



MIND & LIFE

Mind & Life Podcast Transcript

Rhonda Magee – Mindfulness, Interconnection, and Justice

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Opening Quote – Rhonda Magee (00:00:04): *This notion that we have that we are these atomized, isolated, individuated beings is part of the kind of illusion that we carry. I mean we are always, already embedded in a social context. We always have been. So the idea of our radical separateness is really called into question by, I think any serious engagement with mindfulness. And therefore we are called to act in response to our embeddedness in the world.*

Intro – Wendy Hasenkamp (00:00:45): Welcome to Mind & Life. I'm Wendy Hasenkamp. Today I'm speaking with law professor, author, and mindfulness teacher, Rhonda Magee. Rhonda's work has focused on bringing contemplative approaches into both the practice of law as well as the fight for racial justice. I spoke with Rhonda this past spring and as I've engaged with this material, I'm really struck by how her work is all rooted in the truth of our interconnection. I love how this theme keeps showing up in different ways across these episodes.

(00:01:19) As usual, our conversation covers a lot of topics. She begins with her own path to contemplative practice from roots in the American South. Then we discuss her thoughts on the role of mindfulness in racial justice work. And related to that, she reflects on how we can balance equanimity with really wanting a certain outcome. Rhonda then discusses her work using contemplative approaches in law, and we get into challenging what's known as the adversarial model in law—this idea that there's one winner and one loser. We talk about balancing individual rights with the reality of a connected whole, and also restorative justice and something called collaborative divorce. We then get into a discussion of how racism harms us all, including those in the dominant group, like white folks. And we also talk about the role of the body in all of this—how bias, fear, and also safety show up in the body, and how dominator culture cuts us off from our bodies. She also touches on ideas like racial capitalism, ColorInsight vs. color blindness, and the joy that comes from embracing our shared humanity.

(00:02:35) I think these ideas are so valuable and really important to engage with, particularly in this cultural moment, when as Rhonda says, there's some new way of being human that's wanting to be born. I also love how this conversation offers yet another lens on the way that working with our own minds can change our lives and our world. If you'd like to learn more about Rhonda's work, you can find resources in the show notes, as well as a link to her recent book, *The Inner Work of Racial Justice*. OK, I hope you enjoy this conversation as much as I did. It's my pleasure to share with you Rhonda Magee.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:03:16): Well I'm here with Rhonda Magee. Rhonda, welcome and thank you so much for joining us today.

Rhonda Magee (00:03:21): Thank you, Wendy, it's good to be with you.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:03:23): So, I'd love to start with a little bit of your personal background. I've heard you speak a number of times about your experiences growing up in the American South and how that's shaped the trajectory of your work. Can you share a little bit of that, for context?

Rhonda Magee (00:03:38): Yeah, I was born in a town called Kinston, North Carolina, and I was born in 1967. I'll just go ahead and out that year, so many years ago. [laughter] But I think it's important to just name that, as we think about the arc of time that I've been working with. And 1967 of course was a really important year of the civil rights movement, the last year of Martin Luther King's life here on this earth. And for me, my family wasn't very involved—was not involved at all actually, in any conscious way that I knew—in all of that, because they were very poor-to-working class, and just trying to survive and make ends meet, as we would say. But where we were in North Carolina was very clearly a part of that American Southern, frankly racist and patriarchal, like that... The embedded hierarchies were very, very strong, and the legacies of that were very strong.

(00:04:46) So my grandmother, who participated in my upbringing quite a bit, had been born in 1906. So by the time I came along and was a young girl, she was an elder. But she was still leaving the house every day to work in the home of a white family across town. As I have said more than once, once you have your own house you realize no one actually needs someone to come 9:00 to 5:00 for house-cleaning, so to speak. So just the way in which she was working in that home across town was again, this kind of continuation of some of the patterns of economic and social exploitation that are associated with the legacies of white supremacy in the context of the United States.

(00:05:41) And yet, my grandmother grew up in a very traditional Black southern Christian tradition. So she had been called to the ministry, and had found her own voice as a teacher, interestingly. And certainly [was] a kind of community pastor, someone who was there to help support others. So as a little girl, I witnessed her getting up every day before dawn, and engaging in a very disciplined practice of centering prayer, and her own study and reflection, contemplation on scripture. And for her, that was the ground of support that she leaned into to then be able to go out and do this very difficult work in the world, where she wasn't necessarily recognized as valuable. But she had this practice and this way of grounding herself in her own value, worth, purpose, values, and letting that support her through her day.

(00:06:53) So even though I was quite young watching her, I think that influenced me because I was able to, later in my own life—when I, having had this different trajectory, this opportunity to go to school and to study, and go to law school and graduate school and do all these things that were denied people as recently as my own mother's generation—I nevertheless found myself in need of some kind of grounding practice and that image of my grandmother I think was still with me. And so that actually was, I think, a very important entrée for me to opening to this idea of a regular centering... for me what came to be a mindfulness-based practice. But I had that image of my grandmother as a way of knowing what might be of benefit to me, even though our lives were very different, when the time came for me to search for additional support.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:07:59): That's great. So that's the beginning of your contemplative path and interest. Can you draw that line a little further into how you became exposed to Buddhist ideas and more interested in the Buddhist traditions?

Rhonda Magee (00:08:13): Yeah, so very early on, my family moved from North Carolina to Virginia. Then I spent many many years in Virginia, and went to university there. And after graduating from law school and moving out to San Francisco, I, like so many young people starting out with new job, a new apartment, a new city, there's a lot of "new" happening. Plus I'd just taken the bar and just been going through so much in the way of preparation for this new life. And I really felt both excited and ready to start this new career in this new place, but also a little bit overwhelmed and a little bit aware that I had been over-formed for constant busyness. And I learned this really clearly because after taking the bar exam, when a lot of folks, especially those who have extra resources, will go on a post-bar trip or do something to relax in preparation, maybe give themselves three or four weeks, or a month or so off before they start their job. I had that time, because my job wasn't due to start for a couple of months; I didn't have the resources, and I was just in my apartment out here in California, like antsy to do something. Unable to rest, relax.

