Mind & Life Podcast Transcript
Liz Monson – Reclaiming the Magic

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Opening Quote – Liz Monson (00:00:03): *The small self is a full-time occupation. We're constantly involved in creating this sandcastle of the self, and we're constantly brought up against an edge of trepidation and fear because we feel that that sandcastle is always being eroded. But what if who we really are is something far vaster and more mysterious and more intertwined? What if we stopped exerting the energy in that way, and freed it up for another way of being? We'd start to tap into perhaps the much more intuitive and felt sense of truth of what a human being is and why we're here.*

Intro – Wendy Hasenkamp (00:00:45): Welcome to Mind & Life. I'm Wendy Hasenkamp. My guest today is Buddhist scholar, author, and teacher Liz Monson. Liz is the spiritual co-director of Natural Dharma Fellowship and one of the lead teachers at Wonderwell Mountain Refuge, which is a retreat center in New Hampshire. She's also a pioneer in combining Buddhist teachings with nature-based practices, and her work helps us connect in an embodied way to the fundamental interconnectedness of the world.

(00:01:20) I spoke with Liz this past spring, and I just love this conversation. We get into so many topics that have been central to this show, like the nature of self—and Liz offers what I think is now my favorite metaphor to describe the sense of self—and the ways that awareness and letting go can lead to healing. Liz also brings in some powerful ideas about the role of nature in awakening, and we talk about ways to connect with the energies and elements of nature, and how doing so can help us better understand our own minds and work with our emotions.

(00:01:57) I was really glad we also touched on moving beyond human centrism, which is the view that we can often hold, focusing mainly on human suffering and well-being and seeing the value and wisdom in all of nature. And we end with Liz's thoughts and experience working with psychedelics on the path to awakening, and she offers some critical insights about the importance of a strong meditation practice and self-compassion in helping us face difficulties, whether those are internal in our own minds and past history or external in what's happening in the world right now.

(00:02:33) I love that Liz keeps coming back to the big questions of why are we here, and what is our role on this planet? Her answers to these questions are both a kind of wake-up call and also bring me a lot of hope and encouragement. I hope they do for you as well. I'm really so happy to be able to share with you, Liz Monson.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:02:57): It is such a pleasure to welcome Lama Liz Monson to the show. Liz, it's so wonderful to have you with us. Thanks for joining.

Liz Monson (00:03:05): Oh, thank you so much, Wendy. It's really an honor and a complete delight to be here with you.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:03:11): I always love to start with a little background from the guests to understand how they got into the work that they do. So what did your path into Buddhism look like? What drew you to that and how did that unfold?

Liz Monson (00:03:24): Oh, that's a good question. I think even from being a young child, I always had this feeling somehow that something was missing in the way that I saw people living around me, my parents, my friends, the kinds of things I was being shown at school. And the way I used to articulate that to myself was that there was no magic. Where was the magic? I kept wanting to know where the magic was in the world. And as I got older, and I spent a lot of time when I was young reading mythology, fairy tales, fantasy because I could find magic in those kinds of texts.

(00:04:06) But as I got older, I had a really great opportunity when I was maybe eighth, ninth grade to go and work in the White Mountains in New Hampshire in the summers. And being up there in the mountains and the trees and the forests, I started feeling like I found what I had been looking for. There was something about the natural world and the feeling of just being completely at home in these wild spaces that started to fill that gap. And yet, I had a lot of stuff, I don't know, like most young people, working through a lot of stuff that was in my life, and Buddhism wasn't really on my radar. I didn't know anything about Buddhism. I didn't know anybody who was a Buddhist. I didn't have any real connection to that as a spiritual path. My family didn't really have much of a spiritual orientation when I was growing up... a little bit of Protestantism in the bare church with white walls and a single cross at the front. You know, I just, I couldn't find anything to connect with in that kind of a spiritual space. Really, it was the outdoors.

(00:05:16) And after college, I moved out west. I went to college in Vermont, and I moved out west. I was living in a yurt in Jackson Hole, Wyoming—right on the land and right at the foot of the Tetons. And there was something about that wide open space and that energy and that place that I started feeling inspired to... At the time, I really thought I wanted to be a writer. And I had heard about this school in Boulder, Colorado called the Naropa Institute at the time. And a friend of mine had gone there and told me that they had an MFA in writing and poetry where you could design your own program.

(00:05:56) And I thought, "Well, that sounds pretty cool." So I applied and I got in, and in the gap between when I got in and when the program started, which was at the beginning of June I think—you had to show up for the summer because they had this annual summer writing intensive that was part of the MFA program—I had this period of time where I just thought, okay, it's January and I have to be in Boulder in the beginning of June, and I wanted to do... I just felt this need to kind of wander, to do some sort of wandering, almost like a pilgrimage experience. And I packed up my car and I moved out of my yurt and I drove down to the Southwest and I spent four months backpacking by myself through the Four Corners area.

(00:06:48) And I think that that experience of being alone in the wilderness, and just day after day with no company but the birds and the trees and the... Well, really the desert, the canyons. When I showed up at Naropa, which I kind of knew Naropa had been founded by a Tibetan Buddhist teacher, but it didn't really sink in. It didn't really register. It wasn't that... I don't know, it just didn't matter that much

to me. Until I walked onto the campus at Naropa, and something just happened inside of me. I just had this feeling like I had come home.

(00:07:27) And at that time, Naropa had just become accredited and they still only had one campus and one main building. And behind that building were these huge old cottonwood trees because it was pretty close to the river that runs through downtown Boulder. And I remember sitting out behind the main building under one of those trees and just sobbing. And I didn't know why—all this emotion, all this energy was just coming up and I just kept feeling like I had come home. And I knew that it wasn't about the writing. I knew it had something to do with it being a Buddhist, a Tibetan Buddhist space. And my classes required me to meditate—every day, I had to go into the shrine room in the main building and I had to practice.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:08:18): Had you ever meditated before?

