, with other friends of the podcast, Richard Davidson, and John Dunne, and others. So yeah, what drew you to begin working with faith leaders in interfaith contexts around environmental issues?

Dekila Chungyalpa (00:24:34): There is a long story and there is a short story. *[laughter]*

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:24:38): Well, if you have time, I'd love to hear the long story.

Dekila Chungyalpa (00:24:41): So the long story is that I ended up working for WWF. The person I mentioned, Mingma Sherpa, he eventually hired me to become program officer for the Himalayas. And I zoomed straight back home to the Himalayas to work on community-based conservation. And I thought that was the solution to environmental issues—if we could empower and return environmental management to the community.

(00:25:07) And then after a few years, I started really panicking because (and I think this happens to every environmentalist, but it was happening to me at that time) the realization that what I was doing wasn't making a big enough difference... At scale, at scope, right? It was wonderful and it had direct

impact on the ground, but it wasn't large enough when we looked at the environmental and climate challenges we were facing.

(00:25:32) So I switched to working at the river basin management level, and I was the WWF director for the Greater Mekong region. And the same thing happened. Here I am working in this beautiful river system, the second most biodiverse river in the world, six countries. And realizing that again, even at a river basin scale, the changes we're trying to create isn't going to happen fast enough, or at scale.

(00:26:01) So now there are terms for it, like eco-anxiety and climate distress, but those words didn't exist at that time. There wasn't this term that what we are experiencing and what I was watching my peers go through, like actual trauma... That vocabulary just didn't exist. So I was in a state of real anxiety and unhappiness at that time. And I've said this before—I was really successful in terms of Western... what's the word I want... criteria, right? I was the youngest conservation director in the field program for WWF-US I was very supported at WWF. And I was deeply unhappy, and having a crisis.

(00:26:48) So in 2007, my family dragged me to Bodh Gaya, which we insist on once a year. And it was for the Kagyu Monlam. My family is Karma Kagyu. And Bodh Gaya of course, it's our main pilgrimage site. It's where Buddha was enlightened. And His Holiness the Karmapa gave a teaching. And in the teaching, he was talking about the connection between vegetarianism, compassion, and climate. And by the end of the teaching, he ended up saying... He was vegetarian, and he laid out his arguments for why he was, and he went through the arguments for why as Buddhists, we should care and have enough compassion that we choose not to eat meat. If we have that choice, right? If we're in an area where meat is not necessary. Tibet is much harder, of course.

(00:27:40) And by the end of it, when he asked the people—and there were over 10,000 people there—if anyone wanted to be a vegetarian, this sea of hands went up, including mine. And what was really interesting was that basically I watched a mass behavior change happen in front of me. And I had this moment where I was like, "How did I never think about reaching out to faith leaders?" I am the daughter of a Tibetan Buddhist nun and teacher. And it never occurred to me that I had these allies. And that was honestly, that was what my education had done to me. When I talk about that bifurcation and the violence, that's what had happened—was that the community I grew up in, the community that taught me the most, the community I owe everything to is the community that had become invisible to me as a solution, and as a problem solver.

(00:28:36) And then karma is so amazing, right? The universe works in mysterious ways. Or our protectors do. His Holiness [the Karmapa] and I had a meeting very soon after that. And he ended up asking me to create environmental guidelines for Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and nunneries. And I thought of it as a one-off thing. I like to joke that my reaction was so selfish. It was, "Oh my God, my next lifetime is secured!" So I took two weeks out, and took vacation, and went and worked with the senior monks and nuns. And really, I thought that was it. Like, this is what I was doing. I was doing it for the Karma Kagyu [inaudible]. Here I'm handing this over, and now I'm done.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:29:20): And this was building environmental policies for the nunneries and monasteries?

Dekila Chungyalpa (00:29:26): This was laying out why environmental issues and climate change affected the Himalayas, and what Buddhism had to say about that. So this was basically the merging of Buddhist philosophy with environmental science. And it was for the monastics. I basically took the issues

that are threatening the integrity of the Himalayas and the Tibetan plateau, and then sat with seven, I think or eight khenpos, and created the Buddhist framework for why each of these had value. And it was really beautiful, but very simple and short.

