Mind & Life Podcast Transcript
Paul Condon – Relational Meditation

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Opening Quote – Paul Condon (00:00:04): *What we mean by relational practice is experiencing ourselves within a space of warmth, and care, and support that's not just generated on our own, but that's come coming from a kind of ecology of connection, like a social ecology of connection with others. And so from various contemplative cultures and traditions, we can see examples of this. Attachment theory and also other perspectives from social psychology and developmental psychology suggest this is really important. We are really dependent on social connection for our physical and emotional well-being.*

Intro – Wendy Hasenkamp (00:00:45): Welcome to Mind & Life. I'm Wendy Hasenkamp. Today I'm speaking with social psychologist and contemplative researcher Paul Condon. Paul has been at the forefront of efforts to integrate psychological theory with the Buddhist contemplative tradition. And specifically, he looks at meditation through the lens of attachment theory. This theory has come up in a few other episodes, and Paul gives a great overview here, but it's basically about how relationships and experiences in our early childhood set up the way we interact with others and the world later in life. But also, as we'll hear, it's about how that can change.

(00:01:26) In our conversation today, we dive deep into the ways that specific kinds of meditation practice, which Paul and others call relational practice, can help us develop our natural inner capacities for care and compassion, and actually change our attachment patterning. There's a lot of nuance here, and I don't want to say too much upfront because Paul gets into all this in the episode. But suffice to say, I've found these kinds of practices tremendously powerful in my own life. And I think both the experience of doing them and the conceptual shift involved, which emphasizes relationality, can be transformational.

(00:02:04) Paul and I also chat about some seminal research he's done on measuring compassion in the real world, and how meditation can increase compassionate and pro-social behavior. We've included links in the show notes to this research, and also to Paul leading some of these kinds of relational meditations that he talks about, as well as some of his beautiful and accessible essays on the topic. So definitely check those out if this is an area of interest for you.

(00:02:35) Paul is a longtime friend and colleague, and we've also been so happy to support his research through Mind & Life grants over the years. So I've been lucky enough to follow his work as his ideas have evolved, and I feel like he's really breaking new ground with the kind of synthesis that he's bringing around these concepts of attachment, and relationship, and meditation. And the implications are crucial

for our time. All right, I'll leave it there so we can get to the conversation. It's really my pleasure to share with you Paul Condon.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:03:10): I am so happy to be joined today by Paul Condon. Paul, welcome to the show and thanks for being here.

Paul Condon (00:03:16): Thanks, Wendy. It's great to be here with you.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:03:19): I would love to hear a little bit of background to start, about how you got interested in psychology, and then also in meditation, and bringing those two together.

Paul Condon (00:03:29): So I think it really began with some pivotal classes when I was in undergraduate in college. I had decided to major in psychology because I enjoyed that class as a high school student. So I just really wanted to learn more and got excited about doing research with professors. And I don't really know why, but I just had some curiosity about Buddhism and Buddhist practices. I had traveled to Japan and spent some time there as a high school student. So I had that curiosity. And there were a few courses that I took as a college student that allowed me to explore the intersections of psychology and Buddhism.

(00:04:13) So in one class, a personality class, the instructor gave us an assignment to write a paper about a famous person using various psychological perspectives. And so I had just read the book *The Art of Happiness* by the Dalai Lama, and a psychiatrist, I think it was Howard Cutler. And I really loved that book. There were some really interesting ideas and intersections there. So I wrote about the Dalai Lama using different analytical perspectives, to try to determine whether or not he is self-actualized. *[laughter]*

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:04:45): What did you determine?

Paul Condon (00:04:46): I did make a logical argument that yes, in fact he is self-actualized. So that was a fun project. And then I took a class... The class was called Psychology of Transcendence, but it was really looking at the idea of contemplative experience and transcendence through the lens of attachment theory, and other developmental psychology perspectives.

(00:05:13): So in that class, we did meditation practice, simple breathing practices, and just basic concentration practices. But we also talked a lot about attachment theory and how early childhood experiences shape our experiences as adults in relationality and in social settings, and how we might have various kinds of sensitivities around experiences like compassion. So that was kind of my first introduction to meditation practice, actually. Not just thinking about Buddhism or psychology, but actually engaging in meditation practice.

(00:05:51) So the attachment theory perspective really struck me. I really liked that. It felt to me like, of all the different ideas that had been learning in psychology, that was a really foundational, kind of pivotal perspective that explained a lot. I think a lot of other psychology theories or perspectives are kind of one-off ideas, or simple findings. But attachment theory gave a very comprehensive framework of how our experience is shaped, and carries into adulthood, and explains a lot of social, interpersonal kinds of processes.

(00:06:29) And then I took... I don't know what it was, the university that I was at had a lot of emphasis on attachment theory—there were multiple professors that focused on attachment theory. So then I took a seminar on attachment theory specifically. And in that course, I wrote a paper about this idea called attachment priming, which is when we call to mind simple moments of connection, or feelings of care and warmth and love, even just the idea of that, in a very simple way, just for a moment, even for 10 seconds or 30 seconds. That attachment priming procedure is sufficient to increase compassion and actions to care for others, and engage in altruism, and reduce biases, reduce prejudice. And that was work that at the time was really being pioneered by Mario Mikulincer and Phil Shaver. And so I was really excited about that work and wrote my paper about it.