(00:09:37) So I started exploring meditation. My partner at the time (still partner), his family heritage is Indian, from the Indian subcontinent. So there was a book on our bookshelves that I took down that belonged to him, and it was called *The Bhagavad Gita for Daily Living*. So it was clearly an Indian heritage introduction for me that I read about, and found the description of meditation in that to be very evocative and inviting. And so I ended up like many people may do, trying to experiment on my own using the book, and that began a long journey of experimenting in different ways and checking out different communities. And it eventually led to me seeing a way of integrating this with my work as a law professor. Because I was at the same time exploring contemplative approaches to law, and frankly even spiritual approaches to law. And I found this organization called... well it became an organization, but it was a sitting group of law professors who were also interested in the same things. It became this organization called The Project for Integrating Spirituality, Law, and Politics. And this one particular scholar-teacher, Peter Gable, was really influential in helping establish that little node of scholars and folks. And I would meet with them once a month. We'd be reading something and talking... you know how these things are.

(00:11:17) And it became clear to me, and to all of us, that I was one of the ones in that group who kept wanting to integrate actual practice, not just talk about it. Not just the scholarly analysis of what this might do to expand our thinking about law and policy and politics, but I wanted to practice. And so, someone hearing me in that group said, "I think you might want to join the sitting lawyers." And I didn't know at that time that there was a group of meditating lawyers who were actually, it turns out, being supported and held and guided with resources through The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society. So this was a group of lawyers, a couple law professors, a judge or two, based here in the Bay Area. And the lead teacher was Norman Fischer, former abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center, he runs now this project called Everyday Zen, he's a prolific writer. And so Norman was then and still is holding this community of no more than maybe 12 of us at a time, all these years. I started sitting with them in 2004 or '05 or so. And that was when I really had a community of practice focused on Buddhist teachings, to really allow me to then settle into that particular modality. And that really led to the commitment I have to being really a lifelong student of the teachings of the Buddha, and the practices that Buddhist practitioners and communities over the millennia have lovingly experimented with, shared, drawn on, and offered. So I feel very fortunate to now feel myself part of this tradition of Buddhist practitioner-teacher-scholars.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:13:20): Wow yeah, that's awesome. I want to come back in a little bit to the way that you've integrated contemplative practice into your law work. But first maybe we can speak a bit more broadly. You've done a lot of your work around integrating mindfulness with racial justice and equity work. And I feel like, maybe over the last 10 years, as mindfulness has really become popularized in the States, certainly in western society in general, it's been often criticized as kind of this navel-gazing, self-focused opium of the elite, just for privileged folks. So we hear these critiques, and in many ways those are valid. But I feel like your work really brings this into a much more engaged space, and there's a whole movement known as engaged buddhism bringing this work more into real-world impact. So can you share how the practice of mindfulness can help in the struggle for racial justice?

Rhonda Magee (00:14:23): Yeah. Well it's a big topic. And yes I can certainly share some of the ways I think about that. I think, first of all, you allude to the criticism that we often hear about mindfulness being overly centered on the individual, and not perhaps as often presented as a support for our engagement in the world, our social engagement, and frankly the dynamics around power, and the abuses of power that lead to what those of us in social justice work sometimes call surplus suffering, right? The extra suffering which anyone of us might experience because of our mental habits and patterns, but the actual kind of physical material deprivations, exploitations, oppressions that flow from the way we've organized our societies, our communities, institutions in them.

(00:15:23) So I think part of it is just recognizing the ways that mindfulness in actual practice and fact, and apparently according to early Buddhist scholars, in actual early teachings, has always been about not just inner experience and building our own capacities, know our own minds, and habits and patterns, and to be more skillful in terms of how we act in the world as a result of that. But really that mindfulness has always been about external mindfulness as well. So not just the internal, but the external. Like, what actually might I be more aware of in my external environment as a result of these practices?

(00:16:13) So this inner-to-outer mindfulness piece is something that I think we, in the West, haven't as often as we might, or to the degree that I think we should, frankly, highlighted. We have tended to, as we do, package mindfulness in a very salable way, which is, it can be your individual ticket to clarity of thought, productivity and on, and on, and on.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:16:44): Well-being and happiness...

Rhonda Magee (00:16:46): Exactly, right? And it's not that it doesn't have those possible benefits. It's just that that isn't hardly, in my view, sufficient to really describe what mindfulness, at its origin and in fact in actual practice, may deliver us to. To me, mindfulness really is about how we relate to all aspects of our life. And of course this notion that we have that we are these atomized, isolated, individuated beings is part of the illusion that we carry. I mean, we are always already embedded in a social context. We always have been. We will be until we shuffle off our mortal coil and enter a different realm, so to speak. And even then, we're going to be a part of this environment and this natural world. So the idea of our radical separateness as hard-bounded, skin-bounded individuals and egos, is really called into question by I think any serious engagement with mindfulness.

(00:18:13) Therefore, we are called to more deeply know and act in response to our embeddedness in the world. And that necessarily includes all of the different ways that, from this fallacy of the hard-bounded individual self, we create notions of certain other hard-bounded selves that are more valuable

than others, and create patterns and practices and institutions through which resources are distributed or mal-distributed, right, unevenly distributed, including the resources simply to survive and thrive. And for me, the ethics of the practices of mindfulness are central to what it is that this is all about. So in a nutshell, seeking to minimize harm, starting with myself, but not only for myself, invites this inquiry. Okay, well how might my own particular way of being in the world show me something about surplus suffering? Suffering that's being, again, unevenly distributed in my time, that I might have some responsibility to help alleviate. And if I'm able, to whatever degree I can do that, perhaps also there might be an opportunity to help others do that work of becoming more aware of this surplus suffering, and becoming more aware of our potential ethical responsibilities with regard to that.

