Mind & Life Podcast Transcript
Christy Wilson-Mendenhall – Emotions in the World

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Opening Quote – Christy Wilson-Mendenhall (00:00:03): *Inner resilience is interdependent with community resilience and planetary resilience. And so you can't work on one without working on the other two. So, really thinking about what are the practices that support that, and also how we make sure those practices stay embedded in the worldviews in which they originated. So that that interconnection of people and nature is at the forefront. There's so many different wisdom traditions for us to learn from, and Western science is just one of them.*

Intro – Wendy Hasenkamp (00:00:45): Welcome to Mind & Life. I'm Wendy Hasenkamp. Today I'm speaking with cognitive and affective scientist Christy Wilson-Mendenhall. Christy is on faculty at the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where she studies emotions and well-being. And recently she's also been collaborating with the Loka initiative there, to help build resilience for those who are struggling with the impacts of the climate crisis. Christy has a long history of studying emotions, and the perspective she brings helps ground emotions in the complexity of the real world, and it also highlights how changeable emotions can be. Looking at emotions in this way opens doors to the possibility of shifting our emotional landscape towards more well-being, for example through contemplative practice.

(00:01:38) I've known Christy for over a decade, and I've had the pleasure to collaborate with her in various ways. As you'll hear, her sphere is populated by a lot of other guests who've been on this show—people who've influenced my thinking deeply as well—like Larry Barsalou, Lisa Feldman Barrett, John Dunne, Dekila Chungyalpa and many more. By the way, if you like this conversation, you may want to check out some of those previous episodes as well. They complement this material really nicely, I think.

(00:02:08) I love Christy's synthetic and also very thoughtful perspective. She has solid footing in basic science and theoretical approaches, but as you'll hear, she's also been moving increasingly into applied spaces. There's so many useful insights here about emotions and how the mind works, about the critical role of community and relationships, and what all that means for resilience and well-being. I think one of Christy's strengths is that she's totally comfortable going deep in the weeds, but she also keeps stepping back and seeing the bigger picture. For example, we talk a lot in this episode about worldview and the importance of simply making worldview explicit when sharing approaches like contemplative practice. That's an insight I've really been thinking deeply about since we spoke.

(00:02:59) There are a lot of gems in here, a lot of deep wisdom. I'm not going to list all the topics, we'll just jump right into the episode. I so appreciate Christy sharing not only her knowledge, but also her path and her evolving perspective around issues in society and how research can speak to the many urgent needs of today. I hope you get a lot out of this one. I know I did. It's a true joy to be able to share with you Christy Wilson-Mendenhall.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:03:25): It's such a pleasure to welcome Christy Wilson-Mendenhall to the show. Christy, it's wonderful to see you. Thanks so much for being here.

Christy Wilson-Mendenhall (00:03:37): Oh, Wendy, it's so wonderful to be here with you. Thank you for having me.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:03:41): So, you probably know, I love to start with a little bit of background from the guest and kind of understanding what motivated you to get into the work that you do. So, how did you get interested in studying emotions? What drew you to that space?

Christy Wilson-Mendenhall (00:03:57): Yeah, so I started my career actually in cognitive neuroscience and cognitive science thinking about and studying how we come to understand the world around us. And as I continued on that journey, I had the opportunity to collaborate with fantastic Lisa Feldman Barrett, along with my amazing advisor at the time, Larry Barsalou—I think both of which have been on this podcast.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:04:29): Yes, both guests on the show.

Christy Wilson-Mendenhall (00:04:30): Yeah. So, definitely listen to them, they're amazing. And really I think for me, starting to think about this work at the intersection of cognitive and affective neuroscience, studying emotion, the nature of emotions in the brain, and was really drawn to studying emotions because of their very important role in our mental health and emotional well-being. And so for me, it was the first step in a journey, I would say, towards more translational and applied work that I have continued on with.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:05:05): Awesome. Yeah, and I'm glad you mentioned influences from Larry Barsalou and Lisa Feldman Barrett. And so I'd love to kind of touch on some of the perspectives and lenses that you bring to emotions, because I think it's not necessarily the way that most people might think about emotions. So, can you talk a little bit about the lens that you bring there?

Christy Wilson-Mendenhall (00:05:28): Yeah. So, at the time that I started that work, the dominant view I would say of emotions was really asking questions about whether we could find consistent and specific patterns in the brain and body for a handful of emotions—emotions like anger and sadness and happiness and disgust. And the perspective that we were bringing to that work was a different theoretical perspective. I think what was interesting about that is it really asked different kinds of questions to begin with. So, maybe I can touch on a few themes in that work about the perspectives that that work brings to emotions.

