Mind & Life Podcast Transcript

Jon Kabat-Zinn – Many Doors, One Room

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INTRO

David Creswell • 00:03

Welcome to the Mind and Life Podcast. I'm your host, David Creswell. This is where we take a deep dive into contemplative science and practice and explore how practices like mindfulness meditation and compassion training and the wisdom traditions they come from shape the mind, brain, and body. We also explore how we can translate what we learn into well-being and human flourishing. My guest today needs little introduction. Jon Kabat-Zinn created the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program in 1979 at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. And with it, he opened the door for mindfulness to enter mainstream medicine, science, and public life. Decades of research followed, including a lot of my own. But as you'll hear, Jon has always insisted it was never really about MBSR. It was about the M in mindfulness-based stress reduction, mindfulness as a way of waking up and a way of meeting the world as it is.

I recorded this conversation in person earlier this year in Washington, D. C. , where many of us had gathered for a Mind & Life event honoring His Holiness the Dalai Lama, whose encouragement helped bring this field of contemplative science and scholarship into being. It really felt like the right moment to me to ask where contemplative science has come from and where it goes next. Jon and I talk about the earliest days of the stress reduction clinic that he led and the challenge he gave every patient. Essentially, as long as you're breathing, there's more right with you than wrong with you. We talk about turning toward pain instead of away from it, and why, in Jon's words, the suffering is extra. We get into the psoriasis study I promised to ask him about in our season opener and what it tells us about meditation apps and Zoom-based meditation training. We talk about loneliness, about attention and an age built to capture it, and how we can wake up. Papers, books, and links are in the show notes at podcast.mindandlife.org.

And please stick around after the interview if you want to try a short, guided meditation with me. So now, I hope you enjoy my conversation with Jon Kabat-Zinn.

David Creswell • 02:18

Jon, it's so great to have you on the podcast. Thank you for coming today.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 02:25

My absolute pleasure.

David Creswell • 02:27
I feel like we've probably known each other a couple decades now, and you kind of brought me up in the field. You would pull me aside at different points in my career and sort of say *"Hey David, this is a really important area."* Or *"This was a really important finding."* Or *"David, you need to sit down and practice."*

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 02:48
I don't remember any of that, but the third one sounds like it's something I very much would say if it felt appropriate. But in general, I mean I'm just like a big fan of the aspects of your work that I know about and the way you position the meditation practice in the work and in the literature and the kinds of studies you do, I think really are huge contribution to wisdom moving into the world in embodied ways that take care of real people with real lives.

David Creswell • 03:19
Well, thank you. It's really been my pleasure and you know, it's been my pleasure too to really engage with mindfulness-based stress reduction and that program and try to study it in different ways. You know, we have this great new finding where we were looking at the mindfulness-based stress reduction program in lonely older adults, and really showing that could change their immune system.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 03:41
You know, I've loved that from the moment you started investigating that because that was not an object of interest when I started the MBSR program back in 1979. I mean it was basically, the basic idea was to catch people falling through what I used to refer to as the cracks in the healthcare system and challenge them to just see if there wasn't something they could do for themselves that no one else on the planet, including their doctors and their surgeons or their pastors or their spouse could do for them, and just see what happens. And then another piece of it was that we would say to people when we interviewed them, because we had patient intake interviews and health interviews for every single person for many, many years until it became totally un-cost effective in terms of the way medicine was changing. But we would say to people, look, from our point of view, no matter what your diagnosis is, as long as you're breathing, there's more right with you than there's wrong with you. And we're going to pour energy in the form of attention into what's right with you, let the rest of the hospital and the health care team take care of what's wrong and see what happens in eight weeks. And that was the challenge and the other thing is in the old days when we were doing these intake interviews we'd actually listen to people, a lost art in medicine because the data shows that when a physician or a psychologist is interviewing a patient and it takes on the average 17 seconds after asking the patient an open-ended question for the doctor or the psychologist to interrupt the person. So not so good at listening to the very question that they were posing. So we would really listen to people and ask them well what brings you to stress reduction? And just listen. And the stories were like unbelievable because, you know I'm not trained as either a physician or a psychologist, so it's like, as a molecular biologist sitting hour after hour, sometimes eight patients in a day for weeks at a time to fill another cycle of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program, and just ask that question, what brings you to stress reduction, and not look at people's diagnoses beforehand, because I was afraid that if I got the diagnosis then I'd see them through that lens and I wanted to just see them as a human being and not as a diagnosis. And just to hear the enormity of people's lives and the levels of suffering and so forth and then to really propose to them that this is not about taking anything away from you or fixing anything. This is not a model for fixing, but more a model for learning, growing, and healing, by paying

attention to things that ordinarily we never pay attention to, in a kind of systematic way, which is what mindfulness meditation is all about, and mindful hatha yoga, which was a very big part of it as well. And right away it was obvious that, people loved it because usually a medical interview is a very short period of time, you got 17 minutes, you know, with the doctor or whatever, but here you got like two hours and we soon extended it to two and a half hours and with small classes at the beginning like eight, ten, twelve people. It was plenty of time and people felt met and seen and heard. And usually in hospitals, you know in order to bill people they have to fill out an encounter form. Now it's all electronic. So very often you get charged for an encounter, but there was no encounter, because from the hospital side, nobody was actually present. They were just performing tasks. And so it was a real, I think people felt "well, now I'm coming to the hospital for something positive as opposed to just to get diagnosed or treated for something. They believe that there's something intrinsically healing and already more right with me than wrong with me." And then you listen to what everybody else is saying in the classroom. And it's really powerful because you think you've got problems, but then you hear twenty other people say what they're here for and you say, "Holy cow, I'm glad I don't have what she has or what he has. And then maybe it's okay to have what I have." And everybody's feeling that no matter what they have. So there's something incredibly beautiful about that, and so it looks like one person's teaching the class, but actually, you know, with a skillful MBSR instructor, everybody's teaching everybody else.

David Creswell • 08:28
I feel like you know you're so well known for the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program, but I feel like your real message hasn't been MBSR, but has been about a radical wakefulness, and dropping into the present moment in whatever form or training program that might take.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 08:48
Well exactly. And the way I put it in one of the papers that I wrote about it is, it's never been about MBSR. It's been about the M from the very beginning. And the M can take an infinite number of forms. And also it is open to endless research investigation because the M, mindfulness, is in my vocabulary synonymous with awareness. And awareness is like the biggest mystery on planet Earth, actually, because nobody understands how it comes about or even whether it comes about through neuronal activity in the brain or complexity or whatever. And is awareness the same as sentience and how far down does it go in the evolutionary tree? And so awareness is a gigantic mystery. But at the same time it's like, completely apparent that a lot of the time we're just zoning along on autopilot, lost in thought. And now they're teaching this in school to kids, the young kids, and beginning to realize, oh, there's a domain of thinking, there's a domain of emotion, there's a domain of sensation, but there's also a domain of pure awareness where you're not caught in the thought stream or caught in emotional reactivity, or caught in the story of me or about my body and the sensation, the whatever it is, but you're in some sense situated in awareness. And if you start to investigate from a first person perspective, what is awareness? Like, can I find, for instance, the center of my awareness? And we challenge people. Can you find the center of your awareness? Doesn't matter. Eyes open, eyes closed, do it however you like. See if you can find it. See if you can find the edge or the periphery or the circumference of awareness. And everybody gets almost immediately through actually investigation, not through thinking, that "Oh my god. I mean, I can't find the center of awareness. I can't find the outer edge of awareness. It's actually boundless. It's mysterious. It's like, um well what's that most like? Well, that's most like the universe, which is also said to be boundless and there's no center and there's no periphery." So there's a certain way in which we embody a kind of aspect of the universe which is profoundly mysterious. And as the Tibetans like to say, it's empty of any kind of essence, but it's cognizant by nature and it's infinite in its capacity and extent. So in a sense that's a profound Dzogchen teaching and it's right in the