[\(00:20:13\)](#) So yeah, to me, this racial aspect of that is just one aspect of many different ways we could be looking at identity-based harm, the harm that flows from all of the different ways that we embed these notions of meaning, and value, and purpose, based on how we look, what is made in our time and place of our heritage, our lineage, our people, and their value in culture. And so this is all very context specific of course. And in the United States we have, as I've alluded to, this history of a particular kind of racialized way of thinking about human value, and it goes very, very, very, very deep. And really understanding how it might be showing up, how it might be getting in the way of some good we might be able to do in the world... It's been a part of my own experience, frankly. And again, because I feel that mindfulness really is inviting us to start where we are, to start with our own experience and to try to understand that just a little bit better... with humility, because it's so easy to be in a trap of our own creation about what we think we know and who we think we are. And so to just wake up from that continuously is its own challenge. And for me, given my embodiments, it's invited me to reflect on—well, what is this thing called race that is often meeting me in the world? As I walk through the world embodied in brown skin and with these features that are associated with blackness, but also in a cisgender female body, so the intersection of race and gender is very real in my own experience.

[\(00:22:21\)](#) All of these factors and the access to economic opportunities that I've had a chance to experience in my own lifetime, and the arc of that, going from being basically in an impoverished community as a child to now, having a certain amount of wealth and opportunity in the United States as a result of a lot of different things, my education, and so on and so forth. But the bottom line is for me, this reflecting on, not just what's happening... the way in which my mind might be attaching or pushing things away or staying in a fog of unknowing, you know the three poisons, but how that is reinforced and engaged by my social context. What are the things to which I'm drawn to attach, or the things that I'm drawn and invited and many rewarded for, pushing away? What is that reward system actually feel like in the body? All of those aspects of my lived experience are to me present and available for deeper understanding through mindfulness practice.

[\(00:23:40\)](#) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:24:11\)](#): A lot of what you were just saying around these ideas of Buddhist perspectives on attachment, moving away from attachment, and self as a construct, and the reality of ourselves being more fluid, and identity and all these things... I'm wondering how you personally work with that in the context of the fight for social justice or racial justice or equity. It feels like it could be very easy to become attached to a particular outcome, or have that motivation, and there's a lot in it that's about identity and how that shows up in the world. So how do you play with those, the fluidity of that and the reality of that?

Rhonda Magee (00:24:56): Yeah, it's a good question. Well I mean to me, this question of what is equity, and what is justice, and being open to deep inquiry around that and not getting stuck—that's one of the teachings of the Buddha that stays with me. How do you cross that flood of the river of our experiences? By not getting stuck, right? So noticing the way in which I might be tempted to have a fixed notion of what equity looks like, what justice looks like, and knowing I will have my ideas about that, but then holding them a little bit more lightly if I can, which is I think one of the ultimate teachings of our practice in how we move through the world. Whatever it is that we're encountering, it is this, it's like this, and what else is here?

(00:26:02) So being able then... and this I think is very much about not just taking the traditional or the contemporary or the leading thinking about social justice and just overlaying it into Buddhism... it's not that, for me anyway. It's about being in inquiry with all of these things, right? So what is called for in terms of equity and justice and identity-based reckoning? And how do we continue to stay with that question with honor and respect and integrity, and maybe some love, and compassion and humility? All of the different ways that we might put words around "the way" of mindfulness—what it means to walk through the world with a commitment to waking up.

(00:27:09) One of the terms that comes up or one of the terms that's coming up for me right now is equanimity, which of course is identified in the teachings as one of the noble abodes that we might find ourselves inhabiting as a result of our mindfulness practices—along with compassion, sympathetic joy, empathy, all of these, loving kindness—these core ways that the practices orient ourselves to dealing with difficulty. That the practices support us in being oriented to move through the world, where there will be suffering, despite all our best intentions. And worse, there might be suffering that we are causing in some sense, that our actions are responsible for in some sense.

(00:28:06) So being able to kind of, both discern as best we can what kind of action we think might alleviate suffering, but to then, as we seek to deploy that or enact that or invite folks to embark on that, to recognize that we don't have the whole story. And so we are going to be learning as we go, and we will never have the whole story. We will never have the whole cloth to work with. So there's just some way in which for me, the invitation is to have that courageous will to try to discern how we together might alleviate suffering and to try to take some action with those intentions, but then to be open to reading what has been the impact and beginning again. To try again. Maybe, "All right, I tried that, it didn't work as well as I thought," or, "This policy is having this unintended consequence." Let us take that in, pause, see what we can learn from that, and try again. And that to me is where that equanimity piece comes in.

(00:29:31) But it is, it's a different way of engaging in these practices aimed at making the world a little bit better place. It's certainly not the traditional way that the adversarial model that I was raised up in, in law (and that I am sometimes responsible for teaching in law), was meant to help us work with... which is why I was drawn to this contemplative way of being in law. Because I could see that the adversarial model, where there's always a winner and a loser, wasn't always working out so well for us as humankind. And not only that, but embedded in the adversarial model was this deep reinforcement of the idea of the isolated, atomized, hyper-individual with rights that you can't tread on, and all of that. Which is a beautiful legacy of the Enlightenment period. I'm glad we got all of that straight, and the notion of human rights is important. But today, real questions have emerged about some of the, again, unintended consequences of hyper-individuated notions of rights and responsibilities and how we do justice in light of all of that.