(00:07:30) And then I was getting ready to graduate and go off to graduate school. So those were the ideas that were really prominent in my mind as far as psychological research on compassion. And then there was the work by the Dalai Lama and other people who were really trying to find ways to speak about the intersection of meditation, compassion, and psychology.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:07:53): That's so cool, I had no idea that your interest in attachment theory goes back to undergrad. So yeah, you've obviously done so much work bringing attachment theory into contemplative world, and looking at that synthesis, and writing really beautifully about it, and presenting beautifully. So I'm excited to dig into those two things with you. And you already mentioned the attachment priming, which will certainly come into play.

(00:08:18): But maybe first, before we get into attachment theory, one of the first things I would love to hear you discuss and explain for the audience is your first study on meditation, or at least the first one I was aware of, that really brought it into real-world behavior. And I think at that time, that was such a seminal study because so much of the work around meditation and research had been done in lab settings, and looking at brain studies, or physiological outputs and things like that, which are all very important. But a large question remained, of course, about does this matter in people's daily lives, and does this change the way people live their lives? So I feel like you really put a stake in the ground about moving the research in that direction. So can you share that study with us?

Paul Condon (00:09:03): Yeah. So I think that one of the strengths of social psychology in particular is really looking at behavior and how people's behaviors change as a function of different situations that they find themselves in, out in the world. And the only way to really measure that is to try to create some kind of situation in a relatively controlled laboratory setting, and then see how people behave in those situations.

(00:09:29) And there are studies that look at things like self-report, or project yourself into a situation and imagine how you might behave. And those serve some purpose, they help answer some questions. But they also have some biases, like there might be memory biases or ways that people don't account for certain kinds of emotional states that could shape their behavior. We're not very good at predicting how we behave. So we need to create these situations. As scientists, if we want to know how people are going to behave in social situations, we have to put some effort in to try to create them.

(00:10:05) So that was a collaborative project. And the team, we were sitting down thinking about, what are some ways that we could try to assess behavior where people have the opportunity to help another? And this is a pretty common scenario—we were in Boston at the time, with the subway and public transportation. And it's a crowded space, so it's a pretty common occurrence that you might see somebody who has a physical injury or physical disability walk into a space, and the whole subway might be filled up with seats. Every seat is taken. And do some people offer their seat or not? And occasionally,

sometimes nobody does. It's just everybody's kind of in their zone, reading their book, or phone, or whatever.

(00:10:53) So it seemed like a pretty obvious situation. We could just try to recreate that in the lab and see, do people who go through some meditation training offer their seat for somebody who's in pain, or suffering from an injury of some kind?

(00:11:09) So in that study, we had people learn either mindfulness meditation or a kind of compassion training that was adapted from Tibetan Lojong tradition. And then they came back to the lab after eight weeks of doing practice. And they thought that they would be completing tests of various cognitive measures, or attention-based measures, in the laboratory at a computer—the kind of typical study that a person would do at a psychology lab.

(00:11:42) And we set it up so that when they arrived, there was a waiting area in the hallway, and it was a public space. It wasn't actually private for our lab, it was a public space. And there were three seats. So we set it up so that only one seat was available. The other two seats were occupied by actors. And then the one true participant could take the last seat when they arrived. (And we occasionally had to do a little bit of work to really encourage them to sit. Sometimes, people didn't want to sit. And so we'd delay things a bit and say, "You can take a seat..." *[laughter]* I think we had to throw out one data point because we couldn't get the person to sit. So it was a funny note that we put in the publication.)

(00:12:28) So then they would take the seat. And after they were sitting for a little while waiting for the researcher to come back, a third actor came from down the hallway, using a pair of crutches and a boot on their ankle. And the actor would approach the waiting area, and as she arrived, she would express some pain, visibly wince a little bit. And then she'd pull out her phone, lean against the wall, and check the time, and kind of sigh as if she had to wait there for her own research study to start.

(00:13:02) And while that was happening, then one of the other actors who was sitting would use their phone to start a timer and just see what would happen. We would measure the amount of time to see if people would give up their seat or not. And we always set it up so that the one true participant was sitting furthest away. So there were two actors in between the participant and the person on crutches.

(00:13:29) It might seem like a fairly simple kind of scenario, but it's a very well-established phenomenon in social psychology that when there are non-responsive bystanders, the two actors who don't give up their seat, it's a situation that discourages any kind of helping behavior. It's called the bystander effect. So when we see other people around who are not giving up their seat, we might look to that as kind of a signal of how we should behave, or what's sometimes called diffusion of responsibility. Like, "If they're not giving up their seat, I don't have to give up my seat."

(00:14:06) And that was true. We found that for people who didn't do meditation, only 15% of them gave up their seat. It was a pretty low rate of helping behavior. And then when people went through the meditation, it increased. Fifty percent of the people gave up their seat, which is a pretty big increase. So we were excited. That was a cool effect.