(00:30:05) What happened was that when the monks and nuns received it, the feedback was, "This is great, but we actually need much more than this. And we want a proper training." So on the spot, we were in Varanasi at that time, His Holiness called me and said, "Can you do a workshop? Because I know you do this for your work. Can you do a training right now?"

(00:30:25) So on the spot, I had to create a week-long training for Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns. All these tulkus, all these rinpoches. *[laughter]* You know, just like, build it. And basically explain things like the water cycle, the carbon cycle, the nitrogen cycle, right? Really explain the scientific underpinnings for environmental and climate issues. And yeah, so it went amazingly well.

(00:30:54) So this is how I learned. This is what 12 years of working with faith leaders has taught me is that, never underestimate them. I really thought there would be resistance to it. Or that the science might be 'above their heads' or 'above their understanding,' right? Oh my God. Not only did they get it, they were starting to teach me. So there were number of moments in the training where the conversation would flip, and suddenly one khenpo or one lama would get up and just be like, "Let me teach you about interdependence. What you're saying to me is nothing new." *[laughter]*

(00:31:30) And so there was this amazing energy that was created. And again, I thought that was a one-off thing. We're done. And what ended up happening was the monks and nuns started initiating projects. And now we have this eco-monastic movement called Khoryug, which has over 50 monasteries and nunneries all across the Himalayas, a little bit in Tibet too, doing environmental projects, all under the auspices of His Holiness the Karmapa. And the projects are everything you can imagine. Reforestation of indigenous tree saplings, water restoration, rainwater harvesting for example for safe drinking water, solar kitchens. Almost all of them took their very pretty flower gardens and turned it into organic farms. Almost all of them have tried some part of growing their own food. And in the last several years, they've been very focused on disaster preparedness. So we have over 300 monks and nuns who are trained first responders, who can do first aid, who can take their robes and turn it into a stretcher in five minutes. So it's a very incredible practical force for environmental and climate protection.

(00:32:44) But I think the entire time I was doing that work... So when I first began it and realized, "Oh, these are turning into projects," I actually started getting pushback from other parts of WWF saying, "Why are you only doing this in the Himalayas? Why don't you work with faith leaders in our communities? Because we have really influential faith leaders here." And so I was able to go back to WWF and convince them to let me open a new program called Sacred Earth. And I worked in five different places around the world with different faith leaders, including the Catholic church, and the Muslim councils, and all kinds of different leaders. And basically, the goal of that project was to prove that faith-based conservation really moved the needle. So that's how the work began. It really is a long story.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:33:31): That's amazing. No, that's fantastic. And so now, can you describe a bit about what the Loka Initiative does here in the states?

Dekila Chungyalpa (00:33:39): Yes. So in the 12 years I worked with faith leaders, there were certain things that came up again and again. Probably the most common request, interestingly, was never

money. It was always capacity. It was always, "We have this pot of funds, or we have these limited resources, or we have these people. What we need is a scientist who understands our world to tell us what we can do with this that's best. What is the most effective thing we can do with the resources we have?" And what they wanted was someone who would work with them to help them develop those resources. They don't need someone to come in and create them for them. They don't need someone to come in and fly in and be the expert. What they're looking for is basically capacity, and someone who can support them.

(00:34:28) And then the other request I got very commonly was, "Can you create a safe space for us, where we can interact with scientists and policymakers, and basically secular leaders? And then also with ourselves." Because most often, what would happen is they would be invited to come and cut the ribbon. So they would wear all their ceremonial robes. They're invited to a major environmental or climate event. They hope they are coming in as a stakeholder, but actually they're sort of ceremoniously ushered off the stage. And then that's it, right? They aren't brought back into the decision-making system.