(00:06:15) So, one of those themes is the really important role of context in shaping emotions. So, thinking about emotions as really emerging in situations in contexts. So, really being context-dependent, which then points to related questions about how much emotions vary. So how much emotions can vary

across people, and also within a person over time. And so really understanding how the brain was working to produce a wide variety of emotions. And this perspective—the constructionist perspectives that we were working on theoretically and running studies on—really suggested that the neural networks involved in emotion were not specific to emotion themselves. So, there are many networks in the brain that were interacting to produce the very complex emotions that we often experience.

(00:07:23) And so I think what was interesting about this perspective is that it opened up a lot of new questions, particularly about how much emotions vary and also about how we learn emotions. So, instead of assuming that we are born with modules for particular emotions—that we learn much of what we then experience emotionally. And so compared to other theories in the field at the time, this approach was much more focused on, as I said, context. It was much more focused on learning. And I think also it really opened up questions about our well-being, right? So, how we can work with our emotions, how we can shape and change the emotions that we're experiencing.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:08:16): Yeah, very cool. And so just to say that maybe another way is, contrasting a perspective from the idea that maybe most of us think about emotions of: I have anger or sadness or happiness and it kind of appears in my body and it's just something that happens and it's pretty much the same every time. Is that what you mean by the context and situatedness, that those things have influences on the subtle nuances of how these emotions show up?

Christy Wilson-Mendenhall (00:08:48): Yeah. So, the idea really is that even with emotions that we might use the same word for—like feeling 'afraid'—that that can look very different from situation to situation. And it's really important that we think about that context, because it shapes our actions in that situation. So, for example, we can think about feeling afraid because there's a fire in our house, and that is obviously life-threatening and we need to move quickly and get out of the house. We can also think about feeling afraid before giving a public talk or public speaking. And in that case, you don't want to run away, right? *[laughter]* You want to be able to engage. And some research suggests that if you can perceive that as being 'ready,' those sensations in your body as feeling ready and sort of mobilizing to be able to do this, that can be really helpful.

(00:09:51) And so that's what I mean by context shaping how we experience this. So, that's really different from thinking like, oh, fear is just something that gets triggered. It's the same every way. And then we may work with it, but actually the context plays a fundamental role in how we experience the emotion.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:10:16): Great. And then, so I know as your career has unfolded, you started to think more about how working with emotions in this way can have influences for our well-being. And of course you've intersected a lot with Buddhist philosophy and contemplative practice. So, can you share a little bit about how those things came into the picture?

Christy Wilson-Mendenhall (00:10:41): Yeah, of course. So, in graduate school, I was really lucky to be introduced to Buddhist philosophy and traditions actually through a course that was co-taught by my advisor Larry Barsalou, John Dunne, who studies Buddhist traditions and philosophy...

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:11:03): Also been on the podcast. *[laughter]*

Christy Wilson-Mendenhall (00:11:05): Also been on the podcast, and who, I can see his desk now, where I sit here at the Center for Healthy Minds. And then Geshe Lobsang Tenzin Negi, who had gone through the traditional monastic training and then also come to the US and received his PhD studying

emotions. Which was an amazing group of scholars to be in a class with. They were teaching a class on the intersections between cognitive science and Buddhist philosophy. And what was really amazing for me about that class was first just recognizing those intersections. How many of the ideas that we thought were really cutting edge in cognitive science at the time are in these texts that are thousands of years old in Buddhist philosophy, which I found really exciting. And also quite humbling, frankly.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:12:09): Yeah. Do you have any examples of some ideas that were reflective of much older Buddhist ideas?

Christy Wilson-Mendenhall (00:12:15): Oh, that's a great question. Yeah, I mean, I think some of these ideas about how we come to form concepts and categories, and how there's no essence to those concepts and categories was one that was kind of reflected in both.

(00:12:34) And I think the other things that I really took away from that was, also in kind of being humbled, of really realizing and respecting just the value of different wisdom traditions. So, Western science being one way that we can think about these ideas, but that there are many other approaches and perspectives and traditions. And that being able to come together and have these dialogues in very multidisciplinary spaces, just how fruitful that was. And that's, I think set me down a path to really gravitate towards multidisciplinary spaces.

(00:13:21) And then the final thing that really made an impression on me when I took that class is just that, we had been talking about these very similar kind of ideas in cognitive science, but it wasn't in a framework to understand suffering and well-being. And so learning about Buddhist philosophy, which is very much in a framework of understanding suffering and alleviating that suffering, and then has a tradition of practices to do that. What we were learning in cognitive science, again, the ideas were very similar, but we weren't connecting that at all to well-being.