(00:14:31) And as you said, it was one of the first studies to show that meditation could change actual behavior in a social scenario, in a live social interaction. There had been some studies that had shown that meditation could change people's intentions or values around helping behavior, but that was one of the first that showed real action to help another person who was suffering.

(00:14:53) So that was an eight-week study with a teacher, with Lama Willa [Baker], who was one of the guests on the podcast. She was the instructor. But we also then were able to replicate that study using a smartphone app. So it wasn't just dependent on hanging out with a really awesome teacher, which could account for some effects.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:15:16): So like you said, this was one of the first studies to show this effect of meditation in real-world situations. And since then, there's been quite a bit of research on these kinds of outcomes from different experiences with meditation. Do you want to quickly summarize some of the things that have been found in terms of pro-social behavior?

Paul Condon (00:15:48): Yeah, there's been some really interesting results using different kinds of creative measures. So again, trying to get around self-report. Some people have used... there's this online game called Cyberball that social psychologists have used a lot. It's just a basic simple ball tossing game, kind of like playing catch. And there's a way to rig the game so that somebody gets excluded, or what they call ostracized, from the ball toss exchange. And we know that it's painful to be socially excluded—even from this ball tossing game that's just a sort of simple computer thing. And what some researchers have shown is that meditation will increase people's feelings of empathy for the person who's being excluded, and they'll make some effort to try to include that person in the game more, or maybe write a message to that person to express some concern or care for that person. So an actual written message that shows concern.

(00:16:52) And others have shown some research that meditation will increase people's willingness to express care and concern—for example, for somebody who is in prison. So writing a caring, optimistic message, meditation will increase people's willingness and tone of the message that they'll write.

(00:17:16) There's been some research also that's shown that people who go through meditation will pay more attention to others who are in distress or suffering, using a technique called eye tracking. So they'll actually measure how a person gazes at a scene, a picture or a video of suffering, of somebody who's in distress. And the people who meditate are more able to sustain their attention on suffering. Which, I think that's a really huge outcome. Because I think so much of our challenges around compassion involve shutting off our emotional response or shutting off our connection to those who are in distress. But if meditation can increase our ability to stay in solidarity with others' suffering—through just seeing others' suffering, literally paying attention to it—that seems like a huge, really important outcome.

(00:18:06) And we've shown also that meditation will decrease aggression. So in that study, we found that after people went through the mindfulness training with an app, they'd come to the lab and participate in a social exchange. And they would receive an insult from an actor that told them an essay that they wrote was terrible, a waste of time. And then they had an opportunity to prepare a taste sample, as part of a taste sample exercise. And it involved pouring hot sauce into a cup. *[laughter]* And the idea was that the actor would have to consume the hot sauce. And we rigged the scenario so people knew that the other person didn't like hot sauce or spicy flavors. And the people who went through meditation poured less hot sauce after receiving an insult. They still experienced negative emotion. So it wasn't that they just became passively accepting of the insult. They still experienced negative emotions around that insult, but they didn't react by pouring a high amount of hot sauce for that person to consume. So this is another classic example of a social psych test to try to measure a real-world behavior of aggression.

(00:19:23) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:19:53): You mentioned some of the barriers to compassion that we can experience, like just being overwhelmed, for example, with the suffering of another person or something, and kind of shutting down. Can you share a little bit bigger picture, some of the common barriers to compassion that we face?

Paul Condon (00:20:15): Yeah. So I think this is another area where social psychologists have put a lot of work into trying to understand what kind of situations encourage compassionate, empathic processes, and behaviors, and which situations discourage them. And I think the way the picture comes out is that we have innate capacities for care, and compassion, and social connection, and collaboration. So when we're relatively happy, and relatively at ease, and come into contact with another person's distress, it's fairly easy to express care and concern, and wish others well. It's in some way, our kind of natural way of being. I think from the perspective of social psychology, evolutionary psychology, and biology, there's these innate capacities for care that are our natural way of being.

(00:21:12) But when we experience a lot of stress, or we have our own difficulties with our own traumas, or various societal conditions, those innate capacities for care become attenuated. So one common one is a kind of aversion to suffering. So we come into connection with another person's distress and suffering. And it might provoke our own internal stress, our own internal pain in response to another suffering, perhaps because we don't feel that we're capable of doing anything about it. So if we don't feel like we can do anything about another suffering, we might just feel stress and turn inward on our own pain in reaction to that. And it motivates a kind of shutting off or avoiding connection with another's suffering.

(00:22:04) One way this shows up in some research studies is, like I said, we can feel compassion and engage in helping behavior when it's a one-off scenario with another person. We feel some emotional connection with their story. But then when the number of people suffering increases, the capacity for compassion gets shut down, and there's a kind of motivated choice to shut down our emotional response. So we don't actually really feel the emotional connection to the other person. We don't feel that sense of care and compassion for them. And it's sort of like we're just relating to others less in a "human connection" kind of way, by shutting off that emotional response.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:22:52): Which is so interestingly kind of counterintuitive, because with more and more people, there's more and more suffering, but we experience it less.

