



Mind & Life Podcast Transcript

Roshi Joan Halifax - Enactive Compassion

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Opening Quote – Roshi Joan Halifax (00:00:03): *We have to create the conditions where we are not so blind to the interconnectedness. There's a hyper-causality that's now vividly in our face, in relation to the health of our planet and the decline of it. I realized why His Holiness said that compassion is the radicalism of our time—it is truly the most upstream frame of reference, attitude, embodied experience that is essential for the well-being of all species, and also for coming generations.*

Intro – Wendy Hasenkamp (00:00:45): Welcome to Mind & Life. I'm Wendy Hasenkamp. We are back with season four of the show, and I'm so happy to be able to kick things off with today's guest, Roshi Joan Halifax. Roshi Joan is a renowned Zen Buddhist teacher and author, a pioneer in the field of end-of-life care, and founder and abbot of the Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico. She has been an advocate for engaged Buddhism, social activism, and compassion in response to today's crises. And as we'll hear, she was also instrumental in developing the dialogue between science and Buddhism.

(00:01:24) In our conversation, Roshi shares how she worked with Francisco Varela to develop the first dialogues with the Dalai Lama and scientists. And then we discuss what is meant by the term "enactive" mind, which was a central theme in Varela's philosophy. This gets us into the idea that compassion is emergent, and highly dependent on context. And we talk about what factors can be trained that set the stage for compassion to arise. We get into the importance of embodiment in the training of healthcare providers, and the concept of non-referential compassion. Tapping into Roshi's experience in social activism, we discuss the relevance of interdependence and compassion in addressing climate change. And Roshi reflects on her many decades of work with dying people, current research on psychedelics, and the future of contemplative science.

(00:02:20) As always, of course, you can find lots more from Roshi in the show notes, including a presentation from last year's Summer Research Institute on Integrity and Moral Suffering in Relation to the Climate Catastrophe and Health. I also highly recommend checking out the many wonderful talks available on Upaya Zen Center's podcast, also linked in the show notes.

(00:02:42) It's always a pleasure to speak with Roshi Joan. I feel like her work and her wisdom is such a unique blend of anthropology, philosophy, cognitive science, social activism, healthcare, and of course, Buddhism. I hope this conversation sheds new light for you, maybe offering a different way to think about how compassion shows up in your life. I'm so happy to share with you Roshi Joan Halifax.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:03:12): Well, I'm joined today by Roshi Joan Halifax. Roshi Joan, thank you so much for joining us.

Roshi Joan Halifax (00:03:18): I'm grateful to be here.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:03:22): So, there's so many things that I'm looking forward to talking with you about. Maybe we can just start in the beginning. I'd love to hear some of your personal story, and how you came to do the work that you do, and of course, your long history with Mind & Life and Francisco Varela. So wherever you want to start with that.

Roshi Joan Halifax (00:03:42): Well, that's too long a story for what we're doing today. *[laughter]* Simply, I feel a lot of gratitude for what's happening in the field of contemplative neuroscience today, the great diversity of perspectives. And I feel like I've been a small part of that. Francisco and I were both fellows in the Lindisfarne Association. And this was in the 1970s. Also, our good friend, Evan Thompson, was part of that group, and Bill Thompson, Evan's father, was a visionary who was also a historian, and had a prophetic voice. And so he brought together many individuals involved in the humanities, science, social engagement, the environment and so forth, plus philosophers and religious types.

(00:04:40) And so it was in that context that I had the privilege of meeting Francisco. And then we met again in Cadaques, Spain in 1981. And needless to say, very much in the spirit of Lindisfarne, our conversation turned toward dharma and science. And shortly after that meeting, we were both at a meeting in Stanford—on order and disorder—where the economist, Kenneth Arrow, chemist, Ilya Prigogine, and of course, Francisco presented. And it was basically about complex adaptive systems. And it was in the context of that meeting, which was also in '81, that this really radical exchange between Francisco and me moved to me saying at one point, "We should do this, but with His Holiness [the Dalai Lama]." And we both got very excited about that possibility of having an interdisciplinary dialogue with His Holiness present, with him also offering his views, his perspectives. And so that conversation went on actually for several years.