(00:14:04) And so for me, all of those things I would say really shaped the direction of my career. And over the course of many years following really set me down more of a translational path. I'm so grateful for my basic science training and learning about all of these theories and methods and approaches, but really wanting to apply those to have an impact on people's lives.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:14:37): And at that time, had you done any meditation yourself or was that kind of your entree?

Christy Wilson-Mendenhall (00:14:44): Yeah, that's a really great question. I definitely would say my first path in was more of the philosophical. Around the same time, I did take my first meditation class, which I specifically remember because I remember the teacher actually introducing some of the practices with research from cognitive science, and I was like, "Oh, wow!" *[laughter]* Which of course made total sense, but it was interesting to see it integrated in that way. So, yeah, it was around the same time that I was both starting to learn experientially, but I would say I was deeper into the philosophy first.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:15:29): Great. Well, yeah, I know you've been working more recently in applied spaces, like you were saying, and translating these ideas about emotions more into real world applications and helping people. And you've been working a lot, I know with the Loka initiative and Dekila Chungyalpa who's also been on the show—I'm seeing a theme here, a lot of folks in this circle! *[laughter]* And you also have a Peace Grant from Mind & Life for this project too, which we're so happy

to be able to support this work. Do you want to share a little bit about that, and working with folks on the frontline in environmental movements?

Christy Wilson-Mendenhall (00:16:07): Yeah. So it's been really amazing to work with Dekila and the Loka team. I can share a little bit, actually it's kind of a funny story, how we came to work together. So, Loka is also housed at the Center for Healthy Minds at University of Wisconsin–Madison, and they also have many other connections across the university. They work to build capacity and resources in partnership with faith leaders and Indigenous culture keepers on environmental and climate issues. And so we were here for a couple years actually, doing separate lines of work, and we were both thinking about applying for a Mind & Life grant, actually. And our associate director, Issa Delsky was like, "We should only submit one from the Center for Healthy Minds. So, why don't you two just get together and talk a little bit and figure out which one of you is going to submit this year." So, Dekila and I jumped on a Zoom call and we started chatting, and we just realized that we were really interested in each other's work. So, I started talking about the concept of emotional granularity—this is the ability to make really fine-grain distinctions in our emotional experiences. So, for example, to be able to distinguish feeling afraid from feeling lonely, from feeling exhausted, from feeling sad, for example. Versus what we would consider being lower in granularity would just be feeling bad, without any further distinction. And she was really excited about that idea because of the distress that people are experiencing on many levels with climate change and environmental degradation, and this kind of emerging vocabulary.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:18:13): Right, eco-anxiety and things like that.

Christy Wilson-Mendenhall (00:18:15): Exactly. Around these emotions. And she's described in many talks about just having that word 'eco-anxiety' was really helpful and really meaningful for her. And so we decided, actually neither one of us applied for the Mind & Life grant that year. *[laughter]* And we spent a year just really figuring out how we could work together. So, just a year doing partnership development because we have very different backgrounds and disciplines, so what would it look like for us to work together and develop research together? And then the following year we felt ready to actually submit a grant to Mind & Life.

(00:19:03) And that grant is really about... The really interesting thing about Dekila and her work is she's amazing at building community, and that's really so central to Loka's work, is building community. And so when we first started working together, she said, "I think actually the first thing we should do is have a summit, and bring together lots of different people, academics and practitioners and contemplative leaders." And so it was called the *Resilience in the Anthropocene Summit* (and you can still find it on YouTube if you're interested) to talk about these issues. To talk about the distress that people are experiencing, and to be able to really center, as you said, people at the front lines, people who are disproportionately impacted by climate change, environmental degradation, environmental racism, folks from the global south. Here in the US, folks who were disproportionately impacted, communities of color, young people, Indigenous peoples.

(00:20:11) So, that's how we started, which was totally different from any other research project that I had ever thought about. It's like, you get together and you figure out a specific question and you work on that question, you design a specific project. So, that was really amazing just to start so differently, bringing people together to think about these issues together. And to really think about a framework of what we call deep resilience, in which inner resilience is interdependent with community resilience and planetary resilience. And so you can't work on one without working on the other two.

(00:20:56) So out of that summit grew our thinking about this framework, and we have a published paper on that now if you're interested. And then with the opportunity to write the Mind & Life grant, what we're working on is building an advisory board to think about the research questions and again, make sure the voices who are not always present in this literature are present and at the forefront and centered. And then we're working on the questions that are going to be impactful and helpful for their communities.