(00:30:58) And that's where the contemplative approach to law comes in. It's wanting to understand, and be in the space of the "this and that" of rights-based discourse. Because on the one hand, thank goodness we have this discourse to be able to help us articulate frameworks for human rights, and a floor below which we don't want to fall in terms of how we treat each other, how we treat immigrants, all of that. And at the same time to be able to say, and there is this unintended consequence of alienation from our fellow human beings, in so far as we have constructed this idea of this individual packed with a bundle of rights, so to speak, but doesn't really recognize the sort of porousness, the way we inter-are, to use the language of Thich Nhat Hanh, interbeing space in which the individual rights discourse doesn't apprehend that second-person dynamic of the "we" rights. The rights-based discourse doesn't apprehend that. It's very much about the individual, right? And that has an alienating effect on, not just on us from each other, but on us from our full selves, including our spiritual self. And so that part, being in a place of like, "Woo, law does that, but it also does this other thing." That's where my work in contemplative law has been.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:32:30): That's fascinating. I hadn't heard that term, of the adversarial model, since I'm not trained in law, but it makes a lot of sense. And I feel like it's really writ large in our society—probably all the time, but certainly it feels like right now, it's either us or them, and one wins and one loses, and that's it.

Rhonda Magee (00:32:49): Exactly. Right, it's a battle. These are wars, right?

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:32:51): Yeah, exactly. The cultural wars, yeah.

Rhonda Magee (00:32:54): Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:32:55): So, do you have an example of how you're bringing a contemplative approach into law to push back against that individual atomization, as you were saying?

Rhonda Magee (00:33:07): Well, there are folks, I'm not certainly even one of the major exponents of this, but I certainly am a fellow traveler of the restorative justice movement, which is one of those ways that we in law, who are trying to explore a different way, have thought about some of these unintended or deleterious consequences of this adversarial model, and hyper-individualized approach to the subject and object of law, frankly. When we worry about that, some of us have seen a restorative justice approach—this approach that says it's not me versus you, but it is about recognizing that me and you are part of a community, and injury that we tend to think of as some harm that I suffered as a result of something you did, this hyper-personalized approach, might also be seen as an injury to that whole. And of course, this is how... the criminal justice system has a little bit of this already embedded in, like the prosecutors representing "the state" so to speak, but it's still embedded in... It's the prosecutor taking on this one person and trying to hold this one person responsible for harm done to another, on behalf of the state.

(00:34:29) But restorative justice depends that by saying, really what we'd like to enact are places and spaces where we can respond to injury. And injury... first of all conceptualize it as an injury to that preexisting whole community. And the goal then is not to punish, and to hold this one individual accountable, as much as it is to, well, acknowledge and hold the person accountable in a way that repairs the community. It keeps us coming back to thinking about our always being embedded in a network of relationships. In a certain sense, I think implicit in that is this idea that we have interconnected degrees and relationships of responsibility, such that this idea of hyper-individualized

causation and fault need to be massaged. We need to recognize that when harm happens, yes, there are individuals who might be responsible. Individual agency is real, and we need to take those kinds of responsibilities, and act as agents in ways that make manifest that we can do, and we can do better. And to recognize that the options that we have are often shaped, formed, deformed by the context that we're in, by policies that we've contributed to, consciously or not, by voting, all of that.

[\(00:36:12\)](#) So really, I think restorative justice approaches generally speaking, and the philosophy behind them, exemplify a way that folks are trying to move law, or upend the kind of deep commitment and deep embeddedness in this adversarialness. And so restorative justice... Other forms of alternative dispute resolution, whether it be mediation—there's approaches called understanding-based mediation, where the goal is really to try to understand really what the harm felt like or was like for the various parties who feel aggrieved and to try, from that place of understanding to come up with, if not a totally win-win solution, a solution that minimizes and perhaps obviates, to some degree, this idea that there's just one winner and one loser. But instead that we can together come up with a result that works better.

[\(00:37:12\)](#) And I can say from my own personal experience, I happen to have experienced, like many, many people, a love relationship and a marriage that didn't succeed, in my past, and I ended up going through a divorce that was structured in this way, that we call collaborative divorce. And so even ending relationships that have been recognized by law through marriage and all these contractual and other responsibilities, to end that and dissolve that in a way that, again, doesn't make the other person the enemy, doesn't make it about how I can get the most out of that person as a part of the divorce settlement. But instead is about trying to collaborate, to end this relationship that didn't work, but in a way that recognizes you're still a respectful human being and I don't wish you ill. So there's a movement towards conscious and collaborative divorcing. So there are ways that folks like me in law have been trying from within to make some change.

[\(00:38:23\)](#) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:38:44\)](#): So this is kind of making me think of your definition of racial justice, it seems related. You've defined it as "love in action for the alleviation of racism and its harms against us all." So again, I feel like this speaks to that it's not an impact on just one individual. It's absolutely a collective experience. So can you say a little more about the harms that racism has caused against all parts of society? I feel like, for white folks especially, historically I think it was probably pretty common to not see racism as a problem for white people, because it wasn't directly impacting them (theoretically).

Rhonda Magee [\(00:39:27\)](#): Exactly.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:39:28\)](#): Yeah, can you share more on that?

Rhonda Magee [\(00:39:30\)](#): Yeah, and thank you for raising this up. This is at the heart, really, of the insights that have been coming up for me as I've explored racism and injustice through this contemplative lens. It's interesting to me to see how other people, whether they speak to contemplation as the lens they use or not, are coming to similar conclusions. Heather McGhee for example, her book—that's really right now in the United States making quite a stir and getting people to think differently perhaps about racial injustice—the book is called *The Sum of Us*. And the basic theme of that is what we're talking about here, which is racism actually injures all of us. And if we can

understand that better perhaps, we might be able to live our way into more solidarity across these lines, what I call lines of real and perceived difference. Because a lot of the differences between us are more perceptual than real. But there are some real differences that need to be taken into consideration.