(00:06:03) And then in 1983, I had had eye surgery, and my eyes had to have radiation, and they hadn't fractionated the dosage. So as a result, my eyes were burned. And Francisco happened to be in the States, and we were really close friends, and he came to see me. And about this time, I was invited by a faculty person at the University of California–Santa Barbara, to be in a small science meeting with His Holiness. And I had said yes, of course, but after this medical accident, I felt quite inhibited about going to the meeting.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:06:43): Yeah. So could you see?

Roshi Joan Halifax (00:06:45): No, I couldn't. I was in eye bandages.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:06:48): Oh my gosh. So you were blind, basically.

Roshi Joan Halifax (00:06:50): Yeah, I was. And Francisco and I talked about it, and one of the things that we were looking at is if His Holiness, if the opportunity presents itself, would I suggest this idea. And so Francisco really pushed me to go to the meeting, and I went, and it was a tiny meeting. And at the end of it, His Holiness invited me to have a private audience with him, the next morning at 7:00 AM. And so I went for that private audience, and he was so kind, so wonderful.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:07:28): You already had some relationship with him at that time?

Roshi Joan Halifax (00:07:30): No, I'd never met him before.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:07:31): Oh my goodness.

Roshi Joan Halifax (00:07:32): I know.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:07:33): He just invited you from the meeting?

Roshi Joan Halifax (00:07:35): Yeah. Well, I probably looked pretty pitiful, if you know what I'm saying. Or very brave. One or the other. I didn't know how I looked, but anyway, there I was. And in the course of our interaction, I talked about Francisco and about this idea, and he loved it. He was just completely lit up about it. And I think His Holiness has always been a scientist at heart. He teaches like one, and he views things like one. And so not so long after that, there was another meeting in Alpaca, Austria, and Francisco and His Holiness were in the same space. And [Fran]cisco got together with His Holiness, and His Holiness just loved the idea.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:08:29): So what was the idea, specifically, that you put forward?

Roshi Joan Halifax (00:08:33): Well, that we would have an interdisciplinary meeting around certain content related to neuroscience and contemplative experience. And that it would include Western philosophers in addition to neuroscientists, and other people in the humanities, and even people who were contemplatives in other traditions. And, of course, philosophers, essential.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:08:59): Yeah. Was it mainly at that time thinking about consciousness, the nature of mind?

Roshi Joan Halifax (00:09:05): I think really His Holiness, of course, is so interested in consciousness, but what he was really interested in had to do with neural mapping, where this stuff shows up in the brain. So it was pretty neurocentric, his interests, in a way. Because here you'd have neuroscientists, people who were actually measuring activity in the brain in relation to various stimuli. And so there he was. It brought a lot of things together. His scientific view, consciousness, the nature of mind, philosophy, both Eastern and Western philosophy. And then this really radical exploration of so-called phenomenology—that is, first-person experience.

(00:09:56) So it really fit for both Francisco, who was... Okay, he was a neuroscientist, he was a Buddhist, so he was a contemplative, and he was a philosopher. So he was everybody, in a certain way. *[laughter]* He covered the field. He just got backup help from various renowned people later in the meetings.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:10:19): Well, you also brought together a lot of different fields too, right? You're trained as an anthropologist originally. And then at that time, you had already been involved in Buddhism, it sounds like.

Roshi Joan Halifax (00:10:30): Yeah. I've been a practitioner since 1965. But anyway, back to Francisco and Mind & Life... We didn't really have a personal connection with His Holiness. And it was in '85, an associate of mine in San Francisco said, "There are these two businessmen who are interested in doing

some kind of a meeting around physics with His Holiness, and we heard about what you and Francisco were talking about. I think you all should meet."

(00:11:09) And so what was really interesting was Adam and Michael Salman, Adam Engle and Michael Salman came down to Ojai, and we sat under this big oak tree, and began this exploration. And Adam said, "I'm in. I'll do anything to help make this happen." And such an endeavor would take a businessman, in the sense of a certain persistence, organizational ability, refusal to say no, and so forth. So Michael eventually dropped out of the picture, but Adam and Francisco and I also, as a friend and advisor in the early years, really lit up as this possibility began to unfold into a reality.

(00:12:06) So a lot of good things have come out of it. The first meeting was in '87. I was fortunate to be able to present in 1992 in Dharmshala. And it's just been very, I think, useful for this exploration of mind.

