



MIND & LIFE

Mind & Life Podcast Transcript

Jon Kabat-Zinn – The Heart of Mindfulness

Original Air Date: September 10, 2021

Retrieved from: <https://podcast.mindandlife.org/jon-kabat-zinn/>

Opening Quote – Jon Kabat-Zinn (00:00:04): *There's been a strategy from the very beginning for bringing meditation into medicine, what's now called participatory medicine. We're igniting passion in people for taking care of themselves from the inside. And if we take responsibility for our own little piece, because of interconnectedness, you take care of yourself, you're also taking care of the world. And it is a distributive function. We need all hands on deck. It's not like one great meditation teacher is going to come along and illuminate it for us for all time. Each one of us is the cells of the one body of the planet. And when it becomes we, rather than me, I think that's a very healing direction to go in.*

Intro – Wendy Hasenkamp (00:00:53): Welcome to Mind & Life. I'm Wendy Hasenkamp. We are back with Season 3 of the show! And we're kicking it off with a big one—today, I'm speaking with Jon Kabat-Zinn. Jon likely needs no introduction. He's a renowned meditation teacher, author, and founder of the now widely applied program called Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, or simply MBSR. This eight-week meditation training has been pivotal in introducing mindfulness to Western audiences, and it's now been adopted in a host of settings internationally, including healthcare, education, business, and mental health. As we'll hear, Jon began his journey as a scientist and the spirit of inquiry that motivated that path continues to fuel his passion for investigating the mind through meditation.

(00:01:45) We cover a lot of ground in this conversation. It's a long one, but I didn't want to cut any of it out. Jon first shares how he got interested in meditation, and his development of and vision for MBSR. And we get into his experience as a scientist, and the mystery of the line or the boundary between the inside and outside of any system. We talk about adapting Buddhist practices for Western audiences, and the ways that mindfulness has been taken up now in our society, largely driven by science. And we also get into the challenges of repeatability in scientific studies of meditation. Jon also reflects on weaving together art and science, moving from me to we, and how more than 50 years of meditation has changed him.

(00:02:34) One of the things I love about Jon is that his wisdom is timeless, and he also speaks directly to this moment we're in. He scales ideas seamlessly from intimate, individual experiences, all the way up to global perspectives. Jon's work has been incredibly influential in my own life, and my path into contemplative practice. So it was a great joy to speak with him for this episode, and I'm really happy to be able to share it with you. As always, more information and resources—including lectures, papers, and guided meditations—are available in the show notes if you'd like to dig deeper. So with that, it's my very great pleasure to share with you, Jon Kabat-Zinn.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:03:17): Well, I am here with Jon Kabat-Zinn. Jon, it is such a pleasure and an honor to be with you. Thanks so much and welcome.

Jon Kabat-Zinn (00:03:24): Thank you, Wendy. It's wonderful to be here.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:03:27): So, there's so many questions and directions that I would love to get into with you. But I think let's maybe just start with your personal story a little bit, and how you got interested in meditation to begin with.

Jon Kabat-Zinn (00:03:40): Well, my personal story is my least favorite part of all of this. And actually, since so much of the import of my work is to get beyond your personal story, it's not that easy for me to frame it in a way that really has some kind of import or validity. And of course, as everybody knows, you can tell your personal story in a thousand different ways depending on the occasion, what kind of impression you want to make, who you're talking to, all of that kind of stuff, so there's a certain fundamental level of a contrivance where of course it's true, but it's only true to a degree. And that "degreeness" has everything to do with the subject matter of today, which is mindfulness and human awareness.

(00:04:33) So, of course we need narratives and we need stories, and in some sense, that's how we understand each other and that's how we connect and feel like we belong. But if the stories we tell are incomplete or not big enough, then in a sense, we diminish ourselves by even identifying with the story and then perpetrating it on other people to our own satisfaction or delight because we like the way we present ourselves in everyday life. Unless we don't, unless we're depressed or anxious or whatever, and then there's a part of us that knows that we're not that person, but that keeps leaking out... and then we feel embarrassed or reluctant to actually talk or even tell the story or be true to ourselves. And there's a big difference between telling the story and being true to yourself.

(00:05:31) So, I guess that's a certain kind of preamble, because since you asked, I mean I'll tell a story that seems to be relevant in some way when I ask myself or other people, and I get asked that a lot, how did you come to do what it is that you have done? And of course that's a beautiful question for every single individual over the arc of their life is: how did you wind up here instead there, some other kind of fabrication of what might have been possible.

(00:06:05) And so, I sometimes start with the fact that I happened to be born in a family where my father was a world-class scientist at Columbia University, you know, an endowed professorship and professor in four different departments, really what would now be called a molecular immunologist. And I lived one apartment house away from his laboratory, his building with his lab. So he could walk to work in like five minutes and be in his lab at six in the morning. And that's the way I grew up, with a father like that. And we had all sorts of scientists over for dinner all the time with his lab and so I grew up in that kind of world.

(00:06:52) And then my mother was a very enthusiastic, and I would say, intrinsically talented and fairly well-trained painter, who painted only for herself and regretted the one painting she ever sold somebody even though she was incredibly prolific. So she did a lot of stuff in a lot of different forms and media and everything, and she also played the flute. But she was completely unknown. She had no interest in becoming "known" as a painter. So I grew up in the 50s in New York, in Washington Heights right next to the Columbia Medical School, in what C.P. Snow called the two cultures famously—the humanities and the sciences. And that was like my mother and father.

(00:07:48) So there was a certain way in which I felt their passion, both on the science side and on the artistic and musical side. And I could also see that they didn't really... They loved each other, but they didn't actually really have the equipment to understand the depth of each other's insight into the realities that they were investigating. And I picked that up probably when I was four years old. And so I grew up in this household where this was like the coin of the realm, but I was always in some sense aware that those two epistemologies, if you will, didn't intersect that much at the level of their understanding of each other's passions in-depth.

(00:08:43) And so that had an effect on me in a certain way. I didn't realize that of course until I was in college, or maybe even later, but it was in college when I first got exposed to the history of science and of history more broadly, and the whole question of different ways in which people investigate reality. And I remember very vividly taking a history course in which the Christian fathers on Mount Athos were meditating and inquiring as to the nature of reality, and there was a twinge there. I mean, nothing more than a twinge, but like, "Oh, actually you could meditate as a form of investigation." (I had no idea what meditation was.)

(00:09:35) But then when I went to MIT as a graduate student in 1964 in molecular biology, and I wound up in the laboratory of Salvador Luria, who won the Nobel prize in 1969 while I was in the lab. And MIT was just like that. I mean, there were lots of Nobel laureates all over the place, and we were all on a first name basis—it was like the Renaissance of molecular biology at the time. It was phenomenal, where they were like, working out the genetic code!

(00:10:08) And I went to a talk in 1965 by Philip Kapleau, this American Zen master who had written a book called *The Three Pillars of Zen*. And I went to that talk. I saw the [flyer]... I mean the Vietnam War was just starting up, the Gulf of Tonkin. I was very, very aware of the misuses of science for human destruction. MIT was very involved in developing guidance systems. All the guidance systems and smart weapons all came out of the instrumentation lab... And Doc Draper, who I met and had a number of, not altercations, but interactions with during the political turmoil in the 60s.

(00:10:56) And so I went to this talk called *The Three Pillars of Zen*, not knowing what Zen was, but just depressed out of my mind, and not happy at all. Well a seminar hour at MIT, usually a seminar room will be full with like 100 people. There were like four people, aside from the speaker and Houston Smith who'd invited him. Four people, and I happened to be one of them. And Kapleau's talk just took the absolute top of my head. I was 21 years old and I just said, "This is what I've been looking for my entire life." That way of holding, because it was clear right from the moment he started talking—it's awareness that will hold different epistemologies, different ways of knowing, different narratives. The awareness that can hold it all can actually both discern and differentiate in ways that are illuminating, and perhaps liberating.

(00:11:56) So, I started meditating that night. And then he came back and led what he called a sesshin for several days. But I just started meditating there. And of course, people start an awful lot of things in their 20s that never make it to their 30s, but I'm still going like 55 years later and counting. So it touched something in me that is hard to explain, but that really goes back to my childhood. And that sort of... just a sense that there has to be some kind of unifying way of holding all of the diversity of ways of knowing and being that has integrity and that's not imperialistic, that it's not like, my way is the way, but just a Way with a capital "W" so to speak. And that in some sense, I always felt that's what our karmic

assignment is on this planet, is to find the way that yours, which is what the Tao is really all about, or Dharma.