Liz Monson (00:08:20): Just a little bit. I had barely gotten some instruction when I lived in Jackson Hole. When I did a storytelling workshop, the two women who led it were Vajrayana practitioners in the Shambhala Buddhist community, and they taught us how to meditate. And I tried to do it down in the desert in my hiking and my walking, but it was very difficult to do on my own at that point. And so I knew a little bit, but not very much.

(00:08:47) And something about arriving at Naropa and being in a context suddenly where everything was... It had been formed and had arrived out of the mind of this teacher. And I just knew instantly I wasn't there to write, I wasn't there to become... I was there to practice and to explore Buddhism. And I think I'm the only person in the world who has an MFA now in what they... They didn't know what to do with me *[laughter]* because I took so many Buddhist studies courses on top of the writing courses that they couldn't really give me the straight-up MFA. So I have an MFA in Contemplative Prose and Poetry, is the name of my degree.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:09:31): Oh, that's perfect.

Liz Monson (00:09:32): But I knew right away that was it. I was never going to do anything else. It was going to be Buddhism from there on out. It was like I had just found what I had been looking for my whole life. In terms of the way it was articulated. I knew... it's like I started reading the Buddhist teachings and I remember reading the Four Noble Truths and the first noble truth was translated was "life is suffering." And I had gone through a lot in my life up until then, and the fact that somebody... It was just said, so clearly and straightforwardly, was like some part of me just sighed in huge relief. Like, oh, thank God. Somebody's finally saying it like it is. I don't have to pretend anymore. I don't have to... And I was just fascinated by that. So that, it was like something in me woke up again in this lifetime when I hit Naropa. And the way the teachings were articulated there and the way they were taught, it was just... I mean, the passion that came up in me was not going to be exhausted in a couple of years being there. *[laughter]* So that's really how I came into it, and I haven't really done anything else since then except continue to study and practice Buddhism.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:10:52): That's amazing. I love the inexhaustible passion and how it just keeps unfolding. And I've personally been able to benefit from that, because I've had the good fortune to study with you in various contexts. So yeah, that's an amazing story. I was also going to ask you in a separate question about your trajectory and interest in the natural world and your connection with nature, but you kind of already answered that. It sounds like that's so interleaved, in a way, with this trajectory. So is

there any more you want to say by way of background in terms of the connection with the natural world?

Liz Monson (00:11:29): Yeah, no, I mean, I think maybe the only other thing to add is that before, when I was still quite young, junior high school, high school, I spent a lot of time in the mountains. I had been bullied really badly when I was in fifth, sixth, seventh grades, pretty much four through seven. So I really cultivated a very deep distrust of people. I just didn't feel safe with most people. But being in the wilderness and in the mountains, I felt safe. I felt held and I felt seen. I felt like it was okay to just be who I was. And so I think I kind of gravitated towards what I would now call meditation, although at the time I didn't think of it that way. It was just... I would get to different places up on a top of a mountain or on a cliff, and I would just sit there. And just sit there and into the silence in my own body, and into the place to the point where the birds would come and sit right next to me, or other animals would come around. And it felt like being merged into this other space that was so much bigger than my little sense of I. And there was such relief and healing in that opportunity to just be in these wild places.

(00:12:56) And I think that also spurred my... If I had two main interests after I started at Naropa, it was being alone in the wilderness, and practicing meditation and studying Buddhism. They really just dovetailed. They came together in this really beautiful way. But I think that was why, I think initially being in nature, it felt very much like a spiritual experience—and a safe experience. I wasn't afraid to be alone in the dark, in the woods or in the mountains or camping by myself. I was afraid of people, but I was not afraid of the environment and animals. It's just an interesting way that all came to together for me.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:13:43): Yeah. I feel like your teachings are quite unique in really emphasizing this connection with nature, along with just like you said, kind of the interweaving with Buddhist teachings. And so I was wondering if you could share a little bit about that from your perspective within Buddhism. I feel like so much of the way that Buddhism has come into the West, at least, has been in the mode of kind of self-help and a very individualistic perspective oftentimes. But then there's this other piece of the emphasis on interdependence and interconnectedness. So I'm wondering if you could share some of what you've seen through the lens of Buddhism about nature. Because I feel like a lot of the teachings that we get in the west don't often emphasize nature too much, but I know that they exist and that's something that you're really experienced in. So I'd love to hear.

Liz Monson (00:14:41): Yeah, no, you're right. I mean, especially the way Buddhism has come into the West... it's like self-help or relaxation and finding some kind of ease, all of which is great and wonderful and helpful. Or I think the other way that you see Buddhism being interpreted or explored in the West has been this paradigm of it being like a science of the mind. Again, which is not wrong or problematic.

(00:15:13) I have always felt like those ways of interpreting the tradition limit its power, that it's actually about something much bigger than the ways that our human minds want to kind of narrow it down, and make it pertinent only to the individual and the human. When you look into the yogic traditions of the Himalayan Buddhist peoples, you find this emphasis that is much more on working with energy. And a lot of the practices that come out of those traditions were cultivated and maybe explored and developed and came through these yogis and yoginis in wild, natural places. These were not practitioners who were living in institutions, monastic institutions or academic institutions of any kind. These were wandering yogis way up in the steppes and in the caves and in the mountains who were... Their practice environment was the natural world.

(00:16:16) And I feel like some of those kinds of practices that have come through to us were really transmissions from the energy of the natural world. And the yogis and yoginis who could begin to feel that those fundamental energies that make up who we are were not separate from the same energies that we can perceive in the natural world. And that always interested me much more than the sort of science of the mind approach or the approach of reducing your stress and anxiety. Not that I don't value those, but just that I think it comes back to that initial impulse. I've always had to just look for the more, the mystery, the magic, the ways that who we are in this life... "has access to" maybe is a way of saying it, access to this much bigger, more powerful unknown dimension of space and time and place. And that the natural world is a kind of arena in which the human gets to explore and experience and learn from that. So that's why I think I gravitated towards Tibetan Buddhism in particular, because Tibetan Buddhism works with energy, and it works with emotions, and it works with all those kinds of textures and colors that make our lives vivid and rich and powerful.

