



Conscious Life presents

# ANXIETY SUPER CONFERENCE

## Meditating in nature to calm the mind

Guest: Mark Coleman

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### **[00:00:10] Jaia Bristow**

Hello and welcome back to this event on Anxiety. My name is Jaia Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts.

And today I am delighted to be joined by meditation teacher and author Mark Coleman.

Welcome, Mark.

### **Mark Coleman**

Hi, Jaia. Great to be with you.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Great to have you with us.

So to get us started, do you want to just start by telling us a little bit about your own experiences around anxiety?

### **Mark Coleman**

Yeah. So it's funny, I was chatting with my uncle once, and he said, oh, you were always an anxious kid. And I was surprised by that because I didn't think of myself as an anxious kid. But as I look back, I can see how I filtered my experience in life through anxiety. And I actually did run a lot of anxiety.

Having meditated and done a lot of meditation practice for 40 years, that's really helped significantly. But anxiety still comes and the strongest wave that happened, so I had to work through a lot of early trauma, and that definitely triggered some deep anxiety.

And probably about 10 years ago, I had a very strong wave of anxiety that lasted a few months, partly related to that trauma. And it was a profound teacher for me in terms of how to radically work with and radically accept that state, which is, I think, one of the most challenging conditions even for meditators, because actually bringing attention to it often elevates it, and increases it in certain ways.

And so when this full blown anxiety wave happened for me, which went on for a few months, it really challenged me to see how I could meet that part of myself with a lot of love and a lot of softening and kindness and tenderness.

**[00:02:17]**

And it really wasn't until there was part of me, I tried doing all the tricks of making it go away and meditating it away, and nothing worked. The conditions that were fueling it hadn't been resolved so it just kept pervading.

And it really wasn't until I was able to keep fully softening my nervous system, my heart and meeting it with love, softening into my own being with love. And until the point where I said to myself, if this anxiety is with me for the rest of my life, it's okay. I can love this too. I can meet this too.

But it came after some months, and it came after, at that point I'd been meditating for 20/30 years, so I had a lot of experience learning to meet difficulty and suffering and stress. But it was a great teacher in humility and really learning how to be tender and kind with ourselves when our nervous system is agitated with anxiety, which is very difficult to sit with and be with.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Absolutely. And I'm so glad that you brought that piece in about the fact that actually sometimes when you're very anxious, meditating isn't the easiest thing and that it can actually heighten those difficult feelings and that really challenging state that you talked about.

And how it's so challenging that even 20/30 years of meditation down the line, that these states can still arise for you.

And I love the way you talked about that compassion and that tenderness and that accepting, not trying to make it go away or stop it or change it or reject it, but instead just accepting it and accepting that it is difficult, but that there is still a kindness and a lovingness towards yourself that can arise for you these days around it.

### **Mark Coleman**

And I think just listening to you, one of the key things that I've done for myself working with trauma, and similarly with anxiety, and what I teach to students is that because, particularly with mindfulness practice, the meditators encourage to focus on what's happening, to focus on what's predominant. If anxiety is predominant, that's what can elevate the anxiety.

And so the skill is learning to actually acknowledge the anxiety with kindness and presence, but then to shift the attention to anything that's not anxious. Anywhere in the body that might not be anxious, might be the feet, might be the hands, might be the sounds. I'm listening to the morning song here in California.

It may be opening your eyes, looking around. It may be putting a soothing hand on your body. It might be getting up and walking outside, it might be calling a friend, it might be listening to music. Anything that shifts the attention helps regulate the nervous system and then gives us more capacity to then hold the anxiety from a place of more balance and presence.

And that's really an important lesson, particularly for mindfulness practitioners who are used to going to the source of what's going on, and often that can ignite and exacerbate the condition.

### **[00:05:39] Jaia Bristow**

I think that's a really useful skill to bring in. That it's okay to not go straight deep into the anxiety, that that's one of the states that actually if you go more into it, it does exacerbate it.

And that there's all these other things we can focus on, like you say, the sounds, even opening your eyes. This idea that meditation has to be done with your eyes closed, it's like if that works, then great. But if it's not working and it's making you feel a lot worse, then it's also okay to look around.