(00:13:13) It's not to adopt some kind of belief system or catechism or formulaic kind of structure that helps you get through the day, but to investigate for yourself in a very deep way using the apparatus of all of our multiple intelligences and capacity for both stillness, and action, and wakefulness intrinsically, to do that work. And so I consider that to be lab work. And since I grew up as a laboratory scientist, this is like the ultimate laboratory. You take your seat (metaphorically and literally), and you investigate what the hell is going on when you create certain ground rules like, don't move no matter what. You don't have to establish that ground rule, but I was like a Green Beret of this kind of thing. *[laughter]* I was really into it, because Kapleau was really into it and the whole Zen tradition is really like, you know, this is not kidding around. So, you got a certain kind of tough sort of high energy approach.

(00:14:24) So that's how I came to meditation, and then it's, of course, an ongoing flowering. I mean, so it's not like you're just doing one thing for 55 years, because it's not a doing in the first place. It's a dropping into being and then learning so to speak how to take up residency in the... the vocabulary that I've sort of fallen on over the years is "the boundless spaciousness" of your own heart, or your own awareness. And then of course the curriculum is whatever arises, inwardly or outwardly. And the challenge, how am I going to be in wise relationship to it? And then of course, since I've framed it that way, who is that anyway? Who am I? What am I?

(00:15:15) And this seems to me to be at the absolute rock foundation of what it means to be human, and it really begs investigation—not by a few people in ivory towers or in labs, by all of us. And since all of us are endowed with a lab, so to speak, and we don't want the lab to deteriorate over time through lack of use, and the body's a very big part of it, we really need to learn how to inhabit our own laboratory and let it be the catalyst for how we might develop over the course of a lifetime. Which, of course, the word development in the meditative world is like bhavana in Sanskrit, which actually is a term of cultivation and development, that we're planting certain kinds of seeds, and then we water them in a very disciplined way, but also totally open and beyond name and form and forcing anything. And then see what unfolds.

(00:16:27) But that's the sort of personal thing about it. I mean, I was a street kid. I mean, my parents were as I described them, so I had this academic anchor, but I was out there playing in the streets, on 170th street in Washington Heights, with kids that did not go to my public school. They were all going to Incarnation or St. Rose of Lima, and they came from a very, very different kind of working class Irish and Italian families. And it was not easy to belong in that kind of environment without a certain kind of toughness that wasn't mere affectation, because I had to fight a lot. And I learned a huge amount from that. I mean, I couldn't have asked for a better environment in which to grow up. Somehow my parents just let me out on the streets forever, and never monitored or followed up... As a parent myself, I would never ever have allowed that to happen in the 50s in New York City with everything that was going on, gangs and everything else.

(00:17:39) But somehow for me it was the perfect karmic assignment because I found out how people not like myself just live, and what their issues were, and I found a way to actually befriend and even in some fundamental way belong. Even though there came a time when it became obvious that I didn't belong, that there were prejudices that were sort of part of their own family arcs, and they started to come out after years. But between the ages of seven and 15 or something like that, I was like a total street urchin. And then going home to conversations about art and science.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:18:28): Right. *[laughter]* Do you feel like that toughness that you developed on the streets informed the way that you approached practice, or the development of MBSR, or any of your later work?

Jon Kabat-Zinn (00:18:41): Yeah, it did. I mean, because it's like, not kidding around. There are certain attitudes that develop from that. Some of the toughness, of course, I had to work really hard to get rid of. I mean, just editing my language, my street language, when I went to college. I mean, it took a very long time to not intersperse every other word with the street language of New York at that time. And it was just totally natural to me. I feel like, as I was suggesting, it taught me in a certain way that it was possible to be with virtually anybody, if you saw who they were and you could relate to that part of them that was friendly. And there's a part of everybody that's friendly and wants to be seen and met. I mean, His Holiness the Dalai Lama is saying that all the time, and he's serious about it.

(00:19:39) But when you get sort of predisposed to seeing somebody through a particular kind of lens, you might disregard or be completely out of touch with that vulnerability in them, or that open heartfulness in them. And because I grew up in that kind of environment, I think it gave me a real sense that I could handle anything. And again, in terms of the toughness, my first exposure to rigorous meditation practice was Philip Kapleau in the Zen tradition. And Philip Kapleau is like a drill sergeant of Rinzai Zen, so to speak. That's a whole other story because I had certain kind of encounters with him around that, around his toughness. I wound up rejecting it at a certain point. But there's a certain element of the discipline that always shaped me that is like, "Hey, we're not kidding around. Life is short." And the discipline has certain elements of payoff, so your motivation has to be profound to be able to deal with that kind of disciplined orientation. And then, within the discipline, which is tough, huge gentleness, open-heartedness, and non-judging spaciousness.

(00:21:02) So those are muscles that you can actually exercise just the way Richie [Davidson] is always talking about, like skill training and actually developing certain kind of skills to face the vagaries of the mind and body and outer world. So to see the discipline itself as a love affair is really profound. And I think it's a gift, because a lot of people often don't have enough confidence in themselves to opt for a certain kind of open-hearted, spacious, loving, but rigorous discipline. Like, "I will get my ass on the cushion no matter what. No matter what. And at four o'clock in the morning if I can't do it at five. I'll push my meditation practice back as far as I can so it doesn't interfere with family and kids and everything else, but there's no way I'm giving up on it." There's a certain way in which, at first that's kind of like just immature, but after 10 or 20 years, that softens, at least in my experience, but the rigor of "not kidding around" about it, that stays.

(00:22:15) And I hope, in MBSR, that there's been that kind of transmission—that this is a love affair, but it's also one where the stakes could not be higher, because it's nothing but your life, your heart, your mind, and how you are in the world. And not just how the world is treating you, but how you're treating the world. As one of my teachers early on, on a Vipassana retreat, asked me that... I walked in for an interview and he said, "How's the world treating you?" Meaning like, I thought he meant, well how's the retreat going? You know, how's the world treating you? Well... the world isn't treating me. We're on this intensive retreat and we're not talking. But then I said something or other, and then he said, "And how are you treating the world?" And I was just completely undone. Because I didn't think that sitting on my cushion 12 hours a day was calling me to interface with the world. But what he was pointing to was, you don't leave the world when you go on intensive retreat.

[\(00:23:17\)](#) So there are all sorts of elements of, I think... I'm sure this is true for every single meditator. I'll bet it's true for you, that you remember when meditation first landed in your life in a way that you experienced. I'll bet you've never forgotten it. And I think that's true for virtually all of us, because something shifts, some kind of glimmer or opening about how am I (unknown what the my refers to) in relationship to myself (also unknown what that's about). But certainly a field of infinite possibility, especially when you're young. And that's a really important question to be asking yourself. And you could go through all your entire education system and never run into that.

[\(00:24:05\)](#) And then now we know through your work and the work of thousands of people who have made this their career, that it's worthy of investigation through a lot of different scientific lenses. Because this practice, which from the outside looks a lot like absolutely nothing, you're just sitting there—and of course that's not the real meditation practice; we can get into that. But let's say the sitting is still extremely important, whether you do it lying down or standing on your head or whatever. But that's absolutely critical, but it can't be done with any kind of forcing or a gaining idea. Or attachment to the gaining idea because of course you'll have a gaining idea about it. Are we doing this for no reason, or are we doing this to get somewhere?

[\(00:24:58\)](#) And as soon as you really are caught in the virus of "getting somewhere," you've shot yourself in the heart, not in the foot. And so this non-dual orientation to, "Yeah, incredible discipline is required, but not for any kind of end result." That, in some sense, is totally disarming and invitational to inquire about what's not being recognized. And that's... I mean, if I'd found anything more powerful than this in my life, I certainly wouldn't be doing this. And the other point I want to make is, I'm using the verb doing, but it's not a doing, it's a being. And that's in some sense, so you don't need a result because you already are the result. And it's just as you are, as opposed to, as you think you would be, you should be, if you just trimmed off all the rough edges and sanded things down, and put a certain kind of face forward, and pretended that you were your ideal self... when you don't even know who needs to pretend anything.