(00:17:49) And then of course there is... I just always come back to the story of the Buddha's enlightenment and that at the very end of that long, long night, which maybe it was a night, who knows? I think time and space kind of dissolved in that period for the Buddha as he entered into his full awakening. And that moment of being challenged by Mara, where Mara says to him, "Well, who will witness that you have in fact awakened?" And the Buddha reaches down and touches the earth, and the earth trembles and flowers fall from the sky. And if that's the very first teaching that the Buddha gave upon his awakening, it feels absolutely key to me that we don't just step over it like, oh, how cool there was this miracle. But no, he's saying something here—who's going to vouch for me? What's going to vouch for my awakening? It's this. It's this much bigger vaster context that we are embedded in, and it's not about me the individual, it's about something much more than that. Something that's alive and sentient in a way that has nothing to do with our thinking and our distress.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:19:03): Yeah. What you're saying is making me think of the strong emphasis within the Buddhist tradition on thinking about the self, and the illusory nature of the self and distributed or interconnected nature of the self, which I think you were just pointing to there in that story of the Buddha in the moment of enlightenment. And that's making me appreciate really how absolutely foundational that concept of self is in the tradition. So I'm just wondering how you think about that in your own personal experience and in your practice and in your teaching, in terms of working with nature as an avenue towards helping us understand the nature of self. And you even mentioned sitting in the mountains when you were younger, moving beyond the small sense of "I." So I just feel like that's such a foundational concept within Buddhism, and it comes up on this podcast. We talk about the self a lot. So just thinking about that in relation to nature—self and nature, how do you think about that?

Liz Monson (00:20:08): Yeah. Well, I mean, I do have a way of thinking about that. I really believe that the small self is the self that is caught in its conceptual production of who it thinks it is, and all the different ways that we exert energy and effort to construct and fabricate some sense of what this I is about and who it is and what it looks like and how it feels and why it thinks this, and why it thinks that and what its desires are and what its fears are. You know, it's a full-time occupation. *[laughter]* We're constantly involved in creating this sandcastle of the self, and we're constantly brought up against an edge of trepidation and fear because we feel that sandcastle is always being eroded. The waves are always coming in and starting to collapse it, and so the effort and the energy that has to go into continuing to build it up takes 90% of our time, effort, and energy.

(00:21:10) But I mean, maybe from those days when I used to spend all that time just out in the wilderness, I just have always had this sense that there's something more. There's got to be something

more than that. We can't just be these thought bubbles that are walking around trying to make sense of things and control things and get what we want, and not be uncomfortable, and just be entertained, and all of the different ways that our culture and our society tries to encourage us to stay distracted. That in those moments where we do finally have a gap where that busy, active, creative energy calms down, then there's a sense that there's something more.

(00:21:54) So I often talk about it as like, how do we begin to tap into the more that we are? That our experience is constantly overflowing the boundaries of what we think and all of our ideas about the self. And that there's something, if we could start to actually allow some of that busy thinking energy to just take a back seat, we could begin to explore the ways that we are actually continuously extended in time and space, and we're co-terminus with the world around us all the time. We just get so myopic that the relative self, the small self is so myopically focused and so contracted into a sense of separation—because it can't exist without that sense of separation. It has to continuously find external reference points and solidify them in order to say, I exist. Because without something to bounce off of that's been solidified, that relative self starts collapsing again.

(00:22:58) One of the things that most helped me initially connect to this—the more that we are—was a story told about two of my teachers who were living in Colorado, or they were in Colorado, and sitting on the side of a mountain looking down the slope towards an aspen tree. And aspen trees have those beautiful little triangular silver leaves that when the wind blows and the sun is shining, it's just like this shimmering amazing display of dancing energy. And they were sitting side by side and not saying anything. A friend of mine was serving them tea, and so that's how I know the story. And he said that they weren't saying anything, they just sat there for a really long time, side by side looking down the hill. It was a beautiful day. And then at a certain point, one of them leaned over to the other and pointed down the hill towards this tree, and he said, "They call that a tree." And the two of them just burst out laughing. They just thought it was the funniest thing that they had ever heard—because how can this label, this concept of tree ever encompass this experience that is so much more than that, that is communicating something on so many levels to who we are and how we are and what the world is? How can it ever be reduced to this tiny little label of tree?

(00:24:27) And I feel like that's the same thing with the self. We continuously limit the sense of self because we want to have control over it. We want to think we know all the different parts of it. We're afraid of it being something that escapes the thinking mind's dominance, but what if it really is much more than that? What if who we really are is something far vaster and more mysterious and more intertwined than we've ever really imagined it to be, or thought that it could be?

(00:25:00) And what if we stopped putting all of that energy that we put into shoring up this fabricated notion of a self, what if we stopped exerting the energy in that way and freed it up for another way of being, a different way of relating a more inclusive and connected way of being? I think we'd start to tap into perhaps the knowledge, and again, not intellectual knowledge, but a deeper, much more intuitive and felt sense of truth, of what a human being is and why we're here. You know, I don't think that we came here to make such a giant mess. Human beings have made a big mess of this beautiful planet, in many, many ways. That can't be why we're here. I just don't believe that's why we're here. Especially when you look into the teachings, you look into one's deep felt experience, you see how people are in major crises—what comes out first before the fear. It's usually an expression of care. Some kind of expression of care.