(00:12:31) You know, Francisco always saw things, not just from a neurocentric perspective. He always saw things also as context dependent. And out of this, he developed the enactive view, which I think is very important at this time, as Evan Thompson, Ezequiel Di Paolo, Hanne De Jaegher and other wonderful philosophers and scientists are looking at the very fact that we are shaped by our environment, and we shape our environment. We cannot separate ourselves from the context of our lived experience. So this work came really primarily out of Francisco—and Eleanor Rosch and Evan [Thompson] were part of that thinking process.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:13:24): It's so wonderful to hear that history, and your major role in it too. I'm wondering, you spoke a little bit about the enactive view, which has become, I think, really central too in contemplative science as it's evolved. And is that how you would say, now... I guess I'm wondering from all your experiences—with these engagements with scientists and philosophers, and your deep knowledge of Buddhism—how you've come to view the mind.

Roshi Joan Halifax (00:13:56): You know, it reminds me of something I witnessed many, many years ago. This was in the 1970s, where my husband, Stanislav Grof, and I were in a small meeting with Jonas Salk and Gregory Bateson. Mind you, I was an anthropologist, also married to a psychiatrist who was working with LSD as an adjunct to psychotherapy, and I was his partner in that. So we brought an interesting perspective into this question, but also our disciplines—Grof's and mine, anthropology, psychology, psychiatry—brought also views that were very influenced by our own perspective.

(00:14:46) And we watched this interaction between Gregory Bateson and Jonas Salk with quite a... well, for me, it just went right into my marrow. And it affirmed something that I, as an anthropologist, looking at patterns of culture (for individual cultures but also cross-culturally), I knew it to be the case intuitively. But to have it put this way by Bateson blew my mind.

(00:15:13) And this was the interaction. So Gregory and Jonas Salk are sitting in chairs slightly opposite from each other, the chairs rotated at about maybe a 30-degree angle, so they weren't in direct confrontation. And Bateson, who hardly ever wore socks—I just remember looking at his ankles with fascination, those old ankles *[laughter]*—and his hulking physique... he was very tall and kind of hunched over with thought. You know, his brain was so big, it was like a dead weight on him. He was always in this mode of inquiry. And Jonas, who was very slight in frame and a wiry being, and had in his later years become much more philosophical and reflective. But they had kind of opposite energy, and I remember feeling that in my body.

(00:16:21) And Bateson had a very interesting approach to these kinds of interactions, interactions with high-ranking people, so to speak. He would bait them. (I always smiled—his name was somehow appropriate, but spelled a little differently.) But he would ask questions that were apparently very stupid and naive, but actually the "right answer" would reveal a whole landscape. And most people gave the obvious and the stupid answer. And in this case, so did Jonas.

(00:17:08) So Bateson leaned over, and under his hooded lids, his eyes caught Jonas's, and he asked Jonas, "Where is the mind?" And Jonas sat up like, what a stupid question, and pointed to his temples, i.e. to his brain. And Bateson made a barely perceptible guffaw. And he took his long bony finger, much in the same gesture that Jonas had engaged in, but pointed it between him and Jonas. And I could see Jonas, who was a good friend of mine... he was startled. Because he saw what Bateson saw so clearly.

(00:18:07) And I think, though Francisco was not at that meeting, what we're beginning to understand is that a little bit of a rush of blood in a neural system says there's activity, but there's a whole world that is actually responding to us in the similar way to how our brains are responding to the world, and to our experience of it. And so out of this, the enactive view has influenced many of us.

(00:18:42) And recently, I shared about enactive perspective on compassion. And I built that talk, which I did for Mind & Life Europe, out of a line from a piece that Francisco wrote many years ago on compassion, which is also an area that I've been deeply engaged with—in doing this heuristic map of compassion, training people in compassion and so on. Anyway, this line really caught me. It says (this is Francisco), "It should not be surprising that one of the main characteristics of spontaneous compassion, which is not a characteristic of volitional action based on habitual patterns, is that it follows no rules."

(00:19:44) And when I read that, I was like, "Yes! Of course." It's so very Francisco. But it's to understand—and this is deeply in relation to how compassion is trained—[that] in a way it's futile to go right to compassion. And in my work at the Library of Congress in DC, where I was developing a heuristic map of compassion, it was so clear to me that compassion is actually made of non-compassion elements. And that the training had to do with actually identifying those non-compassion elements, and strengthening those elements. Because compassion is this spontaneous process. You cannot make compassion happen per se. You cannot prescribe it. You can only go upstream to those facets of compassion to create the conditions where compassion can be primed. And compassion is fundamentally a sense-making process that is about mutuality, context sensitivity, adaptivity, and so forth.

