



MIND & LIFE

Mind & Life Podcast Transcript Cortland Dahl - Integrating Science and Buddhism

Original Air Date: November 19, 2021

Retrieved from: <https://podcast.mindandlife.org/cortland-dahl/>

Opening Quote – Cortland Dahl ([00:04](#)): *I think that where we need to be, certainly as scientists and hopefully even as a society, is just a place of humility. From my perspective, this is a time where experimenting, having an open mind, really listening to other people and other traditions and other viewpoints, and taking them in and learning. And then just together, realizing from a historical perspective we are at the very, very beginning of hopefully—if we can work through this challenging moment we're at in human history—of what I think we'll look back on as the beginning of just an incredibly amazing dialogue between these traditions, and really being able to help a lot of people through the insights that emerge.*

Intro – Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:45](#)): Welcome to Mind & Life. I'm Wendy Hasenkamp. Today, I'm speaking with meditation researcher and Buddhist teacher, Cortland Dahl. Cort has an unusual range of expertise that embeds him deeply in the world of contemplative science. He's a Research Scientist at the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and also the Chief Contemplative Officer at Healthy Minds Innovations. In addition, he's a scholar of Tibetan Buddhism, an experienced translator, and the Executive Director of Tergar International, a meditation community that studies closely with Mingyur Rinpoche.

([01:23](#)) We cover a lot of ground in this conversation. Cort begins with a very personal account of how meditation helped with his social anxiety as a young person, and then how he came to study Buddhism, psychology, and contemplative science. Then we get into the dialogue between Buddhism and science, and Cort reflects on what is gained from both sides and also some of the challenges that can arise in bringing these traditions together. We talk about the process of tailoring contemplative practices to fit specific needs, and how they might be delivered in a customized way with modern technology. We also discuss some of the work that Cort has done to help develop a framework for understanding the many different kinds of contemplative practice. We talk about the similarity between some forms of meditation and psychotherapy, and then also the use of meditation as a treatment for mental health problems. And then Cort shares how Buddhism sees and works with the conceptual mind—how we can transcend it and maybe loosen our concepts of the self. We end by looking at well-being through the lens of learning, unpacking a model that Cort has been working on to better understand how we can use practice to move towards states of well-being.

([02:44](#)) As I was listening back to this episode, it struck me that there are links here to at least five or six other episodes of this show. Cort works with both Richie Davidson and John Dunne at the Center for Healthy Minds. And as I mentioned, Cort also works very closely with Mingyur Rinpoche, so you may want to revisit that episode for more connections. And if you enjoy our discussion of the conceptual

mind in this episode, you may also want to check out previous conversations with Lisa Feldman Barrett, Anil Seth, and Larry Barsalou, all of whom talk about this information from a cognitive science perspective, whereas here, we're talking about it more from the Buddhist side. And there's probably more links that I'm not even thinking of. Hopefully you can begin to see the larger tapestry of contemplative science as we keep weaving these threads together.

[\(03:34\)](#) Okay, I really loved this conversation. I hope it brings some light to your day. It's my pleasure to share with you Cortland Dahl.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(03:46\)](#): Well, I am here with Cortland Dahl. Cort, welcome, and thanks so much for being here.

Cortland Dahl [\(03:50\)](#): It's great to be here with you. Thanks for having me on.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(03:53\)](#): I'm really looking forward to chatting with you. I think you have such an interesting perspective of really blending Buddhist theory and background with scientific inquiry. So I'm curious how you came to meditation originally, if you could just share a little bit of your story.

Cortland Dahl [\(04:08\)](#): Yeah. I'd be happy to. So when I first got to college—this is a long time ago, ancient history unfortunately—yeah, in the early '90s when I started university... I'd always been wound a little tight, kind of shy and introverted as a kid. And when I got to college, that low-grade teenage awkwardness kind of went through the roof and really developed into some pretty intense anxiety. In particular, I was phobic of public speaking. So much so that in high school, just to give you a sense of how extreme it was, I fainted on stage of a concert, like literally totally unconscious-

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(04:46\)](#): Oh my goodness!

Cortland Dahl [\(04:47\)](#): ... passed out cold, flat on my face in front of all my entire school. *[laughter]* So that's how anxious I could get, just to give you a sense. So when I got to college, the pressure of school, making new friends, all the social stuff in particular was really difficult for me, I was just really struggling. And as luck would have it, I stumbled upon the practice of meditation, and it changed my life really within a matter of months. I remember like six months in, once I started daily practice, it was just mind blowing to me that it so dramatically changed my life. Not only the anxiety and how I was dealing with it, but so many other things that I didn't even anticipate. So it started back then and I knew that meditation was going to be a huge part of my life. Of course, I had no idea what it would lead to, but I knew then that I had really stumbled upon something that would define my life, and it has.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(05:37\)](#): What kind of practice was that, that you were doing back then? I'm curious to hear a little more about specifically the changes and stuff that you noticed.

Cortland Dahl [\(05:46\)](#): So early on, I was reading a lot of books, general mindfulness books. I read Jon Kabat-Zinn's *Wherever You Go, There You Are*. I still remember that. That was just a game changer for me. Sharon Salzberg, Jack Kornfield, those kinds of books. And I kind of flirted with meditation for a while. I would meditate a little bit, I'd get really excited, and then I would get undisciplined and lose track of it. Then I'd read another book and get excited again.