Paul Condon (00:23:01): Yeah. It's like when you would expect there would be more compassion, it's ironically being shut off.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:23:05): Yeah. I think it's so interesting—a lot of your work, and what you were just saying too, shows how so much of our experience of compassion can be contextual. And it's kind of like getting cues or it's situationally derived. And I know you've spent a lot of time thinking about how context influences our individual moment experiences. And then I'm also thinking back to your interest in attachment theory, and how there's a certain kind of vulnerability that is involved with compassion—to be able to feel those emotions.

(00:23:44) One of the things this is bringing up for me is, you wrote a fantastic essay for Mind & Life's Insights project recently. And you open that essay describing an experience that you had in a class that you took, I think as an undergrad, where your teacher asked people to share thoughts or emotions that trouble them, or that are really difficult for them and kind of plague them, and write them down

anonymously, and then ended up sharing a number of them in front of the class. And it turns out, a lot of people had similar fears or similar things that were concerning them deep down. It just struck me that we don't normally share those fears, and it takes a certain amount of vulnerability and feeling of safety, really, in order to do that. And that got me thinking back to your interest in attachment theory, and safety, and what is called a "secure base." So I'm wondering if you want to weave some of that together, maybe explain a little bit of the basics of attachment theory for the audience, and how that might play into our experiences of compassion.

Paul Condon (00:24:56): Yeah, so the exercise in the class—the professor asked us to write down the voice in our head that we wish we didn't have to hear throughout the day. And then we then turned in the card, and then he read them aloud publicly and anonymously.

(00:25:12) And it was really amazing, because I think what happens is, we have these experiences of anxiety or fear, or self-doubt, self-criticism. And we're so fully wrapped up in them as we experience them, as if it's who we are, as if it's our own experience. And it's also a kind of reason to then be disconnected from others. In our social world, we experience those as things that cut us off from each other. But what the exercise revealed was actually the opposite—that those difficult experiences really are a thread of shared human experience. And that can be a tremendous resource for then empathy and compassion for others. And we went then, quite deep in that course into trying to understand, where do these threads of heartbreak come from in our lives and our experience? And attachment theory was one of the main frameworks for understanding all of that.

(00:26:17) The basic idea of attachment theory is that as infants, we come into the world, into our lives with a kind of preparedness for relationality. We come with the expectation of being in connection to a caregiver. And infants will engage in behaviors and strategies to try to maintain proximity to a resource for care, because their lives are utterly dependent on receiving care. And it's not just physical resources like food or physical safety, but also emotional nurturance. Research has shown that that's a kind of fundamental need or expectation that supports the development of humans.

(00:27:05) And so for better or worse, we experience care that is more sensitive or insensitive, based on our experience with our early caregivers. And interestingly, there's some research that suggests that even the most attuned, empathic caregiver is only attuned with their infant about 50% of the time. So that's even the most empathic caring figure.

(00:27:38) So what that suggests is that all of us, whether we classify ourselves as secure, which means we come to trust and expect that care is available for us, or insecure, which means that we have some doubt or distrust around the source of care. Regardless of that primary orientation that we have, all of us have some elements of insecurity. We all have some trace or some sort of inner experience of insecurity that gets laid down in our bodies and our minds throughout our life.

(00:28:19) And we don't just develop experiences of security or insecurity with one caregiver. We develop those experiences across our life throughout a whole network of relationships. And those experiences in relationship then shape our sense of ourself, and our sense of the world, and our expectations of what future relationships will be like. So we develop a sense of identity and a sense of ourselves in connection with the wider social world. And those early experiences then filter how we see future moments of relationship and connection.

(00:29:00) So even if we've had a relatively secure experience, we might still have some sense of insecurity that gets triggered or raised up for us as we're moving about our world. And we might have

some feelings of insecurity that get triggered in certain kinds of relationships, but other kinds of relationships feel more secure. And also, even if we're primarily insecure, we might've had moments of security with various kinds of people throughout our lives. And we can develop moments of security not just with parents, but also with friends, with teachers, with coaches, mentors. Even within an organization—there's research on attachment and organizations, or school systems—that a school system, or organizational or work-based place can foster a sense of security or insecurity in people.

(00:29:57) So what this suggests is that all of us have potential resources that we can find in our life that might help us to experience a sense of security, even if the larger narrative or experience of our life in relationships has been more challenging, or potentially traumatic. There are ways in which we can recover or resource ourselves to experience more security.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:30:25): Yeah, I love that. And I feel like this line of work really just lifts up our capacity for change. And I think for a while (correct me if I'm wrong, but) in this field, it was kind of considered that you develop this attachment style as an infant, and that's basically how you live your life. Most of psychology I think, was under that umbrella that you develop a certain personality through adolescence, and then it's fairly fixed. And of course, in the last several decades, that's completely been overturned, and we're learning more and more about our capacity for change and growth throughout the lifespan. So I always take such comfort in that, in relation to these patterns that have been laid down early in life, that they can be changed into...is it called earned secure? I've heard that term before.