(00:26:08) And the clearest example I ever had of that in my own life was, I was living in New York City at the time of 9/11, and I actually worked in lower Manhattan. I was on my way to work on that day, when

the planes hit the twin towers and the towers came down and I was walking through these clouds of ash and dust. And then I was stuck down in the lower part of Manhattan because they cordoned off that area, and so nobody could come in and nobody could go out once... There a big exodus initially, but then it was just locked down and the city that never sleeps was completely silent, except for the warplanes flying overhead.

(00:26:55) And I just never forget the next day, I found a place to crash on somebody's floor down there that first night. And the next day, anyone who was left in Lower Manhattan was coming out into the streets and coalescing around the hospitals. And the hospitals were sending us out to any store that was willing to open, to gather supplies. And all people wanted to do in that first day was help, whatever they could do. And there was just such an expression of shared mission and concern and care, and a kind of one-pointed focus on, "What can we do to help?"

(00:27:38) So we were running through the streets with shopping carts going from one store to another, and the vendors were, for free, giving away socks and boots and clothes and food. And then back to the hospitals. And so it was like, in this rupture that cut through all of the noise and the busyness of this huge active city—in that gap, which I felt like just cut all the way down to the base, the first thing that rose out of there was kindness, was love, was care, was a desire to be of some help. That was the initial human impulse.

(00:28:17) And yeah, then within a few days, then all the other feelings started crowding back in. There was rage and there was grief, and there was fear, and there was blame, and there was... all that stuff started coming back in again. But that first, the ground impulse out of the human in that moment was love and care and the desire to be of benefit somehow—compassion. It was just such an amazing kind of real-life teaching on why I think human beings are actually here. We're not here to make a mess. We're here to heal and hold and help and care and nurture and steward. And how do we remember that? We need to remember that.

(00:29:01) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:29:33): That was so powerful what you shared about your perspective on the self and how... I don't think I've ever heard it quite described that way. I've always heard that it's this kind of reified stable thing, but the way you just described it was it's also always collapsing. And being eroded—I love that image of the sandcastle by the waves, and so we have to keep expending all this energy to keep it going. I just really appreciate that perspective because it helps us to realize, I think, or it helps make more accessible the idea that you can just relax and let go.

Liz Monson (00:30:11): Exactly. Exactly, yes.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:30:15): And then you will flow into, or become more aware of maybe, this interconnected place.

Liz Monson (00:30:20): You free yourself, you become freed. I mean, that's how we become freed. We have to let go. And the more we let go and relax, the more free we are.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:30:30): Yeah. It sounds so simple. *[laughter]*

Liz Monson (00:30:32): I know it sounds so simple. And it's not. It's definitely not.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:30:38): Well, I think also there is something important you mentioned before about the safety that you find in nature and natural spaces, because I think safety is definitely a prerequisite for any kind of letting go. I think a lot of the clinging is related to some lack of safety. Or fear, yeah.

Liz Monson (00:30:58): Oh, yes. No, I think that's absolutely the main sticking point. How do we really let go? We have to face into the fear and find a new relationship to what we're afraid of, why we're afraid of it, and how we can let go.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:31:15): Yeah. I also appreciate what you were saying earlier about the human-centrism, that at least a lot of the ways that these teachings have been transmitted, and I've certainly seen that in this space. There's often also in Buddhism, a hope or an inspiration towards all beings, right? All sentient beings. But in the practicality, in the day-to-day, I feel like the teachings are often very much about reducing human suffering, right? And the more-than-human world is often left out. So I've personally become more and more interested, or just tuned into this kind of human centrism that pervades our culture and society. So I'm just wondering if you have reflections on that.

Liz Monson (00:32:01): Oh, I mean, it's such a dominant paradigm. I mean, maybe that's a result of the hundreds of years of the patriarchy that wants to put the human at the center of everything, the arrogance and the sort of narcissism that gives rise to that kind of a way of being in the world. And then it's become... It's just expanded into all the different ways that certainly a materialist consumerist society functions. And we forget that so much more is actually unfolding in the world around us. We've marginalized the animals and the birds and the way nature... I mean, everything has been pushed away, pushed out to the sides so that the human can dominate.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:32:45): Pushed out to the sides, or used as resources.

Liz Monson (00:32:48): Exactly right. Right. Co-opted and completely appropriated for our own purposes and ends without any recognition or honoring of the life force and power and teachings that are present in all of those other aspects of life that surround us. It's a tragedy. And such an example of the ego-focused narcissism of the human illusion, delusion really. Maybe that's in some ways why these teachings are here. I mean, the Buddhist teachings and lots of the teachings of lots of different spiritual, which are trying to remind us that the more-than-human world has so much to offer, to teach us. That Dharma is not just something that the Buddha taught, that word meaning truth. It's yes, the Buddha did teach the truth, and the Dharma is unfolding around us all the time—in the lives of other beings and in the life of trees and plants and flowers and animals. And we've forgotten how to listen, and hear those teachings.

(00:34:03) And I think that once we can step past the idea that somehow, truth and teaching is something that only comes out of the human, and begin to turn our attention towards, what are the teachings and the truths that are communicated to us by a flash of lightning in the sky, or a... I mean, the natural world is rising up these days. It's speaking louder and louder. And it's hard to tell where we're going to implode first—is it just going to be on the level of the human, or is it going to be the natural world finally takes the upper hand and says, "Guess what, you have no choice now. You have to listen in a whole different way, and you have to live in a whole different way if you're going to survive at all." I mean, I just feel like I have to look into the truth of that now, that we've come to that point.

(00:34:56) So I also feel... And not just even the natural world "other," but what about the energies of our ancestors, and other kinds of unseen forces that are present that we just are so insensitive to? We

don't notice. I mean, it's one thing to say, oh, those don't exist. Science hasn't proved them. Well, science is one paradigm that has existed in one part of the world for a long time. There's so many other paradigms. Why do we assume that there's just one, and that's the only one that's true? I mean, I can't get on board with that.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:35:34): Yeah. You're speaking about teachings from nature, and I heard you speak recently about the wisdom of trees, or kind of the perspective of trees. Could you share a little bit of that with us?