[\(00:26:23\)](#) – musical interlude –

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:26:48\)](#): I'd love to unpack a little bit. So you mentioned MBSR, which is of course Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, which is one of the things I think you're maybe best known for, is starting that program. Can you talk a little bit about how you began to develop that, and what your approach was, and what you were hoping it would achieve?

Jon Kabat-Zinn [\(00:27:12\)](#): Yeah, it's not so much that I developed it. It just came out of my... the koan of my life, at a certain point. It was like, I was at MIT getting a PhD in molecular biology with a Nobel laureate, so on a certain kind of trajectory, and I was also meditating my butt off and asking what is my true Way, with a capital W. And I realized that all the graduate students that I was with, they were all on the Nobel prize trajectory. But there was this other thing going on with me the whole time, which is, we really need to bring science to this whole other dimension that nobody's even talking about. And when I would talk about yoga and meditation, I mean, you can imagine how the faculty at MIT was taking that.

[\(00:28:23\)](#) And there was a whole conversation about it in my PhD thesis defense, because I put in the front of my thesis a line that went, just on a page by itself, right, after the title page: He who dies before he dies does not die when he dies. And at my thesis defense, they said, "What's this, he who dies before he dies does not die when he dies"? That was their first question about my thesis. And I said, "Wait a minute, wait a minute. Do you really want to know?" Because I'm supposed be here defending my

research, you know? So that took up more than half of my thesis [defense]. And I won't go into the details here, but I basically was suggesting that there was a different way of investigating the nature of life, and the nature of mind. Ironic that we should be having this conversation around Mind & Life, because that's what biology is all about. And that was why I went into biology, was not to become a biologist. I went into biology because I wanted to understand the nature of consciousness, was the way I put it in those days.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:29:34): What was your research about, that you were defending, or was it totally unrelated?

Jon Kabat-Zinn (00:29:38): No. Well, most of it was about bacteriophage, bacterial viruses. But then I actually wrote my thesis on proteins called colicins that are genetically produced by plasmids—these fragments of DNA that move in and out of the chromosome of a prokaryotic bacteria, and that produce these proteins, that when they bind to another bacterium, they actually somehow kill it. And I was studying the mechanism of that killing it, and how it affected the cell membranes of the bacteria that were sensitive to these colicins.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:30:20): Oh, great. So is that the link, then, to dying before you die?

Jon Kabat-Zinn (00:30:23): But you know, that was all about, like, well, bacteria, okay? Why are they even alive? Viruses, of course, we've just been through the pandemic, and these viruses, they're not actually living. And bacteriophage, I read recently, by weight, there are more bacteriophage on the planet than any other thing, basically (living thing, but they're not alive). So this whole question that Francisco Varela was deeply interested in, that had to do with inside and outside, what makes something living? What is the nature of a cell? Autopoiesis, he called it. What is that characteristic? I was obsessed with inside and outside the cell membrane. Why was inside alive in the cell, but outside not alive, and a bacteriophage would land on the receptors on the cell surface and then inject its DNA inside. And then the DNA takes over the entire machinery, as we used to say, of the cell, and diverts it for its own purposes. That's what's still going on with RNA viruses and COVID and everything else. And it's like, holy moly, this is phenomenal stuff!

(00:31:41) But from an evolutionary point of view, how do you get the first cell? How do you get inside and outside? And you know, you're thinking about clathrates and all sorts of stuff... I mean, it's like, I absolutely loved science. I loved the chemistry underneath the biological structures. And I was just like a pig in a poke doing this kind of stuff. But at the same time, this deep sort of uncertainty about how this relates to the inner and outer of being human, and where the boundary of my heart is, for instance, or the boundary of our love, or the boundary of our caring for the planet. And molecular biology was not going to take me there. And there was no neuroscience at that time. It was called neurophysiology. So I decided to switch over to the other lab—the lab of meditation practice.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:32:51): The inner lab?

Jon Kabat-Zinn (00:32:52): Yeah. And then with the intention that this would all come together. And so when I started MBSR, I knew right from the start, even though I'm not trained to do any kind of research with people—I mean, I was doing research on bacteriophage and *E. coli*—that I had to learn enough about how to do outcome studies with human beings, that I could at least establish some kind of *a priori* validity for a training program for medical patients with chronic medical conditions in mindfulness to see what the various outcomes would be. And so that's what I did.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:33:36): So when you started that program, was it kind of equally the hope of helping relieve suffering for the people who were going through the program, as well as beginning the scientific inquiry?

Jon Kabat-Zinn (00:33:50): Totally. There was... like the double-stranded DNA. You couldn't have one without the other. Because otherwise, let's say we had really impressive results clinically happening with all these people that are falling through the cracks of the healthcare system. (And that's what I saw, and this is 1979. Now there aren't cracks in the health care system; there are grand canyons, chasms, in the healthcare system.) And the idea was, I basically convinced the department of medicine that this would be a good idea. What do you do with all the people you don't know what to do with, who are falling through the cracks of your own system that you don't even want to see anymore? Because Mrs. So-and-so is not responding to her medication, you suspect she's not even taking her medication or you don't know what to do because she's got 20 different chief complaints.

(00:34:39) And I said, wouldn't it be helpful to have a clinic in the hospital where you send everybody you don't know what to do with? No matter what your medical specialty is—not just medicine, orthopedics, anesthesiology, chronic pain, neurology, headaches, GI for all sorts of irritable bowel, and everything else. I mean, I just intuited that a lot of people were falling through the cracks of the healthcare system. And so I talked to a bunch of docs and said, "Would it be helpful if you had a clinic where you just sent all the people you don't know what to do with anymore?" And then we would challenge them to do something for themselves that nobody else on the planet could do for them. I didn't bother saying, but it's not really a doing, but we will use meditative... these ancient, I would say, ancient, very venerable meditation practices and hatha yoga to see if we couldn't ignite a certain kind of passion in them for taking care of themselves, from the inside in ways that we can't do just by administering medicine and surgery from the outside.

(00:35:51) And I'll tell you, the response when I started talking to people like the head of the primary care clinic and so forth, they said, "I can think of 60 people off the top of my head that I would send you tomorrow." That was in 1979. So I just said okay, and I opened... I was the secretary, I was... I mean, I did everything. There was nobody there except me. And I put people into classes and then I taught them. And I could tell within the first cycle that... People were saying things like, "This has saved my life." But a large enough fraction of those people were saying, "This is fantastic!" Well, it's what's now called participatory medicine. We're igniting passion in people for taking care of themselves from the inside, so to speak, as a complement to whatever medicine can do for them from the outside. So there's that inside/outside thing again, on a whole other level from bacteria and bacterial viruses.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:36:53): Yeah. And how did you go about—from what you had learned through the Zen tradition... And did you practice in other traditions before that time?

Jon Kabat-Zinn (00:37:05): Well, I got into hatha yoga in 1966 when I went to the Mattson Karate Studio in Boston to train in Okinawan karate, which I did. I was very into martial arts, but they were doing something as warmups that I'd never seen before. These were all like, Marines that were just back from tours of duty in Vietnam. They were very tough guys, and they were into this Okinawan karate, which is all very hard martial art. Like, you just bash everything and block with tremendous ferocity. But they were actually doing warmups, which turned out to be shoulder stand, the fish, the plow, headstands. And I go, holy cow, this is fantastic! So I got more into the yoga than I did the martial arts, although I did continue with the martial arts.

[\(00:38:04\)](#) And so I started practicing yoga right then and there. And I discovered this genius of a yoga teacher offering classes, free classes in Harvard Square in the basement of a church. John Lauder was his name. He was an architect by day, and a yogi by night. This is in... you got to imagine this in the mid-'60s, in Harvard Square. And there were hundreds of people in this class—almost all of them women, almost no men—and he was like a genius. And he was teaching it... he wouldn't use that vocabulary, but he was teaching it in a very, very investigative, micro way that was really about mindfulness. Not about striving or forcing yourself into particular posture so you could look good in your leotard comes summer. But a lot of people were there for that purpose.