I had a wonderful conversation with David Treleaven, who does trauma-informed mindfulness, and we talked about all these different skills. And we did that for the Trauma Super Conference but our conversation is also available on this conference if people want to go listen to that afterwards.

And so, can you tell us, Mark, a bit more about the work that you do and how that is supportive to anxiety? You've already touched upon it a little bit.

### **Mark Coleman**

I'm a meditation teacher in the Buddhist insight tradition. I've been doing that for 20 years. Based in Spirit Rock, but I teach mostly in Spirit Rock in the US and Europe sometimes. But my particular specialty and my love and my passion is being out in nature and integrating meditation, mindfulness in nature.

So I started that when I came to the US and just fell in love with the wilderness, and it's beauty, the vastness, the wildness. And I started taking my meditation practice outside because why wouldn't you want to meditate in beauty, awe and wonder?

And I quickly discovered, it was so many of the teachings and the instructions that my teachers were giving about meditation, about Buddhist practice in general, they were just so accessible in nature.

Mindfulness happens quite effortlessly when we go outside. We're sensory animals, and so our senses wake up and we become attuned to sight, to sound, to smell, to movement, to dynamism, to space, to color, to a whole array of experience that takes us out of ourselves, out of our constant rumination and self preoccupation, which is definitely one of the causes for anxiety, and shifts us into a broader sphere of life, to the more than human world and to a world that's not as...

There's this great line from the poet Wendell Berry, he says, "When I wake up in the night in fear of my life and my children's lives may become, I go outside where the wood duck rests, I come into the presence of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief".

I come into the presence of wild things who are not busy worrying about their taxes or paying the rent or what school their kids are in. Just birds are singing and they have a life and a mission and a purpose and focus. But you would come into a forest and trees are treeing and rocks are being rocks, and there's something profoundly soothing, nourishing regenerating.

As a species, we mostly evolved in nature, in the forest, in the savanna. And it's only recently that we've become an urban species, and more recently an indoor species, and even more recently, a screen oriented species.

And all of those movements have actually, I think, created a sense of disconnection from nature and alienation from the natural world and actually increased both our anxiety and our self preoccupation.

**[00:09:25]**

My passion has been to share my love of nature and meditating in nature. And I do that through retreats, courses and programs and trainings and teacher trainings as a way to show people that meditation is natural, mindfulness is natural, and it naturally happens when we go outside. We're naturally present.

Why, when you go outside like I did for the sunrise this morning, why wouldn't I want to be present? And again, going back to the early conversation, when we shift our attention out of ourselves, especially into something beautiful, calming, spacious, our whole nervous system, as a lot of research is now showing, when we go outside our nervous system calms down, our vagus nerve relaxes, our blood pressure goes down, cortisol level goes down, well being rises, stress levels reduce.

It's been my work through my organization, Awake in the Wild, to share this passion of both how accessible it is to be present and aware of nature, how joyful and heart expanding that is, and how it's great for the stresses that we live in, for the sense of rushing and time scarcity we live in. And also for the mentally dominated lives we live just through our thinking and through technology.

And so going outside in a contemplative way, we can both optimize our connection to nature, become more present. And in doing so, as most people know when they go to a park or the beach or the forest or a mountain, we start to feel more relaxed. We start to feel more spacious. We start to feel more ease, more joy.

And we're not doing anything. We're not like, oh, I'm going to go to the beach to relax. No. We go to the beach and we relax. We go to the park and we feel joy. We go to watch the sunset and we feel love.

And then the way the mindfulness piece helps is that it's just a way of training people to work with their minds so they can be more open and present to the beauty and the power of nature.

And in that, in the light of this conference, that is all wonderfully calm inducing, peace inducing ways of being. And it happens naturally, which is the best way to work with anxiety, is when you're not actually trying to get rid of it, you're just putting yourself in conditions that support ease and well being.

### **Jaia Bristow**

I love that. I really love that. And one of the things that really stood out in what you've just shared is that idea that actually you can do nothing in nature, without it feeling like doing nothing.

