

Dr. Bill Resnick LiveWell Interview

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SPEAKERS

Dr. Wendy Slusser, Dr. Bill Resnick

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 00:03

Hi LiveWell community, so happy to have you back. Today we're getting into insight into a few deep questions. How is pain different from suffering? And why is community a spiritual practice? In this episode, you'll not only learn the answers to these questions, but uncover the story of Dr. Bill Resnick's journey as a clinical psychiatrist and mindfulness teacher. You're also gifted with a 10 minute mindfulness meditation, a poem read out loud, and a sprinkling of Buddhist parables throughout this episode, thanks to the wisdom of Dr. Bill Resnick. Please enjoy. Well, today, we're so lucky to have Dr. Bill Resnick on the podcast. Bill is my good friend and colleague and a compassionate psychiatrist, mindfulness leader and philanthropist dedicated to bringing people together for healing. Bill is impressive, inspiring, and will leave us all feeling lighter after this conversation. So Bill, you have a medical background, getting your MD from University of Pennsylvania, completing your residency at UCLA, and working as a psychiatrist for over 20 years with the Venice family clinic, which is where we got to know each other and have been friends ever since. What you've done with and beyond your Medical Psychiatry practice is quite inspiring. So you found a way to care for patients that integrates both the nonprofit and the mindfulness meditation world, you have built an inclusive meditation retreat center, one of the closest to Los Angeles, and you're integrating meditation into your toolbox. As you teach the next generation of psychiatrists at UCLA, you've really expanded the reach of traditional medical practice. How would you describe your career now that I've given sort of a bio of what you've done or half of what you've done?

D Dr. Bill Resnick 01:59

So my medical career, first of all started a little late. I was a non traditional student, I had my share of, I don't know, not being clear on where I was going, and some just personal issues, I didn't end up going to medical school till I was 28, which, right now, 28 sounds very young, at 58. But back then I was kind of like one of the oldest kids in the class, finished medical school 32 finished residency, 36, I was already kind of, you know, well into my life. And at that point, I was really focused on kind of community psychiatry. And in particular, initially, I did a lot of work with HIV patients I worked at with AIDS Healthcare Foundation. And I had done other

training as a resident specifically, in HIV, I had actually gone to medical school wanting to be an HIV doctor. And for a couple reasons, I ended up in psychiatry instead of internal medicine or infectious disease. You know, one was, I just found, honestly, due to my own experience, having received psychiatric care at different stages of my adolescence and young adulthood, that I just kind of knew it better from different perspectives. And I felt comfortable in that. Also, I like to spend time with people I like to actually hear their stories, which was getting harder and harder to do in traditional primary care, medicine, people were really pressed for seeing patients in a short periods as possible. I ended up feeling a pull towards psychiatry, ultimately, I was very much on the fence until early in my fourth year of medical school. Once I chose it out, it was kind of the right move for me. And, and I did pursue more of the community psychiatry, I was in a position, you know, I have inherited wealth, which allows me to kind of make decisions that are not based on how much money I can make, but on, you know, how I can be of service and, and what's interesting to me and so, I chose that path of doing more community psychiatry, I was in a part of a community psychiatry fellowship through the American Psychiatric Association during my third and fourth years of residency, as well as at the Community Clinic of Venice family clinic, which I started working out about a year after residency. And still, I was always interested in psychotherapy, as well and evidence based practices in particular evidence based psychotherapy. I studied and then was able to teach in the interpersonal psychotherapy clinic at UCLA, which actually recently returned to after a 15 year absence, which is a sort of a short term, evidence based therapy, starting, it started as a treatment for depression, and it's been expanded somewhat to other psychiatric disorders.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 04:52

So how then did you find your way into mindfulness studies coming from community psychiatry and your traditional called education background.