[\(00:38:59\)](#) So yeah, so all these threads seemed to come together so that it seemed like, well, of course we should have hatha yoga as part of it, because that's one body door. And of course we should have sitting meditation, but of course we have a huge number of people being referred from the pain clinic—they can't even sit for 5 minutes, never mind for 45 minutes. So let's start everybody out lying down. Let's teach lying down meditation. Well, that's a real high-risk endeavor, because the first occupational hazard of any form of meditation is that instead of falling awake, which is the whole point, you'll fall asleep. But you know, it turned out to be a very good choice, and the body scan, which in part I adapted from what John Lauder was doing at the end of his yoga class, and of course from Goenka's sweeping meditation, U Ba Khin's whole tradition of very micro level scanning through the body, after doing three days of anapana, just breath awareness.

[\(00:40:09\)](#) So there were all these different doors, so to speak, that MBSR developed into the same rooms—body scan, sitting meditation, mindful hatha yoga, and walking, mindful walking meditation. And to go back to your question, I trained with a number of different Zen masters, but I also trained—once Jack [Kornfield] and Joseph [Goldstein] and Sharon [Salzberg] came back from Asia and started teaching what we called vipassana in those days, or insight meditation—I started going on those retreats as well and really exploring how the different traditions, all within the Buddhist Dharma umbrella, actually are very skillful at teaching in very, very different ways. And so MBSR is, in some sense, a synthesis of... a lot of people say, well, it's most like vipassana, but if people want to do that, then my corrective would be it's vipassana with a Zen attitude.

[\(00:41:18\)](#) But of course, people don't understand what that means when I say it, but what it's really pointing to is a kind of non-dual orientation that is really grounded, in my own experience, in the Heart Sutra. And the sort of core teachings that form is emptiness and emptiness is form. And then everything else involved in that, so that finally you go around what Seung Sahn, my Korean Zen teacher, called the Zen circle: where form is emptiness and emptiness is form; and then there's no form; and then there's no emptiness... And when you keep on practicing, ultimately form is form and emptiness is emptiness, and you just missed it the first time around. But with no attachment.

[\(00:42:02\)](#) So, easy to say, not so easy to actually live. But I felt like, if MBSR doesn't have that non-dual Chan direct wisdom orientation, then it would be like a therapy. And the last thing I wanted to do was to create a therapy. MBSR is not meant to be a therapy. It's meant to be a liberative practice. It's a Dharma vehicle. I say that with some degree of trepidation, because who am I to say that it's a Dharma vehicle? But that was my intention, that it was coming from that kind of a place and not from a place of, let's give people techniques that will help them modulate their stress levels or their pain levels just to get through the day. This was about deep insight into the nature of self and the nature of reality, and then trusting that each person would take that curriculum and be undone and redone by it, by that engagement, in a way that would generate... my shorthand for this is, some degree of learning. Who am I? This person

that has high blood pressure or chronic back pain and got referred to this crazy clinic with 30 other people, sitting in a circle, all with unimaginably chronic, horrible conditions that nobody wants... And who am I underneath my diagnosis and my stories and everything else?

(00:43:41) And then what you see is that people were taking to this like ducks to water. Ducks to water. And it was awe-inspiring to see. I mean, I learned far more—and I think this is true for all MBSR teachers and probably for all meditation teachers—we learn far more from our students than they learn from us.

(00:44:01) So that's kind of a little bit of how it evolved. And it was obvious that we needed to study it in not just descriptive ways with self-report and so forth, but that became a whole other challenge, is how do you actually do more clinical trials within an ongoing... what became a major clinic in the hospital, where we were getting referrals from all over the hospital, from all sorts of different disciplines and subspecialties, and also from at least 50% (after a while) from physicians in the larger Central Mass community. And it's been going now for 42 years, uninterrupted, in spite of various ups and downs, but uninterrupted.

(00:44:45) So it's an object lesson, I think, in a certain way, in how, if the Dharma is kind of languaged and held in a certain way, it can feel like giving food to starving people. And exactly what people are starving for. In other words, food. Nurturance of a certain kind, on a very deep level. Without a catechism, without a philosophy, without some kind of dominant ideology that you have to buy along with it or a religious perspective. But in the deepest of ways, really kind of an arc of, people come, as I was saying, and they learn something. Whatever it is—about themselves, about their body, about their breath, about their mind, about each other, because you hear what other people are carrying. Of course the word carrying is the root meaning of the word "to suffer."

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:45:43): Oh, I didn't know that.

Jon Kabat-Zinn (00:45:43): In Latin, it's to carry. So if you have 30 people in the room with chronic medical problems, and you look around the room and you've got what you've got, and you hear what they've got, all of a sudden you realize, holy moly, this is the human condition writ large, but intimate because these are real human beings with names sitting right across from you, and they're going to for the next eight weeks. And what you have in common is—we've noticed this from the very beginning and we'd never found any exception, whether people are brought in on stretchers or wheelchairs or crutches or on their own—there's not a single case in which somebody came to the stress reduction clinic and was not breathing. There is not a single case that somebody came through the stress reduction clinic and there was not a body. So we start there. It's the first foundation of mindfulness, the body.

(00:46:39) And so there's a certain kind of intrinsic logic to the unfolding of mindfulness that's kind of no separation from the four foundations of mindfulness. And then when that's done in a way that is non-dual, and where you have that Zen orientation of non-attachment to name and form, and noticing how, as a teacher, you yourself are getting attached over and over about wanting people to like you, or wanting people to feel better after a week or two of meditating... "Don't you love meditating now?" No, I hate meditating. And, well, hating meditation is as powerful as loving meditation. Both of them are seriously suspect. Come back in 10 years and tell me how you feel about it. *[laughter]*

(00:47:23) And that's a certain kind of tough angle to the whole thing, to go back to what we were talking about earlier. But when you take that kind of orientation, people feel seen, met, and respected in

a way, because you're not forcing them to be other than they are or dangling some kind of ideal out in front of them that they're never, ever going to actually attain. But on the other hand, to actually point out, there's nothing to attain because you're already whole, W-H-O-L-E, which is the root meaning of the word health, healing, and even holy, H-O-L-Y.

[\(00:48:01\)](#) So from learning whatever it is that people learn, what does learning do? It catalyzes growth. We don't understand this, even. You know, even pedagogy. Why do we bother learning anything? Why do we teach anybody? Because there's not just facts. It's like, a computer can have all the facts, but out of the facts is some kind of synthesis, some kind of growing. And out of that growing—especially when it has to do with life and death and the breath and the body, and the mind, and how the mind can be your worst enemy or your best friend—out of that comes healing, which in my working definition is coming to terms with things as they are.

[\(00:48:51\)](#) So that's a kind of koan. What does that mean, coming to terms with things as they are? So it's not like, getting rid of your pain, getting rid of your stress, living forever because you found the secret to longevity. And you start to talk about telomeres, and how I'm going to just, you know, keep my telomeres long forever. All of those are important elements of this whole thing, but healing is, right in this moment, how are you in relationship to the actuality of what you're carrying? The good, the bad, and the ugly. Not just your medical diagnosis or psychiatric diagnosis, but the totality of it. And then the koan, who's carrying it anyway, and is that you?

[\(00:49:39\)](#) So that is actually liberative, that kind of healing, and it results in transformation. You are the same person you always were, and you're not. And I don't have to say that to anybody. I never say that to anybody. They say it to me. They say, "I don't know what's happened, but I just am more comfortable in my own skin, in my own life, and I know something about my direction going forward while I have some years left," or whatever it is. So that arc of learning, growing, healing, and transformation, or transcendence, or liberation, I mean, it's all like... lives right inside the heart of Dharma. I mean, that's really what it's about.

[\(00:50:34\)](#) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:50:34\)](#): I think one of the most incredible insights that I imagine you had early on, and I'm curious when this came to you, but was to secularize these practices, right? And so you went through the process, I assume, of kind of extracting these insights...

Jon Kabat-Zinn [\(00:51:11\)](#): No, I didn't.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:51:12\)](#): Yeah. How did that go?

Jon Kabat-Zinn [\(00:51:14\)](#): And in fact, I've come, although I've used the word, and so don't take this as a criticism-

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:51:19\)](#): Yeah, no, no.

Jon Kabat-Zinn [\(00:51:19\)](#): ...I've come to abhor the word secularizing.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:51:22\)](#): Well, please, yeah, nuance that.