Liz Monson (00:35:49): Oh, I love trees. I love trees. Well, the first thing to say I think about that is just that, what do we need to do to listen? How are we going to actually hear the wisdom of the trees? Or any other seemingly, what we would call non-sentient being, although I really believe these beings are sentient. They're not sentient in the way we are sentient, but they are sentient. If we have to go with scientific proof, there is now scientific proof that trees are communicating with each other. Plants are communicating with each other. Seeds that are lying underground, waiting to germinate will be in communication with each other about whether it's going to be one seed or it's going to be all of them at once that come up through the earth. And that's not anybody's fantasy anymore. I mean, it never should have been. So I think the first thing is just that how do we start to listen to the wisdom of the trees?

(00:36:43) And for me, the first way that I've begun to tune into the... (I'm looking out the window at the trees) into the wisdom of the trees had to do with a period of time in my life where I was going through a lot of loss and a lot of sorrow, and I found myself... You know, I've been hiking my whole life, just needing to hold onto something that was strong and solid. And so actually hugging trees, putting my arms around them, and then sensing, like I could actually feel through my chest and the front of my body, this kind of sense of the stability and the strength and the groundedness, the rootedness that a tree has deep into the earth, at the same time that it's open to the sky and open to the weather and to the changes of the environment. And something in that moment of being connected with that, just feeling an infusion of that same sense that it's possible to stay connected to the earth, grounded in our being, and at the same time be open and available to all of the fluctuations of the weather of our experience. And that teaching, every time I hold a tree, I feel an infusion of that same energy—which is a wisdom that my own body required some kind of extra help to acquire and to learn from.

(00:38:17) But it's like this way of hearing the teachings from the wild, from the wilderness... again, I don't think it's a teaching that comes intellectually. Maybe it's explored and explained intellectually later on, but beginning to trust that we have other ways of receiving and sharing wisdom and love that do not require us to depend solely on the thinking mind. And again, that's part of the "more" that we are, there's just this capacity that we have, that we can strengthen and grow, to be in connection and to recognize and feel that connection as a real thing, a real experience rather than just an idea. So that's something I've been focusing on a lot in my own practice and in my teaching is just, how do we encourage ourselves to turn towards this different way of being in relationship? Because the ways we have been—through the dominance of the thinking mind—are not helping. Or at least maybe they need some extra help to be more effective.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:39:28): Yeah. I've also heard you teach recently—maybe along those lines, maybe this is part of what you are learning about ways to listen—working with the elements and the energies of different elements from the natural world that are also inside us. Could you share just maybe a little bit, practical thoughts for listeners to tap into that?

Liz Monson (00:39:53): Yeah, it's one of my very favorite kinds of practices and teachings. And again, this is not... I mean, I'm not making this up (I mean, personally making this up). These are teachings that come out of the yogic traditions of Himalayan Buddhism where there's a recognition that at the most subtle level of our being, we are composed of the five elements: earth, water, fire, air, space. That every part of our being is a manifestation, a kind of movement from a very ethereal and formless dimension of those elements into a more and more concrete manifestation of them. So that by the time we're here in a body, we are still... I mean, all the elements of the body are contained within those five. That's what we are. The natural world too is composed of the five elements: earth, water, air, fire, space.

(00:40:54) And so at Natural Dharma Fellowship, which is the organization that I teach for, we have a retreat that we run every year that we call a wilderness retreat, which is a five-day retreat, where every day we go out into the wilderness and we hike and meditate with one of the elements. So the first day is earth, second day is water, third day is fire. And we use particular practices from the yogic tradition to help people relax and connect with the energy of the elements in the outside world, the seemingly outer world. Which the more we can relax and rest our attention and awareness within, for example, if you're working with a river or you're working with a lake, resting your attention and your awareness on the surface of the lake or in the movement of the water, that there is a diminishment of the activity of the thinking mind and an expansion into the energy of the element itself. And then it becomes clear that there's no separation actually, between the energy of the element that's felt in a seemingly external context, and how we experience that element within. So that the boundary begins to drop away, the sense of separation between "I'm here" and "that's there," but in fact, we're an intertwined tapestry of these energies.

(00:42:24) And when you isolate the different elements and really focus on them one by one, you start to really understand the distinctions between these energies, as they form us and as they form the natural world. It's a tremendously fun retreat. I absolutely love that retreat.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:42:43): Yeah, that's wonderful. And I know that you also have been linking the energies of these elements with emotional experiences too. Could you give us a little flavor of that as an example?

Liz Monson (00:42:55): Well, yeah, and I think it's actually part of the teachings is that the elemental energies are manifestations, or are the clarified version of the energies that we tend to label, and have ideas about, as our emotional experience. So for example, if we think about the element of water, there are two ways that the teachings describe that we are in relationship with the energy of the element of water. One is a clarified way, a maybe awakened way, and the other is in a confused way. And this is again, working with the notion of the element not only as external, but particularly as an internal movement of energy within our bodies, which we can feel the water in our bodies, we can feel the saliva in our mouths. We can sense into the movement of blood through our veins and lymph in the lymphatic system. So the element of water is connected with the emotion in a blocked form or a contorted or contracted form as anger or aggression. And the energy of anger, the energy of aggression can be very sharp, can be very penetrating, can be very... obviously destructive. There's a kind of violence to the energy of anger and aggression. But there's also, within an experience of anger, when we feel the energy of anger, there's a very deep clarity. Anger can see things very precisely and clearly in some cases, in some ways. And when it is in its fully clarified form, like when that energy in us is not distorted and when it's manifesting in a, let's say just a clarified way, it manifests as a particular kind of wisdom, is how it's described in the Vajrayana tradition. It's called mirror-like wisdom, which is a wisdom that sees things as they are. Very clearly, it's able to discriminate, distinguish detail, and has a very precise

understanding of the essence of things as they are. And so therefore, it's called mirror-like wisdom. There's a mirroring of the truth of how something actually is.