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Dr. Bill Resnick 05:01

Somewhere along the line, I picked up a book called mindfulness based cognitive therapy. And I didn't really know what mindfulness was. And honestly, after I read most of the book, I still didn't quite know what mindfulness was. But I was intrigued. And it was sort of like in the back of my mind. And like years later, someone recommended a book called The wise heart, which is focused on Buddhist psychology by Jack Kornfield. And that also intrigued me and soon after I finished that book, I did take my first introduction to mindfulness meditation class, and this is, you know, for me, also, part of my story is getting sober 22. And part of that was kind of pursuing somewhat of a spiritual path or seeking a spiritual path. And this was the first one that kind of stuck with me that felt good, there was sort of a pragmatic nature to it, of just and define mindfulness in the way that Jon Kabat Zinn who developed mindfulness based cognitive therapy back in the, in the 70s, originally defined it. Mindfulness is the awareness that arises from paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, and without judgment. So we're doing this intentionally, we're paying attention to what's happening right now. And we're trying to do it in an objective way, not not judging it not adding on layer, just noticing what's here. It's not that easy to do, because it's not our normal mode. So learning how to do that requires practice. And, you know, we're never 100% mindful. But we have to plan we have to, you know, sometimes we have to be an automatic pilot, like we were driving and so forth. But the ability to be mindful is a very valuable one. So after that, first course, that was back in 2010, I got really interesting because I started practicing regularly, which, for me,

was usually about 20 minutes a day, most days of meditation practice. So I also like to define mindfulness as separate, but overlapping sort of a Venn diagram with meditation. So meditation and mindfulness are intertwined. But there are different kinds of meditation that are not mindfulness meditation. And there's ways of being mindful without being in meditation. But the the meditation practice that I usually do is a form of mindfulness meditation. And these practices are really based in Buddhist practice. And I just bring that up. So it's not like just kind of seeming like we just invented this. I mean, these are 1000s of years old, these practices, also like to kind of just appropriate without proper attribution, of, of where these practices come from. And a lot of this came from Western American teachers who studied in Asia, and came back and sort of adapted the teachings and the practices to the Western audiences. Because I feel like I've got off a little bit of a tangent, but

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 08:15

Not at all, you've really covered a lot of ground and a lot of questions that I had about how you got to where you are now in terms of teaching mindfulness to the psychiatrists, residents.

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08:28

Having done other training as a mindfulness facilitator, I had the opportunity to do an online training in the mindfulness based cognitive therapy to actually offer it to groups. And, and then subsequently, I have been working with some UCLA psychiatry residents, mindfulness based cognitive therapy. MBCT is adapted largely from Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction. And in the MBSR was really for the mostly like chronically ill patients who were sort of not able to get better with traditional medical treatment. And it's an eight week program that requires release highly recommends daily practice as part of that a different relationship to your symptoms. So it's not necessarily that the pain is going to go away the initial pain, but sometimes we differentiate between pain and suffering. So the pain is what happens and the suffering is sort of the added reaction to the pain and so learning how to kind of tone down that reaction can make it less harsh, less, you know, stressful, just like call it Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction in this is also kind of true with the mindfulness based cognitive therapy for preventing depressive relapse, and it's really learning how to kind of deal with mood shifts and you know, maybe negative thoughts with a kind of Want to say it kind of distance, but a kind of also like presence without getting caught up in the reaction to it and not letting that reaction get out of control?

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 10:09

So the group that you're training right now the psychiatrists that are in resonance, how are they responding to what you're teaching them? And have you gotten any reactions from their experience?

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10:21

Yeah, what I did was to actually go through the eight sessions with the two residents that I'm working with. So it's kind of a small group, I think they found it beneficial. A lot of what the home practice becomes in this is learning how to take just a few minutes, a few times a day of

home practice becomes in this is learning how to take just a few minutes, a few times a day or checking in with oneself and bringing a sense of mindfulness. It's a core part of the practice, they're also longer practices that are recommended, you know, they, I feel adverse, responded well to it, and have, you know, a lot of good feedback and questions. And one thing I'll say is that, in order to offer it, you have to be a practitioner yourself. And you have to be able to offer the practice, by knowing what it's like, and even to sort of be practicing while you're offering it. That's my, definitely what I try to do. So if I'm asking you to sit and feel your body, and, you know, notice the sensations of breathing, just kind of a main practice and mindfulness. I'm doing that myself. At the same time.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 11:31

The fact that it's requirement or the actual practitioner needs to be practicing this as well. Also will have ramifications for their own well being and burnout. I mean, I, there's a meta analysis that just came out, right, that is showing that meditation is the one individual behavior that can help burnout among healthcare workers. So you're giving a real gift to this group as well, that you've just trained, it's pretty tremendous. I was wondering if you could give us a brief exercise.