Jon Kabat-Zinn ([00:51:25](#)): The word I've landed on, it's not so great, is mainstreaming.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:51:30](#)): Yeah, that's a good word.

Jon Kabat-Zinn ([00:51:32](#)): Secular implies that I'm taking something sacred and denaturing it to make it available more broadly. But I really do see the Dharma as sacred.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:51:44](#)): Right, that's what I was going to ask about.

Jon Kabat-Zinn ([00:51:46](#)): Yeah. And I see the Dharma as sacred in the same way that I see life as sacred. It's no separation. So then the question is, what is the meaning of sacred, even? So I'm not willing to fall into the dualism of, "Yeah, Jon took the Dharma, which is this sacred Buddhist, incredibly beautiful universe, and denatured it, secularized it, and then is making it available for the low life of people who haven't really moved into the orbit of Buddhist illumination." As His Holiness is always saying, there's seven billion people on the planet. There are seven billion people who are suffering. There are one billion Buddhists, but there are seven billion who are suffering. Okay.

([00:52:41](#)) So if the Dharma is only for Buddhists, it's absurd. It's, on its face, absurd. And people don't always love me for saying it, but I say it for a range of different reasons, and in some sense, feel like it's true enough to say—that the Buddha wasn't a *Buddhist*. The Buddha was a *Buddha*. And the point of meditation practice is not to become a Buddhist, nor do you have to go through that gate in order to become an authentic meditator, but to become a Buddha.

([00:53:25](#)) And that simply means, not emulating a statue in some temple or in the British museum, but awake, which is what the word would mean. So if the Buddha was talking, pointing to an intrinsic quality of humanity, that is liberative and a possibility for embodied wakefulness, mindfulness being long ago decided... I'll use mindfulness as a kind of umbrella term, for inclusivity. Because if I was teaching a more Buddhist oriented framework, around either the Theravadan orientation, or even early Buddhism, or for that matter Zen, people would be running screaming from the room in class one and they would never come back.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:54:14](#)): Exactly, yeah.

Jon Kabat-Zinn ([00:54:15](#)): So it's not skillful. But that doesn't mean that I'm secularizing something, and in some sense denaturing it. What I'm trying to do, which I believe has been the course of the entire arc of Dharma since way before the Buddha, is to find skillful ways for this essential liberative embodied wisdom to flow into the world, just as say, water from the high Himalayas or the glaciers (that are rapidly disappearing actually) flowed down mountains. And if they run into obstacles, what does the water do? It just goes around the obstacle. It finds its way down. And I have a deep conviction in a certain way that the Dharma has that same kind of liquid power. That it has the way of flowing into interstices and interfaces that seem like impossible that it could get in there, and it does, and then it moves stuff. And I think that part of what we're seeing with, you might say, the explosion of interest in mindfulness, even if a lot of it is hype and bullshit, frankly, there's a huge amount of it that is not hype or bullshit. And that's going to stand the test of time. Why? Because it's Dharma. And the other stuff, because it's just hype, sooner or later they'll be onto the next hype-inducing thing, and everybody will forget about mindfulness and it'll be so yesterday. And I can't wait for that day, because those of us who care, who love in this way, we're not going with the next fad.

(00:56:10) So in a sense, there's been a strategy from the very beginning for bringing meditation into medicine. Since the two words sound exactly alike, because they are from the same deep Indo-European root. And in that way... You know, in 1979, the idea of bringing meditation into mainstream medicine, academic medicine, was tantamount to, as I like to say, the Visigoths are at the gates of the Citadel about the tear down Western civilization. Bringing yoga and meditation into medicine? Harvard Medical School, UMass Medical School, Stanford Medical School, any medical school? Now, yoga and meditation is in all of those medical schools and hundreds more, and nobody bats an eye. That's a huge cultural shift, or what I sometimes call an orthogonal rotation in consciousness. It's like nothing's happened... everything's happened.

(00:57:11) And the science has been an incredible driver of all of this, or catalyst of this, because for some reason... I mean, science is the religion of the day. And so even if the science itself could be questionable, as many of our colleagues point out, that there are various kinds of interpretations to the validity of even fMRI studies and stuff like that. But the overall preponderance of the evidence—whether you're talking about neuroplasticity or you're talking about epigenetics, or you're talking about telomeres and telomerase, or all the other kinds of lines of evidence, across all sorts of different ages and genders and diagnoses—the dominant vector of evidence is that there's something here that's really powerful. And it needs whole other levels of scientific investigation, and maybe even technologies that we haven't yet arrived at. But that there is something here that's worthy of study.

(00:58:16) And that's happened in a relatively short period of time. 40 years, that's like nothing. So I sort of keep reminding myself, as I was once reminded by Harada Roshi, a Japanese Zen master who gave me a poster on September 11th, 2001, when I was at his monastery on Whidbey Island. I was visiting with a bunch of people, and he gave us all a poster. Enzo.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:58:44): The circle?

Jon Kabat-Zinn (00:58:45): Yeah. Zen circle calligraphy. And underneath it says, "Never forget the 1000 year view." So I went into teaching MBSR with the 1000 year view, not having the poster or ever met him, but just there was like... Yeah, just out of my childhood that this is, and I don't have to be attached to anything happening, any outcome, just be true to my own understanding, and then let's see if it becomes infectious in a positive way.

(00:59:18) So just like we've been through COVID, I think mindfulness is a kind of meme or viral element of positivity, of transformation, of love, of illumination, of liberation, that it has its own kind of dynamic. So rather than us doing it, you could argue, and I do sometimes, that it's much more that the meditation practice is doing us more than we're doing the meditation practice, at a certain point. And that it's gone through all sorts of... If you go back to the time of the Buddha and then through China and so forth, 500-year cycles of a Renaissance and then decay, and then Renaissance and then decay. But those cycles are collapsing. So in 40 years, the Dharma has actually moved into the mainstream in ways that were literally unimaginable in the 1970s.

(01:00:18) And what comes of it is not any one of us's responsibility. It's all of our responsibility. And there's no one way, or one catechism, or one voice, or one hero. Exactly the opposite. Deep, deep listening to what the world is calling for. Where the suffering is coming from, where the beauty lies even underneath and inside the suffering. That's the practice. And then whether it's MBSR or MBCT, or MB je ne sais quoi, it in some sense, doesn't matter. And all of those, to really be effective clinically, the

teachers have to go reach a point where they're no longer following a curriculum. They're no longer following a catechism that is limiting.

[\(01:00:51\)](#) It doesn't mean that there isn't a curriculum, but what is the curriculum becomes a zen koan. What is the true curriculum? And if you walk into Class 1 or 2 or 3 or 4 or 5 or 6 or 7 or 8, and you impose what you planned for that day, you've just missed the boat. You have to hold in mind what might happen during that day, but then within the context of whatever's emergent. And then your wisdom is what does all the work. Your compassion, your sensitivity, your kindness, your deep listening and your practice, ultimately. That's what winds up doing all the work. And then you get a class out of an infinite... When you walk in, any teacher knows this, you walk into a classroom, but let's say an MBSR, a mindfulness-based classroom, and of course you have some idea of which class it is, and what the arc of the explicit curriculum is, but then there's the implicit curriculum. But you walk into the classroom, there are an infinite number... It's just like the collapse of the wave function in quantum mechanics. Before you walk into the classroom, or as you're walking in, there are an infinite number of classes that might unfold. But when you walk out of the classroom two and a half hours later, that infinitude of possibilities has collapsed into the class that you got.

[\(01:02:31\)](#) And there's an art to that. There's a beauty to that, that when the teacher is sensitive to it, then the teaching's not coming out of a book, out of a what they so facilely at the NIH call a "treatment manual"—where you're just like from the book to the teaching out of the treatment manual. Yeah, but that's not mindfulness. You can't teach out of a manual. This is the manual. The human heart is the manual. And all of your life up to that moment informs the curriculum.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(01:03:06\)](#): That's so interesting. And I'm thinking about what you said about science, and of course being one of the major drivers of how this has been taken up in the mainstream. And then, what you were just describing, how that almost goes against the approach of science, that it should be repeatable. It should be something that you can... The manualized version, right?