(00:21:36) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:21:36): I love hearing that story about how this project emerged so collaboratively and like you said, so differently than kind the standard academic scientific development of a project, really based instead on community. You mentioned your framework that you all have been working on, on deep resilience, and three layers there that all work together—inner and community and planetary resilience. Is there any more to unpack about that, like the distinction between those and different ways in to those levels?

Christy Wilson-Mendenhall (00:22:49): Yeah. And that's one of the things I think we're currently working on is doing a lot of that unpacking to really think about resilience at those different levels, and whether there are attributes and conditions that cut across those levels. One of the things that we think a lot about is, with cultivating inner resilience, and particularly through contemplative practice, how that can become divorced from community and planetary resilience, and worldviews—like worldviews of interdependence and interconnectedness. And so that's one thing that we've thought a lot about is maintaining that connection, of building inner resilience so that it stays connected to cultivating community resilience, to cultivating planetary resilience. Versus... you know I think in Western approaches that tend to be very kind of individual, that focus on contemplative practices for reducing our stress, but don't go beyond that sometimes. Not all of the time, of course. So, really thinking about, what are the practices that support that, and also how we make sure those practices stay embedded in the worldviews—for many of them, the worldviews in which they originated—so that that interconnection of people and nature is at the forefront.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:24:30): Yeah, that's so important. I feel like this is a theme that's come up many times on the show in different conversations about how the intersection of contemplative work with Western culture has gone down this much more individualistic path, oftentimes, and has leaned more towards self-help and just focused on 'how can these practices help me with my well-being or my stress,' which are all really important facets. But you were talking about how to maybe reconnect them or re-emphasize the original ethical or theoretical underpinnings of interdependence—which are so central, of course, in certainly the Buddhist tradition that many of these practices have come out of. So, what are ways that you have looked at, or have you looked at ways, specifically to take these practices or even the whole approach of contemplation and try to shift that back a little bit more towards... or re-enliven the interdependence, I guess?

Christy Wilson-Mendenhall (00:25:41): Yeah. So, one of the first projects that we've been working on is an online course that was designed by Loka, called *The Psychology of Deep Resilience: Addressing Eco-anxiety and Climate Distress for Individual, Social, and Ecological Well-being.* So, this is a course program that's freely available via edX. And so in that course program, there are 15 contemplative practices that are embedded within the course, and the theme of interconnectedness is carried throughout the course. I think for me, that's been really interesting—being on the program evaluation and the research side of that project—in thinking about again, how to make sure that these practices don't become divorced from worldview. I mean, that's embedded in some of the practices themselves, but I think also

having that as part of the course content really helps make sure that those contemplative practices are understood within that worldview. And again, the speakers throughout the course... So, there's a lot of videos in the course, and the speakers who contributed to the course were a lot of the people who spoke at the summit. And so for a lot of them, they are speaking from their own cultures, in which interdependence is a huge part of their cultural understanding.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:27:17): I love what you were just saying about really making explicit—and I don't know why I kind of have never thought about this before, but—to make explicit the theoretical underpinnings and the philosophical view behind something is so important. And I'm realizing how rarely that's ever done, even within contemplative practice, I'm thinking of my whole training in science... People don't talk about the theoretical or philosophical perspectives from which information is being shared. And so I love that—it's a simple shift, once you realize that it's like, of course we should be talking about this. Just say that part out loud. That just strikes me as a really simple and critical innovation for this kind of work.

Christy Wilson-Mendenhall (00:28:04): Yeah, it is. When you think, I had a similar experience on this journey of realizing, oh, and talking with other people too, and thinking about, wow, making worldview explicit, it really does shape how we think about these practices. And a postdoc that we work with here, Pilar Gauthier who belongs to the Menominee Nation here in the Great Lakes region, she led a paper actually talking a lot about this, of the role of worldview, of centering Indigenous worldviews. And really when we make that explicit, how we begin to think about contemplative practices and nature-based practices that are currently being discussed in the scientific literature.

(00:29:01) And also really then that brings to the forefront an ethical framework too of how we think about nature connectedness, the literature on nature connectedness, and really centering relational accountability. When we have these deep relationships with nature, that comes with an accountability—we're entrusted to care for nature. And so it really, I think, emphasizes this ethical piece of how we think about worldview and how we also think about intercultural transmission. And so yeah, Pilar wrote a really beautiful, beautiful paper on that.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:29:49): Fabulous. We'll share that in the show notes too, for this episode. Just to push on that idea a little bit further, I've certainly thought a lot about, over the years and thinking about this contemplative science space and what is our goal, kind of big picture, what are we doing with this work? What's our hope? And a lot of it, I think, for me at least, has been exactly about shifting worldviews. And I think that's a piece that, first of all, it's really hard to measure scientifically. So, that's been missing. But also I think it's been missing from the discourse because of what we've just been talking about—that it's not something that is discussed usually, in the context of practice or in the context of science. And so for me, and colleagues have often hit up against these struggles of like, well, how do you change a worldview? That's a massive undertaking, and it comes slowly, it comes through repeated practice and experience, and cultural influence and all of these factors. But I think also it might be sped up, it also comes from talking about it, right? And that's again, just a piece that hasn't happened.