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Dr. Bill Resnick 12:05

I'm happy to do it, I think it is good to have like a little example of a practice.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 12:10

Hey everyone, we're about to do a meditation. So if you're walking, driving, maybe save this for later for safety reasons. And if you are sitting, go ahead and find a still and quiet seat, and let's begin.

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Dr. Bill Resnick 12:23

So, first, I recommend that you sit in a way that you can hold yourself upright that your neck is in line with the spine is straight back as you can hold without creating tension. And letting the eyes have it like a downward gaze or if it's comfortable for you going ahead and closing the eyes. And coming into awareness of any body sensations that are obvious right now. And noticing where the body is meeting either the floor or the furniture and feeling those areas of touch of pressure. You can let the hands rest on your thighs if that's comfortable. starting to notice if there's any obvious tension or tightness in the body and inviting that to relax some of the areas where we typically hold tension are around the face and the jaw. so inviting, softening their softening around the neck and the shoulders. It's another area in the belly, which is often some holding there. So letting go and starting to notice that this body is breathing itself and just allowing the body to breathe itself naturally as it does. starting to notice where it's easiest to feel the sensations of breath. Just following in breath, the out breath feeling maybe it's in the belly, maybe the chest or perhaps the nostrils. Feeling the in breath feeling the out breath in as much as possible just letting the body do this naturally without controlling it. Just being aware, and being in breath feeling the output, that's the simple instruction as I mentioned earlier in the interview, simple is not the same as easy. So by now

maybe the minds wandering off, why am I doing this what's going on or just planning the rest of the day, whatever you're doing and just not judging that thinking, being distracted, not a problem. It's just what the mind is doing. Remember this attitude of not having judgment about what's happening and just gently escorting the attention back. And if you find that the breath is a hard thing to focus on, you can choose to focus on the sensations in the feet or the hands, or where your bottoms meeting the chair or the cushion. And just letting the attention settle their arrest they're just receiving whatever sensations are here continuing to escort the attention back letting go judging and actually welcoming each opportunity to begin again. Let me focus on the breath or the body sensations of the breath or other body sensations because these are sensations that are happening in the present moment are always available just allowing whatever is here to be here. And being aware of the sensations in the body, sensations of breath or if you're focusing on a different part of the body those sensations letting them be just being interested in what's here curious. When you hear the sound of the bells ringing, slowly allowing the eyes to open, perhaps waiting until you can't hear the sounds any longer. So what did you notice? Wendy?

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 19:05

Well, my mind was definitely wandering. So sense. In fact, I was trying to figure out is this mindfulness or meditation? What I was doing that was a question because you said they're both different.

D Dr. Bill Resnick 19:18

Well, I also said they overlap. So this was a mindfulness meditation. So yes, it was both. The reason that I asked because I think it's useful for people to hear other people's experiences, because it's a simple practice. But especially initially, if you haven't done this before, and even if you have done before, it's it's often not easy, like the mind is like has a mind of its own. And so to hear, that can be reassuring, but even have length like Do you have a couple moments of actual mindfulness of presence during the practice? It's great. It's a great start. You know,

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 19:57

I love the fact that you give permission to let your mind go Under because that does, I think, create more freedom to try it because obviously our minds do wander and you might feel like, Oh, I can't do this because my mind wanders all the time. Yeah,

D Dr. Bill Resnick 20:11

right. And I think that tendency of like, I can't do this well, so I'm not going to bother doing it is a very human quality. Right? I

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 20:20

was I was thinking about that. But at the same time, I was also following your lead given. I've been honored to be part of your Circle for a long time. So it's easier for me to be led into

been honored to be part of your Sangha for a long time. So it's easier for me to be led into meditation or mindful meditation with you because I feel maybe there's a trust involved in that that occurs, you know, with people after a while, whoever you're working with this Sanskrit and Pali word Sangha, and I mentioned that I'm part of a sangha. What's the meaning of sangha? And what how are you incorporating that more into your, your work as well?