(06:12) And actually, it was a course on transcendental meditation that I took that got me meditating every day. And I think that frankly it was because I had to pay \$1,000 for it. And for me, that was a ton of money. So I think it was like, "I'm going to get my money out of this." So I didn't really stick with that technique, I think I went back to just a very basic awareness of breath type practices. But that got me practicing every day, twice a day, 20 minutes a day, and I did that for many, many years really regularly. So that was really helpful even though I didn't stick with it as a technique.

Wendy Hasenkamp (06:42): Yeah. Then in terms of your anxiety, did it just start to dissipate, or did you have specific insights that you think helped?

Cortland Dahl (06:51): A number of things really helped. The body awareness aspect of it really helped. I remember walking into parties, being in college, and having this "just wanting to crawl out of your skin" kind of feeling... Really, actually what I was feeling was just wanting to bolt out the door and get out of there. But I remember that the skills I was learning—just bringing awareness into the feeling in my body and just feeling that visceral sensation of that buzzing, anxious energy—that dissipated the emotional impact of it, that was really helpful. And I went into a really introspective period for a few years actually at that point, was reading a ton, meditating a lot. In my academic work, I got interested in psychology and philosophy and Asian religions, all these things. So it wasn't so dramatic. I really got very introspective and then it was really, slowly over a period of years, that it just changed almost without my knowing, it was so gradual and incremental.

Wendy Hasenkamp (07:57): Yeah, interesting. So then you went on to study Buddhism and do a lot of work within that tradition?

Cortland Dahl (08:04): Yeah. At that point, when I was in college, I had started to study psychology. I worked in a lab studying models of intelligence. I remember even helping do validation of a measure they were developing. And I thought I was going to do PhD work then, in psychology. When I finished college, I then backpacked for a year and that was another game changer. I spent a lot of time in Asia, was doing informal retreats. Then I went back after that, I'd left psychology, and went to Naropa University and went more into the Buddhist studies end of things. That then led to almost a decade living overseas in Tibetan refugee settlements. So I was living mainly in Nepal, a little bit in India in Tibetan refugee settlements. And I never thought I would return to the world of science. So that was... Yeah, I never anticipated that, but eventually wound up back here in Madison, Wisconsin and at the Center for Healthy Minds.

Wendy Hasenkamp (09:00): Right. So when you were over in Nepal and India, what were you doing in the Tibetan refugee communities? Were you studying or...?

Cortland Dahl (09:09): Yeah. The first year I was there, I was learning Tibetan. I would just... really hardcore, like every hour, every day. I mean, I was just on a mission to learn Tibetan. So I learned Tibetan pretty quickly. And then I was doing a lot of retreat. I spent probably, over that decade, probably more than a year on solitary retreat. So I was doing a lot of practice, retreats of varying lengths. And then I started translating texts. So I became very interested especially in meditation manuals. I was really interested, just really for my own practice, but seeing that there was just this wealth of literature that had never been translated. And so I started translating these texts. I formed a non-profit somewhere along the way. At the beginning, it was a lot about translation work, but then has evolved in other directions. So I was doing a bunch of different things, but I think that my biggest

passion was really retreat practice, really just doing retreat and every opportunity I could to just do deep practice.

Wendy Hasenkamp (10:12): And then how did you end up becoming involved with the Center for Healthy Minds?

Cortland Dahl (10:17): How did that start? I think it started because a very dear friend of mine and colleague, Antoine Lutz, who you know well, he came to Tergar Monastery. I've worked for years, I've been a student of Mingyur Rinpoche, who I know you've had on the podcast, and I've worked very closely with him setting up Tergar, which is the global meditation community that he leads. So I had been working with him and the first thing I did with Mingyur Rinpoche was we had an institute in Bodh Gaya, India. Antoine Lutz, a really brilliant neuroscientist, and also Tania Singer, another brilliant neuroscientist, actually came one year to Tergar Monastery for a series of teachings that Mingyur Rinpoche was leading, and I was coordinating the organizational side of it. So I met them then. In fact, my hardest translation gig ever was the two of them gave a presentation to a group of Tibetan monks on their neuroscientific research. So I had to translate from Antoine, who's French, not a native English speaker, and Tania, who's German, also not a native English speaker, speaking about neuroscience and I had to translate it into Tibetan for these monks. And it was-

Wendy Hasenkamp (11:29): I can't imagine.

Cortland Dahl (11:30): Yeah, it was just a total failure. *[laughter]*

Wendy Hasenkamp (11:32): Because also, yeah, there aren't... especially at that time, there aren't words in the Tibetan language for these scientific concepts.

Cortland Dahl (11:39): No. And then to the degree they were, I didn't know them. I mean, I was translating these ancient meditation manuals, not anything about modern science. So, yeah. So I met them there and that rekindled my interest in science. And then I think a year or two after that, I was actually at a Mind & Life Institute event at Zurich in Switzerland, and I was there with Mingyur Rinpoche, and then I met Richie Davidson. And in a way that only Richie can do, he was just like, "Hey, why don't you just come to Madison?" And I was like, "Why would I go to Madison?" And he's like, "Well, why don't you just come and see what it's like?" Anyways, long story short, I came and met some people and got really excited. And here I am.

Wendy Hasenkamp (12:20): That's great. Now you are the Chief Contemplative Officer at the Center for Healthy Minds, which is a fantastic title.

