



Conscious Life presents

The Secrets of Space Holding

Guest: Natasja Pelgrom

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[00:00:15] Alexander Beiner

Hi everybody, I'm here with Natasja Pelgrom. Natasja is the founder of Awaken the Medicine Within, which is a psychedelic retreat and education organization. She's a thought leader who has made significant contributions to the fields of personal transformation and psychedelic-assisted care.

As a sacred medicine woman, mentor, and consultant, Natasja has played an instrumental role in over a thousand psychedelic ceremonies, serving as a trainer, facilitator, and assistant. She also acts as an expert consultant to the psychedelic health and wellness industry. Natasja, welcome.

Natasja Pelgrom

Thank you so much for having me today.

Alexander Beiner

It's good to see you. We have worked together extensively and are good friends, so it's nice to be encountering in this format. There's lots of brilliant work you do, I'm looking forward to you explaining to an audience. Maybe we could start with, what is it that you do? What calls you? What work do you bring into the world?

Natasja Pelgrom

That's a very interesting question I ask that question myself many, many times a year because I think that one of the things about psychedelics, entheogens, and plant medicines is that they will consistently help you cultivate a relationship with illusion, with truth, and help you navigate that.

[00:01:39] Natasja Pelgrom

That means that questions and answers, in terms of these plant allies, because I like to call them allies, so I can be a student with them. I consistently ask myself, Okay, what am I doing here? What am I providing?

But in short, for the last decade, I've been facilitating and supporting transformational experiences that include not only psychedelics, but a holistic programming, and cultivating that program because it's really, really important that we touch upon all of the facets, and probably we're going to dive a little bit into that.

Before that, I've been a serial entrepreneur, and throughout my whole life. I've always had this massive curiosity in me as a child, and a sense of interconnectedness to all of life.

For me at a very young age, my first psychedelic experience was with sacred mushrooms, in the Netherlands, it's legal, at the age of 14. My mother did know, I had a responsible caretaker knowing about it. Just as a little disclaimer, we do not promote underage use of psychedelics or drugs.

This was specifically to me, who I was, and who I am as an individual. It was recreational, but that set the tone that year for a very spiritual, from a new age perspective, more spiritual awakening, and curiosity that developed. So meditation, Buddhism, and Hinduism, from a very young age, and then rolled into shamanism.

Everything that I've always done and studied was for my own development until a little bit more than a decade ago, I decided to unplug completely from the hospitality, entertainment, and service industry and dropped completely into a path of a devotee and space holding in the broadest sense of the word.

And naturally, not because I had any calling, I wasn't lying on a mattress in the jungle, and suddenly, Mother Ayahuasca told me, "You will be a facilitator." No, that's not what happened. I got kicked in the butt multiple times by different experiences, and it just happened. The invitation was there, and one of the main responsibilities that I find, even today, is to cultivate stillness and deep listening, so the discernment between what is ego, what is intuition, or what is longing, what is belonging, and everything in the middle.

A little bit about me now today. In 2017, I launched Awaken the Medicine Within, which is really about what I mentioned, a holistic program, multiple weeks with a minimum of five-day in-person experience, with multiple ceremonies, always in a legal setting.

Many different people from across the globe, and especially a lot of different executives, thought leaders, curious-minded people on a threshold, people seeking rights of passage, people seeking forms of transformation, and even healing in the broadest sense, but also out of curiosity.

I've been holding space for individuals now for a very long time. I stopped counting, but I think I came now to the number of a thousand, and I've decided to stop at that number.

[00:05:28] Natasja Pelgrom

And next to that, I'm a consultant. I do consultancy not only in research at the moment, but for clinicians that are wanting to explore the psychedelic and entheogenic space, but are also realizing that it's a transpersonal process and a very intuitive process, and want to bridge both worlds. I consult those and mentor individuals who want to know more about this. That's a little bit in a nutshell.

Alexander Beiner

Amazing. I want to talk about space holding and your approach to that because I've worked with you, I've seen you work, and you really are a master of that.

I also want to pick up on something you just mentioned, which I think is very interesting, which is the connection between the retreat world and the personal development world, of healthy individuals coming to retreats like the ones you run, the ones we run together, and the clinical world where people are going in for treating, for treatment-resistant depression.