center of MBSR. And we'd never use the word Dzogchen or we don't use any Buddhist or technical terminology around the meditation. It's just common sense that when you look at it and then you can ask really important questions that have to do with clinical issues, like, so many people come with a chronic pain condition or chronic anxiety. And they want you to just make it go away, like maybe use my mind to make it go away. We're not going to do anything like that. We're going to turn towards it and actually put the welcome ed out for what you most don't want to investigate and just take a peek, even if it's like just for a fraction of a second. Can you take a peek at and locate the intensity of, let's say, your pain, although it's not yours, but the, whatever it is, the problem, the pain. And then you can play with it and say, well, you know, you can investigate all sorts of qualities. Is it sharp? Is it shooting? You got the whole Melzack, you know, pain questionnaire, like of adjectives that you can use to describe pain. And when you start to take that perspective, you can ask interesting questions, like, is my awareness of my pain actually right now in pain? And people will look. I mean they'll actually engage and, no. And it's not dissociation. What it is, is actually the realization that there's a difference between the object of attention and awareness and that when you're inhabiting the awareness, that differentiates the sensory and even emotional and even cognitive aspects of the pain from suffering. So then all of a sudden like, there's no suffering. That's a kind of profound, I won't say insight, more like realization, like, you know, that in some sense I'm collaborating in the production of suffering because of this sensation. and then build the story around it, like it's going to kill me, it's ruining my life, I had to give up my work and everything else. All of which is true, but it's not true enough. And so people are in some sense learning how to recover the full dimensionality of their repertoire of human capacity. And when they do that, very often their lives will change. They'll go back to work because they won't have the story of how this is preventing me from doing stuff and then discover that it was a thought that was preventing you from doing a lot of this stuff, rather than the thing itself. And if you do that in a gentle, loving, dance-like way, rather than macho forcing, breaking through limitations and so forth, which will just set you back, then a lot of people who feel like their lives have been ruined by their chronic condition,, discover that it's workable.

David Creswell • 14:27
So much of the work and thinking that I've been doing lately is really about, you know, how turning awareness toward pain or you know, suffering, really unlocks some relief. You know, I I think so much about this sort of opening that you kind of mentioned, you know, this equanimity, this sort of curiosity, this sort of non-reactive mental stance to experiences, kind of being one of the keys to sort of unlock that relief. And that so much of mindfulness practices are about, you know, helping people develop this state of mind, this capacity to be open.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 15:10
Exactly, and not fall into, really, the story of me and my pain. But to recognize the story of me and my pain, and to even recognize, and this has profound implications that go way beyond one's pain condition or pain problem, that the story itself is usually not true, only partially true at best, and extremely limiting. And the Buddha is famous in the Bahiya Sutra for having actually stated that his entire 45 years of teaching could be encapsulated in one sentence. And I like to riff on that and say, well, on the off chance he wasn't joking, maybe you should memorize that sentence. And the sentence is "Nothing is to be clung to as I, me, or mine." And the operative verb, of course, is to cling, to attach and self identify. So as soon as you do that you build the story of me and how bad it is and whatever. And it's kind of limiting and imprisoning And it may be true, of course it is you, and of course you have, you know, you did have that car accident or that lifting accident or whatever it is, and you are in pain, but that's not the full story. And so if you begin to investigate, even like in a Zen koan like way, who is in pain? What is pain? And instead of running away from it and trying to anesthetize yourself, you turn towards it, which is

like, really counterintuitive, and go into the pain, which we teach people to do. Then you can discover there's a whole universe in there where the pain is bare sensation. The suffering's extra. And you can liberate the sensation from the suffering. Awareness does the liberating. And it's not like we tell them to do that. That's a discovery that you make that it's a multidimensional experience, and how you, and the story you build around it can make all the difference between your life being ruined and your working with things that, you know, aren't wonderful. It's not like you don't have a chronic diagnosis, but how much it affects your life and your ability to work and pick up babies and, you know, make love and all of the different elements of your life. Don't be so fast to just abrogate all that and write it off as like, I'm in pain, because there's a whole universe that can be explored that way. And the same for you, fill in the blank, stress, you know, that we have these stories that we build about like how stressed I am and everything. And it's not that it's not true, it's just not true enough. Because what MBSR basically affords people is this hidden dimension that's right under our noses the whole time, which is called human awareness. And when we learn how to inhabit the dimensionality of awareness, then it's a degree of freedom that you're adding to the sort of constellation of the experience of quote unquote me and there's a lot of freedom in that dimensionality. Is this making any sense to you the way I'm speaking? Because it's a little bit abstract.

David Creswell • 18:21
No, I get it. And I think formal meditation practice is a practice in leaning in. It's about sitting there with a whole range of benign discomforts.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 18:31
Yeah, we wouldn't even say sitting there, we'd say sitting here, because people will often use the word there, like, yeah, it's hurting over there, but it's not. It's like, remind people like, no, it's here. And let's put the welcome mat out for what's here instead of distancing it and then turning it into a problem. So even the language often is really subtle, but it's amazingly interesting that the self-talk actually can amplify or, let's say reduce the possibility for healing.

David Creswell • 19:00
So I I feel like you're actively working with me on just even ways to lean in even with the language and I just I just love meditation practices in that they do ask us to sort of show up and to open up right here with whatever is here. And that's the magic. But I think a lot of people come to meditation seeing it as a time to bliss out or relax, when in fact it's a a radical greeting of whatever is potentially showing up and that can be a lot of challenging experience.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 19:31
You're not kidding. Yeah, I don't have that much experience of people coming to bliss out because in MBSR nobody's coming to bliss out. They just want relief. But it is continuing to grow and find ways into the world that I'm personally astonished by because nobody's driving it. It's not some corporate thing that's being driven or advertised or anything else, but it's kind of like, a love affair is sometimes the way I'll describe it, that somehow people want to teach MBSR. That's like very satisfying to do it, and then of course there's no end of people who are suffering and falling through the cracks of the healthcare system. And I think now it has the kind of reputation where it's not a stretch for a hospital to say, yeah, we should have a stress reduction program and of course it should be mindfulness. No, that was the whole point is that and you know I have all these business people come to me and say, what was your marketing plan? How did you make MBSR just move you know, around the world, and it's all these medical centers and everything else. My marketing strategy is no marketing. And let the results speak for themselves. Publish it in scientific literature and see what happens. And maybe it was just