Cortland Dahl (12:27): Yeah. I always joke—to my knowledge, I'm the only one. So, still waiting for the professional conferences where I can go and check in with my peers.

Wendy Hasenkamp (12:37): Someday. *[laughter]*

Cortland Dahl (12:38): Yes. It's a very lonely profession at present. I did my PhD work and then went straight into this role, both as a scientist for the center and then we formed a nonprofit really to translate the research we do into more practical tools that people can use out in the world. And that's this Chief Contemplative Officer. So a lot of it is really actually, my role has been a translator. I feel like somehow, in many different ways, I've been a translator. And even this role of Chief Contemplative

Officer, I feel like that's sort of what I'm doing. I'm sort of straddling worlds and trying to pass knowledge and wisdom back and forth between them, just trying to be a skillful conduit.

Wendy Hasenkamp (13:16): Yeah. I know very much what you mean in terms of... I think that's so much of a part of contemplative science and this dialogue, particularly between science and Buddhism, as well as other contemplative traditions. But there is a lot of that translation that's needed, and it's such a unique skill. So that was the next thing I wanted to talk to you about, in terms of engaging with science and having all of your background in Buddhist philosophy and practice. I'm wondering, stepping back, what you feel... I don't know. What is gained from this exchange on either side? For science as well as for Buddhism, if you have thoughts on that.

Cortland Dahl (13:55): Yeah, I definitely do. At the beginning, it was very obvious to me, not surprisingly, that my bias was a little bit on the side of contemplative traditions having a lot to offer the scientific world. Because I knew enough about the research to see that there had been a lot of interesting work done on mindfulness practices, for example, to a lesser degree on other forms of meditation, other forms of contemplative practice. But having been immersed in these traditions, both the Tibetan tradition, which is my home base and what I know, have been most familiar with. But I'm also curious by nature, so I love studying many different contemplative traditions and I've always had a broad range of interests. And I could just see that there was so much wisdom and knowledge and practical experience that hadn't even begun to be studied in the scientific literature. So that was my starting point, of seeing there's just so much accumulated wisdom that is the basis for forming good hypotheses and forming interventions, and just understanding the human mind, human emotions, how they can be transformed. So, even positive psychology, which I think has made some really exciting developments, it always felt like a shame to me that we're just ignoring so much accumulated wisdom. Like, we don't have to reinvent the wheel here.

(15:19) So that was kind of obvious from the beginning, coming as I was more from the contemplative end of the spectrum. But as time has gone on and I've been more immersed in the scientific side of things, I've really come to appreciate how much there is to gain on the other side. And I think a lot there comes down to having more precision about helping people, and what can help who and when. So, you know, in modern medical research, for example, there's this whole idea of precision medicine. So really having a very nuanced understanding of what kinds of treatments and interventions are going to be of most benefit to specific people at specific times. And in contemplative traditions, there is some version of this. There's personality types, for example, and a sense of like, "Well, this type resonates or will benefit most from this kind of meditation." But it's very general, and then the categorizations are pretty broad.

(16:20) And so I think I've come to see that the understanding and the precision that modern science can lend to mental states, to brain states, and to tailoring interventions to specific people, I think can really compliment the kind of wisdom you have in the contemplative traditions quite well. Where you have a similar precision and the mapping of the mind, but it's not as precise, I think (unless you're just an incredibly skillful teacher and you do it directly), it's hard to have a scalable approach where it really can be tailored to individuals or groups in a really impactful way.

(17:20) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp (17:20): What do you think about the challenges of this unique space of interdisciplinary work? Are there certain areas that are particularly... [where] tensions or issues arise?

Cortland Dahl (17:32): Well, of course, learning to speak the same language is one issue. Historically, most of the contemplative traditions are also couched in religious and spiritual traditions, which come with a whole worldview and set of beliefs. And those traditions oftentimes have trouble talking to each other, much less to modern scientists. So I think part of it is just seeing where there's some overlap, enough that there can be a fertile dialogue. And there's other areas where I think if you wade too far into the metaphysics and some of these other areas, it almost short-circuits the discussion before it begins.

(18:11) And I'm reminded of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, I know you've heard him say these kinds of things many times, where he'll say, "Oh, that's Buddhist business. We don't need to worry about that." He clearly discerns where are the areas where we really can have this meeting of the minds, and other areas where one side is not going to make sense of the other, and it would just take a lot longer to get somewhere that's going to be productive. So that part of it, just speaking the same language and finding those points of shared interest and synergistic exploration, I think, that can be a little bit challenging. But I see that happening a lot, and it's really exciting actually when it does happen.

Wendy Hasenkamp (18:51): Yeah. When you're just speaking about the challenge, or the issues around bringing these religious or spiritual practices in conversation with science, that makes me think of the whole domain of "secularization" or how a lot of these practices are applied in the West without the religious underpinnings or aspects of them, in many cases, in many forms. So, from your training and experience as a Buddhist, how do you feel about that dynamic and that space?