Christy Wilson-Mendenhall (00:31:06): Yeah. And it has been really amazing... we've started looking at the evaluation data from the course, and for some learners it's really clear that these are new perspectives for them, and they're learning new perspectives. For other learners they're not necessarily new perspectives, but they wrote about really appreciating the many different ways that interconnectedness and interdependence was talked about by the various speakers. So, it was a kind of, it felt like a deepening of understanding, and as you said, the many different practices that can support

that understanding and learning. So, that was really interesting to think about too, the different ways that people are coming into this course and what they're taking from it.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:32:00): Yeah. I'm drawing links now too from, you spoke a little bit earlier about emotional granularity, which is a really wonderful construct, and maybe we could unpack that even a little bit further. But generally the idea of becoming more nuanced in our understanding of, in that case, emotions and all the subtle differences in experience. And that has to do with how we name them, and how we feel them in our bodies, and how we react to them and our behavior, and all of this. And now I'm just thinking you were saying in this course there was a lot of nuance—and perhaps granularity—about the perspective of interconnectedness, and different subtle ways. And so I'm just thinking more broadly about the importance of that nuance, or that granularity, in the ways that we understand something. Just thinking about implications for learning and how our minds work and things like that. Do you have any thoughts about that?

Christy Wilson-Mendenhall (00:33:00): Yeah, I think that's a really wonderful point. And I think I was lucky to be able to write a paper with John Dunne about emotional granularity and the intersections between Western science and Buddhist traditions. And he shared that the term that he would use is not emotional granularity, it's experiential granularity, which kind of broadens out. Which feels really relevant here for thinking about just granularity more broadly than how it's often been studied in the world of emotions. So, I think that's really interesting to think about in this case, thinking about interconnectedness and interdependence and the many ways that we can think about that. And I feel so fortunate to have been having many conversations with Pilar over the last year, to hear about the nuanced way in which she and her community thinks about interconnectedness.

(00:34:00) And I think the other thing to mention here, since you brought back granularity, it's sort of a perfect opportunity, is that was another kind of core theme in the course, in that we designed it specifically so as learners come into the course and begin to engage with the contemplative practices, we have this pulse check before and after the contemplative practices. And as part of this pulse check, they are naming the emotion that they're experiencing before they do the contemplative practice and rating the intensity of that emotion. And then after the contemplative practice, they rate the intensity of the emotion that they had named again, and then if a different emotion... And the prompt is to name the emotion that's rising to the top for you around the ecological and climate crisis. And so then after, if a different emotion arose to the top for them, then they named that emotion. And really the intention of including that was so that people could start to develop emotional granularity, and then also to be able to connect what they were experiencing to the practice that they were doing, to understand, "Is this something that's potentially helpful for this emotion that I'm experiencing?"

(00:35:26) As well as on the flip side, after the practice for the naming, to potentially help them understand the benefits of the practice that they just did. So, "Was this helpful for me and in what way? What am I specifically feeling?" And emotional granularity is also introduced as a concept in the course as learners are going through the course. So that was done very explicitly with the idea of developing emotional granularity. And I think what's unique about this course too is doing it in a way where you're not just learning to name your emotions, but you're learning to potentially name your emotions and connect them to strategies or techniques that might be helpful for you. So, "When I'm feeling this particular emotion, maybe this particular practice is going to be helpful for me."

(00:36:18) And I think that's one of the major ideas of why emotional granularity, especially around distress and negative emotions, can be helpful—because now I'm naming this particular emotion, then I can figure out what to do about it. And so learning that, "Well, maybe I'm just feeling exhausted and I

need to rest," or "Maybe I'm feeling really lonely and then what's going to be helpful for me there is to connect with someone," or "Maybe I'm just really worked up and angry and maybe taking a walk is going to be helpful for me." And to not do this, I think one of the things that's also different about this course is to not do it in a prescriptive way, but more in exploring for yourself, being able to name your emotion and then to figure out, "Is this practice something that actually is supportive for me or not, or maybe I try a different practice." So, kind of figuring out what works for you.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:37:19): I love that. And I'm wondering, you mentioned earlier how Dekila was saying when you two were first talking, about the importance of the term eco-anxiety and how that has been really helpful in her spaces. And I'm wondering, are there other specific terms or names of emotions that it might just be interesting for listeners to hear about that can help maybe with their emotional granularity around things that come up with climate distress and climate change?