There's so much that the worlds have to learn from each other, and there's so much that the clinical world has to learn from the retreat world, especially around working with groups. It'll be interesting to hear you talk a little bit about what you've noticed about what can the clinical world learn from the world of retreats.

Natasja Pelgrom

That's a really good question. I just want to say that not every retreat has the programming, and not every clinician has the curiosity for it. There is a very big shift that happened in the last few years when Michael Pollan launched his book, *How to Change Your Mind*, and in 2018, we had an influx.

That's where a lot of the people like myself, who were facilitating in a more underground setting, with a more traditional, ancient traditional or Shamanic tradition, or plant medicine tradition, embedded. Or even from maybe more religious traditions, embedded into that. When that happened, there was a real curiosity to bridge the clinical aspect.

With the groups that we've worked with in a different container where we've met, was one of a really beautiful opportunity, where we bridged with research those with the healthy normals, not those diagnosed with what you just mentioned, but still creating data and understanding.

And through that process, one of the things that for me personally was a very big learning curve was that a lot of the times we were speaking about the same thing, we just had different language of exploration, of sharing, and of coming to a certain conclusion.

Now, it takes a certain mind to be able to connect the dots because, at the end of the day, we always have a preference. I also just want to put a little disclaimer, just because psychedelics are popular, it doesn't mean that it makes you a better person. I'm going to be really rude, you can still be an asshole after doing it.

[00:08:53] Natasja Pelgrom

But there is this hope that is created with it to vastly support meaning-making, purpose, change, connection to interconnectedness, and connection to each other. Those are qualities that eventually also serve people who have been diagnosed with forms of depression and anxiety. So that's one aspect.

I think from the retreat aspect, what, let's say, the more academic approach can learn is that the presence of the individual guiding or facilitating is part of the soup that makes the container. It is an absolute influence, it has an influence. And for a lot of those that are more research or academically trained, there is a distance between the client, or the participant, or the patient, and the experience, and the person facilitating. In the retreat experience, we fully understand that there is an intimacy created and there is a relationship of trust.

That trust needs to be cultivated so deeply that the individual can go into, I'm going to say, skillfully navigating an expanded state of consciousness. And this could also be with breathwork, it doesn't have to be with an external substance of course.

But skillfully navigating a psychedelic experience requires the capacity to have the nervous system in a place of safety, in a place of trust, so that the individual's egoic structure can feel, Oh, I can lean into this with curiosity. And that preparation can only be done by individuals that fully understand the mind, the body, the emotion, but also something like maybe the spirit, or the transpersonal, or the soul, or whatever words we may use for it. I'm not attached to one specific word, but that's really, really important.

Putting a pill in someone and sitting on the side just to monitor if they don't have a physical interruption, could be an extreme outcome or anything, it's not just that. It doesn't mean that those settings don't have something of a gift, or a benefit, of course, these are miraculous compounds, and they find their way in shapes and forms. But over the last decade, what I have seen is that the deeper someone can go is built by the trust in the group, and in the facilitation.

This is what a lot of wounding also is. If you look at the learning around trauma and nurture versus nature, the parental, the authority, all of these aspects. There are many things that help with this.

Now, let's say the personal development, I don't like the word wellness, but I use it because I don't have another word for it, but the world of well-being. In the world of well-being and personal development, they can definitely learn, I think this is important, this is something that is about meaning-making and facts.

Meaning-making and facts are... For example, a lot of people that individually facilitate or have retreats, their screening aspect, I'm not saying that the academic approach is perfect either because I think they have a real big component missing, which is a more spiritual aspect to where an individual also is. But that's a whole different topic.

But the whole screening aspect is something that a lot are not doing in the right way. Then there are a lot of them that are doing it the right way and can learn still. Unfortunately start sitting in the chair of a clinical psychologist, because they have these questions and suddenly they have data from an individual's emotional and psychological being, and suddenly it gives them a sense of

maybe power or entitlement with the best intentions. It doesn't mean that someone doesn't have good intentions.

[00:13:44] Natasja Pelgrom

But suddenly they're in a position to screen and conclude something about an individual. Well, they haven't had that specific training. For those of you who know anything about therapy, it takes a very long time before a diagnosis is even made. So the people that would say, Oh, I have been diagnosed by so and so with anxiety or OCD, they might put it in the form.