Cortland Dahl (19:25): On the one hand, I think it was an important step to take and very skillful to simplify them to make them secular. What Jon Kabat-Zinn did, I think, in the time he did it and given the cultural context where the world was at that time, I think it was absolutely necessary to do that. And really, frankly brilliant and skillful to do that. On the other hand, there is certainly something lost with the richness of the worldview, with the ethical underpinnings that you find in these traditions. So there is something lost. And so while I think if that had been introduced at the beginning, I would have been surprised if it would have ever gotten the traction that it did, I think now we're at a different place. Things have opened up, and now that meditation is more mainstream, certainly mindfulness is increasingly practiced in so many different settings and contexts, now I think we can ask different questions than Jon Kabat-Zinn and the early pioneers were asking.

(20:29) So that's actually some of the work we're doing with the Healthy Minds program, for example, which is a program that we've developed, is really thinking about how to add some of that back in. For example, we've talked about having kind of a universal core to the program, but then having layers, contextual layers, where you can almost think of content—for example, we have an app, like content in the app—that depending on somebody's worldview could be added in. So, in the onboarding to the app, just to give an example of how it would work, if somebody self identifies as Christian or Jewish or Muslim or Buddhist or whatever, that it could add in a layer of content that just contextualizes the universal training that everybody hears, in light of their own faith tradition. It could be other things too, not necessarily religion. It could be that you're an artist or that you're an athlete. Whatever it is, that is the worldview that lends meaning to your life, linking up the well-being and contemplative practices with that meaningful worldview. So we're beginning to explore that. It's early days, but it seems like we can be asking some kind of interesting questions there and studying them, and just see how it might change the impact of these kinds of practices.

Wendy Hasenkamp (21:45): Yeah, that's fantastic. I think it has been so under-appreciated, the role of those larger contextual factors and worldviews, in terms of the way that practice can affect people. So that's wonderful to hear. So, is the idea, or is it already the case, that there are different modules that you can add in this app, depending on your background or your approach? Or is that just what you're moving towards?

Cortland Dahl (22:12): We've already done it, not with religion, but with some other factors. We had developed this universal... the basic program, which is just for any adult, and with this idea that we could create these adaptations that add in a layer of content to make it more applicable for specific people. So the first two that we did, that we've already developed and we're actively testing right now, we actually have two studies going on. One is for college students and one is for people with mental health concerns, and depression and anxiety in particular. Actually, here at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, all the incoming freshmen as well as sophomores and transfer students have been offered the opportunity to do a 30-day meditation challenge. So they're actually using this version of the app, of the Healthy Minds Program app, where they get the general program, but it has a layer of content that's specific for students. There's another one; we have a large RCT we're doing this fall that's for, as I said, for mental health.

(23:11) So, the religious part of that, we just finished a whole design study and now we're just moving in... We've been working with the Fetzer Institute and we're working on moving into the next phase of that, which would be doing a similar version of the app, in this case for faith traditions. So we're very much actively exploring this. This is the first year we've actually done these adaptations, and are starting to study them.

Wendy Hasenkamp (23:36): That's really exciting. I think part of what you were saying earlier about making these practices adaptable or in secular forms, is making me think of a paper that you were the lead author on that I loved, and I think is part of a trajectory that's happening in this conversation between Buddhism and science—about helping science become more nuanced about categorizing and understanding different kinds of practices that are out there. So I'd like to dig into that a little bit with you, if that's okay. And I'm thinking that actually my conversation with John Dunne touched on the precursor paper to the one that you wrote, which was a first step at trying to identify some different practices. And that one was differentiating between focused attention and open monitoring, so these two forms of (what you ended up identifying as) attentional practices. So can you say more about... I guess thinking about that paper, and what you were trying to add into that framework that was already there?

Cortland Dahl (24:41): Yeah. Yeah, thank you for mentioning that. So this was this paper *Reconstructing and Deconstructing the Self*, which really, as you're alluding to, we really just wanted to create a simple framework that would help scientists understand the diversity of meditation practices. And so we were really looking at different forms of meditation from the point of view of the different... the active ingredients, if you will, the different mechanisms through which they work in the mind, psychologically, but also physiologically, in particular with brain structure and function.

(25:18) It all started because we wanted to study other kinds of meditation than had been studied in the past. In particular, we were interested in a form of insight practice that is called analytical meditation. This is from the Tibetan tradition. And His Holiness the Dalai Lama had been encouraging Antoine and Richie to study analytical meditation. And there was really no framework in the scientific literature even to make sense of what that was, or what it was designed to do. So, this framework, this simple

taxonomy that we created, was really meant to provide that conceptual structure where you could look at a practice like analytical meditation and say, "Oh, this is where this practice fits into the wider scheme of meditation."

Wendy Hasenkamp (26:06): Yeah. Can you share for listeners a little bit about that type of analytical meditation? I think that may not be familiar to many people.

Cortland Dahl (26:13): Yeah. So just to give an example, I'll use my own story. I mentioned that I had a lot of anxiety as a kid, so just to use a very practical experience... If we zoom back 30 years ago or 28, 29 years ago, whenever it was, and I was doing this podcast, and I had that on my calendar, a month ahead of time, I would be lying in bed at night thinking about it and how bad it's going to go and, "Oh my God! Why did I say yes to that?" That would have been the 19-year-old version of my mind in this situation, right? So if you take that as a jumping off point, awareness practice is like a basic mindfulness practice. A lot of the focus might be simply to be aware of the inner experience. So you might be aware of the sensations in your body, or you notice that there are these thoughts playing out. And that's what, in this framework, we would call an attentional practice because it's primarily working with how you configure your attention related to your sensory and mental and emotional experience.