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Dr. Bill Resnick 20:58

Yeah, so I originally understood the word Sangha, SA, N, G, H. A is, as it's written in English, to me and community, but I think it really means spiritual community. In Buddhism, there's something called the triple jewel, and it consists of the Buddha. So who's the original teacher, and also seen as you know, this enlightened being someone who is fully awakened. So it's a jewel, because that's, that's a possibility that we can become, you know, more awakened, more aware, enlightened with whatever word you prefer, since the Buddha, the Dharma, and dharma is usually translated as the path or the way but it's basically the teachings you know, the teachings of the Buddha, in the sense Buddha, the Dharma, and Sangha, so that's one of the three triple jewels and I'll just, I'll read a little passage from a Buddha Buddhist sutra, which is one of the writings or teachings and just as a background, that blessing wine is the Buddha and a Nanda was his sort of attendant and cousin, and often asking him questions. And so, Venerable Ananda went to the Blessed One and On arrival, having bowed down to the Blessed One set to one side, as he was sitting there, Venerable Ananda said to the Blessed One, this is half of the holy life, Lord, admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie. Don't say that nada don't say that admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie is actually the whole of the holy life. When a monk has admirable people as friends, companions and comrades, it can be expected to develop and pursue the Noble Eightfold Path. The Noble Eightfold Path is kind of the part of the Four Noble Truths. There's lots of lists in Buddhism. And it's kind of a just a way of being in life, it's this eight areas that we try to be better in, you know, it's speech, action, our livelihood, also, there's mindfulness, etc. But the idea is that it's a sort of like positive peer pressure, having the Sangha I mean, that's one element and also just people think, like to feel connected. But if you're around other people who are kind of pursuing a similar path, a positive path that you are in, it doesn't have to be in Buddhism, or mindfulness, whatever you're doing, like you have, you know, it's just it, it makes you better in a way. Right? And, and there's something also you there's just the the deep connections that you can get when you're practicing together, there's something very ineffable, but wonderful about sitting together with other people. And meditating, it seems odd, because meditating seems like such a solo practice. But if you have the opportunity to actually meditate at the same time with some other people, even whether it's in a room or on a zoom, meeting together, because I think both have have benefit. It's not that different than having, you know, a supportive friend group. I mean, it is kind of a supportive friend group, essentially, having that Sangha I think, at least it implies sort of some positivity in this community.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 24:34


The other thing that I love about your Sangha is often you read a poem. And I don't know if you want to share a poem that you've shared with us on a sangha.

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Dr. Bill Resnick 24:44

 Dr. Bill Resnick 24:44


So this is one that I've read a lot that I like. It's called Allow by Diana Falls. She writes a lot of good poems that have sort of a mindfulness theme. So because like this, there's no controlling life. Try corralling a lightning bolt containing a tornado damage stream, and it will create a new channel. Resist in the title sweep you off your feet. Allow and graceful carry you to higher ground. The only safety lies in letting it all in. The wild and the weak, fear, fantasies, failures and success. When loss rips off the doors of the heart or sadness, veils your vision with despair. Practice becomes simply bearing the truth in the choice to let go of your known way of being the whole world is revealed to your new eyes.

 Dr. Wendy Slusser 25:45

Hmm. That sounds like summing up your cognitive therapy.

 Dr. Bill Resnick 25:52

Yeah, yeah, there's, I wanted to talk about the second arrow, the idea of the second arrow, I don't know if you've heard this before. It's this this idea of pain versus suffering that I was talking about earlier. So there's a parable in the Buddhist teachings called the second arrow. And the idea is that you you get hit by the first arrow, you're out in the woods, something happens suddenly you're hit by an arrow, say you're hitting your arm. That hurts, there's pain. But then we end up often stabbing ourselves with the second arrow, which is what we do in reaction to that how we react, you know, oh, no, I'm going to die. Why is it always me that might get infected? What am I going to do this is this is terrible. This instead of just like dealing with it, and going for help. So you think about how we do that in life and how this the first error was, is inevitable pain, pain is inevitable, right? They say Pain is inevitable suffering is optional. It's really say that, but it's not hard, it's hard to actually avoid the suffering. But if you know that, you can just sometimes see how you're creating your own suffering. And also to not judge that that's a tendency that we all have, like, oh, but maybe there's a way to let go of that. To not stab ourselves with a second arrow.

