



MIND & LIFE

Mind & Life Podcast Transcript Nicholas Van Dam - Nuancing the Narrative

Original Air Date: October 8, 2021

Retrieved from: <https://podcast.mindandlife.org/nicholas-van-dam/>

Opening Quote – Nicholas Van Dam ([00:00:04](#)): *It's a really profound experience when you're someone who thinks I have to control everything about my life, I have to be on top of everything, I have to predict all the things that could happen, I have to remember all the bad choices I've made, the bad things that happened so that they don't happen again. When you just observe that breath breathing itself, something just shifts and you just go, "Oh! My body can do that on its own." It's just this little release of going, "Oh, that's one thing I don't have to worry about. I don't have to be on top of this. I don't have to control this." And that one little recognition or shift can lead to many, many more.*

Intro – Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:00:45](#)): Welcome to Mind & Life. I'm Wendy Hasenkamp. My guest today is mindfulness researcher and clinical psychologist, Nicholas Van Dam. Nicholas is the director of the new Contemplative Studies Center at the University of Melbourne, the first of its kind in all of Australia. His research explores how meditation and mindfulness can support well-being, and also can help with conditions like anxiety and depression. Nicholas is also a lifelong skeptic—a stance that I really appreciate—and he's brought important critiques to the field of contemplative science as it's evolved over the years.

([00:01:24](#)) Our conversation spans both the science and practice of meditation. We start with the story of how an existential crisis led Nicholas to take meditation seriously. From there, we get into nuancing the narrative around mindfulness, both how we define and measure it, and how we study its impact on the brain. Nicholas also highlights the need to examine effects of meditation outside of the individual who's meditating, looking at more relational and even societal impacts. He then shares insights from his own life after this last year when he committed to meditating almost every day. And we talk about the freedom that comes from letting go, and how skills learned on the cushion can transfer meaningfully into our daily lives. We then get into the process of deconstructing the self, a common theme here on the show, using meditation and mindfulness for anxiety and depression, getting out of your head and into your body, and quite a few other topics.

([00:02:33](#)) If you're interested to learn more about Nicholas's work, please do check out the show notes for this episode, and definitely take a look at the new Contemplative Studies Center that he directs. It looks like they're up to some really great things there.

([00:02:46](#)) I also just want to lift up the importance of critiques like Nicolas brings, to any ongoing scientific endeavor. It's a crucial part of the process to keep examining the complexities of this work and to not let ourselves get caught up in the simplified narrative that can sometimes feel so easy to slip into.

So, deep appreciation to Nicholas and to all those who keep shining a light on how we might do this work better. All right, with that, it is my pleasure to share this conversation with Nicholas Van Dam.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:03:21](#)): I'm here with Nicholas Van Dam. Nicholas, thank you so much for joining us.

Nicholas Van Dam ([00:03:25](#)): Thank you for having me.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:03:27](#)): So I often like to start with people's personal stories. Can you share a bit about how you first got interested in mindfulness, and how you've ended up doing the work that you do?

Nicholas Van Dam ([00:03:37](#)): Yeah. I'll give you the medium length version, because there's a very short version and there's a much longer version, and I presume nobody wants to hear the long version, and the short version is too short. So, it was about 2004, 2005, I was an undergraduate student at the University of Wisconsin. That was, I believe, right about the time that Mind & Life was really taking off.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:03:58](#)): That's right.

Nicholas Van Dam ([00:03:59](#)): And I believe that might have been the year as well that Richie Davidson was on the cover of Time Magazine. So, I took a course—I was doing my undergraduate degree at the University of Wisconsin, as I said—and I took a course on stress and health. And as part of that course, we did the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program. So that was the first time I got exposed to mindfulness. And while working there, I had opportunity to meet and chat with Richie Davidson a couple of times as well. And I thought it was all very interesting. The thing I like to say and the thing I like to emphasize for me is that a lot of these stories are very linear. Mine is not. So, I sort of got exposed to it. I thought it was cool. I had some wonderful naps. *[laughter]* And I then went off to medical school and thought, "Okay, I'm done with all of that. I don't need any of the mindfulness and meditation."

[\(00:04:47\)](#) About two-thirds of the way into my first year of medical school, I had this major existential crisis. My partner at that time broke up with me and kind of, life as I knew it just didn't make sense. And so, I quit medical school and was trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life and what would make sense for me. And that was when I really got into it. I happened to see some of my old books and I started reading them feverishly and started reading a lot of books about Buddhism and philosophy and mindfulness. That's really when I started to reengage. And at that point, after about six months to a year of really starting to read and practice and get involved, that's when I really decided I wanted to go back to graduate school in clinical psychology with a focus on meditation-based and mindfulness-based interventions.

[\(00:05:38\)](#) So that's how this all really got started. It was in the throes of an existential crisis, not knowing what to do with my life, early 20s, trying to figure out what all of it means. And coming out of that going, "Okay, well, there's got to be some way of making sense of things." And mindfulness and meditation was really a big part of me making sense of things.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:05:59](#)): Can you say a little more about how mindfulness helped you during that time?

Nicholas Van Dam (00:06:05): Yeah. A big part of it was, for me... I mean, I was raised in a very conservative Christian tradition. I was raised in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. The way in which I was raised was without questioning things. There was a real emphasis on, you accept what you're told and you don't ask questions. I was never one who's not inclined to ask questions. I'm inquisitive by nature, I'm skeptical by nature. So I was the student who always was asking the complicated philosophical questions that the school teachers were sort of irritated by, you know. They're sort of saying you're wasting the other students' time, you're asking difficult questions, stop being so difficult.