(27:13) An insight practice, like analytical meditation, is a little bit different. You need to have that space. You need to have an awareness, a ground of awareness of what's going on. But then you might take it in a very different direction. For example, self-inquiry is a huge part of this. So in addition to simply observing the inner experience, like I'm lying in bed and I notice I have all these thoughts and my body is all wired and agitated, you might actually ask a question, like what are the beliefs that are underlying this anxiety, and are they true? And then you might actually really question or inquire into the very nature of the beliefs that are underlying the experience.

(27:51) So it's a little bit different than self-awareness. I like to say it's the difference between self-awareness and self-knowledge. Awareness practices (mindfulness) produce that kind of awareness aspect, but the knowledge comes from actively inquiring, and kind of challenging the oftentimes rigid notions of self that we have, the unconscious beliefs, bringing them up to the surface, and that kind of thing. So that'd be a simple way—of noticing a recurring thought pattern, and then not just observing it, but really pushing up against it and challenging it, and looking at it from different angles.

Wendy Hasenkamp (28:23): It starts to sound a little bit like therapy, which is interesting with your interest in clinical psychology.

Cortland Dahl (28:29): It's very similar to therapy. In fact, when I was doing my graduate work, I wrote a paper on Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) and analytical meditation—showing how they use very, very similar techniques and they just target different ends of the spectrum of mental health. Like, CBT and other forms of therapy are starting with imbalance and dysfunction and getting up to normal, whereas analytical meditation almost takes you at that place where you might actually be okay and functional, but going even to a self-transcendence. So it's almost like from an unhealthy sense of self to a healthy sense of self. And CBT, other forms of therapy are designed to do that well. More meditative approaches oftentimes take you from a healthy sense of self to a transcendent sense of self, even further expanding and loosening ones' sense of self.

Wendy Hasenkamp (29:19): Wow. I'm sorry, so I got us a little bit off track. We were speaking about the different ways of thinking about practices as related to self and these forms of inquiry, from the paper.

Cortland Dahl ([29:31](#)): Yeah, so that was the starting point. We wanted to study some of these other practices that were not really on the map scientifically, so analytical meditation. So what we started to do, we thought, well, having a framework that would help us make sense of that conceptually would be a great starting point that could help us and other scientists who are interested, begin to study them and look at how different forms of meditation might impact resilience and mental health and well-being in different ways.

([30:00](#)) So we basically created this simple categorization of attentional practices, constructive practices, and destructive practices. The ones we just talked about, the insight ones, are more deconstructive because they're taking these rigid beliefs and notions and loosening them up, deconstructing them so to speak. Constructive practices would be practices like compassion, for example, where you're actually strengthening a particular quality or trait, like being kind and compassionate, or more ethical frameworks, like where you actually try to live them in a more embodied way. So it has a bit more of a positive, strengthening quality versus a loosening, deconstructing quality.

([30:39](#)) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp ([30:57](#)): I love this conceptualization of Western therapy, or clinical psychology approaches bringing it from a disordered or destabilized state up to "normal" (whatever that means). Which makes me think that... Many times, I've heard this idea that meditative practices are not meant... they were not designed to cure a mental disorder, as a treatment, for example, for mental disorders. Rather, as you said, they're more designed to push mentally healthy folks into even more transcendent states, self-transcendent states. So a couple things that come up for me there, one being your thoughts or any experiences, because I know you're a meditation teacher as well, of people with mental disorders or struggles doing these practices. And sometimes... I just recently had a conversation with Willoughby Britton, so I'm thinking about her work and some of the negative things that can happen with meditation. So I'm just curious of your experience and your thoughts on applying meditation with people who are really struggling, versus people who are healthy, and how that landscape looks for you.

Cortland Dahl ([32:08](#)): Yeah. This is a really fascinating area to explore. And I think that, to add maybe a slightly different perspective on more of the historical end of what these practices were and were not designed to do, I think in a way it's perhaps not that they weren't "designed to treat mental disorders." These practices were developed at a time and evolved in a context in which the framework of mental health that we have now didn't exist. So it wasn't as though they had the DSM of these categorizations and then somebody, the Buddha, whoever, was like, "Well, it's not for that." It's just, that did not exist. So the categorizations they had were just very, very different. And the things we take for granted now and that just seem like normal, that just seem like, "Oh yeah, depression just always existed as a thing, in this exact same way," I think is maybe, yeah, a very different landscape.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([33:08](#)): Yeah. That's important to note. Thank you.

Cortland Dahl ([33:11](#)): The closest thing they actually had probably to what we think now as these categorizations we have in the world of psychiatry and psychology, actually probably were the contemplative frameworks. That's probably the closest thing you had to looking at the full range of mental and emotional states. So I think it's certainly true that they were not used as treatments in the way that we have treatments now for mental disorders. But I think it's also true that these were probably the closest things that did exist at the time and the frameworks that evolved around them

were the closest thing that existed at the time. That's maybe just something to keep in mind. It was just a very different time, and just the whole categorization structure was pretty divergent.