the timing of it, but seeding the scientific literature with those early papers in the eighties on MBSR and chronic pain, it just started going by itself. Then it was noticed by John Teasdale and Zindel Segal and Mark Williams who actually came to UMass Medical Center at a certain point because they, Marsha Linehan had told him to come, you know, the famous Marsha Linehan of DBT, Dialectical Behavior Therapy, who was actually herself a Zen student and ultimately a, you know, a Zen teacher. And they were looking for something to help them deal with relapse from major depressive disorder, and they wanted to find a kind of group program that would actually help reduce the high relapse rates, even though they're successfully treated by medication. And so they came to UMass and they just sat in on classes and they couldn't believe it. I wrote a whole chapter about their visit in Coming to Our Senses and the title of that chapter is kinda edgy because it says "You Can't Get There From Here". Because they wanted to just kind of take the bottle of MBSR, give it to their patients, and see what would happen. And I say, well, and are you gonna be voicing the guided meditations? "No, we're gonna just use your tapes, your guided meditations." I said, don't bother. It's not gonna work. You have to guide the meditations. And do you have a meditation practice? No, one person did. John Teasdale had a meditation practice, but not the other two. So all of a sudden these super successful, extremely well known and highly regarded cognitive therapists were being challenged to like drop their cognitive therapy vocabulary and world in a certain way, and get in there with their patients, get down on the floor with them, sit with them, practice with them and practice on their own too. And they did it. And in their book they wrote about it from a kind of first person personal perspective, which people almost never do in scientific books. And it was just incredibly powerful.

David Creswell • 23:28
That's one of the amazing things about, I think, your career and contributions is that you're so well known for MBSR, but you're really about big M mindfulness and that it's about adaptation to what the critical needs, like how mindfulness can flex into spaces and you know, one of my favorite studies of yours is the study you did with psoriasis patients. Which had nothing, it didn't look like MBSR at all. These were people going through, so psoriasis is, you know, really difficult skin lesion disease, you get these really itchy, painful skin lesions. And the leading therapy is this sort of phototherapy. People get in these kind of light booths for a couple minutes, a couple times a week And you somehow came up with this way to offer guided mindfulness training in these very short sessions.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 24:19
While they're in the light box.

David Creswell • 24:21
Yeah.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 24:21
We had a sort of Department of Medicine faculty meeting and I happened to have lunch with a guy named Jeff Bernhardt, who was the head of dermatology. And I'd never heard of, I practically had never heard of psoriasis, never mind phototherapy. And he's saying, we have this real problem that you know, people aren't sticking with the therapy because they have to come to the hospital, find a parking space in the garage, come in, take off all their clothes, slather their body with oil, and then step into this light booth, which is like, the kind of circular box that has, you know, six foot long light bulbs that actually radiate ultraviolet light in certain wavelengths. And at first you burn the hell out of their skin so they can only stay in for a very short period of time, and then you incrementally up the amount of time that it gets And, we're just getting people like refusing treatment because and I like to say a light bulb went off in my

head at that moment, saying, Well why don't we teach them to meditate while they're in the light box? Then it could be a study in like, participatory medicine. We can see whether, you know, if we have a control group that just gets the light treatment, the other group they're meditating while they're getting the light treatment, we can look at the kinetics of skin clearing and just have a kind of visual outcome that you can see and document that would suggest that something they're doing with the mind in that light box is actually influencing a healing process that you can see, photograph and do all sorts of things to actually investigate. Because, you know it's kissing cousin with basal cell carcinoma so that there were all sorts of molecular markers that you could study and everything. And we did that, and it was like I think, one of the one of the most fun and satisfying studies I've ever done, but my hope was that at the time, because it was published in I think 1998 that dermatologists would pick up on it and then do the whole soup to nuts real investigation because you could look at all sorts of cellular factors that actually play a role in something, you know, in the genesis of basal cell carcinoma. And maybe mindfulness could actually influence not just psoriatic processes, but skin cancer. And of course it's also a built-in cost effectiveness study because if you need fewer treatments, those treatments are very expensive, as well as very stressful to the patients. So if you need, if you're meditating and you halve the time to skin clearance then you half the cost. So it had a whole bunch of different virtues all rolled up into one. And in the 28 years since that study was published I do not know of one dermatology center anywhere that has picked up on it and taken it to a place where I think, you know, the potential sort of bounty from doing a study like that is huge.

David Creswell • 27:24
It's such a foundational study and we should state that you found a fourfold faster skin clearing rate as rated by condition unaware nurses and physicians.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 27:35
That's exactly right, we had people rating that who had blind to the condition of the patient.

David Creswell • 27:40
Yeah, and fourfold faster clearing rate is a sizable clinical effect. Of course for me and my scientist brain I'm like, well, what is going on? Are there sort of inflammatory processes? Do you have any dermatologists where you work? Yeah, I know. We need to inspire people to pick this up. But I think my main point was that this looked really different than MBSR. You adapted into a space and I when I got your scripts, by the way, I read what you did in those sessions. You shared them with me. Oh good. But what you did was you worked with the sensations that were coming up from that light. And getting people to really open and mindfully attend, to turn toward those experiences.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 28:22
Exactly, because you know, that's what mindfulness is, is like if you're having an experience. I mean if you're basically in a rotisserie, you're being grilled. And so of course it's gonna feel aversive at a certain point, that's why you have to build up, you know, just the way in a tanning box you'd build up or in, you know, exposure to sun. And so it had a lot of virtues that the dermatologists understood, but somehow they never pursued it. And for me it was like, okay, we demonstrated it, we put it out there. And I just let it go. And we were doing a study with Richie [Davidson] at about the same time and a totally different kind of approach that, which was MBSR. But part of that study was this to demonstrate that MBSR is an eight-week program with like a class, like a class-like structure with a lot of people in it. But that the mindfulness practice itself could be done isolated in a light box, you know, and you're basically naked in there, with a pillowcase over your head to shield your eyes and goggles on and all sorts of things

and nobody else there. So one thing that it immediately demonstrates is social support isn't a necessary influence on the rate of healing. And there was a lot of talk in those days about how oh maybe MBSR is just like the social support. Everybody gets together and of course it's powerful. But that would suggest, well, it's not really the meditation. It's just that they're all getting together and so this differentiated the meditation practice because it isolated it to the light box with one individual.

David Creswell • 30:02
Yeah, you know, I do some of these studies with digital meditation apps and I kind of bring up that psoriasis study as an example because it's sort of like, yes, the group context and the teacher and facilitator are so important. But like they're not the only active ingredients.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 30:19
It's not the only secret sauce to these practices. Yeah and it might not be active at all in certain kind of conditions. Like, well the person's voice might be, my it's my voice on the guided, meditation tape in this in the psoriasis study. But yeah, it obviates almost all the social support. Yeah.

David Creswell • 30:38
You know, this idea of you and adaptability and thinking about big M mindfulness, you know you allowed MBSR to sort of grow and flourish in so many spaces, MBCT and so many other mindfulness-based programs that are out there, and I'm sure that probably brings you delight. And I'm curious as you, I know now you've sort of you've started to do mindfulness apps and online stuff. MBSR's gone online too. Yeah. And I'm curious, you know, today, right now, where we are, where do you think the best places are where we can really flex, you know, big M mindfulness and programs that are gonna meet people where they are?