So it's so true that if I'm at the beach or if I'm, I've spent lots of time traveling recently and I spent lots of time in the jungle, and there is so much of me that can just relax and just be when I'm in nature.

When I'm lying on the beach, I don't have to be reading my book, I don't have to be making sandcastles, I don't have to be on my phone, I don't have to be distracting myself. I can just lie and I can feel the sun on my body and the warmth, and I can feel the grains of sand below me. And I can listen to the waves.

And when I'm in the jungle, I'm completely absorbed by all the different sounds and the smells and the sights and the different shades of green. And when I'm home alone and in my bedroom or in my

kitchen, it is impossible for me to just be in that way. I'm constantly picking up my phone and watching Netflix.

### **[00:13:13]**

And doing nothing for me, in that context, is very much doing something. It's, how can I distract? Because it's, like you say, my whole nervous system is in a very different state when I'm in home mode or work mode. Even if I'm trying to relax, there's that trying, that efforting that you were speaking to, which doesn't happen so much in nature.

So I'm so glad that you're talking about this, because I'm, just talking to you, having all these insights. So I'm wondering if you can share a bit more about, both how nature does support that and the connection between meditation and nature that you were just talking about there. That meditation helps you be more open.

But also about the, you talked about accessibility at one point, and I'm wondering about the accessibility of nature. Because, of course, lots of people these days live in big urban environments, and it feels like nature is a whole world away.

### **Mark Coleman**

So to your first question first, it's, in a way, mysterious what and how nature does that. I can't really say. Like your experience in the jungle or on the beach was a beautiful example of how... I think what happens is that nature allures our attention. It's not like, oh, I'm going to go to the beach and be really mindful of the waves and the sand and the seagulls. No, you just go to the beach and you walk along the beach and you notice the waves and the surf and the light and the sun and the sand and people.

Our brains have developed for hundreds of thousands of years to be oriented to nature. And so there's this wonderful, there's a couple of things that neuroscientists have discovered. One is this quality that naturally happens called open fascination, where we just become softly fascinated.

And then there's another facet of research that's looking into brain restoration therapy. So when we're outside, it's naturally restorative for our brain versus when we walk in the city because our brain hasn't evolved to track that kind of stimuli, it engages our brain in a way that's taxing. So it's tiring.

So when we're in nature, generally, not for everyone and not at all times, but generally, it's restful, our attention relaxes, our brain relaxes. And because there's so much beauty, we happen to live on this amazing, beautiful planet that has jungles and forests and oceans and rivers and meadows and wildflowers. I mean, it's just crazy, it's springtime and it's just fecund with beauty.

And so when we notice beauty, again, it creates a sense of wellbeing, when we feel wellbeing, we relax. When we listen to the sound of a bird or we're gazing at a wildflower, it's absorbing.

And I think, again, going back to the anxiety theme, so much of our anxiety, as neuroscience is pointing to, comes from our default mode network. This ruminative part of the brain, the midline of the brain that's ruminating about ourselves, about me and my problems and my stresses and my anxious future.

And with an untrained mind, the mind spins in that endlessly and just whips us up into more frenzy and anxiety about an imagined future. When we come into nature, the natural world is, of course, surviving and with its tremendous intelligence, learning how to survive, but not cognitively, not

thinking, oh, I wonder if there's going to be enough rain today. Oh, I better soak up the rain. No, it's just being. It's in tune with seasons and rhythms and cycles.

### **[00:17:18]**

And so there's a kind of, even though nature is very dynamic, it's also seemingly, to us, very restful and very at ease and at home in itself. It's not judging us. Whereas we feel judged by others. There's a sense of feeling welcomed and accepting.

And so I think all of that just helps us feel at ease, feel relaxed. And there's a lot of times, like if you go out in the morning into a park or a field or your garden, there's a sense of stillness. The air is still, there's the quietude and we're very intimately interconnected with life.

So when we go into an environment that's calming and stilling and quiet and restful, guess what happens inside? We feel calm and restful. If we're downtown in San Francisco or in London or Paris or wherever, everyone's rushing around so we feel that, we feel that stress.