Paul Condon (00:31:14): Yeah. Earned security. Yeah. I think part of the reason why attachment theory was so innovative when it was first introduced, is that it provided some pretty well worked out theory, and then eventually some empirical data that showed that our attachment experiences do persist from early childhood through adulthood. And that's one reason why that theory has so much explanatory power. But then, yes, at the same time, that doesn't mean that we're locked in to certain patterns.

(00:31:48) And that's also where there's some real beauty with the mergence of contemplative theory and practice with attachment theory—that our attachment patterns can change, and we can develop a sense of earned security, or building our own secure base, or discovering our own secure base, in a way, as adults.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:32:09): I have one question before we jump into the contemplative angle. This is just a really basic question that I have never even thought about until just this conversation, but is there research showing a relationship between attachment style and compassionate behavior or tendencies in the world? Has that research ever been done?

Paul Condon (00:32:29): Yeah. Yeah, there is. And that's also where the attachment priming research I think was inspired from, recognizing that. There's some research that shows that people who have a secure orientation are more likely to express curiosity about their peers, a kind of support for empathy and collaboration. As you said, compassion might involve a little bit of vulnerability, being in social connection and around other people's emotions. So security involving that willingness to be in connection with another person is important, and the research has shown that. And then I think that was also some of the inspiration for that idea: if we can help people to temporarily experience security, it might increase compassion. And so then the attachment priming literature showed that.

(00:33:28) So one of the things that I find really interesting, and sometimes not discussed a lot in relation to attachment theory, is a definition of security. It's not that any of us are fully and 100% secure in that we're just perfectly emotionally stable, and comfortable, and confident all the time. But rather,

one way of defining security is the ability to navigate between stages of autonomy and relationality with some ease and comfort. So there's comfort in relying on social connection and support from others, but then also comfort in being autonomous and able to explore the world on one's own, branching out from the secure base and venturing into the world. But also then when needed, coming back to the secure base for support and emotional connection.

(00:34:32) So again, it's not that any of us has it all totally worked out, or are 100% independent, but there's an ability to explore, and navigate, and reconnect with resources.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:34:45): That's interesting. And is it right to say... Just as you were saying that, it made me think about, if you're moving away and being autonomous and independent, if you go too far in that direction, it feels more like the avoidant attachment style. That's one of the insecure categories, where you kind of avoid those close connections. Whereas if you're too far on the side of sticking with that secure base, that can be more the anxious type, where you're always looking for that and you don't trust that it's going to be there. So that's interesting to think about security being almost a midway, or an ability to navigate between those two poles.

Paul Condon (00:35:29): Yeah. It doesn't mean that we don't have those emotions or those experiences that might be like a kind of avoidance or anxiousness. But when those emotions occur, there's maybe not as much fear around them. There's more comfortability to express different kinds of emotions with the trust that it will be met with support and care. Yeah, that's a classic understanding of the secure base is that the difficult emotions will be met with sensitivity and an appropriate response for the situation.

(00:36:09) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:36:44): Well let's jump into your beautiful work, bringing all of these ideas of attachment theory into the contemplative space, or weaving those together. So it might be interesting to start with... I've heard you talk about the picture of meditation as it's shown up in Western industrialized societies in a more individualistic frame than maybe it was originally developed. So maybe we could start there.

Paul Condon (00:37:09): So in our systems of education and learning, especially in Western cultures and societies, we tend to think of learning things as "my own effort," my own discipline to really put in a lot of effort and maintain some kind of connection to it. And then with perseverance and grit, I will improve in whatever skill or domain I'm trying to get better at.

(00:37:35) And that mentality, I think probably many of us bring into meditation practice. And this was the case for me that when I first started meditating, it felt successful to me when I was using my app on my phone, and the number of days of maintaining the practice consecutively increased, and the number of hours increased. And I was like, "Okay, the meditation is getting better and stronger." That's what I felt was a sign of success.

(00:38:00) And not to dismiss any of that, but it's a kind of, I think a limited understanding or perspective on meditation. And also, from the perspective of people in Buddhist studies and history, like I'm thinking of David McMahan who wrote a really amazing book, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, this is a new way of thinking about meditation—that we take it up as an individual practice through our own effort, and learn it maybe through a book or some kind of app, just on our own. Quite different from contemplative cultures of the past, where the way that people would learn meditation is through

relationship to a community, or to a teacher, or to a lineage of spiritual ancestors who embodied the possibility of deep contemplative insight and experience. So through this lens of the individualistic framework, we miss out on that deep sense of connection to a tradition or to a community of practitioners.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:39:06): Yeah. And that also, I think, helps shed light on how meditation has been so much in the self-help domain in the West. Just like you described, "I'm going to do this, my individual self, for my benefit," and it misses potentially larger societal implications and relational implications.

Paul Condon (00:39:28): Well also, there's an interesting thread of connection there to the attachment work. Because if we do have a kind of avoidant orientation, meaning we don't want to rely so much on other people for support and encouragement, we might be attracted to meditation for that very reason—as a kind of self-help project to, through our own effort, increase our well-being. And not that any of that's a bad thing, it's just it may sort of restrict the possibilities.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:40:00): Right. And isn't there even some research showing that in certain situations, meditation can make you more self-focused, or something like that?