(00:06:49) So, I guess, really for me, it was the ability to fundamentally question—to sit with deep unknowing, deep agnosticism as it were. I was really inspired by the writings of Thich Nhat Hanh, and Stephen Batchelor and a number of others. And Tara Brach as well, and these ideas of radical acceptance and just deeply being okay with uncertainty, being okay with not knowing the answer. That was something that was just totally foreign to me, this idea that everything wasn't planned, that there wasn't a clear clean-cut answer to every question you had and that there wasn't a way forward for every problem that you would face. That it was actually just about living your way into the question, so to speak, and just sitting with whatever came up and arose.

(00:07:41) So that was the big part of it for me, was trying to live the questions that I had, and to find my way into the answers. And I think as part of that also, really to explore my values and what I wanted for myself and my life. What I realized, I think, is that a big part of my life was very much focused on traditional, I guess old school American values—consumerism, capitalism, success, making a name for myself. And I increasingly recognized that a lot of those things, while they can be helpful, they can also be quite harmful.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:08:19): Yeah. I imagine we might get into some of that as we go along. It's interesting that you say you were always wanting to ask the deep and complicated questions and you had the skeptical mind, because the first thing I think of you in relation to this field is having this really important critical voice about how the research is unfolding, and how it's being taken up in the public and all that. So, I'd love to talk a little bit with you about your experiences there.

(00:08:46) In my mind, you're best known, or the biggest impact paper is the *Mind the Hype* paper from 2017. So this was a paper that you joined up with a pretty large group of researchers in the field to push back on the media narrative and the hype that had been accumulating about mindfulness practice. I'm wondering, can you take us through a little bit of your experience as the field was evolving and as the media was picking this up, and some of the difficulties you saw arising, and some of the points that you made in that paper?

Nicholas Van Dam (00:09:23): Yeah. It was an interesting process that was spearheaded by a number of people. Some of the conversations and some of the themes that came out in that paper were a result of conversations that those of us on the article, co-authors as well as a number of others, had been having on the sidelines of Mind & Life events and in various other contemplative studies areas for a number of years. Those conversations started in earnest in 2013. So Mind & Life actually sponsored us to get together, and Marieke van Vugt put together the group and got us all together. So, we formally started to discuss that.

(00:10:10) We really intentionally tried to bring a lot of people from a lot of different areas to ensure that we were widely and broadly representing different views. I mean, the fact that it started in 2013 and didn't really get out until late 2017, 2018 just tells you how difficult a process it was to actually

really get everyone to some point of consensus. It's not that we didn't all agree, it's just we weren't quite sure what the message should be. We weren't quite sure what the tone should be.

[\(00:10:39\)](#) I guess fundamentally, one of our concerns was that we all thought, and I think we all still believe, that there's incredible promise in mindfulness and meditation, and that these practices have this transformational potential for well-being and humanity and the planet. But a number of us were quite concerned about the messaging, and how mindfulness and meditation were being marketed, and the way in which the practices were being talked about—both by researchers, academics, and in the media—how the science was being interpreted, and to some extent, concerns about lack of representation of certain areas, or nuance in some of the stories in the headlines.

[\(00:11:22\)](#) So, we really decided at the end to tackle three main issues. The first was this idea of what is mindfulness, which is a very complicated topic. The second was what do we know from the perspective of applications of mindfulness and meditation to clinical problems, as it's been applied to issues of mental illness and other medical conditions. And then the final was really the work and the approaches to looking at how mindfulness and meditation impact the brain. We decided on these three areas because that seems to be the way in which mindfulness and meditation are talked about most popularly. My sense, and I often think of this as the holy triad, like when you hear someone talk about how well mindfulness and meditation can benefit them or benefit individuals, the things you hear first are, "Oh, it's a 2500-year-old or 2600-year-old tradition. Therefore, if it's been around for that long, there must be something to it." And so, that plays into this what is mindfulness, what is meditation question.

[\(00:12:36\)](#) If you push people a little bit on that, you raise questions like, do you think anyone in the present-day context is actually practicing in the same way that they did 2600 years ago? People say, "Oh, no, no. Well, all right, fine, forget that. Let's talk now about all the wonderful clinical trials that are out there supporting how many people this helps with various medical conditions and issues that traditional medicine has failed." And so then, the next point becomes, okay, let's talk about those. Yes, there is some really promising evidence. But as has this been pointed out a few times, I think most notably, a paper by Sona Dimidjian and Zindel Segal in 2015, we're not as far as I think we would like to be, and as some people would suggest we are in terms of those studies. So, we haven't done as many well-controlled studies where we actually have active good control groups comparing mindfulness or meditation to something traditional like cognitive behavioral therapy or antidepressant medications, or things that we know work. So, we then would say, well the results are probably not as robust as we would want them to be if we were going to start to say mindfulness and meditation, on a public health level, everybody should be using that as a frontline treatment.

[\(00:13:49\)](#) And so, again, then the conversation evolves, right? The typical conversation goes, "Okay, fine, forget about that. Let's talk about the changes to the brain." And so there, we would say, "Well, there's similar issues." The results are really interesting and really promising, as you yourself know. But one of the huge issues, I think, is that—and this is acknowledged, again, readily in the literature—but the real start, or the way that many academics and researchers with interest in mindfulness meditation, where they first went was to look at monastics. They went to look at Buddhist monks and nuns. And that made a lot of sense, as Richard Davidson or Tania Singer would say, if there's nothing going on in the brains of people who have been practicing for 30, 40, 50 years, then we're wasting our time. So, it's a great starting point because it really gives us a sense of what is the potential, what is the capacity with these practices?

(00:14:40) However, we've continued to look at monks and nuns who have been practicing in caves and living at the foothills of the Himalayas. And so, who is it that is the appropriate comparison? If you want to know whether meditation is the thing that really makes the difference, one of the things that you have to do is you have to control for all the other lifestyle factors that are associated with it. And when you think about a monk, you think about the fact that they typically live in a solitary or a semi-solitary setting. They live with others, often eating maybe one or two meals a day. Their lifestyle is often incredibly modest. They're committed to a particular idea, a particular goal or a way of life. They often own maybe one or two pairs of robes, and maybe one or two pairs of sandals, and maybe a few books. That's not exactly like what your average American or indeed global citizen of the world really looks like.