(00:35:04) So they were really asking these two questions again, and again, and again. And after a long time, I realized I cannot just hear this and say, "Oh that's great. Someone else is going to create this." So after Sacred Earth, I was really humbled and happy when Yale School of Forestry, out of nowhere, gave me this award. It's the McCluskey Fellowship. And that gave me enough funds and enough time to sit in one place and design a program that served faith leaders who work on environmental and climate issues. And that's how Loka was born. So, basically I designed the Loka Initiative to be this platform that builds capacity and that convenes and does outreach for faith leaders working on environmental and climate issues. I should say, for faith leaders and culture keepers of indigenous traditions.

(00:35:55) And then what we do is basically, we have three different activity streams. The one that I think is the core of what we do is... We work with three different groups at a time. So right now for example, we're working with evangelical preachers and church leaders. We are working with the Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns that I mentioned. And we are working with indigenous leaders in Wisconsin and then around the world as well. So these are the three communities we basically try and get as many resources as possible to. And the work is different with each group.

(00:36:27) So with the evangelicals, we're really focused on creating calls to action around environmental creation, protection, and climate. And I have a convening that's coming up very soon that we're organizing in partnership with the World Evangelical Alliance, A Rocha, and Care of Creation, which is to train them to do media. So it's a training on how do you construct your own narrative? How do you address the fact that members of your own community deny climate science? How do you cut through that? What do you need to say to be able to reach people? Well, it's like you really need to talk on a personal level. And then how do you insert that kind of narrative, which is a very different narrative that is dominant in the media? How do you tell the media, how do you engage the media that actually, there are evangelicals who believe in climate science and who are working on climate issues, right? So there is this whole stream of training that happens with them on that.

(00:37:27) With Khoryug, the most recent work with the monks and nuns of course was around COVID, and making sure all the monasteries were prepared. And the big lesson learned for me from that, was that the monasteries that we had done disaster preparedness training with, and the monasteries and nunneries that had developed their own climate disaster plans were light years ahead of the others. It was like, once that switch goes off in your head that you can be ready and prepared for a disaster, the

type of disaster doesn't really matter. Because you've already created that framework, created resource teams, stored food, stored medicine, stored water.

(00:38:05) And so what was amazing to me is how... You know, a lot of the time in the non-profit world, people really scoff at capacity building. It's kind of not trendy. They aren't drones, they're just not trendy. And yet at the end of the day, community by community, it's the work that moves us forward as a society. So it just reinforces my conviction that that has to be the core of what we do, for those of us who in this world of non-profit and service.

(00:38:39) So that was one activity stream. The other work we do is very much trying to build resources around eco-anxiety and climate distress that I mentioned to you earlier.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:38:49): Yeah, I was going to ask you about that.

Dekila Chungyalpa (00:38:51): Yeah. So we are being housed at the Center for Healthy Minds, which is very focused on well-being. The vision for Loka is really simple. It's that inner, community, and planetary resilience are interdependent. You cannot have any one of these things without working on the other two. And so for us, the inner part is really crucial. And being based at Center for Healthy Minds, and then being a partnership across the university, we're able to draw on all kinds of resources—from the psychology department, from the humanities department, environmental studies—to basically empower people to understand that part of this narrative around being weak and helpless against the tides of environmental and climate destruction can be changed. That we actually are able to address and work on these issues without feeling overwhelmed, and without feeling despair. And that there are methods we can use—contemplative methods, modern methods, nature-based methods—that help protect and build our inner resilience while we're doing this work. So that is one core component of it.

(00:39:59) And then the third piece of course is the piece I'm doing right now, which is the public outreach, and trying to encourage people to break out of their in-groups and reach out to other people, right? Trying to get people, especially scientists, if they bike to work, check out how many houses of worship are along the way. And if you have the time, stop by and say, "Hey, do you need help?" Because all of them are trying to do something on the environment.

(00:40:25) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:40:56): Just curious, working with so many different faith groups—and then on top of that, bridging science with these different religions, which many people often feel like can be at odds—do you run into philosophical pushback between groups, and given their different perspectives on the world? Or is there some common fundamental place where you try to work from, with everybody?