So that's why I'm mostly telling people if you can go outside as much as possible, even if it's walking around in neighborhood where there's just a few trees, it takes very little. It could be a plant. I have an orchid over there, and I look at that orchid sometimes, and that can be as restorative as being in the forest, like it just absorbs your attention.

So, yes, it's lovely to go to a park or a beach or a mountain, in a forest. And as you say, a lot of people don't have access to that. When I lived in London, my Church was Hampstead Heath. I would go there every weekend. It's a beautiful wild park, for those who don't know. It has wild parts to it. And I would just drink in the green and the trees and the ponds and the birds.

So I took it upon myself to always find nature. I lived in the east end of London, it was very run down when I was living there, but I lived next to a Park, Victoria Park. And I'd go there and I'd walk and I would soak it up.

But even if there wasn't a park, there's always a sky, there's always weather, there's wind, there's sunlight, there's the moon rising, there's the sun setting. And so even if we're in a very open place, nature is everywhere. And it could be, as I said, a plant on your desk, a tree on your street.

And when we attune to that, and that's where mindfulness is so helpful, when we bring a quality of attention and presence to anything natural, its essence can influence. Its effect transmits something to us that allows us to feel ease. And the further away we are from the human created stressful world, then the more that allows some sense of well being.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Well, you have me convinced. And what I particularly like in what you're saying is that, like you say, you can find elements of nature everywhere. It can be a houseplant, it can be the sky, it can be the weather, feeling the rain. I'm in England at the moment, and there's been a lot of rain, and feeling the rain on your skin. Even the rain brings up certain smells, I find.

And I think it's really important to remember that we are in nature even when we're not in our ideal image of nature. We might not be surrounded by green, but there is still nature around us, the wind, the rain, the sky, the tufts of grass coming out off the pavement cracks.

**[00:20:48] Mark Coleman**

It's everywhere.

**Jaia Bristow**

And so if we're someone who's with lots of anxiety and someone listening to this talk and feeling like, yes, I know that connection to nature, I know that it helps. And realizing that there are different ways to connect to nature. If you live next to a big park or if you're in the countryside or there's a forest near you, then fantastic. But if not, there's all these other little pieces of nature that you were talking about.

What's the next step? How do you bring the meditation practice into that to really make the most of that relaxing quality you were talking about and to relax the nervous system?

**Mark Coleman**

So the main thing is, and it's going to sound simple. Every meditation instruction and every spiritual instruction is usually pretty simple. It's, pay attention. So what does that mean?

Paying attention in nature means being in your body and in your senses. And what do I mean by that? I mean, the body and its senses is always naturally in contact with the environment. That's the point of our senses, to attune us. They're survival mechanisms, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. We have those to attune us to what's around us.

So whether you're walking down the street and there's some trees or you're in a park or in the woods or on a beach, the practice is simply to be present, which means to be aware of what's happening in the present moment.

And when we're out in nature, whether we're sitting or walking, it's to become really curious and receptive to the sensory stimuli. So, as you say, you're sitting on a park bench, maybe you close your eyes for a moment and you just notice the sounds. Probably there'll be some bird sounds, are some wind, and maybe some traffic and people. Or if you're at the beach or by a stream, of course, there's lots of beautiful sounds that can just hold our attention.

And one of the qualities I'd like to emphasize is the naturalness of this practice. So you don't have to make any effort to listen. You just sit quietly and you'll hear sounds, some beautiful sounds, some sounds you don't like.

And the same way when you attune to your skin. The skin is an amazing organ. It keeps us in touch with our environment. We'll notice the air, we'll notice moisture. If you're in the tropical jungle, you'll notice moisture, you'll notice things like cool breeze touching the skin, blowing the hair, you'll notice the ways that your body is in contact with the ground. I like to encourage people to take their shoes and socks off and walk barefoot on the grass.

Again, when you're walking anywhere or walking barefoot particularly, you don't need to focus that much. You do notice the soft grass, the wet grass or the dry grass.