(00:15:39) So it's really difficult then to find anybody that you would say ... Well, if we look at them head-to-head doing the same thing in an MRI scanner, or we look at their brain activities, there's all these other factors that may be driving that. So, it's really tricky then to say, well, it's meditation alone that is driving why the monks' or nuns' brain activity looks different. Take Matthieu Ricard as an example. Why is he "the happiest man alive?" Why does he show such interesting brain [activity]... I mean, Matthieu is an incredibly inspiring, an incredibly unusual man, right? I mean, I know few other people who have PhDs in molecular biology, have parents who were as influential as his were, having been... I believe his father was quite famous and a philosopher. His mother, I think, was a famous artist. He spent decades meditating; a translator for His Holiness the Dalai Lama; knows science incredibly well; has worked closely with some of the most preeminent scientists on the planet. There's not a whole lot of other people out there like him, so to say that he is the happiest man alive and say that it's only due to meditation is a bit of a stretch.

(00:16:46) And I don't think that anyone, at least in the scientific end, has ever been trying to say that Matthieu is a template for the rest of us. But sometimes in the media that's the implication that you get from interpreting the results of the studies. That, "Oh, yeah, Matthieu had these amazing results and looks this way." And my comedic response to that is, "And you too—if you have a Nobel laureate mentor, and a father who is also a famous philosopher, and a mother who's a famous artist, if you work closely with His Holiness, the Dalai Lama for 30 years and practice on your own in the foothills of the Himalayan mountains as Matthieu does—you too can have happiness." *[laughter]*

(00:17:28) So those are the three themes that we really felt needed to be addressed. I guess, going back then to those three, the first question and issue was, well, what is mindfulness and what does it mean in the context of meditation? And I don't think we have an answer yet. My view and my perspective, and I think to some extent the view of the group, is that mindfulness is a convenient placeholder. It's a convenient umbrella term that represents lots of different things. And Jon Kabat-Zinn has confirmed that himself, that it was never meant to be the main thing, or the only thing we focus on in the context of mindfulness-based practices. It's one thing. So, the attention training and awareness training capacities are one part of a much bigger story, a much bigger picture of how we ought to be doing these practices, and what their real potential is.

(00:18:14) And that was part of the issue that we raised, that asking someone whether or not they think they're mindful versus training someone for 20 minutes in a single session versus having someone do an eight-week course versus having someone commit to a lifetime of meditation practice in a mindfulness-based tradition is very, very different. And it's incredibly hard... often, people equate those things. They often talk about dispositional mindfulness, or they talk about how people talk about their own present moment-ness, or awareness, or attention to the present as being equivalent to those short trainings, as

being equivalent to multi-week or even month-long programs, as being equivalent to what a committed monk or nun might do.

(00:19:04) I think the real issue that we wanted to flag there was that they're not the same. And we have to be careful, we have to use caution when we try to equate these things. And we really have to, just when we think about and consider this term mindfulness, we have to use more nuance. We have to recognize that essentially that that's not a one size fits all term, right? It is representing a lot of different things.

(00:19:29) My personal recommendation at the end of the day is that we move away from the term. Because I actually think there's so much baggage now associated with it, and it means something different to everyone that you talk to. As a result, I think it just is confusing when we have a conversation. I may say, "I love mindfulness," and you may say, "I agree. I love it." I may be talking about meditation in the Insight tradition, you may be talking about your use of a popular app.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:19:55): Right. What might be some better ways to talk about it?

Nicholas Van Dam (00:19:58): The things that get me the most excited and the areas that I'm wanting to move the most to are its impact beyond the individual. I think we've really focused a lot in research on the individual. We really focused on, how does it change that person, per their report? And I think there's been some really fascinating studies that have been done—not enough of them, in my opinion—but there's been some really fascinating studies that have been done looking at indirect effects. By indirect, what I mean is that somebody was trained in the context of learning meditation or learning mindfulness. And then, rather than just focusing on that person and saying, "Do you feel better? Is your life going better? Are you happier?" they then look at the people around them.

(00:20:44) Two wonderful examples I can think of, there was a study that Nirbhay Singh did looking at care workers in elderly care facilities. They trained the care workers in mindfulness and looked at a comparison control group. And rather than asking the care workers whether they felt better, they looked at the people they were caring for. And they found that the people they were looking after were doing better. They had happier lives, they were functioning better. Similarly, there was a study in 2007 that was done by a group in Germany where they trained therapists in training in either Zen meditation or relaxation. It was a randomized trial. Rather than, again, looking at the therapist trainees, they looked at their clients, they looked at their patients. And what they found was that the patients or the clients of the therapist who got trained in Zen meditation recovered faster and did better than those who just got relaxation training.

(00:21:44) So, to me, that's where it gets really cool. It's results like that where I think you really start to go, okay, there's really something to this. It's not just people saying they feel more mindful, it's not just people saying they feel more present. It's actually hard evidence that it's changing people's lives and, as a result, it's changing their lives inward-out. It's influencing the people around them.

(00:22:07) I think even personally, I've really, in the context of COVID, have recommitted to a personal practice. And the first person I asked whether there was any noticeable difference was my partner. *[laughter]* I said essentially, "Look, I've been doing this now for over a year. Am I any different? Do you notice anything? Am I less irritable? Am I nicer? Am I kinder?" That, to me, was the real point when I went, "Okay." When she said, "Yes, actually I've noticed lots of changes about you. I've noticed changes

in the way that you interact with me on a daily basis, I've noticed changes in the way that you interact with our son." That's when I really went, "Okay, now I feel like something's actually happened."

[\(00:22:46\)](#) – musical interlude –

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:22:46\)](#): I actually wanted to talk to you about that because I saw on your Twitter that you were engaging in this committed every day (or almost every day) practice for at least the last year. And so, I just wanted to hear some of your experiences with that. What drew you to commit to this and how was it? What were some of the challenges and lessons learned, and all of that?