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 31:18
Well, my short answer is anywhere you can. It should be ubiquitous. I mean, kids are now being exposed to it in school and have been for maybe a decade or two now , and all the evidence is that, you know, when you teach kids how to pay attention instead of yelling at them to pay attention you get really good results. They learn that, oh, attention is like a muscle, you can exercise it, you can strengthen it, you can focus it, you can use it to good advantage, but you have to learn how to pay attention. And with all the technologies nowadays it's like, you know, those tech companies are as wealthy as they are because they're basically commodifying attention and basically colonizing your attention 24/7 potentially. So we're in the age of perpetual distraction, with the digital technology and it's having, I think, very powerful negative effects on developing brains. Jonathan Haidt's, you know, work and that study and just the general, you know, sort of way in which the algorithms of the digital age are all monetized to capture and optimize attention. And there's a lot of toxicity that goes along with that too. And the challenge I think for this particular time, especially in educating the young, but the educators have to have a passion for it or the insight into it, is that It's really important for us in this age of AI and, you know, everybody's enamored of AI, to not forget that our analog genius is the product of 13.8 billion years of evolution, 13.8 billion years. And the origin story of the universe is that somehow in no time, everything came out of nothing. And it came out at first in the form of like unimaginable levels of heat, far too hot for electrons and protons to get together and form hydrogen. So a lot of cooling had to take place for like three hundred million years for the universe to even clarify, so that you got what we consider now night sky. It was all just like white light for 300 million years. And then you just had hydrogen, a little bit of helium, and over unimaginable billions of years of time, you got gravitational attraction to create stars. And once

you have stars, stars are furnaces for generating all the elements of a periodic table. The lower ones happen in the stars themselves. The higher ones, like the rare earths that everybody's killing each other over now for the phones and stuff like that. Those only happen when the stars explode in supernova and then they seed the universe with the periodic table of the elements. I mean it's like you can't make this stuff up. Everybody in school had a science class where it had the periodic table of the elements on the wall. Now you could teach the entire beauty of everything known about the analog world out of the periodic table of the elements. And it would turn people on like nobody's business to what a miracle it is for us, for our body to actually be what it is, and for plants to be what they are, and for the rainforest to function as the lungs of the planet and that chlorophyll which has a magnesium at the center of the porphyrin ring, captures sunlight, that the Earth figured out at a certain point how to capture sunlight. And then that porphyrin ring, a couple of billion years later, shows up again in hemoglobin, only this time it's an iron atom that came out of exploding stars at the center of that porphyrin ring, and it carries carbon dioxide and oxygen. I mean, unbelievable. So the fact is we are walking miracles in every way, shape, and form. And this is all analog. This has nothing to do with AI or computers or the digital world. And I really feel like before we just completely surrender to the digital onslaught, we need to really come to a profound first person appreciation of the miracle of sentience that's come out of the periodic table, or, you know, the unfolding of this. Or and, you know, that's a big philosophical question, did it actually come out of a materialist evolutionary thing? Or is sentience actually something that, like came out of the Big Bang all by itself, or preceded the Big Bang, because it's kind of ridiculous that even the most far-out mathematical physicists and cosmologists still cannot explain how everything came out of nothing. So, you know, if you're interested in teaching kids science, I mean this would be like a perfect door in to an appreciation of who they are in a certain way and the mystery of it. And then they could come to the digital world, which we all have to adapt to in one way or another, but without devaluing their analog beauty or, you know, what the Buddhists would call their true nature which is infinite in capacity. I mean awareness really is more like space than anything else, except, and they say infinite capacity, but cognizant by nature, and essentially empty. So I'm really hopeful that what's come about in the past forty or fifty years with the dharma moving into the West from the more classical monastic traditions in which it was you know, nurtured forever, that we can have kind of like a new renaissance actually on planet Earth, and instead of creating a nightmare scenario of othering and difference and injustice and obscene concentrations of wealth, that we kind of have a more distributive society where everybody's recognized as being equally valid, including other life forms and everything, so that we actually find some kind of homeostatic way to not destroy the billions of years of evolution or or even throw the planet into a chaotic kind of temperature dysregulation where, you know, we just induce another ice age. And we've had two snowball earths already over like all those, you know, sort of 4 billion years. But we've been in an incredibly stable period and we're destabilizing it within like 30 years. And so, you know, this is a far cry from MBSR in a sense, but it's actually medicine for the world, because if we don't pay attention to the way that we are actually a life form that evolved on a planet going around a star, then the medicine that we develop won't actually address the root cause of our own self-destructive tendencies.

David Creswell • 39:02
I hear you saying we really need to look deeply in at our own experience and you know, where we came from.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 39:10
And marvel at it. Really understand like, you know, and I think there the Buddhists are very clear about it, you know, that they talk about Buddha-nature. You know, the Buddha wasn't a Buddhist, which is really interesting. And I used to show this in my PowerPoint presentations

when I gave all these hundreds of medical grand rounds. I always had a picture of the Kamakura Buddha, which is one of the most beautiful, you know, that is like five stories tall and very beautiful. And I'd have a slide with that, and I'd say like this is where the most elaborate articulation of mindfulness comes out of the Buddhist tradition. It's universal. I mean it's just awareness, but the Buddha, you know, is, the four foundations of mindfulness, and there's a quote from one of the sutras that's saying that mindfulness is the direct path for liberation from suffering. And I think it's a valid statement. I mean that he really meant it. So taking the slide, I would say in the grand rounds, okay, so mindfulness comes out of the Buddhist tradition, and the slide goes up. And I would say, I wasn't there, but apocryphally it said that people would go up to him because he was so luminous and radiant, in a certain way, present, that people would go up to him and say, "Are you a god?" And then I'd switch, I'd have the slide switcher in my hand, and I would say "And he, his answer was no" and then I'd switch the slide, and the big one word on the whole slide, "awake." And basically it was trying to give people a kind of cognitively delivered non-cognitive experience of what mindfulness really is, is like wakefulness. So it's not something you have to get and it's something that is like, a core characteristic of our humanity, but accessing it's a different story. If you really want to access awareness in the present moment, then in a certain way, because we're so caught up in thought and emotion and, you know, sensation, that we have to exercise the muscle, and that's where the formal meditation practices come in.

David Creswell • 41:22
Yeah, we hear so much of what you're saying too about just being interested in consciousness and elevating conscious awareness. And I think there's this cool, there's these all these new strands of science that are actually coming out now. Yeah. There's a there's sort of a renaissance about consciousness. There's like hardcore vision scientists that are sort of doing these binocular rivalry tasks where they can, you know, disentangle attention from awareness. Really? It's so interesting. No kidding. And in the medical area, there's anesthesia, where they study people's brains the moment when the light goes on or off with anesthesia.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 42:06
Yeah.

David Creswell • 42:07
And I'm just so excited.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 42:09
No kidding? So there's a whole discipline around that nowadays?