(00:45:29) So if we find that we're a person who has a lot of challenge with anger, if that is a dominant emotional energy that comes up a lot, one of the ways that we can work to begin to relax and clarify that energy into its wisdom dimension, into its wisdom manifestation, is to meditate with the element of water itself. So sitting by the side of a lake and beginning to merge one's awareness with the water is a way of beginning to transmute the distorted energy of anger into that clarified form of precise clarity, of mirror-like wisdom. So the elements can serve then as practice tools, helping us to transmute our distorted emotional energies into their wisdom manifestations. Because in the Tantric tradition, the human being as an awakened being is understood to be a mandala of these five awakened primary energies. And one of them is this mirror-like wisdom, this capacity for extremely clear seeing, an ability to decide. And you can imagine if, rather than acting out of a distorted anger, one were to act instead out of the clarified form of that energy, the energy is the same, but how we're in relationship to it becomes quite different when you work with the elements. What's possible in terms of the success of the action that we engage in is going to be much higher if it's not coming out of that distorted form, which is likely to only lead to more aggression, and to more violence and to more anger.

(00:47:11) So that's one way of describing it or talking about it. And there are extensive practices called the five Buddha family wisdom practices that explore all of the five dominant energies. Although each one of them, like even within anger, you can say, okay yes, there's the energy that comes up when we feel anger, but anger is a spectrum of energies, right? So there's irritation, there's frustration, etc. And that's the same with each of the others. So that it covers the full gamut of what we tend to experience as energy arising in our being, coming through us.

(00:47:48) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:47:48): There's a topic I wanted to broach with you. I feel like it's a little complicated to talk about, but I feel like you're an excellent person to talk about it with. Because I know you have taught full courses on both the divine masculine and the divine feminine. And so I feel like within that space, it relates somehow maybe to what we're talking about, about nature. I think at least in our culture, this kind of interconnectedness with nature is often associated with a more feminine archetypal perspective. But I also always have a bit of resistance to reducing these to gendered terms. So I'm just wondering how you think about that.

Liz Monson (00:49:00): Yeah. I have taught on both working with divine masculine and divine feminine energies. And that's from the perspective of the Vajrayana tradition, which works with what are called yidams. A yidam is a meditational deity. It's a symbolic form, and usually either in the form of a female deity or a male deity. Sometimes also in the form of that we call Yab-Yum, which means male-female united, so it's really almost a beyond-gendered form. And the way the practitioner works with them is to visualize these forms. They are symbolic and they are actually portals into that energy as it resides within us as part of our awakened being. So when you generate a visualization of a divine masculine form or a divine feminine form or a unified non-dual form, you are bringing that [part of] your own energy into the space in front of you in order to cultivate a relationship with it, a more conscious relationship of it. So it's not like there are truly existing divine masculine or divine feminine entities out there in this sense.

(00:50:16) And so I think from the perspective of those traditions, an awakened being is one in whom the divine masculine and the divine feminine are completely unified, that there is no separation

between the two. It's a non-dual state, and that's what this notion of Yab-Yum... Yab means male, yum means female. And these are these deities that you see that look like they're in union, in sexual union. But what's meant to be—what the symbolic nature of that form is—is that this is a non-dual state of being completely unified with the truth of things as they are. So it's beyond any gendered idea of male or female, or masculine or feminine. It steps outside of all of those concepts. And yet it holds the fullness of the array of energies that make up life, which we have tended to separate out into these different ideas of, these are masculine and these are feminine.

(00:51:18) These days I've become so curious about the fact that many people in our world today are feeling disinclined to identify with one particular gender or another, and are finding themselves feeling more at ease in a non-gendered space, or a non-binary kind of identification of self. And I think that that's actually so interestingly in harmony with the way the path unfolds in Tantric practice where one is beginning to diminish that sense of separation between a divine masculine or a divine feminine manifestation, and moving more and more towards this unified non-dual state that is neither one nor the other, but both. You know, it's this endless contradiction. It's not this, it's not that. It's not the both of them. *[laughter]*

(00:52:15) So I mean, the natural world and our interconnectedness with it is often... as you say, it's being more gendered as feminine. And I think that's more having to do with the notion of interrelationship. And yet all of the energies that we might say are masculine or feminine are contained within the natural world. They're not separated out in these kinds of divisive or dualistic forms.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:52:45): Right, of course. Yeah, all of those are just constructs that we have created anyway.

Liz Monson (00:52:52): Yeah. I mean, and it's not to say though... I just want to make sure I say that in the context of Vajrayana or Tantric practice, there are times when it is... (and that's why I've taught those courses) times when it can be very helpful to focus on one manifestation of energy. Like, oh, here's a divine masculine, what we would label as a divine masculine energy. So what if we discover what a relationship with that energy is like in ourselves? And then with a divine feminine form. Just as a way to explore the spectrum of energies that make us up as beings.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:53:27): Could you share a little bit, just some examples of what energies would be associated with the divine masculine and feminine, from the Vajrayana perspective? I'm just curious whether they're similar to our Western concepts of those terms.

Liz Monson (00:53:43): You know there are some, maybe we could say hard and fast distinctions, but also there are some not hard and fast distinctions. So in a maybe traditional Tantric context, the divine feminine energy is primarily associated with the wisdom, with the wisdom of insight—the insight that sees the wisdom of emptiness, which is fundamentally the wisdom of interdependence and interconnectedness. And so it's the insight that one has when one finally begins to feel into one's being as an interwoven experience of being. That it's not a single separate, unchanging situation, but it's a flow of interconnected, changing, moving pieces that are all dependent in one way or another on each other. And I can say that, but the actual realization or insight into that is far beyond what words can convey. So that awakening of the energy of that insight is traditionally associated with the divine feminine.