Nicholas Van Dam [\(00:23:37\)](#): Yeah. So I was part of a documentary—there was a documentary filmmaker, Shannon Harvey, who's based here in Australia, who made a film called *My Year of Living Mindfully*. And so I was part of that film, and worked with her a bit to understand her experiences. So part of that inspired me to think, okay... She and I had spent some time talking about doing a large-scale experiment, to try to inspire people to do something similar. To take on their own year, or six months, or three months, or one week or whatever they wanted, and try to see effects. Unfortunately, we couldn't get funding support at the time.

[\(00:24:14\)](#) But I'd always... I guess, a bit of backstory about my personal meditation practice. I've always been concerned, and I guess this goes back to my skeptical nature, I've always been a little bit concerned that if I get too committed to my meditation practice, if I get too involved in it, that may interfere with my ability to be a good scientist. And so—because I think that these practices are so powerful and have such great potential—I wanted to be able to be a researcher. I wanted to be the person who could actually study it in a way that was as unbiased as it possibly could be. That may sound silly to some people; but really, honestly, I wanted to be able to study it in a way and be able to say, "Look, this either does or it doesn't work." And I wanted to do that without bringing my personal biases to bear on that. If I was a committed Buddhist meditator, my feeling was that I might just be saying it works because it works for me personally.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:25:11\)](#): Yeah. That's been a conversation in the field too, right? Most of the people who study this are pretty committed practitioners. And so, I've talked with some other folks on the podcast about, does bias creep in? It's a challenge. So that's interesting that you were kind of holding back.

Nicholas Van Dam [\(00:25:28\)](#): And I have friends who have told me that they've left research, who have started off in academia as researchers really with a big focus on meditation. But they've decided that they didn't want to study meditation as their main focus of their research work, for exactly this reason. It wasn't so much that they felt they were biased, although that was a bit of it, but it was actually more of they believe in it too strongly personally. And if it didn't show the effects they thought it should, they were getting really frustrated. And they were feeling like it was undermining both their science, but also their practice. So I've had a lot of conversations with a lot of people about this, as I'm sure many people have over the years.

[\(00:26:10\)](#) Ultimately, where the difference came in for me, and why I decided to do this was that, I was at a bit of a crossroads in my own life and in my own practice, and... We talked about the *Mind the Hype* paper—for me, and as we approached that as a group, a number of us, I think, we're very optimistic. I wasn't sure where I sat with respect to the field and what was going to happen, and how the people would receive that article. I wasn't sure whether people would just say, "Okay, it's another skeptic who

wants to diminish the promising findings of meditation. He's a crank, don't listen to him," or "There may be some truth to it and there may not be," or the opposite of that which is, "Yes, there are some really important comments in here that we need to address it as a field." And so, when we put that out, I thought, "Okay, well, I'm going to wait and see what the response is." Depending on the response, that's going to determine some next steps for me in terms of how much time I spend researching this, and how much I commit to this in terms of my main work in academia.

[\(00:27:15\)](#) And to some extent, to my surprise, the community was just overwhelmingly positive. People really felt like these were important things we needed to talk about, incorporate, address. We needed to do more and do better, particularly because these practices have so much promise for so many people. So, that was a big turning point for me of going, okay, look, there's a lot of potential in the community and there's a lot of recognition of the importance of recognizing some of our own biases, and thinking about ways forward in his research and this work.

[\(00:27:49\)](#) So I guess as I was involved with the documentary that I mentioned, it started to raise questions for me personally about, okay, well, what is the potential of this practice? You know, I've read all these stories, but from a personal level. So, what is the potential? What can this actually do for you? And so, I actually decided to do a year of near daily practice. I followed the instructions or guidance that are laid out in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction of giving myself at least one day, a day off. It's good behavior change principles. So I said if I at least give myself one day where I don't have to do it, then it'll be easier to actually implement it. And I'm happy to talk about other strategies I used, because there were a lot of challenges.

[\(00:28:33\)](#) But honestly, I really took it on as a, let's just see what happens. I honestly do not know. People obviously talk about all kinds of incredible, out there, almost paranormal type experiences. People talk a lot about massive improvements in well-being, people talk about unpleasant experiences, unwanted experiences. So, I really just thought, let's just see what happens. And I made it public because I wanted to be accountable. I wanted people to know what I was doing, and I wanted a way of holding myself to that.

[\(00:29:05\)](#) So, I kicked it off. I started slowly, with just revisiting some of the practices I've used in the past. I've used apps as a way of really supporting myself and being able to track the practice. I've also used apps as a way of just exploring new practices. During the course of the year, I did a lot of reading again of different books, different teachers talking about different approaches to meditation, particularly within various secular and Buddhist traditions. And I started off slow, on the order of 10 to 15 minutes a day and then slowly gradually worked my way up. At the peak, I was probably practicing, 30 to 45 minutes a day, most days of the week. And then I actually gradually pulled it back to about 15 to 20 minutes, just as a function of availability of time and what day-to-day life actually looks like.

[\(00:29:56\)](#) So it was a really interesting experience. When I first started, it was an incredible struggle just to do it. I'm often reminded of, I forget exactly who says it, but the idea of you need the principles of how to get a practice started of just thinking, just set up a space, set the intention to just sit. Not even to practice, just set the intention just to go to the cushion, go to wherever you practice, take the time just to get into the posture. You know, the trick being once you're there, you might as well do it. Right?