So in the same way with smelling, we don't tend to notice much smells, maybe coffee or pizza or something, but mostly indoors, our sensory environment is very limited. We go outside, there's a

whole range of smells. It's springtime, there's either fragrance in the air, pollen. We're by the sea, it's salty. We're in the forest, we smell like humus of the Earth.

**[00:24:17]**

And then, of course, seeing, there's a whole just wonderful panorama of things to see, leaves, trees, grasses, flowers, sky, clouds, space, mountains, earth. And so the invitation is just to be curious about what's being known through the senses. What are you seeing? What are you hearing? What are you sensing? What are you smelling? What are you touching?

And the natural world is just alive with stimuli. There's always something happening in nature. It's a very dynamic environment versus the staticness of our indoor living.

So mostly the instruction is to pay attention, be aware of what's happening in your senses, notice how that's impacting your body, whether it's the breeze or the heat or the coolness or the rain or the smells. And then, as in most meditation instructions, to notice when you go from just that simple noticing, feeling, seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, to thinking about it.

Of course, we think a lot as human beings, and maybe we start thinking about the birds or what kind of bird it is. Oh, I should come to the park every week, it's so good for me. Or why don't I go to the beach more, blah, blah, blah.

So we notice the thinking, and then we just come back and then just ask a simple question, what am I knowing now? What am I experiencing now? Oh, now there's a different kind of bird sound. Now the breeze has really picked up from the south. Now I walked into the shade, and it's really cool and moist.

And so you just let your attention be allured, invited to what's naturally calling it, but we just don't notice because we're usually here or we're usually here.

And then that can be mostly the practice, whether you're sitting or lying or walking or standing. Just simply being attuned to your senses, attuned to your environment.

And then also noticing, what I love to have people attend to, is notice how we're always intimately in relationship with the natural world, there's an intimate reciprocity. So when you hear the bird song, like I'm hearing a Bewick's Wren right now, every time I hear it, I feel my heart, it soars a little bit. It delights. How sweet. This tiny little bird makes the sweetest sound.

Or I'll look out the window and I'll see the light on the trees and I feel, I just feel wonder. How beautiful is that? I'll be walking on the sand and I'll feel the sand between my toes and just the yumminess of that and all the memories that that brings.

So it's being attuned to how nature is always influencing us, touching us, opening us in a certain way. And so in that way, the practice, when I say meditation, it's really being mindful, which is really being present. And it happens very naturally and easily.

And the more we do that, again, in the context of working with anxiety, each time we attune to our environment, to our senses, for the most part we're shifting attention from our mind or our heart. But usually our mind, that's often creating stress, problem solving, worrying about the future or whatever.



And so each time we attune to the present outdoors, we're inviting a sense of well being, a sense of ease, even if it's just for a moment.

**[00:27:56] Jaia Bristow**

Wonderful. And I think you're just starting to answer what would be my next question. Which would be the why of it all. So, why, in the context of anxiety, is it supportive to go out into nature?

And one of the things you haven't said, but I assume it's obvious for people listening, especially around meditation, is to remove distractions. Like, I guess go into nature and meditate and pay attention, but turn off your phone or at least silence it and maybe don't bring a book and those kinds of things, avoid devices.

But the question is, in the context of anxiety, why is it supportive to go into nature and pay attention? Why can't I just go and sit in the park and let my mind drift, for example?

**Mark Coleman**

Again, that's why the meditation or mental training, whatever that looks like to people, is so important, because most of our stress and self created anxiety and fear comes from our mind, comes from our fears and worries about our present or future life. And there's a place for thinking and a place for working with those strategically, and problem solving and whatever effectively. But we tend to ruminate and we tend to whip ourselves up into a frenzy that's really stress inducing.

And so what I find, and I do this daily, every time I go outside, pretty much every single time I go outside, it pulls me into a world that's not about me. I'm not the center of life.

In my home, in my bedroom, it's just me and my problems. It feels like my world is the most important thing. As soon as I literally step outside the front door, there's the sunlight, oh my God, 93 million miles away. There's the sky, this massive blue or cloudy sky. There's a whole bunch of trees.