Paul Condon (00:40:09): Yeah, there is some research on that, that shows that if we approach meditation through a mindset of individualism, then doing the very practice can actually make us more selfish, or less helpful when there's requests for help. It can make us less likely to experience guilt, which is an important emotion in terms of social repair and social connection. It can make people think more highly of themselves, which is ironically not what contemplative traditions are trying to promote. So yeah, that's some important research also coming out of social psychology.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:40:49): Okay, so that brings us to what you've talked a lot about in terms of a relational starting point of meditation, and how we need to reclaim that or move towards that, at least in Western societies. So can you unpack what you mean by that?

Paul Condon (00:41:06): Yeah, and so this is really coming out of collaboration with John Makransky, who's a professor of Buddhist Studies, and has done a lot of work to try to translate and make accessible more relational practices. What we mean by relational practice is, very much like the secure base concept or the attachment theory idea, experiencing ourselves within a space of warmth, and care, and support that's not just generated on our own, but that's coming from a kind of ecology of connection, like a social ecology of connection with others.

(00:41:45) And so from various contemplative cultures and traditions, we can see examples of this—calling to mind maybe an enlightened figure, like the Buddha for Buddhists. Or within Christianity, calling to mind the presence of God, or a figure like Jesus or Mary. These are a kind of relational connection that supports the development of contemplative experience and qualities like compassion and wisdom. Or calling to mind connection with one's community of other practitioners, or a lineage of teachers, other people who have really dedicated their lives to practice. Calling them to mind as a way of supporting one's own process engaging in meditation practice.

(00:42:37) So this relational starting point, or sometimes we refer to it as a relational mindset for meditation, seems to be kind of absent within a lot of the discourse or secularization around meditation in the Western setting. And so attachment theory and also other perspectives throughout social psychology and developmental psychology suggest this is really important. We are really dependent on

social connection for our physical well-being and emotional well-being. This is a natural thing that we need. And that became even more apparent for us as a result of the pandemic—when we're cut off from people, it causes a lot of suffering. We need social connection. So there's a sort of obvious and natural connection there between these various theories and psychology, and the idea of a relational field of support for meditation practice.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:43:33): Yeah, I think that's so interesting too, you brought up secularization. Of course, a huge avenue through which meditation has become popularized in the West was to kind of remove the religious elements so that it would be more acceptable across different faiths, or not tied to a certain religious belief system, which has been brilliant in many ways. But I think what you're pointing out is there's also this then maybe inadvertent loss of some of the relational experience, I guess, that was embedded within the religious context. So that's really interesting to think about. And John Makransky, as you say, has done beautiful work shining a light on that, and then finding ways to recreate that in a secular way for folks in the West, and of all faiths or no faith. So can you describe a little bit about how the process works in these practices?

Paul Condon (00:44:35): Yeah. So in terms of trying to translate this into a setting where not everyone is in the same religious identity or same religious framework, how can we help people connect? I really like this concept that I think Brooke Lavelle wrote about, distinguishing between an open secular context and a closed secular context. So in a closed secular context, there's no discussion of religion or spirituality, and there's a kind of assumption that science is the agreed upon framework that everybody can just connect with and engage in, and that becomes the platform for conversation and then also, meditation practice.

(00:45:26) In an open secular context, there's not any one particular perspective or framework that is prioritized. But rather, people can be invited to connect with the meditation practices by drawing upon resources from their life, or from their worldview, or their culture, or their lineage and ancestors, as a way to inform engagement with meditation practice. So that feels like a really important and valuable concept for just understanding the different spaces that frame contemplative practice and dialogue around practice.

(00:46:05) And the way that then we try to engage this relational mindset with meditation is by inviting people to populate a field of care, or a kind of caring moment or benefactor experience, by calling to mind something that is meaningful to them in some way. And I always try to give people a lot of different options for how to do that. So it could be a simple caring moment, like a memory of being with somebody who that memory helps you just feel happy, helps you feel at ease or calm in some way. And it's of course not maybe a perfect relationship. Again, no one person is perfect. But there might be simple moments that feel happy to recall. Maybe a moment as a child with a grandparent, or with a friend, or with a teacher, or coach, or maybe somebody who provided you some encouragement in some way. And the memory of that experience becomes the basis for experiencing ourselves as an object of care. And as we learn to experience what it's like to receive care or to feel care, that can help evoke our own inner capacity for qualities like care, and joy, and ease.

(00:47:30) But there are also many other ways to do that practice. So it could also involve a spiritual benefactor of some kind. If a person has a connection to a particular worldview or tradition, they could be invited to call to mind that tradition. And you can do this. You could do that in a secular space, where a person is just being invited to connect with something that's already meaningful to them. It could be a lineage of ancestors, calling to mind their presence and bringing them into the room. It could also be a benefactor or a person maybe who we've never met, but their writing or their work is meaningful for

some reason. Like that book, *The Art of Happiness*, for me, that was like a benefactor book when I was in college, and it really inspired me. So it continues to serve that, just thinking about that book is a kind of benefactor experience.