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:30:33\)](#): Right, right. *[laughter]*

Nicholas Van Dam (00:30:33): Like, you're already sitting down, you bothered to get out the timer or the bells or your blanket or whatever, you might as well do it for at least five minutes. And that worked quite well. And carving out, as well, a time, a regular time, for me in the morning. Particularly during the pandemic. That was the other thing I haven't mentioned, that it was also a very personal decision. I needed something personally. I was really struggling, as many were in the context of COVID, and I needed something to reflect. I needed a space to not have responsibilities. I needed a space just to be me, whatever that meant. To really temporarily be free, to renew, to explore without the various things associated with my academic role, my role as a partner, my role as a father. I just needed a bit of space and time for me to kind of... And I don't mean that in a selfish way. I just really did need some... I needed a way to renew.

(00:31:35) So, early on as I think it often is, it was really quite refreshing. I mean, it was irritating and difficult. But there were many things about it that were refreshing. I would say, three months in is when things, I think, probably started to get really interesting. I mean, I think early on, I noticed a lot of really interesting changes. I felt like I was more positive, I felt like I was a bit more balanced, I felt like I was a bit gentler and kinder in my interactions with others. But as my practice deepened, and as I became more regular and I extended it, I guess I noticed more about what I didn't know. You know, I've had periods of my life prior to this where I practice intensively, and this has been my experience in the past as well. Early on it feels like, "Wow, this is amazing. I've unlocked all these new abilities, all this new potential." And then you go a little further and you go, "Oh, that was just the tip of the iceberg." There's so much more underneath that.

(00:32:41) And so, as I progressed, lots of new things came up—including difficult experiences and emotions. I would have days where I'd sit down and I would practice, and I would just feel incredibly sad. Sometimes it would be related to a memory that would pop to mind from childhood, sometimes it would be a global issue that just really distressed me, sometimes it would just be me feeling like I'm not doing enough for my family... But there were these various things that would pop up, and it made it tricky, it made it hard. And there were days where I had to say, "Okay, I need the next day off of meditation because I need time to process or cope with that experience."

(00:33:23) But I did also turn at that point to various teachers in various ways. And asked questions and read books and tried to explore, okay what do you with this? When these things come up, what do you with this experience? And many teachers encouraged loving kindness or metta practices, or cultivation practices, as well as things like self-acceptance and self-compassion. You know, go easy on yourself. Probing the depths of your mind is a tricky enterprise and lots of things will come up. And as these things come up, you need to have strategies for how to deal with them. You can't just keep pushing through; you have to give yourself time and space to cope.

(00:34:04) And so, I had a couple of real breakthrough moments between the three- to nine-month period where there were a couple of things... I mean, for me in particular, I mentioned I was raised in a Christian tradition. I was reading some kind of Christian texts and those triggered some really intense negative experiences for me, just memories from childhood and negative experiences I had had growing up. And it was until I was prepared to sit with that and understand what those experiences were, what they meant to how I thought about myself, and to find a way of letting go of that, to find a way of just letting those be. I mean, those experiences are part of my story of me, of who I am, but they don't define me forever.

[\(00:34:50\)](#) And it was when I got to the point where I could recognize that, at least in the space of meditation I could put that down temporarily, that I realized I could do that more generally. And I realized that with other things as well. I could start to put down temporarily the stress or the strain associated with my job. Or I could put down temporarily the pressure and expectations I put on myself as a father, or as a partner, or as a son, or as a friend. It's only 20 to 30 minutes, but what you realize is the freedom that there is in that, that you can just put it down.

[\(00:35:30\)](#) And it's not to say... I often describe it as, it's like if you're traveling. I now live in Australia. I've moved here from America. It's a long trip. And so, the analogy I use is if you're traveling internationally, you're often tired. You're saddled with baggage, you're exhausted. You probably haven't brushed your teeth in a while, you haven't changed your socks in ages. There's a lot of things about the experience that's just really unpleasant. It's like in the midst of that, being able to just find a pleasant bench and just sit down and remove some of the baggage, maybe change the socks, take them off. Just sit somewhere in the fresh air and just take some time. It's not that you stay there, right? You've got another flight to get to or you've got somewhere to go. It's that, for however long you need, 20 minutes, 30 minutes, you're just there in that moment. You're nothing. You're not you, you're not a father, you're not a parent, you're not an academic. You just get to be in that space and just sit with whatever comes. So that, for me, was a huge realization and breakthrough. And then it started to extend outward. I thought, okay, if I can let go in the meditation context, I can also do that outside of it.

[\(00:36:50\)](#) – musical interlude –

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:37:16\)](#): So you've brought up a lot of interesting things in your journey, just in this last year of practice, that I'd love to dig into a little more. One is, just the last thing you were talking about—this process or realization of the capacity to let go [of] the baggage, I guess, that we're carrying. Learning that "on the cushion" as it were, like during practice and then translating that into regular life in other settings, how powerful that can be. This is kind of a strange question, but I know exactly the experience that you're talking about, and I'm trying to find a way to put words to how you actually do that. Like, how you let go. Can you say more about that?

Nicholas Van Dam [\(00:38:03\)](#): Yeah. Look, it's a challenge. I mean, I wouldn't say that I know more than the many excellent, exceptional teachers out there who focus their teachings on this. I mean, Martine Batchelor has written a book titled *Letting Go*, and it's quite wonderful. There are many very much more experienced teachers and academics and clinicians than I that can describe these things.

[\(00:38:28\)](#) I can speak from my experience, though, which is to say, you start small. I think, when we talk about this, and I think... I have often noticed myself in conversations about this idea of letting go—it feels a bit similar to the way we talk about "leaning in." Or getting more involved. I feel like it can often come off as a bit flippant or a bit like, "oh, it's so easy, you just let go." That's all you have to do, is you just let go. But it's one of the hardest things in the world.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:39:00\)](#): It's not easy, yeah.