But there is a whole area of people that might not put it in the form, or have not been, or didn't have the financial means to extend their therapy and only maybe had two or three sessions. There is a majority of people that have that, too. So I feel that there is that aspect.

Then there is the aspect of the boundaries and the healthy boundaries, and learning how to discern that. There is a protocol and a framework in place which helps you to navigate your own psychological projections and assumptions. And with the right supervision, you'll be able to navigate. Then again, recently there has been a lot of exposure on academics and therapists misconducting their own. So there's no guarantee for either party.

I think my calling today in 2024 is stronger than when I started, it's really bridging the many ways of knowing. And with that I mean bring the academic, the transpersonal, and the holistic into one. Where can we unite? I don't think there is another way for it. I hope this answers your question, and I actually answered it because sometimes I get carried away.

Alexander Beiner

It's fantastic, you more than I answered it, actually. There's a lot of key points there that I think are very important to highlight for people because you touched on some of the tensions in the field, which maybe we haven't talked about yet through the conference.

But one of them, I think, is in the research world, there's this, I don't want to say, controversy, tension between the importance of the drug, or the importance of the therapist, and the whole process that's going on.

For example, Guy Goodwin, one of the heads of Compass Pathways, one of the pharma companies developing a version of psilocybin as a treatment for depression and other indications. He came out with a paper saying it's mainly the drug, and the therapist is less important, it's a drug effect. And then, other therapists are saying, well, that's absolutely not what we're seeing.

There's a tension, of course, but there are a lot of incentives because for a pharma company, and I'm not claiming that this is why they're saying that, but it is worth mentioning that this is an incentive, the less therapist attention the better, because it's extremely expensive to have two therapists for 6 or 7 hours. That's just the session, then think of all the other hours.

[00:16:38] Natasja Pelgrom

That's the same thing for the retreat business. Just to say that we have groups, always 2 and a half to 1 facilitator. You can only have people that have I call it not knowledge, but wisdom in their bodies to be able to facilitate. That's the... You and I decided at the time. People see the pricing a lot of the times, and they don't fully understand the amount of complexity, and work that goes into it, the amount of hours, and the skills you need to help that. But I just wanted to confirm that for the other party, it's the same.

Alexander Beiner

Absolutely. I think it's very important because it's deep, complex work, and it needs time and attention, and cutting corners then takes the magic out for the participant in a lot of ways, whether they're on a clinical trial or whether they're at a retreat. I think it's really worth saying.

I want to talk about that specific process of the person holding space, and what it is a facilitator does. What are some of the key qualities of good space holding, or healthy space holding in your view?

Natasja Pelgrom

The thing is, I immediately want to share here because I think it's really, really important that I own my own path. I do not have a PhD, I'm not clinically trained, I'm not an academic. I have had the privilege to have a life that has put me in the right situation at the right time.

I've been able to learn from people from many walks of life, from people in the more Indigenous aspect, people from Buddhism, and from clinical approaches, I've talked to many people. I've had many different types of teachers, I've had teachers who don't want me to say that they've been my teacher.

I want to name that because I'm sitting here as someone who has a certain type of experience, I definitely don't want to make the claim that there is only one way to do this.

There are a lot of trainings out there which are now online, for between 6 and 10 months is the average, with maybe one retreat experience. I will say that in my book, that's not the way to learn, and not saying that the context of those trainings isn't good in the content. Absolutely, there is absolutely valuable content in there.

There isn't a general overview, but there is a very big difference between sitting in a space, observing, and witnessing. This is why the Indigenous practices of apprenticeship, it's a life choice, it's a path choice. It's not something you do for a few months and then move to the next thing. It's a lifelong choice.

The simple words that I'm going to just name about, let's say, the eight pillars. I call it 8 pillars of space holding. They're very simple in its meaning. But if you fully understand them, it takes a long, dedicated path to even maybe cultivate one of them. This is what it is.

[00:20:14] Natasja Pelgrom

I've been personally asked over the years to really create training programs. I'm a guest of faculty in many training programs. I'm not against it at all, I love it, it excites me. The movement excites me of what the potentiality is. But I still think we're at a very premature space. We're actually little babies pretending we're teenagers, thinking we know already. My heart sometimes goes a little bit faster with, Oh, I hope this whole renaissance thing doesn't implode on itself. Aren't we going too fast?