(00:48:25) So when we teach these practices, these relational mindset, or this relational starting point for practice, a lot of the work is trying to help people in a way recover some memories that they might not have paid much attention to or thought much about, but are actually really valuable and can be very helpful for experiencing care and warmth.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:48:52): I was going to ask, what about folks who had very difficult childhoods or life experiences, and maybe don't have belief systems or figures that they can bring to mind? Does that come up in your experience, people who really struggle to find those examples?

Paul Condon (00:49:10): Yeah, I think it's quite common. So it could also be a moment with a pet. An animal can be a really nice way for people to do the practice, like being with a dog or cat. Or also a place in nature. Or a place that feels welcoming—it doesn't necessarily have to be outside, but a memory of being in a particular place that feels safe, and encouraging, and welcoming, where we just feel at ease.

(00:49:43) One of the neat connections with cognitive science here is that when we recall various experiences, we're not just thinking about them in an abstract way. So I'm thinking of Larry Barsalou's work on grounded cognition. When we call to mind memories or experiences, we're simulating them across a sort of full embodied sensory experience that draws upon the visual system in the brain, and the kinesthetic systems like body movement, taste, touch, physical movement, sounds, and so forth.

(00:50:22) So when we think about something, a memory from the past, we're reenacting it throughout the brain and body as if it's happening now. For example, even if we think of somebody who's maybe passed away, it might be at first painful to think about them. Maybe we haven't thought about them because it causes some sadness or grief, but we can actually, through a meditation like this, from that perspective of grounded cognition, we're reenacting in our bodies what it felt like to be in their presence. So we can literally experience their presence through ourselves, and experience the warmth and care. So I find there's a lot of really inspiring and neat connections that come from bringing science into the dialogue with meditation practice in this way.

(00:51:12) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:51:12): I love that emphasis—that it kind of doesn't matter what experience or memory you're drawing on. The point is to kind of reactivate that experience in the present moment in your body-mind system. So I think I heard you also give examples of even activities that might feel very calming or grounding to you, like playing music, or writing, or something like that. So it's really broad. I love the creativity that you can bring into the kinds of things you can use to focus on. So then you bring these up, and steep in them, I guess, or just hang out in that emotional experience? And then what do you do with that?

Paul Condon (00:52:24): Yeah, so you use the memory or the imagery to help connect with the emotional experience of care, or warmth, or noticing the positive qualities that come with that memory. Then the practice is to then turn our attention to those qualities, and let them help us relax into them more and more. So in a way, it's not trying to create something new, but those memories are helping us to access something that's already present.

(00:53:02) So from an evolutionary social psychology or biological point of view, we have some neural architecture and systems for care that are present. And these memories are actually, I guess you could say they're helping to activate those processes. And then we're learning to let them do their work, I guess is a way to put it. Let those experiences and qualities help us relax and settle down into a space of warmth, and ease, and care. And then that can be the kind of inner quality that's not dependent on something external. It's our inner capacity that can inform how we show up for others.

(00:53:51) There's one story, which I've written about and shared, but I think helps illustrate an important aspect of this. So during Covid, my daughter was nine months old or something, fairly young, and it was a difficult time. And there was a pond in the neighborhood where I live, and we would go to the pond, and it was very helpful and nourishing. When we showed up at the pond, she really enjoyed it, and it helped me feel more at ease. And it was sort of like a space for us, where we kind of just developed a bond, I think, over being at the pond.

(00:54:30) And we had a big fire, then that came through our town that destroyed a lot of buildings and homes, and a lot of the natural landscape. And that space was no longer accessible for a while, so we couldn't go back to the pond. So it was kind of difficult, but then I used that as a benefactor place and a benefactor memory for meditation. And it was like the experience of it became stronger. Even though I was not able to go there, something about losing it, but then recovering it through meditation made it even stronger. It wasn't dependent on the actual space. It was pointing to a kind of inner capacity within our own being that we could access with some immediacy and freshness here in the present moment.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:55:17): I love that. It really speaks to the power of our imagination, and like you were saying, the capacity of our minds to simulate and make something real just by thinking about it. And then I guess the idea with this practice is repeatedly then over time, you start to re-pattern or shift the balance more into these qualities that come up from re-experiencing these things. Is that the idea?

Paul Condon (00:55:45): Yeah. I think in terms of relating it back to attachment theory, when we do the practice at first, it might be that the mind has some various reactions, or even maybe some difficult emotions or some distrust. So we might feel a little bit of that happiness or ease or care, but then at the same time feel some reactivity to it, some distrust. Or it might involve some vulnerability, like that card exercise from the classroom. It just can trigger up our emotional insecurities.