David Creswell • 42:13
Yeah, so we'll try to share some of these papers in the show notes.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 42:16
I'd love to see that. And you know, I've known a number of anesthesiologists in my day and, you know, because their job is to put people to sleep so that they can undergo surgery. But the other half of their job is to wake people up. So, and you know, you have not succeeded unless you wake somebody up after the surgery. And so, yeah, I used to joke, well, we're in the same business because that's what mindfulness is about, is waking, waking people up.

David Creswell • 42:42
Well and the beauty of what you've done too is to say that there's a lot of ways to wake up and adapt to that waking up.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 42:50
Yeah, and I've come up with the moniker "Many doors, one room." So yeah, there's no one way to wake up or to learn how to, as we say in the guided meditations, rest in awareness. So, you know, it's like send the post office a change of address card. My permanent address is now going to be awareness, and every once in a while I'll get visited by thoughts or I'll live in the thought realm. But my permanent address is awareness. If you intend for that to happen, then your meditation practice is going to be very different because the invitation could be, you know, just to rest in awareness in this moment. You don't have to actually do anything because the awareness is never not here. And if you can playfully kind of experiment with seeing what it means to rest in awareness, you learn a lot because the first thing that you discover is, it's not a problem to rest in awareness. But the next moment some thought is gonna come up and carry you away and you're gonna be lost in thought and caught up in thought. But then at a certain point if you stay with the process, awareness is going to recognize that you haven't been aware. And then lo and behold, you're already aware again. So there's a certain kind of playful and really interesting way in which you can get to know your own habit patterns of falling asleep. And then watch how that actually operates, say, in your relationship in the family. You know, where like, you know, the kids will say "Earth calling Daddy," for instance, you know. I mean, because they know. They know right away when you're tuned out, when you're lost in thought, when you're distracted. When you need attention from somebody, they're not paying attention, you go to the doctor and the doctor's going through some sort of list of things, but the doctor's like not really fully present. We trained the medical students in just being present, because very often you fall into, what is the sequence of questions that I have to ask to get to the diagnosis? And if you get lost in that, you've lost the patient. So these are kind of really pretty elementary, but they're core aspects of being that actually give you an extra dimension to living. And that's why I use the word orthogonal around mindfulness, is kind of like, it just adds a new dimension to experience so that, yeah, you can be in lost in thought, you can be caught up in emotional reactivity, you can be obsessed with sensations in the body or stuff going on outside with your kids or in the work or in the world. But there's also this orthogonal dimension that's like kind of rotated ninety degrees to all the other dimensionalities, so it's in kind of a hidden dimension where everything's the same but nothing's the same because you are now aware. So that can happen in no time. It's helpful if you, and it's more likely that it will happen if you exercise that muscle when you have time to do it and you're not really stressed out. And then you can set that as your default. Like I'll live more, in awareness as opposed to in continual thought, emotional reactivity, and stuff like that, and which the shorthand for it is the story of me, starring me. And it's incredibly liberating to realize that the story of me is mostly not true and then it's a very small part of who you really, really, really are. And if you recognize who you really are, I mean it's like your true nature is a lot like beauty, genius, miracle of I mean, you see it in every newborn, right? There's no problem seeing the newborn as like a bloody miracle and perfect, just the way they are. Why can't you see a 40 year-old as, in the same light. You know, even for yourself, you see that, like, I'm okay. And I've started to say actually in large groups of people like, take your hand and actually put it down here on your belly and feel it, do you not notice that there is a certain signature someplace in the midline that signals that you were once connected to something else. And there's not one person on planet Earth that I know of so far, that doesn't actually have that signature scar, we call the belly button, that reminds us that, you know, you came out of the body of a woman, and you were once connected to that other body, and that's how you came into the world. So in a certain way that there's nothing wrong with you. What's right with you is far more than anything that's wrong with you. And when you recognize that, it's

intrinsically liberating. And then you can recognize that the story of me is fine as far as it goes. It could even be true, although usually it's exaggerated or, you know, warped in one way or another. But it's nowhere near who you really are. Which in a way, you can't put into words or that's why poetry is potentially of value in this domain because, for the great poets, I mean the job description of a great poet is to put into words what's impossible to put into words. And the great poets succeed. You know, that's as ancient as human civilization. I mean, if you can see the poetry in your own life and the mystery in your own life, then it really makes the moment kind of pregnant with possibilities, which it is, and then also an adventure. Not that there's not stress, pain, and illness, but that's not the whole story, so you don't have to be completely captured by it or anticipate the worst when the worst is not here in the present moment. A certain like spontaneity to living that way. Yeah. And when you meet that, you know what it looks like? It looks like joy. When you meet it in another person, it's joy. It's like full presence. I mean and they, you know the Dalai Lama in Tibet, they refer to him as Kundun. Kundun means the presence or presence. And he's really present. And I've been in a stadium with like, you know, 80 thousand people. And people can't even see him, he's so far in the distance. But they know he's in the stadium and they start crying. Because he's so present. I don't think it's all projection, I think people just are affected by the fact that someone can be that present. But his message of course is like, I'm no different from you. So, you know, maybe I've realized how my mind works to such a degree that it no longer distracts me from my true essence. But that's something that anybody can learn. And that's what mindfulness is. It's like a doorway into the full dimensionality of being human.

David Creswell • 50:58
I feel this underlying sort of subtext to so much of this conversation is also about relationality. And, you know, one of the big, you know, new directions for Mind & Life is to really focus and amplify interconnectedness and you know, we're living in polarizing times and I feel the the weight of friction in the relational space. And I'm curious how you sit with that.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 51:24
Yeah. When reporters ask me, well, give me a one-word definition for mindfulness. I say, you know, I have two, and one is relationality. So to apprehend the interconnectedness of things, to see how we are or who we are in relationship to everything else. And to circle back to what you were saying about consciousness or sentience or awareness, Michael Pollan just came out with a book called The World Appears. You know, and a lot of it is about just going around and interviewing all of the people who work with models of awareness, and then people who use psychedelics, and meditators. The last chapter's on Joan Halifax and his visit there. And the fact is that when you see something, what actually is happening is that there are two upside-down images on the backs of your retinas, and the brain is constructing the world out there that you think is out there and that is appearing. But actually it's just two upside down images on the backs of your retina. So this is like, a miracle that a world appears. And also the same is going on with all the other senses, that we are fabricating a world, and we make this dualistic separation between outer and inner. But actually that's kind of just an appearance, that the actuality is different, that there's only something happening, but it's unbelievably mysterious and we don't understand it. We have no idea how you get sentience out of the big bang, you know, or whether as some people think it came before the big bang or it came with the big bang, but it's not matter related. So there's all sorts of different, you know, theories about that. But from the point of view of a regular person living their life, to appreciate the gift of sentience, the gift of awareness, and the intrinsic way in which awareness or mindfulness is not separate from compassion because the first thing that you become aware of is the fact that everything is connected with everything else that, you know it's a delusion that you're out there and you know I'm creating you inside my whole neural system and it appears, the world appears because of all