But to answer your question about cultivating space holding, and the qualities around that. I think probably the most important one is, can you allow others to really rely on their own wisdom and intuition? Can you really? And that is, if we really go into that, what would that mean? What would that even mean? Is there a skill set between when you...

Anybody that's ever sat with someone that is wise, and it doesn't matter what walk of life, they will listen deeply, and they will not put their viewpoints on you. And their own wisdom and intuition, this is what a lot of the times people have lost connection with, is this inner compass.

I like the word very much inner healing intelligence, although there was an amazing article recently about questioning inner healing intelligence in the psychedelic space from Jules Evans, and I always think that he asks amazing questions. Again, there is a nuance in everything, and this is a psychedelic space, so everything is a paradox in itself.

But creating that makes you, I would say, one of the things that have helped me through one of the coaching trainings that I've done was really about that it's about the individual and their relationship to something bigger.

This was a coaching training more leaning into neuro-linguistic programming, but more from a spiritual aspect. Then that third party, the individual, and the third party that is bigger, those are the ones that go into a relationship.

If the third party, in this case, would be the entheogen plant medicine or the psychedelic, then it's us as a guide, or facilitator, or space holder that witnesses the situation. Immediately, what happens if you bring that relationship in, is that you fire yourself from the contract of needing to know anything. Therefore, you put your little ego in a little box by just putting that as a framework.

So can you help the other rely on that wisdom, intuition, and having that relationship with, a lot of the times we say, the medicines? The medicines, not from an academic point of view that everybody needs healing, but that's more referring to the Indigenous practices and honoring their words.

Now, for the second one, I will go a little bit faster because otherwise I'm speaking of 8 and it will take the whole time. Another one is, can you make people feel safe? This is also another one, even if they fail in their book.

Safe is a very interesting thing. Again, there could be a whole training around that, about what is safety? What is projection? What are the limiting beliefs connected to that?

[00:24:01] Natasja Pelgrom

We started this conversation about building that trust. There are components of building the trust with the right time, they made the right choice, they're at the right place, they've chosen the right compound.

Creating the safety as this is the environment, the same thing as you would treat, not that adults are children, but if you would look at the sensitivity and the intimacy that an individual goes into if you would treat it as the most open and vulnerable aspect of themselves, and they would suddenly change, you want to tell them, Oh, we're first going to pack our bag, then the car is going to come. That will create predictability and safety.

Then showing and sharing about the facilitation, of course, the rest of the group. That was also a question, something you said about the group and how important that is.

Then another aspect is, it's one of my favorites, the work is never about you. It's never about you. And this asks cultivation of a lot of different practices in terms of your own practices. You have to walk the path. And what does it mean? A lot of the time people create workshops or not even psychedelics, but in general, and they've done something one time and then go like, Oh, I can do it, I can give it.

But I would say, do something like... I'm not saying you should do 100 psychedelic experiences because I don't think I even reach 100. But you should have definitely something that's an amount that it becomes a muscle memory, that it becomes a natural state of being.

When you and I were in retreat, we both of us have shadow work skill sets and very different ones. Then we share after the fact how that navigated in the ceremony. And the shadow work is not for the other person but is for yourself. Wherever something is hooking into you, you have the capacity to navigate questions, and answers, and therefore create a massive skill set of self-reflection, which can be exhausting for the people that you live with. So that's one.

Another one is respecting someone's autonomy. Are you able to do that? What does that even mean? Can you, are you able to cultivate those aspects and help them in those aspects? It's again, a lot of the time people seek something external, a validation, or a healing. A lot of the time, the invitation is consistently coming back to self, taking that responsibility back in a way. Meeting people where they're at. These are fundamental places.

Then giving people, and this is maybe something that people can only go, and this is where the contradiction between indeed having the idea that you don't need a lot of personal experience in expanded states of consciousness is, in my personal viewpoint, really, really incorrect because you need to give people permission to feel complicated emotions, even if it's challenging for you.

And you can only do that if you have understood what a transpersonal, expanded state, psychedelic space is, and that you have a sense of navigation and what dosing does to your system. Those things are crucial because, in that space, the nervous system, and this is also something that is seen a lot in many different traditions, you learn through sitting next to an elder by observing, but mostly by feeling. And the feeling body is something that you cultivate.