(00:54:51) But then what rises out of that, what comes from that recognition is a flow of compassion into the world. It's the dynamic manifestation of awareness itself that is a moving, flowing energy. It's described as being unimpeded. There's nothing that can block it. And it's everywhere, and it's a part of

every being. And how it takes form and interacts in relationships, sort of like the energy of relationship, is understood to be as compassion. So compassionate skillful means. The skillful means of how to be of benefit in the world is traditionally then associated with the divine masculine, because it's the moving energetic flowing force of our awakened essence as it comes into the world. Whereas the awakened essence itself is then more traditionally understood to be the divine feminine. But the fact is they're not separable. We can talk about them separately, but actually you can't have one without the other. They exist simultaneously. Those are maybe two of the most traditionally clearly defined ideas around what is the divine feminine, what is the divine masculine.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:56:08): Yeah. That's now making me think of the... In Buddhism, sometimes you hear of the two wings of the-

Liz Monson (00:56:14): Of the bird.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:56:15): Yeah. So the same. Both are necessary.

Liz Monson (00:56:15): It's the same. Exactly.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:56:21): Oh that's cool. Well, I know we don't have too much time left, but I also really wanted to give space for you to share a little bit about your interest in plant medicine and also psychedelics, and that path. And I know there's a lot of growing interest within the meditation community and the Buddhist community about working with psychedelic medicines to explore consciousness. You have shared recently about thoughts on the interrelationship or the potential synergies between Buddhist teachings and meditation and working with psychedelics. So I wonder if you could share a little bit about your thoughts there, and also maybe some of the cautions that come up in that space.

Liz Monson (00:57:02): Right. Yeah, very important to include that. I mean, it's a big topic and it's a growing topic, I think. There was recently a conference in New York City, the first one of its kind on Buddhism and psychedelics. And I gave the keynote address at that conference, which was a really wonderful opportunity to try to bring together some thoughts around, what is this situation and what is this movement? And a lot of my explorations came out of this desire that I have had for my whole life, but especially moreso in the last 10 years or so when I've been made much more keenly aware, as we all have, of the challenges that are facing our environment, and the loss of our biodiversities and our ecosystems. And just like, what do we need to do to start listening to the natural world, and the teachings and the truths of the natural world? I just felt like all of my meditation practice and all of my time in the natural world... it was still, I felt, on the surface. Like I'm hearing something, but I am not going deeper into the fabric of reality, not deeply enough to really hear, you know, the songs of the wind or the... What are the teachings here?

(00:58:24) And so I found... Happily, I was exposed to some plant medicine traditions coming out of South America, 5000–7000-year-old traditions where the curanderos or the shamans have been teaching, and actually have been in relationship with and learning from the plants themselves, for thousands of years. And these are long lineages of healers and healing practices that are now just beginning to... Well, they're coming actually into the world with quite a strong presence in the last few years particularly. So I've been fortunate to be able to engage in some of those practices.

(00:59:09) And they do work with these plant medicines, many of them have psychedelic components to them. They contain DMT or they contain mescaline, or they contain psilocybin, or they contain some

other psychedelic compound. And so at the same time that one is connecting in with the energy of the plants, one is also having one's consciousness expanded. And I mean, actually consciousness is always expanded. It's just our habit pattern of limiting consciousness to this conceptual frame keeps us from understanding what it's like to dissolve into the fullness and openness of consciousness in its expanded form. So psychedelics and plant medicines are a powerful tool for giving us that taste—showing us how the small self can dissolve into the vaster space of being. And helping us cultivate a kind of ease and trust in that experience, so that we are releasing the boundaries of the sense of I and me and mine, and connecting into a much less conceptual, but much more awakened, energized space of communication.

(01:00:28) Again, those teachings don't come through in concepts in the moment of receiving them. They can be distilled into concepts—which maybe I think is one of the powers of the human being, that we have that capacity to do that. But it is also, on some level, it's such an expedient and powerful methodology—technology—for accessing not only the vaster space of being, but also our own lack of solidity and our own constantly flowing, shifting, changing nature. It can be very frightening if one doesn't have the capacity to hold the space of one's own being, the space of one's own awareness, and one goes into a psychedelic experience, the first thing that's going to become highlighted is the activity of the thinking mind. And if we don't have a way to be in relationship with that thinking that allows it to exhaust itself and to release itself, then we can get caught in thought loops and fear patterns, in emotional reactivity, and it can be a pretty unpleasant experience, and feel solidifying and unpleasant rather than opening and expansive and connecting. So one caveat for sure is that, I mean I feel at least that, a stable meditation practice is extremely helpful if one wants to go down that road and start to explore the intersection of those modalities.

(01:01:59) And another thing is just to say that psychedelics and expanded states of consciousness are not necessarily for everybody. Depending on different psychological conditions that somebody may have, it's important to be aware that if one has significant traumas that have not been healed and worked through, one could just dissociate and bypass the work that needs to be done. Which is part of every spiritual path, right? These medicines, these plant medicine traditions are spiritual paths, and they're not meant to help us shortcut the essential work we have to do. They will help us go deep into it in a way that we cannot avoid if we want to do the work, but we have to want to do the work, I believe.

(01:02:47) And then on top of that, I think there's just the need to stay awake to the fact that these technologies, it's not that psychedelics are new to the world, because they're not, but the way they're being used now and the availability of them and the ways they're being touted as beneficial are new perhaps, or are at least being re-emphasized in a very powerful way. So there are lots of people... Not lots, but I am aware of the fact that sometimes we get overexcited and we think, oh, I've done two or three ayahuasca journeys, or I've done five or ten psilocybin journeys, and now I think I'm going to take other people into those spaces, and I'm going to serve those medicines. Forgetting that the healers that come out of South America from the Indigenous people have been training their whole lives to serve these medicines, and to understand what happens in an expanded space where you're holding the hearts and minds and consciousnesses of multiple people. And so one wants to be really careful about who one works with, and how one receives these medicines, and make sure that you're working with someone who knows what they're doing, because otherwise it could be quite dangerous. So I think it's important just to make sure that that's clear.