Nicholas Van Dam [\(00:39:00\)](#): No, it's incredibly difficult. And so, where I started was really small. I thought, "Okay, if I can just be with the breath; if I can just get a few seconds even of just essentially saying, it's just me here in the moment with the breath. And if I can just sit here, and I can just experience what I experience. And all the thoughts, all the aches, the pains, the prongs from various areas of my life that pop to mind as you sit in meditation, if I can just acknowledge them and recognize

them and go, "Okay, thanks for the offering, thanks for your effort to try to help me, as it were," and go, "I'll get back to you later." Again, I use the analogy of putting down the bags because I view it very similarly. And I think what was really helpful for me in that analogy is... I think for a lot of people, there's something about this letting go or often even in notions of radical acceptance, this idea that, "But you're a parent. Or you're a partner, or your friend, or... But that's your job. You can't just let go of those things. You don't just accept that you're not as good a parent as you want to be."

(00:40:23) And I think that's misunderstanding it a bit, right? You're not saying that you're not going to pick those titles up again. You're not saying that you're not going to pick those bags up again. The way I describe it is you're putting the bags down temporarily and you're probably going to pick them back up again. But even if it's just for a moment that you get to put those bags down, it gives you the experience of pause. It gives you the experience or the recognition—experientially, internally—that you can do it. And that gives you a little bit more space to then decide, going forward, how many bags do you want to carry? How many labels, titles, responsibilities do you want to take with you in your day-to-day life, as you go about doing what you do?

(00:41:07) And so, that little space, that little tiny fragment, that moment of relief where you were letting go, grows. And so, as you practice, as you're on the cushion, as you said, doing this, the awareness increases that, if I can do this for a moment, I can do it for two. If I can do it for two, I can do it for three. And the experience just grows and grows. That's not to say that you ever get to the point where you go, "Okay, for the rest of my life I'm not going to hold this bag, or I'm not going to have this title, or I'm not going to hold myself responsible for these things, or expect more of myself." Because it's a slow, gradual process.

(00:41:46) But it does make it easier. Something clicks inside and you go, "Oh, I can actually do that." It's not intellectual knowledge. It's not in your head that you go, "I can do it." It's somewhere in your heart, in your being, that you go, "I can do this. I know I can do this," and you actually believe it. And having this visceral experience, it makes all the difference.

(00:42:09) And then you draw on that. You draw on that in your everyday life. I think that formal practice serves as the basis. You begin to notice yourself, at least I began to notice myself in my day-to-day life going, what bags am I carrying right now? In the way that I'm relating, particularly in my family. I think we've all had a lot of experience being stuck at home in the past year. So I started to notice more and more the way in which I might react to something my son would say or do. And I would go, "You know what, I just put on him something that was not his. I reacted in a way that was irritable or snappish because I was stressed about something from work. And that's not his thing. Why am I ... I'm conflating the roles." And then I was able to go, "Okay, look, let's just take a breath, put down or let go of that role—again, momentarily—so that I can focus on the role that I want to hold in that moment."

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:43:08): Yeah. So, a lot of what you're talking about is letting go of these identities. And somewhere underneath that, it's making me think of letting go of self-construct, maybe more broadly. Do you want to say anything about that from your experience?

Nicholas Van Dam (00:43:24): Yeah. So a big part of this whole process, I mean from the very beginning for me, has been about self. You know, who am I? What am I about? I very much started from the position of thinking that there is something, there is some continuous everlasting thing that is me. I was raised obviously in the Christian tradition that think that there is a soul. So that was very important. I thought there was something about me that would continue in some way, permanently. And at various

points I came to the realization that that just doesn't work for me, that idea of self doesn't work for me anymore. It doesn't fit with how I view the world or the experiences I've had, or what I've learned.

(00:44:12) And I came to view ideas of the self... There's an essay by Daniel Dennett, the philosopher, that's called *The Self as the Center of Narrative Gravity*. I'm not necessarily promoting or espousing the article per se, as much as I am just the title. I love that idea of "the self as the center of narrative gravity." In other words, who you are is a collection of stories you tell yourself about yourself, right? Who you are essentially is this idea that's based on all the experiences you have. And you're writing it, you're deciding who you are.

(00:44:49) And so, in coming to realize that and coming to live that—and coming to recognize ideas that permeate Buddhism, ideas of impermanence, nothing lasts forever, everything changes—I came to realize that for me this idea of self, it's a narrative, it's a story. The story continues, but it changes. Different historical events, different memories get adjusted, get tweaked as I go in time. And you can change how you remember certain things, you can be a little bit more positive about things that have happened earlier in your life.

(00:45:27) One of the things we know from research on depression and anxiety, which is a really great example, which is one of the areas that I study, we know that people with depression tend to be overly negative when they recall events. And there's a similar issue along with people with anxiety. They tend to be overtly negative in terms of how they interpret their experiences. And so, the reality is we often think, "Oh, but that's exactly what happened to me. I remember it perfectly, that is what happened. That person walking across the other side of the street, that friend that I waved at, they were ignoring me! I can't believe that they had the gall to just not wave back." And when you can look at it in a little more detail, you go, "Well, maybe they just didn't notice me. Maybe they had headphones in, maybe they were on their phone." You go, "Well, maybe the offense that I took at that, maybe it wasn't as personal as I thought it was."

(00:46:22) And I guess that's the conclusion I've come to, is—it's not about you. [laughter] At the end of the day, very little is actually about you. There's so much more going on in the world, and in so many other people's lives. And that's actually quite a relief. It's refreshing. When you go, "Oh, okay, I'm not that big a deal, I'm not that important." It gives you the freedom to go, "Okay, well who do I want to be, what do I want to do? How do I want to help?" Yeah, so for me that was really important, that recognition of, what is this self that I cling to and how do I want to define it or redefine it as it were? That's been a huge catalyst for me going forward, and for me thinking about the work that I want to do.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:47:13): You mentioned that you work a lot in clinical diagnoses like depression and anxiety, and bringing mindfulness into these spaces. What has been your experience working with folks who struggle with depression and anxiety, or other psychiatric disorders, and bringing mindfulness and maybe some of the things that we've just been talking about, about these ideas of, or abilities to let go and deconstruct the self? Do you see that as a piece of what's helpful for them?