[\(00:40:41\)](#) But there are, to get back to the core of your question, how exactly does racism harm us all. Again, I think that is something we should all just invite ourselves to think about. In the United States, we should and we might see so many ways that the recent rise in the appeals to racism and to white nationalism, how that has been used successfully to divide the population, to reinforce narratives of fear and grievance based on this idea and ideology of race and racism, that have gotten in the way of so many good things that we could have. And this is again part of how we think about it—all of the good things that we, as a society, deserve. You name it. From healthcare, to a fairer tax system, to better education for all our children in all our communities, at the public level that we're already paying for through our taxes. There are so many ways that, because we are very predisposed to think about "my" kids deserving a certain something that may be different from so called "your" kids or "their" kids... There are so many ways that we've embedded these narratives of the undeserving among us. That it gets in the way of us doing right by each other, and coming up with more effective policies.

[\(00:42:26\)](#) So we've got a criminal justice system that kind of run amok. That makes actually anyone of us more vulnerable to violence and to criminalization than anyone of us should be in this great country at this time. But it has very much been steeped in that deep history of dehumanizing racism. And we've all been coarsened because we've normalized dehumanizing racism in our culture. You can't not be affected by a culture which in many, many ways suggests vast segments of the population—by virtue of the way their bodies were colored at birth—kind of don't matter as much. And that's it's okay to pull the gun more quickly on these people, and shoot these people, or keep the knee on the neck of these people longer. It can't help but then make all of us, because we're all humans and if you can see that done to one human being, it can be done to another. So the idea that race—whiteness and lightness, which is the hierarchy we deal with the US (or whatever your identity-based privilege system, wherever you are)—the idea that that social identity will save you from all of the disadvantages that the other is suffering, is largely myth, but it's a powerful one.

[\(00:44:04\)](#) And I say it's largely myth, because if you search you will find, as I have done and found, examples of, for example white men who have been suffocated by police, right? Impoverished people of all backgrounds facing inadequate healthcare and economic ruin and climate distress. Of all backgrounds. But that narrative of racism makes it hard for us to make common cause. And to address climate change, and to address healthcare for all, and to minimize weapons in our lifetime, and the vulnerability we are all facing in the United States to gun violence. Because we've got a narrative of there's that other that we all have to be afraid of, and so therefore we all need the guns...

[\(00:44:53\)](#) So there's just countless ways if we think about it, that racism really makes all of us more vulnerable, yet we are tempted to take the bait. And I say "we"—those who are privileged, those who are either white or have affinities to whiteness, and are associated with whiteness, because it's not only white people who get privileges under the system of preferences for whites. It's whites and those with affinities that make us in some sense available to be treated almost like whites. So it's complicated. And that is something we need to recognize as well, that gets underappreciated in the dominant narratives about racial justice, and how to do racial equity. It's not as simple as: white bodies are privileged and everybody else is disadvantaged. That's where I think contemplation can help us understand and unpack how this is operating. And I think we need that extra level of spacious contemplation for these times, because it's so much more complicated than is obvious.

(00:46:09) But if you just stop and realize, it's so obvious that those who are racially privileged in whatever way are tempted to take the bait of, "If I just don't make too many waves, my people will be okay," which doesn't really ever protect us. Look at January 6th. You can't find for example, in the United States—this is all US centered, so apologies to those who are not in the US—but on January 6th, we had basically a race riot, the data is telling us, at the Capitol. Many of the people who were there were racially aggrieved and they were feeling that... The studies are now showing us the complaint that unified more the people there was not that they were impoverished, they were mostly middle class or upper class white racialized people living in communities that were suffering demographic changes, and leaving folks leaving that they might be somehow displaced. Right? And so that led to all of us being vulnerable to our Capitol being overrun. And that led to our Vice President, Mr. Pence at the time, Vice President at the time, who could hardly (if I may say) be whiter, being vulnerable to being lynched! Right?

(00:47:30) So really it's a false support, these ideas of identity-based privilege, in a context which is privileging some and not others. And certainly, if you look at how it's playing out in the United States, and I would suggest and invite those who are in other contexts and cultures to look at this, because the sociologists—and I studied sociology before going to law school—part of my work leans into the sociological insight that wherever we are around the globe, these tendencies to identify bodies and rank order them, put us in different groups and rank order, is pervasive. Certainly we do it around age and gender almost across all societies. What we make of different ages, old and young, who's privileged and who isn't, what we make of the gender difference, who's privileged and who isn't, may vary a little. But again we do this identity-based hierarchy... making of hierarchies of value across societies, and then there's often an open set. In the US it's race; we've created this thing called race, and it's not only in the US. But other places it may be more associated with immigration status, or it may be more associated with religion, or it may be more associated with any number of different ways that each culture comes up with those markers of value.

(00:49:06) And so the question really, for any of us wherever we are, is to really wake up to some of the false consciousness that's created by these deeply embedded, deeply trained in us, hierarchies of value based on the bodies that we're in. And to see, if we're willing to see it, we can see it. We're getting quite a teaching on that in the culture of the United States right now, and it's a teaching that's out there for all of us to see, if we're willing to see the harm and the vulnerability that we're all now facing. We're all more afraid. This entire country is more destabilized. We could all be victim of a new civil war, because of the rise and the rhetoric around the threat to the white majority. Which, if you look at the data, you'll see that whites continue to be fairly comfortable here, predominating on all levels—income, wealth, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So it's a false consciousness. And yet, it's just really, really real in its consequences, and that's what we're up against.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:50:20): Yeah. I wonder if you could share, some of this was woven into what you just were describing, but I know you've done a lot of focus on embodied mindfulness and really working with the body, also around racial trauma. Could you share your perspective on the role of the body and how this all shows up, and the importance of working with the body?

Rhonda Magee (00:50:43): Yeah, and I'd invite you to reflect on this with me, if you're willing, my dear.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:50:46): Yeah.