(34:03) But here we are now where we do have the scientific understanding of mental disorders that we have now. So in a way, it's beginning just to bring together fields of knowledge that evolved somewhat independently in a way that historically they were... Like within the Buddhist framework, it was sort of one system, right? You have Abhidharma, as one very comprehensive mapping of the human mind and all its many variations. And the contemplative practices were couched within that. Now we have the development of modern psychology and psychiatry that, for the large part is very independent and separate from the world of contemplative practices. And contemplative science is the first really large scale attempt to really bring those together. And I think we're already seeing the tremendous benefits of doing that. You can see, obviously the study of these practices and the benefits being demonstrated. But also, it's influencing psychology, all these forms of therapy that are incorporating contemplative practices increasingly. So it's just something that's new. I mean, it's very exciting and I think only time will tell what directions we're going to find that are the most fruitful.

Wendy Hasenkamp (35:15): Yeah. I really appreciate you raising the cultural and historical context of what is considered mentally normal or healthy and just these different categorizations that we... create, basically at different times. Which makes me think more broadly—I've had a number of discussions on the podcast with cognitive scientists about this whole idea of concepts, and how our minds form these categories, and lump the world into them. I know we had a conversation about this kind of thing many years ago. So I'm just wondering, I think it would be maybe interesting to hear a little bit about the Buddhist perspective of that, because I've talked to a number of neuroscientists and cognitive scientists about it. But I know Buddhism has a lot to say too, about the way we categorize and construct our world.

Cortland Dahl (36:06): Yeah. This is a huge area, certainly within Buddhism, and other traditions as well but definitely within Buddhism. One of the very basic things about Buddhism, having its very practical concern with suffering and the alleviation of suffering, is about conditioned experience. Essentially, how we have conditioned thought patterns, emotional patterns, conceptual patterns that can promote suffering on the one hand, or can be reformulated or undone to lead to flourishing and higher states of well-being, which traditionally would be described as awakening or enlightenment, and things along that side of the spectrum.

(36:47) So in Buddhism, there is this more course-level patterning that is more around attachment and aversion, to use just very classical Buddhist terms. Attachment being where we tend to over-fixate on the desirable qualities of an experience and we tend to minimize the undesirable qualities. So it's kind of fundamentally distorted attitude where we're just getting overly fixated on the things we like. It's kind of a honeymoon period, which of course we can have relationships, but you can have that with anything. Like you're just, "Oh, this is only a wonderful thing," and you don't see the negative. Aversion being the exact polar opposite of that, where you fixate on the negative qualities and you're screening out the positive qualities. But both of those, you can see, are based on a cognitive distortion that is rooted in unconscious, oftentimes conceptual belief systems that are underlying all that. So Buddhism in particular tries to go to the root, which is all of this conceptual overlay that is so pervasive that we don't even see it.

(37:56) And in particular, the conceptual overlay that pertains to the self. These very rigid, unconscious beliefs about who and what we are that shape how we see ourselves, how we see the world, how we

relate to all of our experience. So that's a huge part of meditation practice in the Buddhist tradition, and specifically, these insight practices like analytical meditation, which are really meant to first help us to see all of that conceptual patterning. And then from there, we can begin to almost relocate ourselves, so our center of gravity is not in the belief system, but more in the immediacy of experience. Because the immediacy of experience is less rigid and it's fluid and changing, that then tends to have this almost backward moving effect where it loosens up all that conceptual patterning, because it's being challenged by the orienting towards direct experience. So there's this really interesting dynamic, but it really critically involves the loosening up of all of these concepts that we hold about ourselves and the world.

Wendy Hasenkamp (39:05): Yeah. With the loosening of concepts, particularly around the self, of course from an evolutionary perspective or however you want to frame it, these ideas that we have about ourselves are pretty useful, right? To get along in the world and to have this idea of you being separate from other things, just even as an organism, and all this. So how do you think about that dynamic then, of completely letting go of concepts, but still being able to operate in the world where you kind of need them?

Cortland Dahl (39:38): Yeah. That's another great question. There can be a misunderstanding that the loosening means we don't have concepts. And as you're saying, of course, to be in the world, to communicate, to operate in the world, we need concepts. We could not have this conversation without operating in the world of concepts. This is just the currency of the relative world, to again use the Buddhist term, just the relative conditioned reality. So it's not that transcending concepts means somehow they disappear, and we're just floating off in directionless space with nothing to tether us to the actual world. It's simply that we see the limitations of concepts. So we can see in the moment that this is a concept and it's distinct. It's a convenient fiction that helps us to navigate an overly complex world. But not conflate the concept with what it's pointing to—again to use another traditional metaphor—we're not mistaking the picture of the moon or the finger pointing at the moon with the moon itself. We see that they're doing different things.

(40:50) So again, to give another example, I've used this a number of times now, but with anxiety, I think to see how this plays out in life. When I started meditating, and I was coming to it because I had this emotional challenge, I completely equated my sense of self with anxiety. I would've thought if somebody asked, I'm just an anxious person, that is who I am, I was born this way, it's probably genetic, it's in my DNA, and this is just who I am and how I am. It was just inextricably linked to my very sense of identity. So one of the first things that I remember seeing as a practical insight, not a belief about it, but I started to see, "Oh, I have this idea of anxiety as though it's just this thing. Like, it's anxiety and I have it." And I started to see that actually anxiety itself is so complex, and that I have this just one word and label, that actually is just very loosely approximating this incredibly complex dynamic unfolding experience. So I started to see that, even that as a concept, to talk about it, I need to use the word. But I started to see that, "Oh, the experience and the concept are not the same thing." That then, I think further beyond that, helped me to see that, "Oh, actually I am not anxiety." I started to see there's many times where I don't have that experience. It's totally different. So the concept in describing me was also utterly inadequate.