I notice, oh, it's spring. I'd totally forgotten it was spring. There's a whole cycle of life happening. And there's migrating birds. I'm noticing more bird song because it's springtime and they're nesting and they're protecting their territory. And I notice flowers, or I notice beauty.

And so all those things help us remind us of a much bigger web of life that we're part of that's not revolving around me and my problems. And so when we attune in that way, it just brings a sense of space, perspective. And when we feel space and perspective, it's like we have a much bigger context to hold our problems and stresses and life and challenges.

And so it's not those things go away, but we are learning to calm and relax and regulate the nervous system. People in the trauma world talk about resourcing. We learn to resource and regulate our nervous system by going into an environment that's calming, soothing, relaxing, opening, joyful.

And then once the nervous system is calmed or more relaxed and more spacious, it has a broader perspective, then whenever our challenges or stresses or anxieties come up, we have much more capacity to deal with them because we're more resourced. We're more grounded. Being outside generally is grounding. Being on our devices in our homes, we don't feel so grounded.

So we're just naturally resourcing in ourselves. And again, why I like it so much is you don't need a PhD, you don't need a teacher, although I teach this and there's value to that. But you just go outside

and you just take a walk around your neighborhood. You look at the sky, as you said, the grass is peeking through the cracks in the pavement. You notice someone's window box. You notice some dogs walking along the street.

**[00:31:58]**

And it's amazing how powerful it is when we shift our attention away from this looping, into the natural world that's been thriving for millions of years. It just tends to create a sense of well being. And the more we do that, the more we feel nourished and have more capacity, as I said, when the stressors come, to deal with them.

**Jaia Bristow**

I'll love that. And I think, as well, as you talked about resources and well being and what you spoke about before, that it helps switch from mental activity into that very sensorial embodied state. Which is fantastic for people suffering from anxiety because anxiety is so much mental activity.

And another thing I really love in what you're sharing is that, we spoke a bit about at the beginning about how sometimes meditation can be more anxiety provoking because it's accentuating the anxiety. Where this kind of nature meditation that you're talking about, doesn't sound like that at all. It sounds like, not only is it more relaxing and being in nature, which is helping the meditation, there's also that it's just the coming into the body, the focusing on the senses. And it's not something that's being added to the to-do list.

I know so many people who are so stressed and on the edge of burnout and very anxious, so they have meditation and yoga on their to-do list. And it becomes one more thing that has to fit into an already over busy schedule. Whereas this is breaking that cycle, stepping out of your routine and going into nature and then focusing on your senses within nature.

And it sounds like a break from all the devices. It's not listening to a meditation on your phone. So I love everything you're sharing. And it sounds very accessible as well. Even if you have mobility impairments, then it's just finding, stepping outside your front door or finding a park bench or whatever it is.

So thank you for your time today. I'm aware that you have a meditation class that you actually need to go and teach soon, so I will let you go soon. But before you do, can you share with us how people can find out more about you and your work?

**Mark Coleman**

So my main website is my name, [markcoleman.org](http://markcoleman.org) and I have information about meditation, nature retreats and I have a lot of talks and meditations and things people can listen to and download.

And then my other website is [awakeinthewild.com](http://awakeinthewild.com) which is the name of the work that I do, Awake in the Wild. And you can find information about what I'm going to do in 5 minutes, which is to lead a sunrise meditation which is taught every morning at 7:30am California time, but also about my nature retreats, which are all over, mostly the Western States of the US, sometimes in Europe.

Also my Awake in the Wild teacher trainings that I teach both in Europe and in the US. And also I run mindfulness teacher trainings with a wonderful teacher, Martin Aylward, who I believe is also going to

be on your summit, so you can find out information there from my website, [markcoleman.org](http://markcoleman.org). So, thanks, Jaia.

**[00:35:38] Jaia Bristow**

Thank you. Thank you so much. I really, really enjoyed this conversation. And I'm inspired to go out for a walk after this and pay attention to my senses as I do.

**Mark Coleman**

Great. Wonderful. Good to be with you.

**Jaia Bristow**

Thank you for your time.