 Dr. Wendy Slusser 27:19

I really like that. It really creates this dissection of emotion that you might have that you aren't aware of that you can think of in different stages, because it does provide insight into how we respond to different outside forces, like an arrow, but also even in the inside chatter in our heads, right. Yeah,

 Dr. Bill Resnick 27:46

And one other thing, because I think it's core for me, it was one of the most important things that I learned early on when I was studying mindfulness was in sometimes so the word suffering is, in the Buddhist context, it's a translation of the word from Polly Dukkha. Do you kick a Ha, it's usually spelled, and that sometimes people who are more scholars may say, well, it's really like, it's not just suffering, it's like unsatisfactoriness. It's like not something not being quite right. Jon Kabat Zinn used the word stress, but he was really talking about suffering, he

just thought that that sounded better for people with more, something that he could mark it, you know, and the suffering, the idea is that it's caused by not wanting things to be the way they are, or not accepting or allowing that things are just the way they are right now. And so it's always wanting, wanting something that's going to make you feel better, I'm not going to, I'm not going to be happy until I have that ice cream, or I'm not going to be happy until I get rid of this pain in my toe, or, you know, like this, this idea that waiting for something or like it's in that's also tied to mindfulness because you're not being present. You're like waiting for something else. And so that that's the idea that learning how to be more in the present is a big way of getting past suffering. So people think sometimes, the Buddhist taught that life is all suffering. But the four noble truths He taught that there is that suffering exists, that we, you know, we experience suffering, but then there's also a way to get rid of suffering, which is to, like, just learn that that's possible, and to start letting go.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 29:30

Well, that makes me think about all of the different, you know, aspects of emotional well being and how there is, it's almost like, you know, and for people that know what slide rules are, you know, it's like, you know, you can feel stressed or all the way to anxiety, highly anxious and you there, there's a movement that goes back and forth. And those are the kinds and accepting that there's going to be some sort of shift in either direction, can help you then accept and move forward rather than suffering in whatever space that you land in. I've had the privilege to be in your Sangha that's virtual. But also, the last guided in person meditation I had with you is at your big bear Retreat Center, which I know has been a real, I think, a real contribution to the Los Angeles Community, you started it in 2018. It really set the stage for all of us to be able to have access to your and other meditation practices. And then you have these offerings of these retreats that have really served such a diverse group of people. And you've really built a foundation where it creates a capacity for social movement and activism and accessibility. And I'd love to hear you know, what your vision was when you designed it originally, and how it's playing out for you.

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Dr. Bill Resnick 31:11

Yeah well, I think to go back to like my, how I got into and continue learning mindfulness. And one thing that one of the first things that did was was a training in mindfulness based relapse prevention and other sort of eight week program this for people in recovery from addiction, one of the recommendations was that you do, at some point, at least, like, at least a five night meditation retreat, I went with a friend to a place called Spirit Rock, that most of what they do is they offer these residential, silent meditation retreats, it's kind of an intensive practice is a schedule, it's structured, you have teachers, but most of the time, you know, you don't speak to each other. And it's, you know, you do the meditation period, you do the walking meditation, you have your meals, you might have a daily chore that you do. And that was something that happened to me when I went to that, which it first of all, it was a, it was quite difficult. The first couple of days, just, and it wasn't the not talking, it was the not doing. But after, you know, like the third or fourth day, I started having this feeling of kind of, like lightness of peace of, you know, almost like this kind of natural high from just letting everything settle. And I found this a very profound experience, you know, I got to thinking like, why don't we have something in Southern California that's like, really a place that can have these. And so that was just the thought for many years, and I was kind of waiting for somebody to do it. And in 2018, this