Christy Wilson-Mendenhall (00:37:49): Yeah. So, eco-anxiety is one that many people know now, and I think actually is starting to get used in a really broad way.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:38:00): Yeah, so maybe how you conceptualize these terms or what they mean for you.

Christy Wilson-Mendenhall (00:38:04): Yeah, I mean I think the other thing, that sort of brings back the perspective that I talked about in the beginning of really being situated, is that eco-anxiety is also going to mean different things for different people. And so I think that's really important to think about—that having these words can be really helpful, and also it's important not to assume that someone else is going to experience them the same way that you will. So, if you've been impacted by a climate disaster and you live in a region that is at risk for more of those disasters, your eco-anxiety is probably going to look different than someone who is more removed and less likely to experience those disasters.

(00:38:52) For Indigenous communities and cultures perceiving nature and land as another person, as kin, as part of their family, the eco-anxiety around what's happening to Earth feels very different probably than for many Western folks. So, I think really being thoughtful when we use these words... We can provide a definition and there are many definitions out there. One of them is 'chronic fear of environmental doom.' But I think what's really important is to think about what it means for you, and also that can really look different depending on the context. So, to not necessarily make assumptions about what other people are experiencing, and that eco-anxiety can vary quite a lot too.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:39:46): Yeah. And are there other terms? I feel like I've heard terms, but I'm not even bringing them to mind right now.

Christy Wilson-Mendenhall (00:39:52): Yeah, ecological grief is another term that often gets used. Solastalgia is another term that I don't know if you've heard.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:40:03): Oh what does that mean?

Christy Wilson-Mendenhall (00:40:03): Solastalgia, it reflects really a deep attachment to place and land and what happens, what you feel when that land starts to change, for example, due to climate change. So, people have described it as a homesickness.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:40:21): Like nostalgia.

Christy Wilson-Mendenhall (00:40:22): Yeah, even though you haven't left. Like a homesickness for what was there, as we're experiencing these really significant changes due to climate change.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:40:36): And I really appreciate, you were talking about the course that you and Dekila and others on the team have developed that offers different practices, encouraging learners to determine what's helpful for them. Are there any specific approaches or practices that you want to share that might be helpful for learners?

Christy Wilson-Mendenhall (00:40:57): Yeah, so I think one of the really unique things about this course is that there are 15 different contemplative practices that are also drawn from a variety of different traditions, beyond Buddhist traditions that I think many of us are quite familiar with. And before each contemplative practice, again, we talked about the worldview piece, it talks about the tradition from which the practice is drawn.

(00:41:26) They range from somatic practices that really focus on the body, and feeling emotions in the body. And with a lot of these emotions—these what we would call negative emotions, which we know from looking at the data that those are the emotions people are coming into the course with, of feeling anxious and afraid and frustrated and sad. And those are really valid emotions. They're really important emotions, they're really meaningful emotions. They have something to tell us about the very real threat before us. About the many losses that we've already experienced due to climate change and environmental degradation. And really the injustice of it all. And so some of the practices are really about allowing those emotions, of being able to turn towards those emotions—of being able to grieve, for example—and to normalize those emotions too.

(00:42:36) So, one of the really interesting things about the first practice in the course is that it was taken from the summit that I mentioned earlier, and Prentis Hemphill is offering that practice, a really beautiful practice. And as part of offering that practice, because it was part of the summit, at points, they are sort of prompting if people would like to share in the chat, and then they are reading the responses in the chat of what people are experiencing. And really also being very intentional about the wisdom of doing this in community and hearing each other's responses. And what we've learned in looking at the data from the course, is that that's really meaningful to people. Being able to normalize these emotions is a really important part of working with them.

(00:43:34) And so I think having, we often think about communities... when we think about climate change, I think our first thoughts go to communities for activism and action. But I think what we're learning is it's equally important to have communities where you can process your emotions, and that we have spaces to allow for emotions, and we have spaces that normalize these experiences. So, that's just one practice, although I think we see this theme of allowing of emotions to come up and work with them throughout the course.