these processes, but some there's something really mysterious and miraculous about the whole thing. And that intrinsically brings up the sense that we inter-are, to use Thich Nhat Hanh's word. And so a sense of deep relationality, connection. And then out of that comes the kind of ethics, ethic of non-harming, an ethic of belonging, an ethic of appreciation of "not two, not one," as Suzuki Roshi said about just sitting in the lotus posture. So, you know, I think what's happening on the larger scale is that consciousness or mindfulness or awareness of like, this, all these streams of ancient wisdom practices, including ancient Indigenous practices because the Indigenous peoples of the globe, found ways to live for tens of thousands of years without, you know, sort of destroying the planet. So I think there's kind of an appreciation of different ways of knowing that are going to be incredibly important in navigating the future decades of planet Earth and whether we have enough common sense to not destroy ourselves and I think the key is mindfulness. That if it's really all about waking up. So are you a god? No, I'm awake. So can humanity wake up enough to not other ourselves into total destruction. And I think that's the koan for humanity. It's like, can we thread that needle? And there are a lot of very positive things going on the planet, including Mind and Life, and His Holiness and all sorts of forces at play in the world that are really, in the past forty, fifty years have moved things in that direction that would have been unimaginable beforehand and now being taken up possibly by the United Nations and the High Commissioner for Human Rights who just hosted a program in Geneva on, they called it United and Present was what they called it. United as in United Nations and awake. And the World Health Organization is into that as well. And so we may be turning a new page or a new chapter on planet Earth. And I would say that there's a certain urgency for turning that page because the forces of greed, hatred and delusion are really powerful and we're seeing the consequences of it right now. So it's more like maybe we'd need to put the stethoscope on the planet itself and listen very deeply to what it's calling out of us.

David Creswell • 57:01
Yeah, Mr. Rogers, you remember Mr. Rogers? He talked about his mom saying that you know during difficult times look around there's so many people reaching out to be kind and to help. I think we can't forget that, that these, there are challenging times, but there's also a tremendous capacity for us. And I think there's a lot of, you know, great leaders too. I know you have a relationship with Vivek Murphy, our, you know, former surgeon general who really was pushing on this loneliness epidemic and trying to I think bring light to helping transform it and even, I think he, did he work with you on meditation programs?

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 57:46
Yeah, we had a couple of conversations online that were, you know, featured online. And then he developed a series of guided mindfulness practices that I still have on my website. You know, he was the Surgeon General twice and yeah, I think, you've done a lot of work with MBSR and a sense of loneliness and isolation and haven't you done things that show that when you take an MBSR class there's a greater sense of connectivity and less isolation?

David Creswell • 58:23
Yeah, you're right. It was actually with a digital meditation app, just 14 days, not only reduced loneliness, but also increased like, meaningful social connections in daily life. They'd get regular pings on their phone. We'd say, hey, in the last couple hours, like tell us about your social interactions. And, you know, we found that that learning these acceptance and equanimity skills as sort of these skills about opening up to experience seem to be a real key driver for fostering those sort of ,social outcomes. So I really I've always said, you know, to the degree you can learn how to sort of open up and lean into your own experience allows you to open up lean into connecting with others.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 59:09
Does that have anything to do with differentiating between loneliness and aloneness?

David Creswell • 59:16
Yes, I'm glad you brought that up. I think what mindfulness training might be doing is kind of akin to what you were saying is like, recognizing lonely thoughts is just lonely thoughts. Like this is just a narrative and that it sort of severs that lonely thought becoming some pervasive sense of distress.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 59:37
And so then in that moment, you're not lonely. And he said, well yeah, but what about the next moment? Because I'm still like alone and not happy. But actually if you learn to string the moments together, and then you also, maybe go out for a walk or do something to get out there, interesting things happen that wouldn't have happened because you're stuck in your I'm lonely story. So I think in MBSR when people come who are lonely it's an immediate experience of sangha. Because first of all you realize, as I said earlier, you don't want to have what anybody else in the room is saying they're dealing with. So it allows you to in some sense befriend what's going on with you, even if it's aversive and you don't want it and you realize, well, yeah, but look what everybody else is carrying. And maybe for now it's okay. And in terms of loneliness, you know, when you have a lot to talk about, you know, because people when they're isolated in their diagnosis or their problem or whatever, that compounds the suffering. And when you can name your suffering and other people say, oh yeah, I feel with you, or that's horrible. So they get some compassion and also some recognition, then it actually reminds you that you're a complete human being and not the story of what happened to me or my particular disability or whatever. And so there's a lot of love that arises in the MBSR classes, you know, that people they become friends, they go home together, they talk and you know, so it's not just what happens in the classes. And to come back to loneliness, that MBSR can function that way as a kind of antidote because it's not just loneliness per se, but what if you don't have any people who you can relate to around the stress or the pain or the illness that you're experiencing? In part because you don't want to be a burden on other people and in part because they don't get what you're going through. But everybody in the stress reduction clinic is going to get what you're going through because they're going through something similar. And so there's a way in which loneliness and cultivating community or sangha in that kind of a clinical setting could actually lead to friendships outside of that, and that happens all the time in MBSR people make friends. In one of my early classes, back from the early eighties, it met for six years, I think. It was like eight weeks. And then they just kept meeting in each other's homes for years. I don't know if they met every week but maybe it was every month I went once, just to see what that was like, they invited me. And it was like I can't believe you're doing this. It was like "well, you know, you started us off on this thing and we're just like a community now." So there was something about that, that kind of dissolved the clinical element of just a program in the hospital, but this was like the hospital actually served as a kind of catalyst for a greater sense of community, which is not a bad thing for a hospital to do, you know, in its neighborhood.

David Creswell • 01:03:20
And so many of the conversations I'm seeing right now, you know, in academic and otherwise, you know, community health settings is how do we, how do we scale up these programs in ways that are sustainable? And we also have done MBSR programs where we then offer you know, an opportunity for people to come to, you know, the graduate course or the advanced, you know, and it's basically just once a week where they can come and practice. And has it

been successful? Yeah, we've definitely had groups and, you know it certainly surged during the pandemic when people are feeling more isolated in ways that, you know, you felt some stickiness, but you know, also we look at the you know, look at the data and a lot of people don't stick with it after these programs. Or some people say, you know, I'm not doing formal practice anymore, I'm doing practice in daily life. Like it's you know, it's kind of in there, but it's not in a formal space.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 01:04:20
Well that's fabulous. I mean, you know, I mean, and also if you look at this as a kind of lifetime engagement or a love affair, you know, people they discover that not practicing is also practicing. Because let's say you're practicing for a while and then you stop practicing. You see the consequences of stopping practicing. Maybe you go back to practicing. It's the same with the yoga. We haven't talked much about the yoga, but the yoga is an incredibly important part of MBSR. Because you have a body and to get down on the floor and actually experiment almost from first principles like how does this thing work if I'm lying on my back, can I lift my leg? And what's it like when I lift my leg and you breathe with it and then you lift the other leg and everything in the body is responding. You don't have to think of it as exercise, but if you do that over forty years, your body's gonna be incredibly strong in all sorts of ways if you do kind of like, you know, a three sixty kind of range of different kinds of practices. So, you know, I've been doing yoga since I learned it at Mattson Karate studio in downtown Boston in, you know, 1965. And now being in my early 80's, I don't know what I'd do without it, you know, it's like, it's really an incredibly important part of my day. And it's just a different door into the same room. It's awareness, but it's awareness in motion, same with the aerobic exercise. I mean that all of these things really go into making up a healthy human being. And part of that health of course would be good connections with other people. Love, friendship, you know, common purpose, and that's where the, you know, Richie's flourishing would come in, you know, that actually do have a purpose. It gives you an incredible sense of belonging and meaning and also motivation to like take care of the apparatus because it ain't forever. And so, you know it's both a timeless moment by moment meditation, but it's also a kind of insurance policy to sort of take care of your spinal column, for instance, take care of your vertebrae, take care of your neck and your back and your shoulders and your pelvis and your lower back and, you know, it's all like one seamless meditation practice