(00:21:10) So you can see that my own work has been deeply influenced by the enactive perspective, from just sharing Francisco's view of compassion being non-volitional, and as well, you can't prescribe it. It is emergent. But in training, you can create the conditions of sensitivity that prime this process that we call compassion, which is enactive, completely context-dependent.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:21:42): I'd love to hear more about that—creating the conditions, and how can we prime the facets that lead to compassion?

Roshi Joan Halifax (00:21:50): Well, actually, I have too much to say about it, and our time is just trotting along. *[laughter]* But anyway, so what was clear to me is that compassion is composed of non-compassion elements. And here are some of the things that are trainable, which make compassion possible.

(00:22:12) And the first one is something you're really familiar with, and that's attention. If your attention is divided, dispersed, or distracted, the quality of balance required to be in the presence of suffering, or even to sense the general suffering of the world—it's not possible, because you're ungrounded. You don't have the capacity both to focus and also to include the immediate and the wider context—including not just the physical or social context, but also the view.

(00:22:55) So attentional balance is essential. And of course, as you know, I've worked with healthcare workers for many decades, since 1970 actually, so that's 51 years. And the way most healthcare workers are trained—whether they're doctors or nurses, chaplains—is to ignore, for example, their own physical experience. But their attentional field is constantly being fragmented by how they're trained and the context of their service. So if you just think about the healthcare field, but how about all the rest of us? With our devices and so-called multitasking, which can't really happen. And so attention is one. And whether it's focused attention, in the beginning to maintain concentration, and then panoramic, what's been called open presence. I think this is really critical for the training of clinicians, educators, politicians, human rights workers, environmentalists, et cetera.

(00:24:14) And then another aspect has to do with the cultivation of prosocial qualities. There's so many approaches in Buddhism and other traditions, and also just the basic perspectives of civility in society—what it is to be a good person, how to be a good person, and so forth. And so from the Buddhist perspective, it's everything from the Brahmaviharas, practicing the four wonderful boundless abodes, or in Lojong, the seven-point mind training, or whether it is this experience of Tonglen, exchanging self with other as well (two different branches of the same bodhicitta practice).

(00:25:08) So there's various wonderful approaches in Buddhism to cultivate that sense of prosociality. And also, we see in the values of our culture, both the positive effects of prosociality, so it's good to practice it. And it's interesting. I was saying... I met with a student this morning who came from a very busy urban life and is now in the Upaya community. And we were exploring how the experience of actually living in a small social network, such as one would in a practice center like our center, there's much higher accountability for pro-sociality than in our small nuclear family systems, or even our individual lives. But training in that, which has a strong ethical component.

(00:26:10) And then insight is another quality, and I have lots to say about that, but not to take up the whole podcast with this perspective. And then embodiment is so important, that even if we can't do something, we actually have the impulse to engage; so our premotor cortex is lit up. We want to be engaged in an action that benefits another or others.

(00:26:41) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:27:12): This last point on embodiment, I feel like, is another thread that really runs through so much of what we're learning from contemplative science these days, and the central role of the body in mind, of course, and in transformation and healing...

Roshi Joan Halifax (00:27:30): And Wendy, the body in context. The body in its situated-ness. The body is in response, through all of our senses, but even on a most subtle level, to the very experience of our surrounds.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:27:49): Yeah, exactly. It just shines such a light on interdependence, right? It's impossible to separate any of the elements of everything that's going on around us.

Roshi Joan Halifax ([00:28:03](#)): But let me make another or point here that's more contemporary. And that is that, from really the time of the Buddha up into more our recent time, what is clear to us is that when one is training in these subtle mind states, doing it on the subway, or in the busy streets of New York, is not the best place to begin. That we go to places like Upaya or IMS [Insight Meditation Society] or Spirit Rock, which have a contemplative atmosphere, and we train in those contexts. At the time of the Buddha, the recommendation is this forest practice. For me, it's been mountain practice. Using the natural world as a way to reduce the psychosocial distractions of civilization, and to be able to not have the nervous system mediating these more complex, and even disruptive and anti-physical inputs that we experience in our built environments.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:29:16](#)): Yeah. It's so essential, and it's hard, I think, for so many people to find that quiet secluded space these days—whether even just psychological space, or physical space too, is equally important. Is there anything else to say that's coming to mind for you about the role of the body, and how we can use that in practice and in generating... Well, I was going to say generating compassion, but generating the prerequisites for compassion?