(42:19) So you just start to see, at a practical level, the hold of the concepts begins to loosen, but you can still use it. Like now, I'm using the word anxiety, because we need to talk about it, right? So it can still function in the world, but you can at the same time see the limiting nature of it, and not be bound by the concept in the way that you are when it's purely unconscious.

Wendy Hasenkamp (42:43): Yeah. Something just sparked in my mind when you were talking about that in terms of understanding the limitations of concepts. It just maybe think about seeing the limitations of science for some reason. I don't know why, I've never thought about it this way before. But in a way, it's a similar thing. Like, science is an approach to try to identify something, or get our hands around something, that inherently is actually infinitely complex. So I feel like there's also... somewhere there was some connection in the value of seeing the limits of science. And I feel like a lot of times that gets lost, certainly in media portrayals of science. Science is almost the religion of the day—it's like a currency that we use for truth, somehow. But I think once you really get into doing science and practicing science, you see there are also limits. And it's a way that we try to describe and understand the world, but eventually it doesn't quite get there, somehow.

Cortland Dahl (43:47): Yeah. It's so true. You can almost... From a historical perspective, it's like these different worldviews become dominant, and in an unhealthy sense can be perceived or felt to have a monopoly on the truth. And then you're minimizing other perspectives and worldviews. Like in modern culture, the arts, for example, that's another way of viewing the world. It's another form of truth, you could say. It's certainly another form of experience that is equally valid and important and useful, and it's just different. It's telling you something different. You get something unique from the scientific worldview, as you're saying. It tells you something important and unique, and it has its own limitations in the same way that art does or storytelling does or many other disciplines would. So yeah, hopefully we're moving toward a humility in our own disciplines, where we can both see the beauty of it and the importance of it and the validity of it, but also in a way that doesn't minimize other ways of knowing and experiencing that are also equally important to the human experience. And we could certainly see the wars and all sorts of negative things when we hold a little too tightly to our particular view of the world. But yeah, I couldn't agree more.

(45:03) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp (45:03): I'd love to talk a little bit more about your work at the Center for Healthy Minds. I know that you all have been working on a model of well-being, which is at the core of your work there. I think it's a really maybe different way than most people think about well-being, or just happiness, or what it is to be healthy. So I'm wondering if you could unpack that a little bit for us.

Cortland Dahl (45:49): Yeah. We published a paper not long ago called *The Plasticity of Well-being* that was looking at well-being from the point of view of learning. And again, looking at all of the scientific work that has happened in the space of well-being. And there's been a lot of really amazing work, frameworks that already exist, and we felt like we don't need to create just another framework. Carol Ryff has an amazing framework that's just been incredibly fruitful as a basis for research. Ed Diener and the idea of subjective well-being...

(46:26) But we felt like there was a gap in this research, in that it tended to be measuring well-being almost as a static phenomena and then putting that in conversation with other things. Like, you can measure your level of psychological well-being along these various dimensions, and then look at what are the correlations with health outcomes, for example. Or is it more or less predictive of other variables? We didn't see anything that really was fundamentally viewing well-being as something that was malleable and trainable. And both in empirical research, certainly in the world's wisdom traditions and contemplative traditions, it's something that can be cultivated, and the viewpoint of it is fundamentally is something that can be cultivated. So, well-being is extremely complex, and there are so

many different dimensions, but we wanted to put something out there that, again, could be a basis for researchers to clarify the dimensions of well-being that are the best targets for learning and cultivation.

[\(47:31\)](#) Part of that was also creating a common language across disciplines. Because just to give one example, there's an amazing field of research in the cognitive sciences around attention. Decades and decades of amazing, innovative research. Almost none of that has any relationship to well-being and mental health. It's almost like this completely separate discipline, and there's very, very little connections. In recent years, there have been people, like Amishi Jha and others who have done pioneering work to bridge that gap. In the contemplative traditions of course, attention is central to well-being and the cultivation of wellbeing. I mean, it's one of these foundational pieces.

[\(48:14\)](#) So we thought to create something that again could be a common language. Where it wouldn't be just for meditation researchers or cognitive scientists or people in positive psychology, but something that any of these disciplines who are interested in well-being could look at, and see where an intervention or a particular psychological or neural mechanism might fit into that wider picture.

[\(48:38\)](#) So we focus on what we call the four pillars of well-being, but it's again from that point of view of learning and cultivation. The shorthand we use is ACIP, which is... So the four words, just as a quick way to get a high level view, are Awareness, Connection, Insight, and Purpose. I think you could say each one of these on their own, and more importantly synergistically, in combination and in balance with one another, are central both to resilience and also to flourishing. So when we're facing challenges, being able to manage our attention, to be more aware and present and not pulled uncontrollably into our thoughts and emotions, for example, is central to being able to be resilient in the face of a challenging situation. But similarly, when we're at our very best, say we're in nature or we're with friends or we're at a concert listening to something, these are similarly times when we're attuned to the present moment. So that's just an example of awareness, both as it pertains to resilience and to human flourishing. Similarly, you could say the same for each of the other three as well.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(49:49\)](#): Right. Yeah, so just in terms of connection, I love that that's included here and I think that's been really maybe only recently appreciated as having such a core role in our health and well-being. So by that, do you just mean basically social connections, the strength of your bonds with those around you?