Jon Kabat-Zinn [\(01:03:28\)](#): What I'm talking is infinitely repeatable. It's just never the same.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(01:03:33\)](#): But not the same, right.

Jon Kabat-Zinn [\(01:03:34\)](#): Yeah. So that's where science... I love that you brought that up, because I think this is where science actually needs to stretch its own envelope. That's why I'm not a big fan of treatment manuals. Because there's the pretense that it's always the same, but everybody's going to even dump the treatment manual onto their class in a way that, even if it's effective, it's going to be different every single time you do it, every time somebody else does it. So there's this uncertainty principle, so to speak, that's very much this sort of complementarity between the elementary particle and wave form... That it's like form an emptiness, inner and outer, inside/outside, and then explicit curriculum, implicit curriculum. And that the teacher has to hold all that not in their mind, but in their being, and continually ask and trust in emergence, what's called for in this moment.

[\(01:04:34\)](#) It requires incredible deep listening. Sometimes a listening that means this listening to the fleeting expressions on people's faces. How they're carrying themselves in their chairs. Not just who's making the most noise in the classroom or wants to talk the most, or what they're saying. It's really an art form. It's very, very hard to turn into an authentic professional training trajectory where then you get the certification at the end. "I am now a certified Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction teacher." *I am not a certified Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction teacher... [laughter]* And I never would dream of either

certifying myself, or having some higher authority or lower authority certify me. For obvious reasons. Don't need it.

[\(01:05:27\)](#) Now, if it's skillful to be able to convince an insurance company that you're not some sort of buddy just off the street who's making this stuff up, and a complete charlatan—yeah, I understand that framework. But if that framework winds up coloring the ethic and the culture, then that's the kiss of death.

[\(01:05:48\)](#) So this is actually a big koan of its own, is how to transmit this through the generations going forward? And I feel like that's where all of the traditions can collaborate and contribute. I have friends and colleagues around the world who are Buddhist monks living in monasteries, teaching MBSR. In the Zen tradition, especially in the Zen tradition, because they recognize something about it. That, if form is really emptiness, then it doesn't matter if you call it MBSR or you call it Zen. It's like, what do people most need in this moment? And then how do you frame it in a way that there's no separation between the classical texts and the actual curriculum of MBSR. And they're doing the kind of work. I mean, they're a lot younger than I am, and I don't know how it's all going to unfold, but I think it's kind of interesting that it's come to that. Where it's not like, "Oh, we're just taking the stuff from Asia," but actually Asia is very interested in adopting it both from the side of the classical Buddhist lineages, and also in terms of Chinese medicine, the Chinese Academy of Sciences. They really care about this in a deep way.

[\(01:07:13\)](#) So there's a lot of potential, I think, for a flowering... a flourishing. (I know that the Mind & Life loves the language of flourishing.) But I think this flourishing is a certain kind of flowering of what's deepest and best in us as human beings. You don't have to call it Buddha nature or true nature for that matter, but let's call it "don't know." Let's call it not knowing mind. And an openhearted spaciousness, so there's no separation between mindfulness and compassion. It's, as they say, two wings, one bird. And I would say that this is either going to, hopefully does, lead to a certain kind of Renaissance where we wake up as a species, which we have to. And actually the name we gave ourselves as a species, it's all about wakefulness and meta-awareness. Awareness of awareness. *Homo sapiens sapiens*. A double dose of *sapere*, which means to taste, or to know, in that kind of way through direct experience.

[\(01:08:25\)](#) So I would say that now that it's not just MBSR for individual people falling through the cracks of the health care system, it's like the planet is falling through the cracks of the human system. We've given it a fever. We are extracting resources, both from the earth and from each other in ways that are incredibly violent and dominating, and ultimately disease causing. Dis-ease and disease causing. COVID could have been 10 times worse, and it could easily... Those molecules of RNA can rearrange themselves and it could very well be 10 times worse the next time around. This is a kind of wake-up call for humanity. We are not kidding around. How about you stop kidding around, and wake up? So that would be a universal Dharma Renaissance, expressed through tech, through biotech, through everything—but with humanity at heart, rather than capitalistic sequestering of unimaginable amounts of money, while most people are so poorly resourced. Even as the pandemic showed, in terms of food, in terms of housing. And the diagnosis of the patient is like, if the heart and the liver went to war with each, that would not be a good outcome for either the heart, the liver, any other trillions of cells that make up the universe of you or me.

[\(01:09:57\)](#) So we know enough about medicine to actually apply medicine to the world now. And mindfulness and Dharma, universal Dharma articulation, I would say, if there was anything else on the horizon that might do a better job of it. I'd say go with that. But I haven't seen anything remotely

possible to move in that direction. And in its universal form, I don't think there's a person on the planet that wouldn't actually feel healthier and more at home and belonging, and therefore less falling into fear and dualism about us-ing and them-ing, and then moving into greed, hatred, delusion, and violence. There's not a person on the planet that wouldn't, not only benefit, but actually recognize that this was a whole new degree of freedom added to not just a person's individual life, but our life as planetary citizens for the sake of all beings.

[\(01:11:05\)](#) And it is a distributive function. I guess that's the last thing that I would say about this is that it's a distributive function. We need all hands on deck. It's not like one hero, one Dalai Lama, one great meditation teacher is going to come along and illuminate it for us for all time. Each one of us is the cells of the one body of the planet, the body politic, in a way. And if we take responsibility for our own little piece—well, because of interconnectedness and quantum entanglement or whatever else you want to bring into the mix—you take care of yourself, you're also taking care of the world. And when it becomes we rather than me, I think that's a very healing direction to go in.

[\(01:11:49\)](#) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(01:11:49\)](#): I would love to talk a little more about that. You've mentioned the self, and who are you really, and who is there... And now talking about us-ing them-ing, and this kind of division between self and others seems to be such a—I mean I'm sure it's been a prevalent problem throughout human history, but it seems very poignant and relevant right now, in this moment. So I'm just wondering if you could say some more about the role of mindfulness as it relates to our concepts of self and other.

Jon Kabat-Zinn [\(01:12:54\)](#): I really appreciate your asking that. And of course I've talked an awful lot, so things can get lost. That's one thing that should not get lost. And of course this lies at the heart of BuddhaDharma and universal Dharma. And I will approach this playfully. So I'm not going to give you any kind of complete definitive answers or statements about, this is the way it is. Because I'm a big fan of don't know mind, as Seung Sahn called it, and not knowing mind. So that's of course a great koan, is who am I? Or what am I? And that was Ramana Maharshi's, when he was 16 years old and he laid down in a casket and pretended to die. To just investigate that. Looping back to my thesis defense, and he who dies before he dies... And he lost his, what you might call small self, or any sense of just being an ordinary 16-year-old boy. And he just moved into a whole domain of boundless, open-hearted spaciousness. It's a classical example, but it's only one of an infinite number in the literature. It's very contemporary because he lived throughout the 20th century.

[\(01:14:21\)](#) So the way I sometimes approach it practically is, I'll say things like... I'll make a joke out of it and say... I will ask a room full of people, like 100 people, 1000 people, "How many of you are breathing?" And 100 or 1000 hands will go up. And I'd say, "Now let's be real about this. Okay. Yeah, we say I'm breathing. But whoever you are, if it was up to you to be breathing, you would have died a long time ago. You would have gotten distracted, got a text, whatever. Whoops, dead."

[\(01:14:55\)](#) And besides, we breathe through our sleep. So when we say, "I'm breathing," it's a certain kind of semantic convention, but we have no idea who that "I" is, who the personal pronoun is, what we're claiming. Because the way it's structured, the collaboration of the brainstem and the phrenic nerve and the diaphragm, yeah, you can hold your breath for a period of time, but you can't auto-suicide by holding your breath. You're not allowed anywhere near the real regulatory controls of breathing. Heart rate, heart contraction, even more so. So when we say, "I'm breathing," we don't know who that

is. We say, "My breath," we don't know. When we say, "My body," who's talking? Is it the body talking? Is it somebody other than the body that's claiming, "This is my body."?

[\(01:15:57\)](#) So this is like elementary stuff. It's kindergarten. But it's really important to begin to inquire and investigate these personal pronouns. Who do I think I am? And that's why I started out saying what I said when you asked me about my personal story. "My" story. And how easily we can shape it in any number of different ways, including into utter depression. Because depression is actually a disease of thinking. And Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy—and John Teasdale and Mark Williams and Zindel Segal have shown this, dramatically—that it's a disease, it's a pathology of thought.