Roshi Joan Halifax ([00:29:50](#)): I think there's very interesting literature on the relationship between interoceptivity—that is, our capacity to sense into our somatic, particularly our visceral experience—and where that shows up in the brain, and where empathy shows up in the brain.

([00:30:12](#)) So I often use the image, I referred to it earlier in our conversation, of the way that many healthcare workers are trained is that their own relationship with the body is disrupted by the structure of their training. So eating, sleeping, bathroom needs, et cetera, are basically disassociated from. And what is experienced is pretty much from the eyebrows up, if you will.

([00:30:48](#)) Whereas the body is this incredible mechanism, not only of receiving sensory input from the environment, but also it actually teaches us things that are at the pre-conscious level, if we can access. It makes clear to us that we are, for example, in danger, there is attraction, there is resonance, or whatever suite of possible responses that there can be, based on what's happening in the body. Even the toes curling up, knowing that when your toes begin to grip, that's telling you something. And so if you're just operating out of ideas only, out of calculation, all of this more subtle content of responsiveness that is telling you what is happening in your subjective and lived experience is not available to you. So being able to track your somatic experience, we feel, is really important—in part to have access to this treasure trove of information, but also in part to mitigate the possibility of being overwhelmed.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:32:09](#)): Which goes towards burnout, which is often so common in healthcare workers. And I'm thinking now with the pandemic we've been experiencing the last year or two now, it seems even more so. In all of your work with the training of healthcare workers, you mentioned the ways that you are taught to disassociate from your bodily signals, and not attend to your basic biological needs. But is it also an almost intentional cutoff in terms of how they're taught to relate to suffering?

Roshi Joan Halifax ([00:32:41](#)): That's a very good point, Wendy, that dissociating and objectifying—dissociating yourself from suffering, the truth of suffering, your witness, and then objectifying that suffering—can mitigate overwhelm. And one is always looking for this sweet spot between over-identification, where there is psychosomatic overwhelm, and objectification, where there is the ground

for unethical behavior, basically, or a longer-term sense of moral injury because you objectified, and didn't realize that is a human being before me.

(00:33:28) So yeah, I think that a couple of things. One, we really got out of the work from Nancy Eisenberg and Daniel Batson, that being able to both be in resonance with the truth of suffering in one way, and in another way to have the insight: I'm also not that person. It's actually not happening to me.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:33:57): Even though your body may be responding in a resonant way.

Roshi Joan Halifax (00:34:00): Yeah, but what that does is it provides the means for you to down-regulate and not move into overwhelm. And Batson and Eisenberg both write about this in terms of empathic distress, empathic over-arousal, moving to empathic distress and moral outrage (which can be a protective response), freeze, and also just avoidance, abandoning your patient. Or engaging in selfish pro-social behaviors.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:34:37): And so do you view compassion as a kind of antidote to this empathic burnout or overwhelm that can happen?

Roshi Joan Halifax (00:34:47): Yeah. From one point of view (this is a crude way to put it, but) compassion is a triple win. That those who receive compassion—and I'm speaking about compassion in a very specific way, and I can talk more about that if you wish. But the benefits for people who receive compassion are consequential. Those who experience it, we're discovering, thanks to the work primarily through the experience of Matthieu Ricard and him subjecting himself to many tests, work that Antoine Lutz has done and Richie Davidson, Tania Singer, others, that the one who is compassionate has all kinds of very subtle but clear benefits. It not only makes you feel good, because you don't feel morally compromised for having objectified or ignored the presence of suffering, but that you've actually engaged in behaviors which are about benefiting others. And you can have the joy if it turns out well. If it doesn't, so be it. So that's the second geography of benefit, is that the one who is compassionate benefits. Then what is really so wonderful is those who witness compassion feel morally elevated, and want to engage in compassionate acts themselves.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:36:25): So it's contagious.

Roshi Joan Halifax (00:36:26): It is.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:36:29): You said you were speaking about a very specific view of compassion. Do you want to say more about that?

Roshi Joan Halifax (00:36:35): Well, I learned about this, in part, through hearing about the research Antoine Lutz and the UW team engaged in with a group of Tibetan yogis, advanced practitioners on the practice of what they called non-referential compassion. And I was like, "How can that be? What is non-referential compassion? You need an object." But then I began to do research. In the 14th century, a very great Zen master, Muso Soseki, from Japan articulated a few (which is in the Vajrayana world as well), about these three different valences of compassion—the third being authentic compassion, realized compassion.