[00:28:14] Natasja Pelgrom

The feeling body is also something that you cultivate with the unseen, the place of the unseen, where if I say, if you go to someone's birthday party, you enter the room and you go like, There's something off here, and go like, Oh, I actually want to go home. What is that? What is that feeling body? Everybody has that feeling body.

So can you have the capacity to whatever challenges come up for others, that you're able to stay in that feeling body from a place of trust, in such a deep place that you will not be challenged in the face of when someone is challenged?

Another part is, of course, cultivating integrity, cultivating trust, cultivating discernment, cultivating curiosity, and then having a deep path for holding an intention for self-healing, but also collective contribution. I really think a lot of the aspects of this work are about self. There is an undercurrent where people come for their self, my healing, my purpose, my thing, my question, which is great, of course. That is what it is.

But I think as a space holder, you need to be able to also invite, without pushing or without putting your viewpoint of the world on the other, but invite a collective responsibility because the individual aspect of our society is where we have lost a lot of the beauty in our shared humanity. I think this is where the challenges are right now in our society. I think these are more or less the 8 pillars.

For each one of them, you could put subcategories in and how that training would look like, and how you cultivate it, and what practices and everything in between.

Alexander Beiner

I think they're all such good principles. And listening to you describe them, I think what comes across is that it is highly skilled work to hold space for people going into very deep altered states, regardless of whether it's psychedelic, breathwork, or even just regular group work, is incredibly powerful. That's an important message because as psychedelics expand out, and more people create retreats, workshops, and training courses, et cetera, the risk is that that gets lost.

In a lot of traditional cultures, indigenous cultures, you mentioned the word apprenticeship. The way you learn is through this embodied process of seeing someone work. I was lucky enough to have that training in non-psychedelic group work with Raphael Morgan, one of the therapists who trained me. I noticed how being with him in groups and seeing what he was doing, being able to ask him, Why did you do that? Just observe and digest. That's the knowing, that's called procedural knowing. You learn that it's different than knowing that the sky is blue is a fact, and that's called propositional knowing. That's what science does, and that's what often our culture goes to.

Then procedural knowing is knowing how to, like how to ride a bike. You can't read a book about how to hold space for psychedelics, or how to hold space for breathwork, whatever it might be. You have to be in there and then have all that lived experience. There's something else you mentioned, which I'd like to end with as the last question, which is that quality of bringing something bigger into the space.

[00:32:03] Alexander Beiner

It is not just about our own personal healing, as very important as that is, but looking outwards into the world and asking, how can these experiences lead to a sense of deeper leadership in people, deeper showing up in the community? I know you've talked about that a lot. We've talked about it together a lot. What are your thoughts on that? What's the role that psychedelics might be able to play in helping us show up in the world, in our communities in a different way?

Natasja Pelgrom

This is something for me, it's the part of my why. Part of my why is, can we, as a Western society, or where we are, find the relationship between the interconnectedness, the unseen, the sensitive, the Gaia principles, and the nature relationship? A lot of what we see today in terms of leadership skills, and people that are in leadership or executive positions, they need to have such a broad skill set.

One of the things we know from research, and anybody interested in psychedelics, maybe this is your first time tuning into any of this, but most probably have read something, is that the cultivation of creativity, adaptability, and... Are one of the... Just to name a very few. Those are the things that are really cultivated in a psychedelic space because there is a dissolution between the boundaries of the mind.

You really can have, for example, an understanding of your own behaviors. You can also have an understanding of things that have impacted you and why they have impacted you. The relationship between question and answer is very different and is cultivated.

I think in especially this is, I feel, why it's important to have a multiple-day process, and more of a method in a program, than just a singular experience to really help you understand in a process of meaning-making while holding that lightly.

But this is where that leadership aspect of openness, curiosity, and self-compassion, which are words that have been overused, and we're overtired with them. There are trendy hashtags like self-care is such a trendy hashtag. But what does that really mean in the psychedelic space?

There is a very condensed amount of time in a ceremonial or therapeutic setting with the compound, that you have the capacity to learn a lot. But it doesn't mean that suddenly you don't have to apply it anymore. This is where that goes.