(00:44:10) And then a couple practices in, there's a sit-spot practice. So that's actually sitting in nature instead of... you know, I think for a lot of people, we're 'doing' in nature. We're walking through a park, we're going for a hike. And this is really just about stopping the doing, and sitting and observing and learning, taking in—in a very sensory way—everything that's happening around you at a place in nature that you find. And doing that repeatedly, so coming back to sit day after day, which allows you to also see how that place is changing.

(00:44:55) Again, we've been learning from the evaluation that that is a practice that learners really appreciate, and that they can also integrate into their daily life. So it's something that they come back to

again and again once they start doing it. And that also, I mentioned sort of naming the emotions after the practice. So, after this particular practice, and different from some of the other practices, one of the most frequent emotions named is joy. And so we think a lot about joy as being really important to resilience. Oppressive forces do not want us to feel joy. And so moments of joy really helping us through these challenges and reminding us of why we do what we do, and what's possible when we can really connect with other people and with nature.

(00:45:55) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:46:28): I love that. And it makes me think about another piece that kind of links back to the perspectives that you were sharing in the beginning, but also is so important for this topic of resilience in the space of environmental degradation. And that's about visioning or envisioning, kind of imagining new or different futures, which makes me think about the role of imagining and simulating in our minds. So, could you share a little bit about your perspective on those?

Christy Wilson-Mendenhall (00:47:02): Yeah, absolutely. Imagining is really interesting to me because it's something that I worked on initially in my career, when I was still in basic science. And what we learned in that work really is that when people are vividly imagining a situation, what's happening in the brain is that it's running a simulation in a way that is, as if to a degree that the person is actually experiencing what they're imagining.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:47:39): So, if you're imagining a cat, your circuits in your brain that would actually be active if you were interacting with a cat or seeing a cat, are actually active? Like almost hallucinating a little bit?

Christy Wilson-Mendenhall (00:47:53): Yeah. And so it's of course not exactly the same as if you were actually experiencing that, but the idea is that, thinking about a weak form of perception. So for example, if you're seeing a black cat, then when you imagine, when you really vividly imagine that black cat, the same sort of neural circuits and areas become active to a weaker degree. And so it's this really interesting mechanism in the brain that we think is due in part to the predictive way that the brain works, which I know has been talked about on this podcast before.

(00:48:40) But what's interesting about this from an applied standpoint, and we've written about this a little bit with compassion meditation, is that when you're vividly imagining a scenario, and not only... we talked about the sensory areas and circuits of the brain, but also you can really induce rich emotional experiences too from imagining scenarios. I'm sure many people have had the experience of being lost in a daydream, or even just anticipating something and starting to feel anxious about it. And so what's interesting about this is thinking about it as, if you're able to vividly imagine a situation or a scenario, something happening, something that you're experiencing, and that's laying down a pattern that is similar to what would happen if you were actually experiencing that, then it sort of by laying down that pattern produces a readiness or what we call a kind of priming. So, then if you find yourself in that situation in the world, because you have imagined through that situation exactly what it would be like, it may be easier for you to actually act in the world.

(00:50:02) And so we've written about that specifically with compassion meditation. Again, this is work with John Dunne and also Richie Davidson, looking at these intersections between social psychology and modern neuroscience and Buddhist traditions and Buddhist philosophy and writings in Buddhist philosophy. So, it's interesting to think about in the sense that when we talk about a lot of mindfulness practices, we are sort of talking about de-reification—of seeing your thought as a thought, and not

attaching to it as something that is stable and permanent and real. But this is a very different mechanism in that you're actually trying to reify, right? You're trying to imagine it so vividly that it feels real to you. And by doing that kind of laying down a pattern that potentially helps you navigate and act in the world.

(00:51:00) And so we were thinking about that with compassion, and again, going back to context and situatedness, that compassion looks different in different situations. You're not always going to act the same way. You want to adapt to the situation before you. And so by doing these kind of imagery-based practices, that might allow you to work through what you might do, how you might act, before you're presented with a situation in real life, and that can maybe help people overcome just not doing anything in a lot of cases.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:51:39): Right. And then is it fair to say that we could leverage this capacity of imagining and visioning... I love what you were saying about the readiness or priming our systems to enact these responses more readily. So when you apply that to the bigger picture of thinking of different futures in the face of climate change, or different systems, or different ways that we could live, does the same thing apply? Like, by imagining it we somehow maybe make it a little bit more likely that we could respond in those ways? Or how do you think about that?

Christy Wilson-Mendenhall (00:52:18): Yeah. I mean I think a lot of feminist and social justice writers have written about this—the importance of being able to imagine a different system, to imagine what we want to work towards. And how important it is to do that, to be able to think outside of the oppressive systems that exist today. So, what does it look like to have a just and a fair system where everyone can be well? So, I think that's incredibly important.