(00:37:29) But those valences, it's simple. It's compassion with an object, so your child, your in-group, your co-combatant, your medical team, your culture, your neighborhood, your race. It's whatever your

in-group is. And so there's a bias toward responding to the suffering of those in your in-group, more than those who are not in your in-group. Which is not to say that many people aren't compassionate for those not in their in-group, but it's not as common.

(00:38:04) The second valence of compassion is compassion that is dharmically and ethically based. It's compassion where one sees the absence of a separate self-identity, and yet at the same time understands interconnectedness. So just out of being a wise being, we want to serve, and this has a strong ethical base.

(00:38:30) And the third valence is what Antoine was, in his research, exploring, and that is this non-referential or universal compassion—compassion without an object. And Soseki articulates this clearly. He makes the point that this is really what authentic compassion is. As Matthieu [Ricard] describes it, you're always at the ready. This is your view, your attitude. It's in your marrow. It's not produced by a specific event in context. It's that you are embedded in the context at all times, and when suffering is present, you spontaneously arise to bring benefit to the one who's suffering.

(00:39:24) I was just really fascinated by that, and realized why His Holiness said that compassion is the radicalism of our time. I mean, it is truly the most upstream frame of reference, attitude, embodied experience that in our era (but I would suggest in any era), is essential for the well-being of all species, and also for coming generations.

(00:39:57) – musical interlude –

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:40:15): I'm just thinking about... You were contextualizing compassion and interdependence in the context of so many current crises that we face as a world, perhaps the greatest one being climate change. And I feel like you've spoken recently, drawing that view into the space of climate work. Do you want to share your perspective there?

Roshi Joan Halifax (00:40:39): Well, I think, of course, this is the issue, not only of our time, but in the recent past and for the coming generations. And I think that unless we do realize this non-referential compassion, that is a compassion that is all-embracing, if you will, it's going to be a tough go, so to speak.

(00:41:04) And I think there's another thing, and this has to do with the ethics around climate change. And we are seeing that in the testimonies that are being pulled out of oil executives this very day, that we have to create the conditions where we are not so self-centered, where we are not so blind to the distributed self, which is our very atmosphere, all of the earth, the rivers, the oceans, where we are extracting ancient sunlight and critters from the mantle of the earth to throw into the atmosphere. And the outcomes are just staggering, not just to contemplate. They're being lived now. So this view that Francisco and his colleagues articulated and that were explored in the *Embodied Mind* of the enactive perspective, if we do not understand the nature of Pratityasamutpada, interconnectedness, interdependence and interpenetration, that we are not separate from any being or thing, and that there is a hypercausality that's now vividly in our face in relation to the health of our planet and the decline of it.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:42:43): Yeah, thank you. In terms of realizing this view... I'm thinking especially in the West, we come from this lineage of individualism and separateness that's just baked into our mindsets. Do you have thoughts about—I don't know if there's specific practices or certainly just

embedding yourself in the study of these systems—but how can we help people shift out of that sense of separateness?

Roshi Joan Halifax (00:43:17): Well, I think that the endeavors being made by people in education, in politics, even in business to create the opportunities for people to explore their own subjective experience, both in the narrow sense of what's going on in my mind, heart, and body. And this is big in the West where everybody's in psychotherapy, so they think they know what their feelings are about, but they don't broaden the inquiry to include the somatic dimension or the possibility for understanding these narratives are constructed, and so forth. So these endeavors to train people to really cultivate a generation (of all ages) of individuals who are both wise and compassionate through having the opportunity to have a contemplative life. Not necessarily in the sense of, say, Brother David or Thomas Merton, where you have your cell or your wonderful little house, your hermit's hut, but where you actually understand the value even of a pause in this moment. An exhale, a dropping down, a looking more deeply. So I feel that those endeavors are really important.

(00:44:54) I also feel that the voices of Indigenous peoples and their wisdom being brought forward, where they have managed or been in relationship to these wild ecologies that have kept their lives intact until, of course, the small pox blankets arrived on the scene. These Indigenous cultures have so much wisdom to impart to us. And including actual, practical approaches to maintaining balance, being part of the system that maintains balance in the natural world, so the natural world is in a process of mutuality with the human world.