[\(01:16:40\)](#) And when you begin to regulate that thinking so that then you can ask, "Who's sad? Who's depressed?" And then all of a sudden you can ask yourself the questions. Here's the laboratory, you got your own laboratory. Okay, let's investigate the thought, "I'm depressed." And it comes with all sorts of feelings in the body. And then, okay, can you hold that in awareness? Now, can you investigate like with a microscope or telescope, or whatever scope you want. Is your awareness of your depression depressed? (And let's call it your depression, as opposed to just whatever it is.) But is your awareness of your depression depressed? You immediately know that no, it isn't. Is your awareness of your anxiety anxious? Nope. Is your awareness of how much pain you're in at the moment, either emotionally or physically, in pain, suffering? No. So immediately you realize there's more to this whole story than we learned in kindergarten. Or in graduate school for that matter. And we can investigate it. We can exercise the same kind of scientific rigor that we would bring to the laboratory, to this [internal] laboratory.

[\(01:17:53\)](#) And then there's this whole poetic element of it, where I like to use poems to actually evoke this in people. Because I'm not going to give big lectures on the philosophy, or the nature of self, because it's boring for most people. And it's also, then it would sound like I have some axe to grind, and now I'm attached to no self. Which would be just as pathetic as being attached to the story of me. So the two poems that I like to use, almost like a hydrogen molecule, you know, H₂, so you've got these two protons and you've got this force field of electrons between them. And it's pretty powerful, there's more hydrogen in the universe than any other element. These two atoms would be Emily Dickinson and Derek Walcott. You probably know both these poems, but if you don't mind, I'll recite them.

[\(01:18:49\)](#) So this is Emily Dickinson. And I usually preface it by saying, well, Emily Dickinson, no one ever did poetry like she does poetry, before or after her. And you have to listen very, very carefully. And it's hard for people who don't have English as their native language, because they don't know that it's just as hard for people who do have English as their native language. So here goes:

[\(01:19:14\)](#) Me from Myself — to banish —
Had I Art —
Impregnable my Fortress
Unto All Heart —

But since Myself — assault Me —
How have I peace
Except by subjugating
Consciousness?

And since We're mutual Monarch
How this be
Except by Abdication —
Me — of Me?

[\(01:19:49\)](#) That bears repetition any number of times, but I won't do it. But that me from myself to banish, who hasn't done that? Like, who is the true you? The real answer, I mean, to the koan who am I, what am I, is—don't know. The not knowing is the embrace. And the knowing of not knowing. I mean, this is so important for science too, because anybody who gets caught in their own models of thinking is caught, and doesn't see the one thing lying outside the model that might open up the whole thing to a new insight that connects all the dots. Then you say, well, why didn't I see that? Well, because maybe you were too attached to the thought stream itself, and you didn't see the spaces between the thoughts. The rest between the notes, as Rilke said. I won't get into Rilke today. But again, there's so much in this.

[\(01:20:53\)](#) So then the other poem is, the other pole of the hydrogen molecule is Derek Walcott's *Love After Love*. So again, it's a dualism coming back to no dualism, because we separate what was never really separate. So this is how he frames it:

[\(01:21:14\)](#) The time will come
 when, with elation
 you will greet yourself arriving
 at your own door, in your own mirror
 and each will smile at the other's welcome,

 and say, sit here. Eat.
 You will love again the stranger who was your self.
 Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
 to itself, to the stranger who has loved you

 all your life, whom you ignored
 for another, who knows you by heart.
 Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,

 the photographs, the desperate notes,
 peel your own image from the mirror.
 Sit. Feast on your life.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(01:22:12\)](#): Beautiful.

Jon Kabat-Zinn [\(01:22:13\)](#): So very often if I'll use those two poems in my teaching, either back-to-back or separated by a few weeks or whatever, they start to do something in concert with the meditation practice, because you're going to ask, like, who's sitting, who's breathing, who's meditating, who thinks they're getting somewhere? It's like a can opener. It just kind of takes the top off, and it undoes the usual habit patterns that wind up creating the fabric of selfing. The habit patterns of selfing, where we generate stories that may be true to a degree, but they're never true enough, and they're never big enough.

(01:23:01) And that's why silence and the poetic imagination are so intimately associated. That silence itself is in some sense the greatest poem, silent wakefulness. But in the Zen tradition, all of the great Zen masters were poets. And sometimes it was only one word or one line, but it left enormous space for the mind of another to resonate and be illuminated. And it's like, this is true, I believe (although I'm not aware of all traditions), of all wisdom traditions, that there's a certain way in which it's just looking in the mirror. The mirror of our own mind when it's willing to be, as Sharon Salzberg said with the title of one of her books, was with your heart as wide as the world.

(01:24:02) And that would include you. Don't exclude yourself in this, which means even my totally unworthy, damaged, or whatever narrative you want to include, including traumatized self—when even that is not your true nature. Whether it's trauma, whether it's depression, whether it's chronic pain conditions or whatever, we have to begin to inquire, what is holding the pain? What's holding the scars? And what's holding the scars is not the scars. So is there a way to actually hold the whole, W-H-O-L-E, in a way that just comes back to what I was talking about originally when I was defending my PhD thesis. And that's the love affair.

(01:25:04) And then life itself, as I said, is the curriculum. And every moment is a profound gift, opportunity, and everybody is the beneficiary of your not believing in your, what we might call, small self or small self narrative. Because when you're really who you are, you are infinitely lovable. When you are contracted around your personal pronouns, you're a pain in the butt to most people, even people who love you the most. They know when you're contracted better than you do, often. And so that's really an important element of all this.

Wendy Hasenkamp (01:25:53): One of the things I just want to mention, and I don't know if there's a question in it, but you started by talking about your parents, and your mom as an artist and your dad as a scientist, and them not necessarily having full understanding of each other's modes of inquiry into the world.

Jon Kabat-Zinn (01:26:11): And that was... ha, "full understanding." That was like, how do I put it, it was like, I couldn't exaggerate it less. *[laughter]*

Wendy Hasenkamp (01:26:21): Gotcha. So maybe a disconnect. But I feel like so much of what you have developed and what you bring into the world is completely synthesizing those two perspectives. Bringing in poetry and art, and this very different frame...

Jon Kabat-Zinn (01:26:38): Yeah, I'm aware of that, too. That actually it's kind of a, I don't know what to call it, like an irony of emergence. But it wasn't like, oh, let me do some science and let me do some art and see if I come to mindfulness. But it's just like spontaneous emergence out of inquiry.

Wendy Hasenkamp (01:27:00): Yeah. I think it's beautiful. Yeah. It's such a holistic inquiry, I guess, is what it feels, bringing these different lenses. And that's such a part, I think that's a part of contemplative science, too, is bringing these different perspectives onto the mind.

Jon Kabat-Zinn (01:27:18): Yeah, and it's everything. It would be music. And again, I'm also very well aware that I'm, at this particular time, I'm talking from a certain age, a certain cultural arc, certain sort of racial characteristics and so forth, using a certain kind of language. And that what I'm trying to point to is something that's universal and that has profound implications for people from all over the world, who don't look like me, who don't think or talk like me, but have their own ways of thinking and talking and

loving. And that I really do see this as, as universal as gravity. That wherever you go on the Earth, gravity is exerting itself. And of course, mindfulness is as well, in a certain way.

[\(01:28:11\)](#) And so we need to treat other expressions of mindfulness with that kind of gravitas (to play with the words), and then really recognize that this will not look one way. That if it looks one way, then it could be very easily seen as sort of culturally reduced to particular groups of privileged people who do it this way, whereas I see that it has everything to do with the full dimensionality of our humanity. And more like His Holiness, like there's seven billion people on the planet. He doesn't necessarily talk about different races, and the Tibetans versus even the Chinese. I mean, he recognizes the humanity underneath all of the animosity, the differences, the genocides, the horrors. The enslavement of people and historical generations of that, of genocide of the Native peoples of this continent. If we're not mindful of that, then we're turning away from something that's actually part of the landscape, just the way, if we're not mindful of where the glaciers have gone, we're turning away from that actual part of the landscape.