Rhonda Magee (00:50:47): Just these things that we're talking about, ideas of race and deeply embedded notions, because of the fact that we are these soft biological beings, how they impact us is again, not only just cognitive or social in a certain sense, only to show up in the way in which we interact with each other. But if we're willing to reflect on it, we will see that these imprints, these stories, these ideas of whom to fear, like who we can fear, around whom we're safe, they impact us. In certain neighborhoods we might feel ourselves, "Ah, relaxing," because we have the sense that we're around people who are more like us. Or in certain other neighborhoods, we feel a little bit more like, maybe we should be looking over our shoulder, because it happens to be populated by a different kind of diversity.

(00:51:51) And again, the inquiry piece is, let's look into our own experience. What do we know in our own bodies about this? What do we know in our own bodies about what happens when somebody from a background that, through some way, obvious or not obvious, we've been trained to fear? It could be someone wearing a burka, which in the United States right now, since 9/11 if not before certainly, we've gradually increased the way in which we have been trained to think about folks from the Middle East through narratives of fear and potential terrorism, and all of that. So much so, that now when folks encounter folks who are covered in some way, whether they're wearing a hijab or a more full expression of that choice, that religious expression, often in our bodies, if we are willing to acknowledge it, some reactivity, some sensitivity, some quickening of breath.

(00:53:03) So being open to acknowledging, noticing and naming, "Oh this is what this feels like. This is what bias embedded in the body feels like." And to try and recognize that with as little shame as possible, because often these lessons we have about, against whom we should direct our fear and all of that, we didn't invite these lessons, right? We haven't invited these trainings. They just have been served up onto us. Often, constantly, very subtly, in movies, and this and that. So if we can create places and spaces where we can acknowledge these things, put the shame aside for long enough to say, "This is in me too." That can be a first step to doing what we can to disrupt the potential for those embodied trainings to shape how we are with each other.

(00:54:06) And I'm pausing as I say this, because I just want to underscore, the data seems to show, this is much, much harder than is advertised. It's really not that easy to go to a workshop or take an implicit bias test and be over this. Right? It's really hard, because it's really in the body. And you don't disrupt that, or disengage that simply by intending to do it. A lot of data has shown that.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:54:42): Yeah. It feels like a lot of it is about, like you said, being able to recognize those embodied states of fear that we've all been conditioned to feel. And then working really intentionally to create senses of safety in communities where safety can be felt in the body, right?

Rhonda Magee (00:55:01): Exactly.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:55:02): And then start to un-pattern that, yeah.

Rhonda Magee (00:55:05): Right, and that's a practice. So yes, I thank you for naming that. That it's creating places where you can feel that safety in the body. Yes, particular practices—in my own experience, and I hope that's been so for folks with whom I've worked, it seems to have been so for at least some of them—there are ways that we can practice together, that can give us that sense of dysregulated, down-regulation where we're feeling ourselves, feeling that anxiety, that fear, and because so much of what gives the power to racism and other forms of identity-based othering, is some often under-appreciated, under-acknowledged manipulation of fear.

[\(00:55:57\)](#) So much of it is traveling on fear. That if we can really invite and explore practices for meeting fear and anxiety... And explicitly looking at racialized fear, and racialized narratives that are meant to make us feel afraid and anxious, because that's really I think at the heart of what we're up against right now, and what we need to really be courageously responding to. Because as we don't, right here right now as we sit here, folks are constantly using the beautiful technologies, and the technologies we're using right now to connect are being used by others with a very different intention—to divide, to reinforce fear. And it's so effective, Wendy, that whereas some years ago it used to be, you had to be willing to go off somewhere in the forest and put on an outfit and do this and that. Now you can literally just be sitting right with your loved ones and being radicalized by sitting on your device. And it is happening. It is disrupting all of our neighborhoods. Even right here in San Francisco, there has been a clear rise in which the feeling of some of us in this community are afraid of others in this community, and nothing really has changed except the way in which we're getting fed these messages of fear. So it is real.

[\(00:57:29\)](#) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:57:29\)](#): Yeah. The other thing around that space of embodied experience in this area of race that you were speaking to earlier, is this coarsening, I think is the word you used—about how we kind of get hardened by being exposed to this.

Rhonda Magee [\(00:58:06\)](#): Yes.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:58:06\)](#): And I think that's something for me that, particularly this year as I've dug in a lot more to a lot of this work after George Floyd, and I thought I was an open compassionate person that was able to feel and sense the suffering of other people, and injustices... And just realizing how much I have been cut off from my body and these experiences of pain and especially my own complicity. And just the understanding and knowledge, and taking in of the information around the suffering and oppression injustices that are happening... I think that's also, at least speaking personally, been a real eye-opener about how much that is a part of whiteness and, going way back into European lineage, for a lot of reasons. But I think that's also has a major role to play in why white people haven't been able to see this, or take this in, in certain ways. So I hope that that is shifting now. It feels like there's a different level of awareness, at least in some communities these days. But I don't know what you think about that.

Rhonda Magee [\(00:59:29\)](#): Yeah, I thank you for naming that, and bringing us back to that. Because that coarsening, that numbing, that spacing out, that "it's not my problem," is a big part of, and again I sometimes use the phrase "dominator culture," because I think it's not only whiteness that does that. We're talking about race, so we're wanting to look at what whiteness does, but again remembering that not only white bodies get trained in whiteness.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(01:00:10\)](#): Right.

Rhonda Magee [\(01:00:10\)](#): It's really these patterns of domination that are the success culture of our time and place. And those of us who learn those patterns can be of many different types of bodies, frankly. And yeah, feeling like a winner in a dominator culture, the question is, what does that actually feel like? One aspect of that, at least in my own experience I think, is this invitation to not be vulnerable, to ever be vulnerable. Vulnerability is for somebody else. If I am succeeding, and if I am winning (on the

terms of this culture), then I don't have to feel. And we're getting the hyper-lesson on this right now, because even as you mentioned on the one hand, In this post-George Floyd killing reckoning era, we're looking at the way that whiteness is a real feature of this numbing, this distancing, this coarsening of our hearts to each other's suffering. At the same time in the same era, we've been witnessing the other training, which is never apologize. Never admit that you're responsible or might be a part of anybody else's problem, or even your own.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:01:40](#)): Right.