place, I found out that this place was on the market, we were in the process of this, thinking about a retreat center. And so originally, the plan was that it would be primarily or solely for these meditation retreats, but early on, just feeling like there were other uses for it. And that I appreciate that most people are never going to go on a silent meditation retreat. And it's fine. You know, I'm not like an evangelist, it's got to push people to do that. So to have other kinds of groups up there, or just have a place where people can be in nature and maybe learn a little bit of mindfulness or other practices, being able to connect in different ways. And it's and that's kind of what we're looking to do more and more of, and so that it'll be like about half of mindfulness or other kinds of meditation retreats, and half sort of other but might incorporate some meditation and you know, maybe other movement practices and so forth. And really like wanting to focus a lot on people who are experiencing burnout, especially people working in nonprofit world, service, world, health world, whatever. There's a lot of people who really give and give of themselves movement, people who are in movement building activism. And, you know, they're not taking enough time to rest, to just be still to pause. A lot of mindfulness is just being able to pause and just be aware of fully what's here.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 34:20

Well, I have to say I've, each time I've visited, I've come back, fully recharged. And you know, it's really incredibly inspiring how you've weaved your work from a one on one patient experience to then educating the next generation of psychiatrists with your skills and now really expanding it to a larger group of individuals. I really feel that others could learn from that and way it's a lot of, you know, life trajectory in you know, as we age, we become the mentors and the lead Leaders and the sort of ability to share what we know to others. And you're living that every day. So thank you for that. Well, you know, there's so much more that we could cover, though we're getting towards the end of our interview, and I wanted to ask you, any reflections or tips that you might have for our listeners in relationship to mindfulness or Sangha that you might want to offer up? Yeah.

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Dr. Bill Resnick 35:25

Well, in terms of mindfulness, like it just depends on what you're looking for. If you if you want to learn a little bit about mindfulness or start a practice, there are a lot of people out there, teaching it who've been trained to teach it. I don't know if there's one central repository of information. But there is now something called the International mindfulness teachers association that has certification. So it might be good to find someone who has that certification, who's been through a certain amount of training. There are a lot of apps that offer mindfulness teaching, I usually recommend a lot of people know Headspace. Headspace is a perfectly good, mostly introductory, like mindfulness app. And the one that I like the most, I'd say, is 10% Happier. Most of the lessons are like short little videos of prominent meditation, mindfulness teachers, and then they guide a meditation and there are varying lengths but often very short, and there's like little kind of courses, you know, that you can take. And if you're in LA, you can check out Insite LA, they offer some some classes, Mark, UCLA, I think they're taking a little bit of a hiatus, but hopefully we'll be offering classes again.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 36:45

And they have guided meditation app that's free, which is nice.

D Dr. Bill Resnick 36:51

Right? So that's, yeah, that's a good I think that's a good app, too, that has some good guided meditations on it. Well,

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 36:59

we end our, our podcasts with every guest with this question, what does it mean for you to live well, so

D Dr. Bill Resnick 37:07

for me to live? Well, it's, I think, I think of balance is kind of a good watch word, meaning, you know, balance between activity and rest. Between time that I can spend in by myself and contemplation or meditation or whatever and time with loved ones and friends, time balance between learning and enjoying, whatever I am somebody who enjoys performance, a lot, watching performance, and so forth. So and also a balance between, I guess, your service and taking care of myself, too. Though,

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 37:48

you have so much to share, and I'm so grateful to everything you do, and have done for our community and for our future. Psychiatrists, and, and for me, so

D Dr. Bill Resnick 38:01

Well, I'm very grateful for your friendship. You have been a really wonderful part of my life for the last several years. And I appreciate that and happy to be in conversation with you.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 38:15

Thank you, Bill. That means a lot. I feel the same. And thanks to you all for tuning in. After this conversation, I'm feeling inspired to return back to Bill Sangha, and to differentiate between my experience of pain and suffering. I sincerely hope you learned something in this episode, or at least learn to invite some more mindfulness into your days. Check out the separate live will episode that has the 10 Minute Meditation for you to return to whenever you may need it. Talk to you soon live well. Take care. To learn more about today's guests, and to explore the entire podcast archive, visit our website@healthy.ucla.edu and find the podcast page under the media tab. If you enjoyed this episode, the best way to support the show is to subscribe on Spotify and Apple podcasts. And if you can leave a review or share on social media even better. If you have any guests suggestions, visit our website for the submission form, or email us live_well@ucla.edu or direct message us on Instagram at healthy UCLA. Visit the show notes on our

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