Dekila Chungyalpa (00:41:26): So I get pushback. I've always received pushback on this idea of working with and appealing to faith leadership for environmental and climate issues. And all of that pushback, I have to say 99% of it, comes from the science and academic community. No faith leader has ever turned me down for a meeting. They might not believe in my worldview. The conversation might end up going in a very random direction. But the amazing thing, the thing that always still fills me with happiness and humility doing the work I do every day, is that faith leaders have already self-selected to care, and to act, and to protect people. They are a self-selected group of people that are driven to do better for the community. If we can appeal to them to understand that the well-being of the community includes the

rest of life on earth, and the well-being of the human community is dependent on the well-being of the non-human communities, that is it. That's all they need for that interest to spark.

(00:42:37) And here is this group that, if you think of them from a scientific, academic, activist perspective, here is a group— so therefore self-motivated, self-organized. They are collectively the third largest financial investor in the world. They run half of all the schools on this planet. The Catholic church is the second or third wealthiest property owner in the world. You know, 85% of the human population subscribes to a religion.

(00:43:08) To me, I think the question that I always come back to is, why haven't we been doing this more? Faith leaders have been working on environmental issues for decades. All three popes, including the current one made a statement that climate change is real. I think it was during Pope Benedict's time that the Vatican very gleefully announced that they were the first nation state to be carbon neutral.

(00:43:32) So actually, faith leaders have been doing this work all this time. Where has the science and academic, and the activist community been, right? And so it's still interesting to me. And it brings me back again to this trope that we started with, which is the 'us' versus 'them.' And this whole dualistic need. And this real addiction to wanting to believe that rationalism and objectivity are objectively and rationally superior. When actually, all of these are constructs that can be broken down very simply and easily. We are locked in this cycle where we are having to reassert the value of the education system we've all been part of. We are locked in this cycle and forced to run the cycle, right? Almost like rats around a circle. We're just constantly having to prop the system up instead of acknowledge that it's been flawed, like every other system, and that it's to allow other kinds of knowledge systems to come in and other kinds of knowledge paradigms to come in. And I think that's where I spend a lot of the time doing my pushback, interestingly, is with this community—my community of scientists, and academics, and activists. Yeah.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:44:49): Yeah. So how do you bring in, or what are some ways that we can try to challenge the unitary perspective of this dualistic and rationalistic framework, and bring in more views on interdependence? Do you have any ways that you try to do that?

Dekila Chungyalpa (00:45:11): Yeah. I mean, I think this is why the public outreach matters so much. Loka organizes a lot of different events with different partners. Partly because we're trying to break down this idea that there is only one knowledge system of value. We insist on having indigenous leaders as well as scientists. We insist on having representation from different generations. We insisted on having Black, people of color, indigenous peoples speaking as experts, whether it's from their tradition or whether it's from the Western, Euro-derived knowledge system.

(00:45:45) So I think for all of us as individuals, but for many of us who are parts of institutions, part of creating this paradigm shift is owning up to the fact that we are part of the problem, and part of the solution. And if we don't actively advocate for the transformation of the system, we are continuing a cycle that really is harmful on so many levels.

(00:46:08) And I think what's really interesting to me, and this is going to sound very harsh, but I see this a lot among the Western Buddhist community, and also among the academic community, is this ability to do all of these things in theory. To sit and meditate on compassion in theory, right? To talk about the importance of diversity in a classroom, and then not apply it in a practical way in our everyday life.

(00:46:34) So I cannot tell you how many Buddhists for example, have come back and pushed at me because I talk about the fact that Black Lives Matter. And sort of said, "Of course I believe. Of course I believe. I work on compassion." However, they would never show up, physically, for a Black Lives Matter rally or event, right? They would never show up when Black people right now in America and other people of color and indigenous people are having to reassert their basic humanity on a daily basis, just to say they are human and they should be valued as humans, as equal.