You will get exposed to all these learnings, and then there is a question, can you then apply it? This is where integration comes back in, which is really, really important. I'm really happy that there is so much out there on integration.

But this is where the leadership aspect and taking that responsibility. Over the years, I've seen specific cycles, there is a natural cycle with people, and I don't mean a linear month or yearly process. For everybody that's slightly different. But I've had clients work with us in a personal one-to-one private work with myself and coming to retreat containers. There is this arc of transformation.

[00:35:57] Natasja Pelgrom

One of the things that excites me is really mapping out, connecting the dots, and seeing patterns. One of the things that I've seen is there is a rite of passage process. The most famous one that probably everybody knows is Joseph Campbell, The Hero's Journey, or The Heroine's Journey, which was written by one of his students.

There is this rite of passage process that takes place. Through that process, there comes a time naturally into the psyche of the individual where the I moves into we. Sometimes there are little glimpses in their first-time experience, and sometimes there's a real big calling at some stage. I think that that is something that is very untouched.

I applaud every researcher who is now working on severe mental health and bringing this into this space as a solution. Then I also call in those that are curious to research deeper, can we find new blueprints? Can we find ways where we use this creativity for behavioral and systems change? Because I've seen people receive insights and blueprints out of that space. Can we create frameworks where there is a way to then maybe experiment with that blueprint if it works?

Would there be, I know everything comes around to funding at the end, and then IP-owned. We still live in that world. That's where that leadership aspect, where that curiosity from you by witnessing so many people, and going through different types of these awakening, or remembering, or capacity to flourish innovation, decision making, and a cultivating of integrity, humility.

Those things are cornerstones of that leadership that moves into stewardship, which is the ultimate word for me, which goes beyond leadership, which speaks about more legacy. This is what plant medicines... If you work with it in the container that we mentioned, you have the capacity. Like I said, it doesn't mean that by doing psychedelics, you're still not going to be a narcissist. Or you're going to be healed from all of those things. There is just hope.

However the pillars of stewardship are around integrity, humility, interconnect, relationship, understanding the interconnectedness, and the personal responsibility into that. Compassion is a really important one. Courage and resilience are important ones. These things are things that you can really cultivate in that space, especially with helping people with specific types of frameworks.

In terms of the integration process, one of the things that we've done in our retreats is part of the integration is we always go into mind, body, now let's call it spirit, and emotions. Then the fifth part where we help people integrate is like, Okay, how can you bring now something back into your own community? We always plant a seed for, Okay, now back into... How do we do that?

Even in the smallest sense, even if someone is watching this and is providing one-to-one facilitation in really small containers, there is an invitation for you to invite people to go broader and to impact that back. Maybe it's starting a little community garden, and that can already have such an impact in an environment.

[00:39:53] Natasja Pelgrom

It's understanding stewardship and leadership, and especially when it comes to knowing that leaders are at this moment. Then again, I feel that everybody is a leader, it doesn't mean you are a business owner. But the direction of our society, and organizations, and communities where it's going to have that effective leadership knowledge and to bring in positive change, you really need to start seeing that there is a complexity and that there are generational gaps becoming more and more.

I know I said, that a lot of the people that I consult and mentor are executive leaders from a specific generation and are challenged by a new generation, on how to bring problem-solving, and how to build relationships. There are so many still untapped things that we could explore. I could go on and on, but I'll leave it at that.

Alexander Beiner

That's fantastic. It reminds me of this piece of research that my friend John Vervaeke, a cognitive scientist, he mentioned once in a talk, which stuck with me, where he said, "The biggest indicator, or one of the biggest indicators of fulfillment and happiness in life comes from the question, what do you want to continue after you die? That's meaning. And what are you doing right now to contribute towards that?"

If you people say this thing and I'm doing this, that indicates a sense of fulfillment and happiness. If the answer is nothing, and I don't know, that generally correlates with feeling unfulfilled, and unhappy. So the point of this work isn't about our own personal gratification of just healing ourselves continuously because you can keep healing yourself forever. It's about healing up to a point, I think, and then applying that into the world. And that's what the world needs, all of us doing that to some degree.

Natasja, this was fantastic, as always. I'm very grateful that you've taken the time for this, so thanks for joining us.

Natasja Pelgrom

Thank you.