David Creswell • 01:06:58
Yeah, we played in this space a little bit. I think this sort of mindful awareness of body is so, well it was so central to MBSR because you're working, at least initially, with all these chronic pain patients that were trying to essentially develop a new relationship to their bodies.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 01:07:14
Yeah. And turn towards what you most want to run away from, which is a tall order, but, you know, I'd say, well just take a peek, you know. Just like they wherever it's hurting the most, instead of running from it or wanting to take an aspirin or a codeine or whatever, a Tylenol. Take a kind of two second peek, how is it? And like assay it, you know, and then maybe take a four second peek. You know, and just kind of begin to befriend what you most want to actually eradicate or go away from, or have go. And when you ask people to do that, they report that it's nowhere near as bad as what they thought it was. And that's like reclaiming your body. Then okay, then it's workable. It's workable if you're willing to do a certain kind of work. So that's what the yoga practice or the meditation practice, I don't see them as separate because they're all awareness practices, but you're actually taking care of what needs taking care of so that you're optimizing well being and presumably health too down to the almost you know cellular level.

David Creswell • 01:08:32
It seems like such a radical idea. You've got someone in, you know, intense chronic pain and they're leaning in, they're opening. And in fact that what that reveals is you know, it's not as bad as I thought. I mean it's sort of, you know, looking from the outside, yeah.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 01:08:49
See if you can just do it for now. This is like they take a peek. It's only for now. Don't worry about like you know, the next whatever, even in-breath. That's how you befriend that kind of thing. A couple of years ago I created a book that's for people who are in a lot of pain where everything they've tried doesn't work. And the book is meant to be a kind of multisensory experience, or reminder that you can just open the book, touch the book, look at what's you know, on one page, it doesn't have to be read. But to just give you that momentary experience that maybe I can change my relationship to the sensory domain, the affective domain, the cognitive domain. And just do it as fun, play, interest, you know, like curiosity. What does this do to the story of oh how much it's killing me in this moment.

David Creswell • 01:09:53
It's about just about this moment. It's not about making stories about what's going to happen in another hour or two hours. Exactly and it's not about making the pain go away or anything like that. There's this wonderful paper that came out in Psychological Science, one of our best journals about three years ago now, 2023, we'll link to it in the in the show notes, where they took people, this was not in a meditation context, but they were people that had showed up to Second City, the improv theater in Chicago. And these were community adults who wanted to take their very first improv class. And in one group, right before they went in for their first improv class, they told them the purpose of improv is to be awkward and uncomfortable. And in the other group, they told them the purpose is to learn new skills. So just given this simple expectation to be awkward and uncomfortable, this invitation to lean in produced all these amazing results. They were more likely to hold focus on stage, you know, in improv, you know you're trying new things, they're more willing to do that. The judges rated them as more creative and they also reported that it was like more personal achievement that after the improv experience. So how do you interpret that? I think that it's these moments of inviting people in just as your book is doing, this pain book, is inviting people into their pain just for a moment.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 01:11:13
Right. And it's also giving them permission in advance to be playful and not to be caught in the conventional view of things.

David Creswell • 01:11:23
And it, I think meditation when viewed in this way or turning toward pain can be an invitation to have these perhaps more mindful moments of transforming their relationship to challenging experience.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 01:11:39
Exactly. And that's, you know, that changes everything. So the present moment, you know, the more we can learn how to inhabit it as it is and then not build a personal story about it, but maybe just as my Korean Zen master used to say, rest in not knowing, you know, don't build the story. That changes the experience in the next moment. So that's, if you want the future to be different, the only leverage, the only Archimedes fulcrum we have to influence the next moment

is to be present for this one and then that really transforms the next one. And if you turn that into a practice and not just one more thing to do, because it's not a doing, it's much more a being, then over days, weeks, months, and years, like people come back to us years later and say, you gave my life back to me. They, you know, I'm sure you've seen tons of things like that. People come and they're like, incredibly grateful. You don't say like I didn't give you anything. You gave it back to yourself by actually changing your relationship with experience. And cultivating a certain kind of agency too that doesn't believe your own propaganda about how bad things are. That's what mindfulness-based cognitive therapy is all about, actually, you know, sort of because the major depressive disorder is really a disorder of thinking. And you build this story and you just spiral down into what they call that black hole of depression. And what they showed is that if you actually bring mindfulness to the thought process, the Tibetans have a term for it, that's it self-liberates. It's like that soap bubble thing. You just, awareness is like touching it, it just goes poof by itself and you don't have to be caught up in the usual story.

David Creswell • 01:13:43
Well, Jon, we've covered a lot of ground and I think I'm feeling the central message is wake up and that that takes so many forms. But I'd love to hear you know I guess I really wanted to ask you, you know, what your hope is for the future for humanity, but I assume it's probably the same message you've been saying from day one.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 01:14:09
Yeah, it is. Uh before we go there, maybe we should just talk a little bit about this whole idea that in the digital world, you know, now everybody has to have an app. Would that be okay?

David Creswell • 01:14:26
Yeah, I'd love to do that. I mean I know, you know, you've got an app and you at least told me at one point in time or another that you know, you were kinda skeptical of the space,

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 01:14:36
Very skeptical of it at first, but I let these guys do it because, you know, I didn't know anything about apps or and it was just another way to put out my guided meditations. So that's all they were. But now they've created this unified platform called JKZ Meditations, with all of not just my guided meditations, but also my books. So there's an awful lot of stuff on there. And of course, app developers always want new stuff. And they say, no, this app is different from all other apps. I don't know about other mindfulness apps, but you know, there's like an endless desire for more stuff. But these guided meditations are meant to be revisited over and over and over again. It's really about endless repetition, rather than novelty. I gotta keep feeding you with more and more guided meditations because you're used to the old ones. Because that's the whole point of a guided meditation is like it's always the same, but you're never the same. That's why MBSR is so powerful, you do the body scan three different times. It's three different yous in a certain way. I mean you hear things in the eighth week that you've been listening to for eight weeks and they must have changed the tape. I never heard that before, but it was there from the beginning.

David Creswell • 01:16:06
It's ten different mes in each guided meditation session. Within sessions, there's so much.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 01:16:12
Exactly, but then the only other thing I'll say about the JKZ Meditations app is that they then proposed having live sessions within the app and that's been very, very gratifying, because it's

like an MBSR class for two hours, with, you know, a thousand people in it in real time and then many other thousands of people listening, but from around the world simultaneously. And then part of it is a guided meditation, part of it's like a talk by me that weaves itself into the guided meditation. But the most powerful part of it is when people, you know, speak. And so they're invited to ask questions or say stuff and stuff like that. And really breathe certainly in a new sense of engagement into my appreciation for the app because the live stuff is really very, very real.