[\(01:29:26\)](#) So the curriculum of mindfulness is boundless. It's infinite. And the reason it's so important is because our default mode, to a very large degree, is blindness. We default to our own comfort zone in thought, or in the language that we grew up with, with the parents that we grew up with, in the households that we grew up with. And we don't realize there's insane beauty in all languages, in all households, in all cultures, in all skin colors, in all traditions.

[\(01:30:03\)](#) So this is another part of the curriculum for this moment, is that the chickens are coming home to roost on a lot of different levels, not just global warming. And wealth inequality, racial injustice, social injustice... To go back to what I was saying earlier, the body politic cannot live, just the way the body can't live, if it's at war with itself. Or the heart insists on taking all of the blood and leaving the brain with nothing. Or the brain insists taking all the blood and leaving the liver with nothing. It's like, wait a minute. This is not a zero sum game. And people say that all the time, but when you wake up to it, that's what we really need, is the waking up to it.

[\(01:30:48\)](#) So just to say, I mean, we published a paper on an inner city clinic that we ran for seven years in the inner city of Worcester that was free, with free onsite, mindful childcare and free door-to-door taxi transportation, to demonstrate that this was really universal for people across a very broad range of different kinds of backgrounds, economic status, homelessness, everything. And it wasn't the greatest study in the world, but at least we were able to demonstrate that that was the case. We've also worked in the prisons for any number of years. And a lot of the people who are in prison shouldn't be in prison, and a lot of the people who are in positions of power, they should be in prison. Seriously, if we're going to be imprisoning people for crimes against humanity. But when I was teaching in the prison, it felt like giving food to starving people. Just to be present and then have the curriculum not be art or science or learning to read or anything like that, but learning to read yourself. And the narrative, so to speak, of how you wound up in prison. And that story, well, that's part of a much larger story of who you weren't seen as, who you were not nurtured as, and then you're stuck in this hell realm. Only you're not if you fall into wakefulness, then even in a hell realm, you're free.

[\(01:32:17\)](#) And so these are profound areas of a certain kind of work that could be done, social activism, and research that could be done as to the infinite ways in which mindfulness or heartfulness can manifest to the benefit of the greater whole.

[\(01:32:39\)](#) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:32:40](#)): At the risk of asking another personal question, and getting into your story-

Jon Kabat-Zinn ([01:33:01](#)): Uh oh. *[laughter]*

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:33:02](#)): I'm just curious, obviously you've been practicing mindfulness for so much of your life, but can you articulate how it's changed you, or maybe continues to change you?

Jon Kabat-Zinn ([01:33:17](#)): I don't think there's any question that if I hadn't gotten into meditation when I did, I'd be dead, long dead. I had all sorts of very wild, very self-destructive, very angry energies running through me in the sixties. And a lot of people I know did wind up casualties of that time, and never got to complete the arc of the later decades of life, so to speak. More than that, I can't really say.

([01:33:53](#)) I mean, I'll say this, people often ask me, well, how many hours a day do you meditate? Or, how long do you meditate? I'm sure you get the same kind of question. People who are naive to meditation. How long do you meditate? And I used to say, for decades, I would say, well, I wake up very early in the morning, and I spend about 45 minutes to an hour doing my yoga practice. And then I sit for another half hour, 45 minutes, or whatever. And early enough so that then I can have breakfast and go to work and see my kids off to school or whatever. But I don't answer that way anymore. Because I can't really differentiate formal practice from life itself anymore. Yeah, I still do the formal practice, but I don't want to answer the question like how many hours I do formal practice, or what other people would think of as formal practice. Because if I'm spending four hours with my grandchildren, I feel like that's as much practice as anything else, or taking a walk with my wife, or making dinner, or for that matter, doing my taxes. You know, it's like there's no moment of the waking day, at least, which isn't at least available for us to show up in. And that's kind of the way I see it.

([01:35:21](#)) But I also feel like at a certain point, this sort of paradox of self and other, that it is not clear whether you, whoever you are, is stretching the envelope, or the world is stretching your envelope. But there's a lot of fungibility and room for profound creativity, even in the face of what I called, back in 1990, when my first book came out, the "full catastrophe" of the human condition. And I think if people didn't understand that title in 1990, after this year of pandemic, they have a little bit more of an inkling of the full catastrophe of the human condition. And how it's not a prescription for despair, but an invitation to meet it with the full repertoire of our human endowment that has never, ever been fully defined or circumscribed. And I just love that, because it's not circumscribable.

([01:36:32](#)) And this brings us back to awareness. It's like, no neuroscientist can really define awareness, right? We have no idea how you get sentience out of three pounds of meat in the head, as people like to say. So out of 86 billion neurons, and trillions and trillions of neuronal connections and so forth, but all cells, you get experience. And this is where Francisco Varela's work and so much of the work of Mind & Life and neurophenomenology all comes together. But it's a profound mystery.

([01:37:10](#)) And [Noam] Chomsky would say, it's kind of a mystery—and Chomsky's fairly sophisticated in this domain—there are certain domains of human experience that are simply going to be mysteries. They'll never be illuminated by science. And that's okay, because we're biologically in some sense limited by having evolved this way, rather than some other way. So it's conceivable that there could be other forms of cognition or sensation or whatever, that we just, until aliens come from some other planet, but it's true on this planet, as well. So rather than put ourselves at the top of some evolutionary

sort of narrative that we built for ourselves, that we begin to really inquire about the opportunity that this level of consciousness has to keep the fun going on planet Earth while we have the chance.

[\(01:38:12\)](#) It also strikes me, in a different note, but I wished I'd looped it in earlier, that talking about spinoffs, so from MBSR came Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, and John Teasdale is coming out with his own book soon about his understanding of mindfulness based on a very interesting theory called interacting cognitive subsystems. And it's really profound, because his life—he's one of the greatest cognitive scientists on the planet—and meditation changed his life and his science in a way that's really profound.

[\(01:38:47\)](#) Mark Williams is working on a book on the Vedanas, retiring after founding the Center for Mindfulness at Oxford University. And Zindel Segal, back in 2007 with Norman Farb, wrote this remarkable, I think, remarkable paper about self representations and how mindfulness, and particularly MBSR, influences self representations and where it's pointing at, is truly remarkable. So there's all sorts of stuff going on in the scientific domain at the interface of Dharma that would have been completely unimaginable 40 years ago. And now it's come to pass. And even the NIH, totally into research on mindfulness. Like, how did this come to be?

[\(01:39:37\)](#) And so I would say the Renaissance isn't something that's coming in the future. It's here. It is already here. And we need to wake up more to that actuality. And maybe COVID and this kind of insidious pandemic of a little RNA and protein actually being able to undo us and target receptors in the lungs that actually kill us, to find these positive memes, like mindfulness and heartfulness compassion, that also target not only receptors in the heart, in the lungs, but throughout our bodies, in ways that really do catalyze learning, growing, healing, and transformation across the lifespan.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(01:40:38\)](#): Well, thank you so much, Jon. This has been amazing, an absolutely enlightening conversation. I want to personally thank you very deeply. Your work, and *Full Catastrophe Living* was one of the first books I read that introduced me to these practices.

Jon Kabat-Zinn [\(01:40:51\)](#): Really?

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(01:40:51\)](#): Yeah!

Jon Kabat-Zinn [\(01:40:51\)](#): Oh, that makes me feel wonderful, I'll tell you.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(01:40:53\)](#): Oh my goodness, life changing. So thank you, really, for spending this much time and sharing all these insights.

Jon Kabat-Zinn [\(01:41:01\)](#): Yeah, well, it was fun. And I think it really is beautiful that you've found this medium, and I just want to bow to you for what you're doing, and also for how generously you listen. There's an artistry to what you're doing, and I can just feel it emanating out of you. And it's non-trivial, so I really bow to you for that.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(01:41:23\)](#): Oh, thank you so much. That means a lot.

Outro – Wendy Hasenkamp (01:41:32): *This episode was supported in part by Inespera Health. Show notes and resources for this and other episodes can be found at podcast.mindandlife.org. This episode was edited and produced by me and Phil Walker. Music on the show is from Blue Dot Sessions and Universal. If you enjoyed this episode, please rate and review us on Apple Podcasts, 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.*