(00:45:44) And then the voices of young people. I have to hand it to Greta Thunberg. She's got it. She's making it work, and I love it! I love the fact that she's young. I love the fact that she is mentally different. And I love the fact that she's in a female body. And her voice, whether meeting the Pope or the Dalai Lama or Jane Fonda or some of the great Bodhisattvas on the planet with us today... And also just bawling out the heads of state of countries all over the world. And boy, do I agree. You know, we're in the middle of this big vote about the well-being of not only our planet, but our children in our own country, in relation to the dispensation of resources to support a society that is really in trouble, to dial it down, which will take a generation or two in terms of the rebound effects or the cascade effects. We can do this. Will we do it?

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:46:52): Yeah, that's the question.

Roshi Joan Halifax (00:46:54): We have to do it. Will we do it?

(00:46:56) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:47:28) I wanted to talk a little bit, if you have time, you've done so much work with dying people over your life. And I think, in the context of COVID and everything we've experienced in the last several years, so many more people are facing death and dealing with death. And I'm just wondering if you have insights about the process of dying, what's the most important or the most important things to know, in terms of being with dying people and helping that transition.

Roshi Joan Halifax (00:48:06): Well, this is where I feel healthcare workers who have training in, not only the experience of contemplation—that is being able to be grounded, to remember really why they're there, to attune to their own subjectivity, to be in resonance with the experience of those whom they are bearing witness to, to have the insight to look deeply to see what will serve, and then to engage...

But I created this training process called grace, and I've just taken you through it. This, I think, is really important. In other words, having the internal means to respond and to understand, those are means that can be nourished.

(00:49:07) The second thing has to do with what Norman Fisher has called the bodhisattva view. And this is a view that is opened up by the qualities of heart, mind, and body that we cultivate, or are present for us as we are met in the world and by the world. And that bodhisattva attitude is this spontaneous response coming from our marrow, unprescribed, not volitional, to the truth of suffering that we encounter. And we just begin to really feel, why am I here? I'm here not to get another automobile, my gosh, or another zero in my bank account, but really how can I benefit others?

(00:50:04) So it's a deeply moral and ethical perspective, but it's in the marrow it's where you realize you're not separate from. And it's that landscape that makes it possible to be with dying people because you see we're all going to die. The truth of impermanence is so in your face. And you also know that this is a sacred time—no matter how chaotic or messy, how many family conflicts there are, how much fear is in the room, how much beauty is in the room—that this is a sacred time, and maybe the most important experience of a person's life, that shouldn't be just soaked up in the midst of fear. And maybe you are that island that that person can psychically step onto to realize their own confidence in letting go.

(00:51:14) It's powerful work. And I think many people who have gone into the end-of-life care field have been drawn, because they realize this is a sacred time, and this is an opportunity also to face the truth of one's own mortality—a thought that does not leave me, ever.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:51:37): You just mentioned letting go, which of course, I guess death is the ultimate act of letting go. And I'm thinking about all of the letting go that can happen in contemplative practice. And I'm wondering if that can be like a slow preparation almost. Do you find that?

Roshi Joan Halifax (00:51:56): Yeah, I think that practice provides often a very powerful context for learning that ultimately we're safe. I know it's crazy to say, and it reminds me of something Ram Dass said—death is safe, letting go is safe. And it's really a matter of how we develop trust in what is. And it reminds me of a line from a Zen Master Keizan, who came a little after Eihei Dogen in Japan. And he said, "Do not find fault with the present." And he basically was saying, the present is safe. This is what's happening. This is the only reality that is. So it's pretty radical. A pretty brilliant view. This is what is. A dying person (not dead yet, so to speak)—this is where we are—well, you don't say that to a dying person, of course. But you live it as you make that connection.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:53:11): Yeah. Thank you. I guess, just as we are starting to come to a close, I'm curious, with all of your involvement these many decades in the origination and development of contemplative science, your thoughts on where the field is now, and I guess most importantly, where it should be going. What are the most important next steps for people to be looking at?

Roshi Joan Halifax (00:53:37): I don't think I can really answer that, Wendy, adequately. I also don't think, in a funny way, anybody knows. Like, it's hubris to say where we think it's going. We didn't know it would go this way. Certain ways it's gone, it's not so good. The commodification of the processes, for example. Or the misapprehension, misunderstanding of why we do these practices. And turning them into big businesses, creating cult-like organizations. You know, not everything is unicorns, rainbows and butterflies.