(00:47:08) And it both outrages me on a moral level and an intellectual level, because that is the kind of dishonesty that I see. Where we are willing to be proud of the work and the progress we've done sitting on our mats, and not actually change anything in the system that props us up and supports us. And so if I want to challenge anyone, it really is the Buddhist community in America and in Europe. It's not enough to sit and meditate on compassion, if you are not taking your body and showing up with your body. Embodied. What is the meaning of embodiment? It is to be in body.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:47:48): Yeah. This feels like it's at the heart of so many really critical issues that we're facing as a society. So I feel that you're weaving together, under this frame of the problem of separation, falls into then, racism, and systems of oppression, and injustice. And it falls into our disconnection from the environment, and what we've been able to do in exploiting and creating the problems that we face now with climate change. So I feel like the frame that you're bringing is really integrative, and it feels like it's getting to the heart of deeper problems than just looking at the way they manifest in these really tragic and problematic ways in the world. That there's something more core that you're getting to.

Dekila Chungyalpa (00:48:32): You know, one of the things that I really am trying to unlearn myself honestly, is this real addiction to wanting life to be... what's the word I want? Stable. Wanting life to be stable, and therefore predictable, and therefore comfortable. And therefore controllable. And my mother would have been the first person to laugh at me if I said these other things I want. Because if she taught me anything—verbally, orally, and with the example of her life—it was that, what is the point? She would have said, what a wasted life! That we spend all our time wanting to control what happens to us, right? And we are so uncomfortable with being uncomfortable. Many of us struggle with this in our practice, but there are people who are struggling with this in a real way because the system has disenfranchised them very deliberately. So our comfort has come at a cost.

(00:49:41) And if we want to think about ourselves as karmic people, if we want to think of ourselves in our future lifetimes, then I would say it's time. It's time we look in the mirror and have a real reckoning with all those invisible people and systems that have been subjugated to give us our world of comfort. And our world of even having the luxury of having meditation spaces, and having teachers, and going into retreat, and feeling so very good about our progress in our path to liberation. And it's like, at the cost of whom? Whether we actively did it or not, we benefit from the system, you know? So how is it that we are then so weak, honestly, in our practice, that we can't show up where it matters and when it matters?

(00:50:38) And I've become more and more verbal about this as time goes on. Because what I've learned now is that this pushback that I get around faith not being measurable, not being objective. Buddhism, and our work to become non-attached, therefore meaning that we have to give up our attachment to samsara, therefore having a justification for why we wouldn't work on racism, or climate, or environment, or what have you, human rights. I could almost condense them all and give you... It would be basically the same person. So what I've learned over time, and because I've come across it in so many

different systems now, is that this kind of pushback, this kind of intellectual pushback, whether from the science community or from the faith community, isn't about science or faith. It isn't actually about the paradigm. It's about the person, and the fact that that person does not want to do the work. And that person doesn't mind the status quo being what it is.

(00:51:49) So I think I've become more and more verbal about it simply because now that I've experienced it enough to see that, I can't keep quiet about it anymore, because it is infecting the system. When there are enough white men saying that Black Lives Matter is irrelevant in an academic setting, that infects that entire system, because it's white men who are in power in academic settings, right? When there are enough Buddhists saying that becoming a climate activist is anti-Buddhist because we must practice non-attachment, that is infecting the whole system and disempowering other people to care about the climate issue. And I always find it so amazingly shortsighted when I hear Buddhists say this, because it's like, "You forget. Remember, we're in a loop. We're not only physically in a closed loop system. Philosophically we're in a close loop system, because guess what? You're being born again, right here on this planet. And you will be reaping the consequences of what we haven't done right now."

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:52:57): Yeah. That is so interesting. And that feels like a really... The philosophical framework of rebirth is such a particular drive for those who ascribe to that. And I imagine when you're working with evangelical Christians, you can't bring that frame as a motivation.