Nicholas Van Dam (00:47:42): I think it's quite variable. I think we have to be really careful about who we encourage to explore exactly these kinds of issues. I think there are threads of Buddhist modernism (the current interpretations of what Buddhism is), or threads of meditation, or threads of mindfulness that do really push for this exploration and deconstruction of the sense of self. And for some, that can be an incredibly transformative and positive experience.

(00:48:10) I think, though, that there are particular conditions or psychiatric disorders where the fundamental issue is the person's sense of self. They don't have an established sense of self. I often think of Mark Epstein, the psychiatrist and a friend of Mind & Life, who has talked about this idea that before you go pulling threads at the ball of yarn that is the ego, you have to establish the ego. So, before you can explore what the self is, before you can dissect it, you have to have a good sense of it. If you don't have a good sense of it to begin with, it's probably not a good idea to go pulling at those threads.

(00:48:50) And so, there are conditions... I think, in particular, people who have things like schizophrenia, or who suffer from disorders to do with a sense of identity, or have histories of trauma where they're not sure how those traumatic experiences fit within their sense of who they are, I think it's really important just to be really cautious in how we approach that. Now, on the other hand, I think there are a lot of disorders for which I think this can be incredibly powerful and helpful.

(00:49:18) For me, I think, at the end the day, it's not a one-size-fits-all thing. There's no one practice that will help everyone. And certainly the type of practice that has worked for me, I doubt, would be helpful for everyone. But I have seen, I think, in my experience the type of person who is especially stuck in their head, and I think there's certainly a lot of us. I'm guessing there's a lot of us that are into meditation, that are interested in introspection, looking inside, are exactly those types of people. Not all of us, but I think a lot of us. And I think these practices can be especially helpful for those people.

(00:49:55) When you're often in your head, when you're often trying to remember the past and think about the future, you're trying to project forward, you're exploring or simulating all the possible outcomes of something you might do or say, or you're recalling a past experience that you had and you're going, "Okay, well what if I had done this instead of that? What if I had gone there instead of here?" I think for those people, recognizing some of these issues around how the self is constructed and recognizing that, as I said, I think at the end the day maybe it doesn't really matter. I mean, all choices matter, but not everything has as much weight, I think sometimes, as what we assign to it. We think certain things mean a lot more than maybe they do.

(00:50:43) And so, to elaborate, I guess a practice that I've used in clinical practice with certain patients, particularly patients that experience a lot of rumination or worry, is I've tried to get them to let the breath breathe itself. This is not a practice that I do with them in session one, it's not a practice I do with them even in session six. It's often like, I've been seeing them for quite some time, they trust me, they're ready to do it, they're ready to jump in. It's also something that's incredibly hard to do. But it's a... just watch the breath. Try not to control it. Just sit back. Your body will do it for you.

(00:51:22) And I've seen in a lot of clients, and I've seen for myself, it's a really profound experience. When you're someone who thinks I have to control everything about my life, I have to be on top of everything, I have to predict all the things that could happen. I have to remember all the bad events, the bad choices I've made, the bad things that happened, so that they don't happen again. When you just observe that breath breathing itself, something just shifts. It's like Jon Kabat-Zinn's term, the "orthogonal rotation in consciousness." You just go, "Oh, my body can do that on this own." It's just this little release of going, "Oh that's one thing I don't have to worry about. I don't have to be on top of this. I don't have to control this." And that one little recognition or shift can lead to many, many more. And so, I think that's a great example where in clinical practice there is a lot of power and potential to this.

(00:52:14) The other thing really is for those of us who are in our head a lot of the time, we rarely inhabit our actual bodies. Evan Thompson has been massively influential in my thinking in many ways,

and his recognition or discussion of how important for us to recognize that we're embodied beings. But we rarely actually do inhabit our bodies. And so, I think for those of us who are in our heads a lot of the time, actually spending more time in our physical body and recognizing the value that that has, and the important information that's there in our bodies can be not only incredibly important to better understanding how we're feeling, but it also grounds us and makes us more present in our day-to-day life. I found that a lot of clients get a lot of benefit from that.

[\(00:52:55\)](#) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:53:15\)](#): So, you are the director of a new center for Contemplative Studies at University of Melbourne, right?

Nicholas Van Dam [\(00:53:22\)](#): Yes.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:53:24\)](#): This is a newly established center, and is the first in all of Australia around contemplative work. Do you want to share about your vision for that, and the goals?

Nicholas Van Dam [\(00:53:32\)](#): Yeah. Look, it was a very interesting process. I guess, as I mentioned, in my approach to my own research, I was waiting to see what happened with the *Mind the Hype* paper. And as that turned really positive and as I committed myself to more practice, I realized more and more that this was something that I really wanted to turn my efforts to full time. And so, since I moved here to Australia about four years ago, I've been exploring the scene in the Australian context, and trying to understand how meditation and mindfulness works here. I've been thinking a lot about the connection to Asia, and the fact that Australia is geographically located much more closely to Asia than many of the centers of similar names or varieties of names in North America and Europe are. And so, I started having discussions and reached out with a few people. After about probably six to nine months of discussions, we were very fortunate that the former CEO of a company called Redbubble, Mr. Martin Hosking, incredibly generously gave us \$10 million to set up the center.

[\(00:54:39\)](#) The interesting thing, I guess for me, and thinking about Martin's incredible vision and trust in me, is that it really was just a big vision, it was a big goal, a big idea. The things that we really want to do, the things that we're really focused on are trying to clarify some misconceptions about what meditation and mindfulness look like; trying to make these practices more accessible for people more broadly; finding ways essentially to help people figure out what can they do, how can they do it, and how do I get to them. To really decrease, I guess, the barriers that are there to just trying out different types of practice.