David Creswell • 01:17:15
Yeah, you know, I feel like the app space is complex and it's moving quickly. You know, you look at the top five meditation apps out there, they have over three hundred million downloads.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 01:17:26
I know. And it's also big business. It's capitalism on steroids.

David Creswell • 01:17:31
Yeah. And you know at the same time, you know, I grew up in Nebraska, I think about farmers in rural Nebraska that, you know, now have access in ways that they can they can tune in and practice or, you know, you're in the line at Starbucks, these are opportunities for some, you know, guided support if you if you want them. So but at the same time, you know, speaking to the analog pieces of this that, you know, having a real teacher and real human contact is so essential too.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 01:18:02
But that's a little bit like, you know, with the live stuff in the app is like having it with a teacher. I mean, I was skeptical about Zoom, but in the pandemic, I mean the first thing we did when the pandemic hit, well almost right away, was, we did went online every day and called it the mitigation retreat and went for three months for two hours every day, every weekday, for you know, from March through June, 26,000 people showed up live the first time. And I meet people all over the world who say "I was part of the mitigation retreat." We called it a mitigation retreat because for months people were isolating in their own houses. So this was a way to not isolate and we would actually spend time flipping through the screens. You know, there'd be like fifty screens, you know, of forty people per screen and we'd say hello and goodbye and it was just incredibly touching, it created an incredible sangha. And people say to me to this day, you know, I still watch those. I've seen the whole thing three times or four times. That's like an awful lot of meditating.

David Creswell • 01:19:14
So how do you hold this space? Because it's, it is a powerful medium for connectivity and bringing together community and this, you know relationality, but it also has an impersonal element.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 01:19:26
It doesn't feel that way to me. One of the things I do, which is so extraordinary, is like I point out that like, look at your screen. Every single one of us is at home. Now, ordinarily, you'd never see me at home. We'd see each other in a space where you're not at home and I'm not at home. I've never been in your home. You've never been in my home. But on the screen, you're at home and I'm at home. So now the meditation practice, the invitation to meditation practice is to be at home wherever you are. That's the, can you be at home in your body right in this moment? So

there are ways to use the Zoom technology actually, to diminish that sense of, well, it's not in person, because there are elements of Zoom that you never even get in person. And if you emphasize that at homeness, I've found at least that everybody sort of has a sense of, wow, I'm belonging to this collection of people and we're all at home in this moment. And then we're practicing to be at home in any moment, anywhere. And that's kind of like a huge gift. That would never have happened without Zoom or the pandemic for that matter. And so I think that the analog is great and the online is also great and ultimately it's again coming back to that moniker, different doors, same room. Same room. And the room is the room of the human heart when it knows itself.

David Creswell • 01:21:05
Yeah, we've been really working in this space. I know a lot of great scientific groups are trying to get more involved, just knowing that this is a place where we can meet people where they are. Right. You know, we've been building new respiration tracking. So, you know, you can put the phone on your chest and the accelerometer can measure your breathing patterns. And then we have this cool machine learning work showing that like, your breathing patterns tell us a whole lot about whether you're going deep with your meditation practice. And so now more or less in real time we can start to give people feedback.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 01:21:34
Is it just respiration rate or is it something larger than larger than that?

David Creswell • 01:21:45
It's larger than that but we do show people how their respiration rate changes. And it's such an interesting literature if you look at breathing patterns during wakefulness versus sleep, for example, you know, it's usually you drop by like five breaths per minute. But when you look at people going deep into meditation, it's like they're going down real low. And it's real, real rhythmic types of breathing patterns. And so when we can show that to people, they say it's kind of an aha moment. Like this is tangibly changing my physiology in real time.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 01:22:16
That's a real motivator.

David Creswell • 01:22:17
Yeah, we found that it definitely makes these practices, you know, more sticky for folks. So I don't know, I feel like it's a really fast moving train with digital meditation apps and I'd certainly love to see everyone with their own teacher and you know, group, but we're in a world where, you know

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 01:22:43
Yeah, I think, you know, any way you can come to it is better than not coming to it. And then I think if the world is changing in ways that maybe we will talk about in some other program, the world actually can become a support for one's own meditation practice in a new way where we're taking care of it not just for ourselves but we're in some sense practicing as they say in the Buddhist tradition, for the sake of all beings, but that actually it's instantiated by social activism, by a sense of kind of responsibility for what humanity is, our industriousness is doing to the planet and kind of threatening of life forms future generations. This is kind of like a new world that we're entering into. There's the realization, I mean just what we've done with the glaciers. You know, I mean that's a mindfulness practice if you just line up all the photographs of one glacier over the past fifty years, you see that like there was a glacier there and now there's

no glacier, that's a mindfulness practice. That has import. That has you know, sort of gravitas. Oh wow. That's the water supply for, you know, potentially half the people on planet Earth. Greenland, the Himalayas, or wherever the glaciers are, that we need to wake up to this kind of thing. And so bringing that into the practice and making it part of the meditation practice I think, also has the potential and I try to remind people that we only have one planet, we don't have a planet B, as they say. It's kind of a all-hands-on-deck moment on spaceship Earth. And mindfulness of climate change and the ways in which we're despoiling our home really has to become a much deeper part of individual behavior, but also how we govern ourselves on planet Earth, you know, as nations and collectives.

David Creswell • 01:24:30
Well, we've got a lot of work to do. Thanks for taking your time today to talk and go deep.

Jon Kabat-Zinn • 01:24:40
Well, thank you. It's been an absolute pleasure. And I really just bow to you for everything that you're doing in the world, David, making it a more wonderful place.

David Creswell • 01:25:00
I can't wait for the next time we get together and do this again. Thanks, Jon.

David Creswell • 01:25:10
Before we go, I want to leave you with something to try, not something just to think about. And Jon really has been asking people to do this since 1979. I think this formal meditation practice will take about two minutes or so if you want to try it. And of course, if you're driving or doing something else, just listen. You know, you can do a formal practice later. Okay, so go ahead and close your eyes if that's comfortable or soften your gaze. Take one deep breath in. Out. I invite you to scan the body for something that feels unpleasant. Maybe it's a tight shoulder or a stiff lower back or an itch. Or even just that sensation of restlessness of trying to sit still. And let's put our full attention on that experience. Jon calls this “putting out the welcome mat.” Let's get curious about it. Is the sensation changing? Where is it exactly? Does it have edges? Is it sharp or dull? There's really no need to try to do anything with it. We're just investigating the way a scientist would with some curiosity. Now let's shift our attention back to the sensations of breathing and pay attention to one more big deep breath. In. Out. And when you're ready you can open your eyes. So this was one formal meditation rep. Jon calls this the brief practice of mindfulness. We're putting our welcome mat out to unpleasant experiences. For me, I think we are really changing how our brains are relating to our own suffering. You know, just practicing this capacity of staying open to something unpleasant without fleeing it or fighting it. So the next time something uncomfortable shows up in your day, maybe it's a challenging email or a sore knee or a wave of worry. Well, you now know what to do with at least the first two seconds. Each moment really is an opportunity for practice.

Phil Walker • 01:28:29
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