Dekila Chungyalpa (00:53:18): Well, it's amazing to me that for a lot of faith leaders, it's just enough that I say I'm a person of faith. The interesting thing about religion is that, what they really are looking at is what motivates people. And it seems to be quite often enough for me to say I'm a spiritual person and that motivates me. My faith motivates me to do better and to serve the faith community at large.

(00:53:46) I have really strong friendships among evangelical leaders. And I mean, I can't emphasize enough the importance of showing up and doing the work, because that's really why. It's been 12 years and they've seen me for 12 years doing the work. And they're willing to ignore the fact that I believe in Tibetan Buddhism. We have a lot of jokes around it, how slippery Buddhists are. *[laughter]* We're terrible converts, because apparently we say, "Yeah, yeah, you're right. That's the truth. And also my truth is the truth..."

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:54:21): Yeah, the relativism is a problem. *[laughter]*

Dekila Chungyalpa (00:54:24): Yeah. There's a lot of humor that goes into it, and a lot of understanding of each other, I think. Yeah. But it works.

(00:54:30) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:54:30): I was thinking about... You were just reflecting on people's resistance to actually making behavioral change in their lives, even when they see this data or, it's still so hard to somehow integrate it. And you talked about this kind of addiction to the idea of being stable, or the world being predictable. I think it's really interesting to bring that up. Because in a way as biological organisms, we are in the business of predicting and trying to create stable environments that we can operate in, with homeostasis and in the most controlled way. And then you're raising the fact that well, that's actually not the reality. So how do you work with... because you also have such a view of biological systems and things like that. So I don't know, how do you navigate that tension?

Dekila Chungyalpa (00:55:50): I think for me, when I talked earlier about being in crisis in 2006, 2007, I think for me, it was this dawning realization that the world I'd grown up in—where it was a given that if you got a good education, you did well in school, you would get a job and you would end up having not just in America, having the dream that all our parents have wished for us everywhere in the world—it was this realization that this wasn't going to happen for the next generation. Because what we were doing at that time, I distinctly remember us mapping out different future scenarios around climate change. And I was sitting in the room with all of these demographers and all of these different types of scientists, starting to understand what the ecological science was telling us, and how it would affect the world and people. Right? So having all these social scientists basically saying, "Well, this is the type of migration pattern that will happen." So basically, what you're saying is, this is how the river is going to change, and it's going to create these kinds of disasters, these kinds of droughts, this kinds of food scarcity, then let me tell you what will happen to people. And all of that becoming real to me.

(00:57:05) And so I had to let go of the idea, in my work as a field conservationist, that our goal was to return to this pristine world that existed at some point. This idea of a pristine biodiversity. This idea of the planet being in this perfect balance that it was in the old days of yore. I had to completely let that go, because that was clearly not going to happen.

(00:57:35) So what can come instead of that? Well interestingly, what comes instead of that is actually working on the ability to bounce back for ecosystems. Working on the ability to bounce back for human populations. And that's how my framework shifted to one of resilience. So the interesting thing about resilience is that, it means exactly the same thing whether you look at it psychologically, in terms of sociology, or ecologically. It basically is the ability to bounce back from a threat. It doesn't mean returning to how things were. You can be in a very unstable situation still, but you can anticipate the threat, adapt to it, and respond to it from a place which isn't completely that of a victim, right? It's of a survivor.

(00:58:26) And to me, rethinking through that and understanding that from my own Buddhist philosophy, and from my own Buddhist ethos, and then from a scientific perspective, meant that it completely changed the way I wanted to do work. It meant that I really had to walk away from what I knew and what I loved, which was really being in a forest and getting to see as many wildlife as possible. And move towards actually working with people who spend their entire lives working on inner resilience, and thinking about resilience. And for me, that was the faith community. Which was to understand that, how do we psychologically, spiritually, prepare people and communities to bounce back? The world that we now are in is not a predictable world. I'm so sorry; it's not a stable world. It will be less stable and less predictable as time goes on because we are in a system of...