Rhonda Magee ([01:01:40](#)): Right? So that's to me what is so poignant about this time, is that we are immersed in a real battle for almost our souls, and this is more than just some political narrative about what's going on. We really are, because on the one hand, to the degree we want to feel more and empathize and have compassion, there's a ready narrative over here that that is what we should be defending against. How dare somebody make us feel anything? I think this is part of what those who are using this, what I think is an awful term, "social justice porn" is about, right? There's this way in which people recognize that we could care for each other more if we're willing to pause and reflect, and open our hearts. And there's a resistance to that.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:02:38](#)): Yeah.

Rhonda Magee ([01:02:40](#)): Right? But I do think that this contemplative inquiry around racial justice if we're willing to engage it. So I always invite, starting with, "Where are we? How open are we to this?" Notice the defendedness against being present to other's people's suffering. And the different ways that we navigate that inquiry. Like, "Okay, I'll be present to this kind of suffering, if you're grieving or if you're sick, but I don't want to hear about your racial suffering. I'll be present to some climate-related distress, but don't talk to me about intersectionality of race, sexism, and heteronormativity, or whatever, trans. I don't want to hear that." So I think just really seeing if we can open up to, if we're willing to engage in this. How willing are we, and to ask that question again, and again, and again. Because in my experience the walls can come up again very subtly, depending on... again, because we're constantly being retrained or re-invited, re-immersed in these narratives of dominator culture.

([01:04:03](#)) So it's hard. It's hard, and I think part of it is about subtle ways that we've gotten comfortable with the way of accumulation and patterns of exploitation that are associated with racial capitalism, we might call it, and some do call it out there.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:04:25](#)): Can you say more about that term?

Rhonda Magee ([01:04:27](#)): Yeah. So racial capitalism is meant to help us understand that, or just to be curious about, the way that race and racism has been such an important aspect of the development of accumulationist capitalism, wealth-building capitalism. From the days before slavery and enslavement, even going back as you were saying to days in Europe. Where do these notions of the Jewish character or all of these different ways that even amongst white racialized ethnics in Europe, in some measure, stories about each other have traveled with invitation to do business or not, or on what terms. So this idea that once we embed notions of differential hierarchy and worth, wherever we are, and then we overlay it with a market, that's a powerful, powerful combination.

([01:05:33](#)) And many, many fortunes have turned on that. And part of it is here today in the United States, it's still possible to make money off of racism, and to make political hay out of it, which is

associated with making money in this country. So it really is an ethical question. To me, we are called to choose very clearly, if we're going to live with a capitalist system, which is less regulated around some of these things, and it could be, then we have self-regulate. We have to be more aware of the way that racism might be one of the reasons why I might be getting a higher salary or he or she might be getting a higher salary than this other person. Sexism, all of these things.

[\(01:06:26\)](#) And we have to ask ourselves, what are we willing to do, and what kind of way are we willing to maybe give up some of the benefits, the unearned or ethically unjustifiable benefits, that flow from racial capitalism? Am I willing to say, "I don't need that. I don't want that," or "I want to disrupt that in these systematic ways." The ways to do that are not necessarily obvious or easy and they require us constantly tinkering with policy maybe, because I'm not speaking here about any revolution. It is about just saying, how do we want to live, how do we want to live more ethically, how do we want to, as best we can, disrupt some of the ways that unearned racial privilege is running through the markets that are determining the value of our homes, the value of our educations, the value of our... on and on and on. And it's a lot to try to turn toward, but it starts with waking up, in the ways that we've been talking about. Just noticing, how is it in me? And how might I need to keep some part of my commitment to studying and learning devoted to these things that I might not be being paid to study, how racism is showing up in contemporary society. But if I am concerned about inequity and injustice and racism... And if we're not concerned about it right now, I feel that we are missing an opportunity, a real opportunity at this time. Because it just feels like we are called to really wake up to the legacies of racism today. But it's a very individual call, and you and I both know, many of us can get by without doing this work.

[\(01:08:27\)](#) Yeah, and some of us have to do the work and will do it. So here we are, at least creating the space for all of us to think about, what's our personal commitment to doing our work and staying engaged, even though we know we'll be tempted to, maybe rewarded for, turning away from this work? Even though it'll be hard and it'll feel like we're not making progress. And I say all of this with so much humility. I know that it's possible that this is bigger than us, that the systems are so well oiled and they're going to keep on percolating long, that no matter how hard we try, our children's children, that generation... (I don't actually have children. People ask me this question, but I worry about our children, you know?) These generations to come, will they still be worrying about these issues? I really wish that we could predict that that wouldn't be so, but if history be any guide, it's really really hard for us to upend this, and this is why. It's because it's so persistent that we have to do what we can.

[\(01:09:37\)](#) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(01:09:37\)](#): I wanted to unpack a term that you use called ColorInsight. And I think you use it kind of juxtaposed to idea of color blindness, which I think for many decades was the idea or the goal that you just don't see color. We don't really talk about it and then those issues will go away, which has clearly not happened. So could you describe ColorInsight, what you mean by that and the difference, and the problems with color blindness?

Rhonda Magee [\(01:10:37\)](#): Yeah. Well yeah, I think you've alluded a little bit to the problems with color blindness. I would say, coming probably from a well-intended place in the wake of the reckoning with racism that we describe by the label the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s roughly and '70s a bit. In the wake of all of that, especially in the United States, many people believed that the best way to get beyond race would be to just not... If the problem before was that we took race into consideration and

we were organizing our lives and segregating the world in racist ways, then the solution must be to not take race into consideration. And then however we organize our lives, it won't be because of our racism.