Wendy Hasenkamp (01:04:10): Yeah, thank you. I wonder if you wouldn't mind sharing—since you have such deep and long practice in the Buddhist tradition and with meditation, and then also have experienced these journeys with some psychedelic plants—maybe some of your own experience, to

whatever degree you're comfortable but, maybe comparing/contrasting, or how are they similar/how are they different?

Liz Monson (01:04:33): Yeah. I mean, it's definitely still for me, an ongoing and fascinating exploration. I'm really intrigued by the potentiality of it. And what I've discovered, without getting into really long descriptions of my own personal journeys... I would say that for the first couple of years, it was a very dark and difficult road. And almost every journey I did was incredibly hard, and I just felt that I was swimming in a sea of darkness. Couldn't really understand what was going on, didn't know why it was happening, felt sick and horrible, on every level—physically, emotionally, spiritually—just in a thick black fog of confusion and despair and self-hatred.

(01:05:28) And eventually, what I started to discover was that what was happening was that the medicine was showing me a very old pattern, or a way of being that I had ingrained so deeply in myself that I had forgotten... Not that I'd forgotten it was there, but it was so much a part of how I thought of myself, I didn't see it. Even though what drew me into working with plant medicines was feeling that there were layers of my subtle body, my energy body that I could not access through my meditation, and that there was a lot of congestion and trauma stored in those places that I wanted to access to release and find some ease from.

(01:06:14) So what I didn't anticipate was just how vibrantly and powerfully accessible those medicines made those habit patterns. I mean, I was just in the darkness in a very unpleasant and difficult way. And I had to find a lot of love for myself, and I had to find a lot of patience and a lot of care. And it brought alive the teachings that I had studied my whole life from the Buddhist tradition, brought them alive in a way that was purely experiential. It was so far beyond what I'd ever "thought" the Four Noble Truths were about. I was living them. And not only in ceremonies, but then that began to translate into my daily life. And so I feel like I went through quite a crucible of... You know, you want to really know what it means to say life is suffering? And actually what I ended up discovering is that that noble truth—the translation that Stephen Batchelor has cultivated or coined, which is not "life is suffering," his translation is more "suffering is to be embraced"—just became so real for me. I had to embrace that suffering if it was ever going to heal. If that darkness and self-hatred and self-dislike was ever going to release me from it, I had to find a new relationship to it. And the first was just awareness of all of its dimensions. I mean, I knew it was there, it was just so monolithic. And then it was, what does it mean to embrace this, and find the diamonds in the darkness? And so a lot of my journey with plant medicines for the first few years was very much about finding the diamonds in the darkness. But that meant having to come to know that darkness in a very direct, immediate, no excuses, experiential way.

Wendy Hasenkamp (01:08:14): Yeah. I really appreciate your highlighting the need for self-compassion, and to meet these experiences with love. And also it feels like such a lesson of... We have such a tendency, a really deep tendency to avoid suffering.

Liz Monson (01:08:31): Yes, we do.

Wendy Hasenkamp (01:08:33): And that phrasing of "suffering is to be embraced," really makes clear the need to move into it and deeply accept it, which feels transformational, and so difficult.

Liz Monson (01:08:44): I mean, if we're really going to wake up in this lifetime... And I mean, I like to think that the Buddha's first teaching was touching the earth, but very often it's described that his first teaching was the Four Noble Truths, right? And so the first noble truth, if the Buddha decided that that was the very first thing... Because the Buddha didn't want to teach after he was enlightened, he thought

nobody would understand. If that was what he wanted to share first, it's just really struck home to me like, "Oh my goodness, we have to do this."

(01:09:18) We may have no choice as a species already, to have to face into the darkness of our own suffering. It may just be that the way things are moving on this planet and in our lives is going to force us into that relationship. But how do we want to do that? Do we want to do it with fear and aggression and struggle? Or do we want to try and come into that experience, all of our experiences of suffering, with some kind of self-love and care and gentleness and compassion for ourselves? Which is truly where the rubber meets the road is in that intersection. At least for me, that's where that has been absolutely true. I think that the journey to our awakening is a journey through the darkness with gentleness and ease and kindness and care—as much as we can bring to it—and then cultivating more of it along the way. Learning what it means to bring those two together.

Wendy Hasenkamp (01:10:19): Yeah. It strikes me too, going back to this larger conversation about interconnection and connection with nature and the safety that comes there, that that kind of safety also can be a piece of helping to face all the difficulties.

Liz Monson (01:10:36): Oh, absolutely. No, absolutely. I think one of the most powerful ways we can feel safe is in recognition of the... Again, back to the discussion of 9/11, that what's really deepest inside of us is an energy of love, an energy of care, and can we access that as our vehicle for traveling through the darkness? However it manifests, whether it's our emotional darkness or it's the challenges that are arising in the external world, seemingly external world, around us all the time.

Wendy Hasenkamp (01:11:11): Well Liz, wow, thank you so much. This has been a really wonderful conversation. I feel like we could have gone on much longer.

Liz Monson (01:11:20): Me too. *[laughter]*

Wendy Hasenkamp (01:11:21): And it feels like yet another deep teaching that I've personally been able to receive from you. So personal thanks, and thank you just so much for taking the time and sharing all of your wisdom with us today.

Liz Monson (01:11:33): Well, Wendy, thank you so much. It's just a joy to be in conversation with you. And thank you for your beautiful questions and for inviting me to be here. I feel very honored and delighted.

Outro – Wendy Hasenkamp (01:11:48): *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.*

(01:12:18) *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.*