[\(00:55:19\)](#) So, our commitment, really, is to authentic practices. There is a preponderance of practices that are in the world. There's tons of apps, there's lots of teachers, there's lots of programs you can do. There are some people that are out there just to make money. We're really eager to promote those practices that have as their goal the betterment of humanity, the betterment of the world, helping people to live their best lives, helping people and the world to be a better place. That's a fundamental thing that we're committed to.

[\(00:55:51\)](#) We're also really committed to recognizing the context and traditions from which these practices come. So, Australia in contrast to, say, North America and in particularly the US where I grew up, is largely a secular country. And so, in many ways, the contributions of Buddhists, Christians, and other religious traditions in particular have largely been left out of the discussions with respect to

meditation and contemplative practices. So, that was something that was really important for me and for the center, is that—there's a lot of expertise there. There's people that have been practicing these traditions for a long time. It's not to say that we'll defer to them and we will say that they are the experts, but we have to respect them, acknowledge them, and work with them. And in Australia, in particular, we have one of the oldest civilizations on the planet. The Indigenous populations in Australia have all of this incredible knowledge and wisdom, and ways of living with the planet that are really, I think, relative to what they know, are largely unexplored. And so, we really want greater connection with these traditions, and understanding how these traditions have used these practices to keep the world rotating as it were.

[\(00:56:59\)](#) And then finally, we really want to promote empirical rigor, in the way that hopefully the *Mind the Hype* paper has raised. We really want, as we work with people, as we work with communities of practice, as we work with teachers, we want them to be open to feedback. We want them to recognize that, really, truly, this is a two-way street. They get to have influence on how we think about these practices. Maybe we can put aside some of our preconceived ideas, even if just momentarily, about whether rebirth or karma, or whatever is real. And maybe we can ask of them the same, that momentarily they can put aside some of their beliefs or ideas about karma, rebirth, the soul. Just while we're conversing, just to see if we can find common ground and actually accrue or accumulate good empirical evidence.

[\(00:57:47\)](#) Because at the end of the day, one of the most important things, I think, is as these practices become more widespread, as we seed mindfulness and meditation in more and more areas of society, it's one thing to say on an individual level that people could benefit from the practice. And if someone chooses to meditate in whatever tradition or whatever way they want, I have no problem with that. But if we're going to start recommending it as a primary health care intervention; if it's going to be a thing that companies require; if it's going to be something that is going to be in the military, in schools, we need rigorous robust evidence that says this is an important evidence-backed approach to resolving some of our problems, or giving better lives to our children, to ourselves, to our world.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:58:32\)](#): That's fantastic. Congratulations on the center. It sounds like you're off to an amazing start. We'll definitely put links in the show notes for that work, and your work in general. Is there anything you wanted to say before we wrap, or to chat about? Or do you have any takeaways from your work?

Nicholas Van Dam [\(00:58:49\)](#): It might just be worth it, just to say one thing to situate myself a bit. So I think many people do, and as you mentioned, many people do think of me, I think the general perception of me, both in the field and potentially in the media, is as a skeptic. Someone who is a disbeliever, or who sort of is a pain, like I poke holes and things, I try to undermine people's... I guess what I really want to be known is that I actually do that out of love. I know it may sound weird.

[\(00:59:25\)](#) But when I moved to New York, I really found a home. And I started to have conversations early on—I'm not sure if listeners will know of Paul Grossman. Paul Grossman has lived in Europe and is Jewish by background. And Paul and I worked together for a number of years on a couple of projects. When I started chatting to Paul and when I moved to New York City, I encountered this sort of Jubu tradition—the Jewish Buddhists. And I encountered this idea of the Talmudic tussle, which is this idea that you can kind of go at each other ideologically; you can disagree. You can say, "I don't agree with you. These are all the reasons. I think you're missing the point here. I think your evidence isn't strong enough." And then you can walk away from that and you can go and have a beer and you can be friends.

So when I encountered that, I really found what felt like a home for me. I found like... That's where I'm coming from.

[\(01:00:19\)](#) Essentially, when I critique these ideas, when I critique these works, it's not because I want to tear them down or I want people not to do them. It's because I actually think that there's so much promise in these practices for so many people. I don't think it's going to fix all of our problems as people, as individuals, as a society, but I think there's an incredible amount of potential. And I think, in order to achieve that potential, we have to do the absolute best work that we can. I'm concerned that if we don't do our best work, there are people out there who just are uninterested, or who think that this is kind of a lot of fluff. And so, if we don't do the best work, we won't be able to convince them. Ultimately, I think, we need to do our best work, basically, to find out what is the real capacity of these practices, how can we best help people, and for whom and it what way will these practices help.

[\(01:01:11\)](#) So that's where I'm coming from, and I just want to make that really clear, that my approach is one where I do think that these can be enormously beneficial, but I think we have to do better in the way that we explore them. And that also entails exploring how they work. Just because a practice doesn't show changes in the brain, that doesn't necessarily mean it doesn't work. Maybe we're looking in the wrong place. As I emphasized in part of our discussion, I think we haven't looked enough around the person, outside of the person; we haven't looked enough at the impact of these practices on society, on our relationship to others and to the planet. And I think that's somewhere we need to start looking.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(01:01:47\)](#): Yeah, thanks so much for all of that. I know that I personally have really appreciated your voice as a critical voice in the field. I think it's so essential—you know, we're doing this work as scientists—to always be in this dynamic back and forth of re-examining and pushing into and picking apart, how is this, can we do this the best way? So, keep doing what you're doing. I think it's been so helpful for the field, and it's really critical.

Nicholas Van Dam [\(01:02:14\)](#): Well, thank you. It's good to hear that.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(01:02:17\)](#): Great. Well, thank you so much for spending the time today. It's been really great to have you on the show.

Nicholas Van Dam [\(01:02:23\)](#): It's been a pleasure.

Outro – Wendy Hasenkamp [\(01:02:31\)](#): *This episode was supported in part by Inopera 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.*