[\(01:11:36\)](#) So I think... again, I understand at least some of the ways that it, for many, was founded on good intentions. And the problem of course is that even when we intend not to take race into consideration, owing to all the things that we've been talking about, the way that race is already baked in to so much. The way that we are being trained and reinforce the narratives around who matters and who doesn't constantly in our culture, in subtle and obvious and non-obvious ways, in stereotypes in the movies, and the particular way our local news talks about racialized bodies and crime. There are just constant, constant feeders to this idea that race matters.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(01:12:27\)](#): And this is also often under the umbrella of implicit bias, what you're describing, and how that gets set up in our minds.

Rhonda Magee [\(01:12:34\)](#): Exactly, right. So yeah, under that umbrella, the cognitive psychologists, social psychologists tell us, the brain is doing bias because bias works, in a certain sense. We are creating in other words, these schemas for categorizing reality in the world around us, and we have schemas for different types of bodies because that has mattered in our social world. We can't not have them. We're sort of, again, as I've alluded to before, being reinforced and rewarded and punished in obvious and non-obvious ways, for getting it, like getting who matters and who doesn't. And so we do that even when we don't intend to. Like we're, again, implicitly biased even when we're not intending to be. And so the research seems to confirm.

[\(01:13:24\)](#) So given the reality of race mattering, this failure to be able to acknowledge that, and to talk about it, and to try to figure out how to actually minimize its operation, which has been the consequence of color blindness... Color blindness has said, all of that is a problem, so we just can't talk about it. Therefore we can't talk about when it is showing up, when we are being biased. If you do, you're the problem. So many of us looking at the data on that, the data that revealed that even those who intend and say they're not biased, act in ways that reflect bias through various measures and research findings that's been replicated again and again, and again. That called forth—that plus our own lived experience, right? We've all witnessed folks saying, "I'm not biased," and doing things that seem to reflect it.

[\(01:14:27\)](#) So I think my own awareness practices have invited me to really look how we might turn toward, rather than away from, racial information, and the indications that something racial is happening, and develop more capacity to understand that. Develop that capacity that we all have to know more about the dynamics of race in our own life, bodies, experiences, communities, relationships. And from that place of having that courageous will to engage and will to know, then develop that ability to work across our different experiences—mine in my body, yours in yours. But working together, having some interpersonal commitment around this, because so much of the data show we need each other to really see the places where we can't see around all of this.

[\(01:15:34\)](#) And then finally, the fourth piece for me is, from that place of strengthening our will to see, to know, to interact in ways that unpack even more, then from all of that, to really engage in whatever efforts we might engage in together to change the world. To minimize the likelihood that next year's interactions that you and I have will be filled with just the same content. Maybe there will be new content around race and racism, because it keeps coming. But at least we'll be really working with it,

and deepening our ability. And I'm just pointing toward things like that when I use the world ColorInsight, because it is just a term.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:16:26](#)): Yeah. Thank you. Well as we wrap up, I'm wondering whether you have any, kind of stepping back from all of your work and experiences, any big picture take homes for our listeners, from your perspective.

Rhonda Magee ([01:16:43](#)): Well I think that the only one other thing I would just say, because I don't think we talked about it enough, is how much in my own experience... You know, we've kind of been sold this bill of goods that suggests that somehow we're protected by staying in our lane and with our own kind. And it can seem risky to do this work of trying to get to know each other across race, and trying to upend racism together, and we've all been hurt and wounded. We've tried something, it's been misinterpreted. We've decided maybe it's not worth the effort.

([01:17:28](#)) To me, there's a lot of joy, and a lot of actual human loving experience that we're missing. And that's my why, really. I'm not pretending I'm in this from some deep ethical moral ground that isn't also about a kind of desire for more joy in my life. I just happen to know that human beings are fortunate. We can connect, we can care about each other. We can learn from each other, no matter our background, if we're open to it. And so I just feel like we've all suffered enough, actually. And at this point it seems most of us, if we're fortunate enough to be able to be reflecting together in this way, probably have much more ability to let go some of the ways we've held to what we need and what it means for us to be safe, respected, and comfortable. And open up to a little bit of maybe comfort with discomfort or willingness to sort of be present to the other realities out there, the experiences of people who don't look like us. And from that, to grow and to help enact, help live our way into whatever wants to be born.

([01:19:10](#)) Because I'm convinced there's some new way of being human that is wanting to be born in this post-coronavirus (if we ever get there) period. There is just, it seems to me, we've become radically reawakened to our interconnectedness across the globe, and our vulnerability. We can be tempted in the face of that to withdraw and to go into places of fear and anxiety and anger. But there's another way. And that other way is something that we're right on the cusp of actually finding our way into. And if we just have the courage, and if we can just be open to experimenting with being together in this different way, we will know from the experience that it's worth it. And that all of the fear and the anger and anxiety and all of that was just a barrier to what our experience in the world right now is wanting us to really be able to appreciate about life itself.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:20:27](#)): May it be so. Thank you so much. Yeah.

Rhonda Magee ([01:20:31](#)): Thank you.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:20:32](#)): This has been really so nourishing and rich and you've been really generous with your time, so I want to thank you very much, and for all the work that you're doing in the world; this is such important work. And thanks for sharing your wisdom with us today.

Rhonda Magee ([01:20:46](#)): Thank you.

Outro – Wendy Hasenkamp (01:20:53): *This episode was edited and produced by me and Phil Walker. Music on the show is from Blue Dot Sessions and Universal. Show notes and resources for this and other episodes can be found at podcast.mindandlife.org. If you enjoyed this episode, please rate and review us on Apple Podcasts, and share it with a friend. If something in this conversation sparked insight for you, we'd love to know about it. You can send an email or voice memo to podcast@mindandlife.org. Mind & Life is a production of Mind & Life Institute. Visit us at mindandlife.org where you can learn more about how we bridge science and contemplative wisdom to foster insight and inspire action towards flourishing. There you can also support our work, including this podcast.*