(00:56:20) But if we keep doing the practice, and explore doing it with different kinds of benefactors or different kinds of caring moments, I think what can happen is the mind begins to learn that the ability to experience care, and qualities like warmth and ease and joy, are not dependent on the content of the field of care practice. The specific content is not actually the main point. The main point is the content is helping us to access something from within that is more trustworthy or more fully who we are. And that can then become the basis for deepening in contemplative practice, and that can then help sustain and inform our efforts to care for others. So in that way, it's not just for ourselves, but it becomes a practice that supports our efforts for others as well.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:57:12): Yeah, I just want to emphasize that point, because I think it's really important and powerful. The idea that... I think so often we have this tendency to experience the world, like the good feelings that I have, if and when I have them, are because of what's happening out there, the way people are treating me or the situations that arise. And that's what is the source of my good feelings or bad feelings. But I think this really—I know I've experienced this myself in doing these kinds of practices—really shifts our ability to see that, like you said, it's a subtle thing, but it's like, "Oh no, that's actually generated inside me. And in a way, it is related to the care that I have received in all of

these ways that are sometimes very hard to see." But the more you practice, maybe the more you see it. So I'm kind of curious for you personally, how engaging in these practices has changed you, if you have examples of things in your life that feel different.

Paul Condon (00:58:18): Yeah. I think probably one of the most powerful things is, it can help lead to a kind of basic... people sometimes describe it as a feeling of just basic okayness. Like what you were describing, we can recognize that our feelings of warmth, and care, and joy and ease are not depending on something external, but are helping us to access and sort of discover resources for all those positive qualities from within. That that's actually the more fundamental resource for our happiness and well-being. It's just kind of, in a way, our inner experience.

(00:58:59) And I think through doing the practice repeatedly, one of my favorite things about it is we start to experience care in all sorts of ways that might not feel obvious at first. Even just the idea of the breath as a kind of benefactor, or the body as a benefactor. So sometimes, the mind just gets kind of restless or caught up in the whirlwind of activity of our days. And then you might come to the end of the day, and have a chance to just take a breath, and relax, and settle into the body. And that's a kind of moment of care that we're experiencing. So it's not coming from an external benefactor in that case, but it's just the physical being of the body as a kind of benefactor experience.

(00:59:46) And we might start to notice care in all aspects of our lives, that maybe we might at one point just dismissed or thought were not particularly important or meaningful. But then when we recover it in our mind, it becomes much more meaningful. It's like, "Okay, that's now a resource that I have that really can support this meditation practice."

(01:00:08) Even simple moments of laughing with friends. Or sometimes in the classroom, I'm teaching, and funny things will happen. It was shortly after we came back to the classroom after Covid, and I was running late to class one day, and I ate a bagel really fast before class. And then I went to class and I was coughing, and I had my mask on. And I apologized. I told them, "It's not Covid, it's just because I ate my bagel really fast," and everybody started laughing. *[laughter]* And it was like in that moment, I could feel the boundary, or the sort of iciness between a professor and students just fell away for a moment. It's just, we're there together laughing.

(01:00:47) So maybe we don't pay much attention to those experiences. They might not mean much. But when we do these meditation practices, we start to see those moments through a different light and feel kind of grateful for them. Or those become more valuable than other ways that we're conditioned to think about our world, and other goals that we might be pursuing. That actually, social connection and opportunities for social connection can be found in just mundane experiences that are really meaningful.

Wendy Hasenkamp (01:01:22): Yeah. So I'm thinking about... I'm curious what you see as the applicability or value of these kinds of practices in a larger scale, thinking about challenges we face as a society. So just any reflections on that would be great.

Paul Condon (01:01:39): Yeah. I think that, again, going back to attachment theory, one thing that is made possible by a feeling of security and feeling of safety is a kind of willingness to venture out into the world with more curiosity, with more courage, with more empathy.

(01:02:01) So I think in terms of the current challenges that we face in the world, doing a practice like this could provide a greater inner resource—to have the willingness to see suffering more clearly, and to

be in relationship with the suffering in the world without getting burned out, without getting so emotionally reactive to it. So that then our potential ways of engaging with the world are coming from a space of more ease, and well-being, and even joy to be then in connection with others. Not ignoring suffering, but being in greater touch with suffering. Both with our own difficult experiences, and then also with the difficult experiences that others are going through.

(01:02:54) So I think in terms of social challenges and challenges of climate change, there's some heavy emotions that come with learning about all of these things, and the history of our country and our world, and then the future. There's a lot of difficult emotions that might get triggered by that. So having practices that provide us with a sense of a secure base to come back to when we're experiencing difficult emotions can then help us be sustained in doing that work.

Wendy Hasenkamp (01:03:23): Well Paul, this has been so great. Is there anything that you wanted to share or touch on that we haven't talked about?

Paul Condon (01:03:31): Well, I just wanted to say that I think Mind & Life has really been a great support for me and my journey in all of this. And so I really see Mind & Life as a kind of benefactor, or field of care. So thanks so much for all the work that you and the organization are doing.

Wendy Hasenkamp (01:03:51): That's great to hear. Well, I think that your particular synthesis and direction is so powerful and needed, so thank you for all the work that you're doing. And thanks for taking the time to chat with us today.

Paul Condon (01:04:03): Thank you, Wendy.

Outro – Wendy Hasenkamp (01:04:08): *This episode was edited and produced by me and Phil Walker. The 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.*

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