(00:54:29) I think what's important is that we do the best that we can within our limited capacity to stay self-honest, and honest with each other, as this field unfolds in various domains—whether it's politics or law or meditation booths in Amazon—of working the questions, and not being afraid to say, "Okay, let's look at this. Is this really going to benefit in the long run?"

(00:55:04) So I think we have to stay awake and sharp, and not be in the trance of saying that... Whether it's mindfulness practice or the use of psychedelics in psychotherapy, you know every stick has two ends. And that we keep compassion out front in all of these different fields. So that the "right use," the beneficial use of these technologies, is engaged, and not the harm that can arise when these technologies or approaches are abused.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:55:46): You just mentioned psychedelics. That's another thing I was thinking to ask you about, because you did a lot of work decades ago using psychedelics, I believe also with end-of-life care. And of course, there's such a renaissance now with psychedelics being used again in therapy. Do you have specific thoughts or experiences on their use, the way they're being used now?

Roshi Joan Halifax (00:56:10): Yeah, I feel like I'm one of the elders of the field. I married Stan Grof. We did the work with dying cancer patients and others. And that work, I feel, which is reflected in a book we did called *The Human Encounter With Death*, I think that came out in the mid-'70s, which is now a kind of classic in the field, reflected our research in using LSD as an adjunct to psychotherapy.

(00:56:42) We had a very specific approach. Stan, of course, had a very intensive exploration of these states—not with dying people, but with artists and philosophers in Czechoslovakia. And he ended up developing a perspective, which was very interesting, which had a transpersonal dimension related to basic perinatal matrices, and the reliving of one's biological birth, the effects of what he called COEX systems, systems of condensed experiences, that we repeat these patterns throughout our lives from maybe even conception through our birth and et cetera.

(00:57:24) And so this work was really powerful. And what we discovered, with intensive preparation the day of the trip and then very intensive integration, not only with the dying person, but with their family or friends or spouses and so on, that people benefited deeply. And we had very specific, you know, a double-blind study, we had very specific criteria to evaluate, including pain perception, ease of medical management, and all kinds of... You know how you have to do this stuff. Anyway, outcomes were great.

(00:58:03) And then that work, part of our team was Bill Richards, who then took that work out of the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center in the '70s, moved over to the East Bay campus of Johns Hopkins, and continues to this day, which I think is just so fantastic. Working in collaboration with Roland Fisher and other people on that East Bay team, and others around the world, including in Switzerland and other places and in this country as well, using psychedelic psilocybin or other hallucinogens as a way to take individuals through a very contemporary and powerful rite of passage. Where you see that we've underestimated the human mind, seriously. When the gates, if you will, of defenses are dropped, and there's this profound activation that often leads to overwhelm and this mystical experience, or old memories being evoked. It's a whole world.

(00:59:16) So I think it's very interesting. And I always say, just like meditation, every stick has two ends. It can be commodified. It can be abused. People can get in trouble meditating, and they can get in

trouble on psychedelics. You know, you mess with the mind, it can get messy. But it also has enormous potential for positive transformation.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:59:46](#)): Well, thank you. This has been so wonderful. Is there anything that you want to share that we haven't touched on, or do you have any final take-home thoughts for the audience?

Roshi Joan Halifax ([00:59:55](#)): I just feel a lot of gratitude for you, Wendy. And thank you for allowing me to share a little bit about these various situations we find ourselves in. As I think we both agree, the upstream from our environmental crisis is obvious to many of us. Maybe upstream of that isn't. But I feel that this is a time where really cultivating these qualities of wisdom and compassion are essential for the survival of all species, and our planet.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:00:35](#)): Amen. Well, thank you so much, Roshi. I'm really grateful to you. Personally, you've been a great teacher to me, and just for all that you've given to this field, and to this world. And thank you for taking the time to be with us today.

Roshi Joan Halifax ([01:00:51](#)): Thank you, Wendy.

Outro – Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:00:56](#)): *This season of Mind & Life is supported by the Academy for the Love of Learning, dedicated to awakening the natural love of learning in people of all ages. Episodes are edited and produced by me and Phil Walker, and 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. And if something in this conversation sparked insight for you, let us know. 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. If you value these conversations, please consider supporting the show. You can make a donation at mindandlife.org, under Support. Any amount is so appreciated, and it really helps us create this show. Thank you for listening.*