Cortland Dahl [\(50:11\)](#): So all four of these, including connection... Here when we say the four pillars of well-being, we're specifically talking about psychological wellbeing. So when we talk about connection, which is of course very much about relationships, we're talking about the subjective psychological qualities that contribute to forming and maintaining healthy relationships and having positive interactions with other people. So a little bit less about the objective circumstances of relationships than what is the inner space of connectedness. Because of course, we've all had experiences, or most of us have, where we can be in a crowd of people, like my experience of walking into a party with social anxiety, and feel totally isolated. And we can be totally alone and feel deeply connected to others in the world. So that's an interesting dynamic. Like, what is it that helps us to feel connected in some situation, and in other cases might lead to feelings of alienation or disconnection or a range of other factors.

[\(51:13\)](#) Another interesting point about research in this area, which was shocking to me when I first heard it, is that the quality of our relationships can be as predictive of physical health as these other risk factors. For example, having stressful relationships is as big a risk factor as smoking. And it's a bigger risk factor than obesity, poor diet, exercise. Only smoking, is the only thing that rivals it. It's on par with

smoking. But that's amazing to me because when you go to the doctor, and you have these health issues, of course they talk to you about smoking and diet and exercise. When does a doctor—or anybody—ever tell you, "Hey, how are your relationships? Here's what you could do if you're having a tough time."? I mean, maybe your therapist does, but this is physical health. It's clear it impacts our mental health, but physical health, it's huge. But nobody talks about it.

Wendy Hasenkamp (52:14): Yeah. It's making me think of Vivek Murthy, the now Surgeon General of the United States. His whole interest and focus is on loneliness now. So it's just great that as Surgeon General and a medical practitioner, someone who's focused on physical health, he's really now bringing in these ideas of connection too.

Cortland Dahl (52:34): Yeah. It's been so inspiring that he's so out in front with this issue. It's so important.

Wendy Hasenkamp (52:41): So in terms of that well-being model that you all are working with, are there perspectives that you bring from the Buddhist side that relate to these four pillars, as you called them? Do those also overlap with Buddhist philosophy?

Cortland Dahl (52:55): Yeah, very much. When we developed the model, we were looking at a range of disciplines and we were looking at the points of convergence. Where do different disciplines tend to agree? So we looked at well-being research, for example. We looked at neuroscientific research, which of course is kind of a focal point at the Center for Healthy Minds. We looked at more the realm of psychiatry and psychotherapy—what are the people on the front lines, the people who are out in the world who are actually trying to help people in this area, what are those models? And then also, as you're alluding to, very much contemplative traditions. And not just Buddhism, but where do you find common themes across contemplative traditions?

(53:45) And so, these four pillars—awareness, connection, insight, and purpose—I think you could find evidence really from all of these different domains that points in a similar direction. Just as an example from the contemplative space, I always love, when I give talks on the model, I love to give a quote from a Catholic Saint named Francis De Sales. There's this quote that, literally if you changed a few words, it would be Jon Kabat-Zinn. But it's from hundreds and hundreds of years ago, it's from the Catholic tradition. And it basically is saying your mind is going to wander off over and over again, you just return it again and again to the present moment. But it's in the Catholic tradition, so he's saying return it to the presence of the Lord. So it's like, instead of just bringing your mind back from distraction to the present moment, you're bringing it back to the divinity in the Christian tradition. So that, to me, was just a great example of linking up this awareness kind of meditation, but with a Christian worldview. And again, you can find that in many other traditions as well.

Wendy Hasenkamp (54:49): Yeah, that's great. I really appreciate that perspective, across traditions and also across history, yeah. Well, as we're wrapping up, do you have any big picture, take-home messages, or final thoughts you'd like to share with the audience?

Cortland Dahl (55:04): I guess just to share from the work that we do at the Center for Healthy Minds... There's so much exciting research that we have right now. But I think as somebody who's very immersed in the world of research, as you have been as well, Wendy, for many years, I think that where we need to be individually, certainly as scientists, and hopefully even as a society, is just a place of humility. There is so much we don't know. And it's such an exciting time because really for the first time ever, we can

just get knowledge from virtually every tradition throughout history, in the snap of a finger. I mean, that's just amazing that that's possible. So from my perspective, this is a time where experimenting, having an open mind, really listening to other people and other traditions and other viewpoints and taking them in, and learning. And then just together, collaboratively, we can, I think, do some really, really exciting things. I mean, those things are already happening, but I think it just calls for a deep humility in this whole endeavor, and realizing from a historical perspective we are at the very, very beginning of hopefully—if we can work through this challenging moment we're at in human history—of what I think we'll look back on as the beginning of just an incredibly amazing dialogue between these traditions, and really being able to help a lot of people through the insights that emerge.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([56:34](#)): Well, this has been so fantastic. I've really enjoyed this conversation. Thank you so much for spending the time, and for joining us today.

Cortland Dahl ([56:42](#)): Yeah. It's an honor to have this conversation with you. Thank you so much for inviting me on.

Outro – Wendy Hasenkamp ([56:54](#)): *This episode was edited and produced by me and Phil Walker. Music on the show is from Blue Dot Sessions and Universal. Show notes and resources for this and other episodes can be found at podcast.mindandlife.org. If you enjoyed this episode, please rate and review us on 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.*