(00:59:23) You know, so I don't enjoy using the language that is often used around environmental and climate change, which is very like, "We have X amount of years left and time is ticking—tick, tock, tick, tock..." That doesn't help anyone or anything. But I think we have to be fair to the younger generations, to acknowledge that their world is completely different than ours. They are growing up a world where it's just disaster upon disaster. And there are a series of knock-on effects that we have not even understood, studied, or managed to have conclusive strategies towards. Right?

(01:00:06) And I think the thing we can do though, for the next generation, the thing that we can do for people everywhere—marginalized people in particular, women and children, who we know are 80% of climate victims—what we can do is actually create systems of resilience and create adaptability as a

strength. To get people to understand that yes, we cannot control what happens out there. But what we can do is make you as strong as possible to withstand that.

(01:00:38) The other part that I'm really focused on is this breaking down, once again this very dualistic notion and this kind of hierarchy that exists in the science world, which is one solution is better than the other. So we have spent internally having an argument for years around mitigation versus adaptation. So mitigation is basically, you avert the climate crisis, right? You come up with all these solutions to change it. Adaptation is, this is the climate crisis. We need to get the communities to adapt to it. And a lot of our arguments, a lot of our funding, a lot of priorities within our organizations end up being locked in this debate, and sort of forced to justify again and again that this is my stance. When actually, we need both. It's so apparent we need both, right? There's no way we can do it all. And actually, people do need to specialize as well within that. You can't ask an immigrant single mom who's arrived in this country and is trying to take care of her kids that she needs to care about climate change, as well as lead in the water, as well as PFAS in the water, as well as whether her kid is safe going to school or not. We are asking too many people to do too many things while creating a hierarchy and telling them what they are doing is just not enough.

(01:02:00) And so I think using compassion as an organizing principle for environmental and climate issues is so crucial. It saves lives. Compassion saves lives, you know? And I think encouraging everybody to do the bit that they can and being able to count that as part of the larger progress is so important, instead of tearing each other down. And unfortunately, that's still very much the driving energy.

Wendy Hasenkamp (01:02:29): Yeah. Wow, thank you. There's so much richness in there. I really appreciate all that you've shared. I feel like you've given a lot of important take-homes and action steps, but is there anything that you want to pull out and highlight for our listeners, just kind of as a take-home?

Dekila Chungyalpa (01:02:51): Maybe if there's anything I had to say, I think it really would be—the time to stand on the sidelines is long gone, whether it is human rights, whether it is environmental issues, climate issues, civil rights. One of the things that I have loved and really learned so much from, is recognizing that my tradition and my lineage is not the only source of wisdom. It's like, being open to understand that there are a million lineages and a million wisdom traditions around us. And that, what I know is not even a 0.00001% of what we collectively know. And that should be so reassuring for us. That should be such a source and reason for joy and celebration, that we are not having to carry ourselves as the leaders and the heroes of our stories. That we are in community.

(01:03:59) I would love to develop a coat check for hubris. You can just be hang it, be like, "I'm giving it in. When I get five people to sign my token, I'll come back for it." Something like that. *[laughter]* Because I think a lot of the time us being in these fights to prove that our system is better. Whatever that system is, right? Whether it's science versus religion, whether it's like our lineage versus their lineage, whatever that is. All that energy that goes into proving that is just part of our ignorance and part of the trap, you know? And it's like, we're out of time. We're out of time for these kind of hubristic, egoistic battles. If we are not learning in community and working in community, our time on this planet—this beautiful, beautiful, completely, absolutely unique planet—is up. It's a time when we as a species, we really have to think of ourselves collectively and find love for one another to find solutions.

Wendy Hasenkamp (01:05:11): Well Dekila, thank you so much for taking the time to chat with us today. This has been really inspirational. And I'm so excited to see you also at the Summer Research Institute very soon.

Dekila Chungyalpa (01:05:23): I know, I'm so excited! It's going to be fantastic, such a great array of speakers. It was lovely speaking with you, Wendy.

Outro – Wendy Hasenkamp (01:05:36): *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 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.*