(00:52:52) And it's interesting to think about practices for that, in the sense that... what we've been talking about is very sort of grounded in sensation and action. There's a practice like this actually in the course, a visioning practice. And in that practice it is very sensory-based. So, you're sort of imagining in 50 years, if we're living in a different system where everyone feels free and supported and seen and heard, you're going about your day, what does that feel like for you? What do you see? What do you hear? It was interesting to me to see an example of that, of thinking about a different world in a lot of senses, but doing that in a way that is very grounded in sensation. And to think about, oh, being able to imagine that helps us work towards that. But I think there's still a lot of really interesting and open questions about that readiness, and in what ways it primes us.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:54:08): I think there's just an interesting landscape between the idea that many people probably in our culture could come from the perspective of, "Well, that's so unrealistic. That's never going to happen, so why bother? That's just fantasy land or whatever." But then coming from the other perspective of, "If you don't imagine it will definitely never happen. In order for any change to happen, it has to first be envisioned and imagined." So, that's an interesting kind of tension there.

Christy Wilson-Mendenhall (00:54:44): And to remember that the people who are marginalized by a current oppressive systems, they see very clearly, "This system is not working for me and here's how it could work for me." And so I think it's really important to remember that those are the perspectives that we really need to make sure that are at the center and the forefront of what we're doing.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:55:12): Oh, this is so great. I know we're kind of coming up on our time, but I'm wondering if you have closing thoughts on how working in these spaces and with these perspectives on

the mind and emotion, and also the ways that you're applying it now have changed you personally, and/or any big picture take homes for the audience?

Christy Wilson-Mendenhall (00:55:34): Yeah, I mean, it's changed me in so many ways. It's honestly hard to articulate the numerous ways I think, in which the work that I've done has changed how I understand the world.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:55:52): A worldview shift, like we were talking about.

Christy Wilson-Mendenhall (00:55:54): Yeah, exactly. The worldview shift, in so many different ways. And it keeps shifting. I think the thing that I really try to keep coming back to is just keep learning, keep listening. There's so much that I don't know, and there's so many, I think as Dekila said in her episode, there's so many different wisdom traditions for us to learn from, and Western science is just one of them.

(00:56:27) And I think the other thing is just when we think about systems change that can feel really overwhelming of what that looks like. And we were just talking about being able to imagine that. But even today, I think you can think about the systems in which you're embedded, and how you can start to make small changes in those systems. So, for example, I'm in academia, and academia can be a really competitive and stressful place. So how do I make changes to support the people around me in that space?

(00:57:09) I've been really, really lucky to be part of a NIH-funded network grant to advance research on emotional well-being. And I think maybe the biggest thing that's come out of that grant for me, is sort of stepping back to think about how you shape a field. And this isn't necessarily in the grant language, but I think what's come out of that for me is just the importance of relationships. And I've been so privileged to work with an amazing group of emerging scholars through that grant, who have taught me so much about creating emotionally promoting spaces, creating spaces where people can really bring their whole selves—they're not trying to step through the door and put on their academic self. And building community, which is sort of the foundation of all of that. And so really being able to step into that work over the last few years, to build community here where I am, and to see how together we can start to shift culture so that it is more supportive and we can lean on each other and we don't have to hide our emotions.

(00:58:27) So I think that's also been really important in my work lately, is thinking as much about *how* we do our work as the questions and the scientific approach, and things like that. Really thinking about our relationships with each other, our relationships with the communities that we hope the work will impact, and really putting community-building and building relationships with each other first. It all comes from that, and it should in our scientific work as well.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:59:05): Wow. Well, thank you so much, Christy. This has been really rich. I love this conversation, and I really appreciate the work that you're doing and bringing into the world. Your whole trajectory of the path, is really beautiful to see where that's going now. So, thank you so much for all that you're doing and for taking the time to share it with us today.

Christy Wilson-Mendenhall (00:59:27): Oh my gosh. Thank you, Wendy. I always appreciate speaking with you and really enjoy our conversations.

Outro – Wendy Hasenkamp (00:59:38): *This episode was supported by the generosity of The Bess Family Foundation, dedicated to fostering kindness and caring for the earth and all beings through mindfulness and meditation practices. Mind & Life is edited and produced by me and Phil Walker, and music is from Blue Dot Sessions and Universal. Show notes, transcripts, and other resources for all our episodes can be found at podcast.mindandlife.org.*

(01:00:08) *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 find these conversations valuable and you'd like to support the work that we do, you can make a donation of any amount at mindandlife.org/give. Be well, take care of each other, and thank you for listening.*