



MIND & LIFE

## Mind & Life Podcast Transcript Juan Santoyo - Practice and Peace

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**Opening Quote – Juan Santoyo (00:03):** *This work really helps me to focus in on this question of, what are the conditions we need for peace? We need to learn how to live with each other in a way that's sustainable, that is healthy, that we can be happy with 100 years from now. If we make our guesses of what the next 10, 20 years look like, we know we need tools for healing. We know we need tools for building peace. That's what's at the forefront of my mind, and I'm trying to see how the tools and opportunities I have in my disposal can help me move towards that question. But really it's, I think, a collective mission, we all need to hold.*

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**Intro – Wendy Hasenkamp (00:45):** Welcome to Mind & Life. I'm Wendy Hasenkamp. Today I'm speaking with contemplative researcher and social activist Juan Santoyo. Juan is a rising star in the field. And as we'll hear in today's show, even though he's still fairly early in his career, he already has quite a range of experience, interests, and accomplishments. In his undergraduate work, he studied the neurophenomenology of meditation. That's an approach (championed by Francisco Varela—it's come up in the show a number of times) where you bring first-person information from the participant about their experience into more traditional objective measures in neuroscience research. Juan then went on to develop a contemplative intervention for ex-combatants in Columbia, his home country. And we talk about that quite a bit in the episode. He's also a co-founder of The Black Lotus Collective, an organization aimed at challenging systems of oppression by grounding in contemplative practice and community. Juan is now studying for his PhD in Brain and Cognitive Sciences at MIT. And he's interested in understanding the factors that are needed for peace and healing—both in the brain and in the world.

(01:59) I chatted with Juan earlier this spring about a lot of this. We start with his path into contemplative research, and his connection with Willoughby Britton and Jud Brewer, also previous guests on the podcast. And we touch on his early exposure to neurophenomenology and some of the findings from that research. Juan then shares about his work in Columbia, developing a contemplative intervention with ex-combatants who are reintegrating into society, following the peace accord there. This is really an excellent example of community-engaged research, where you work with the communities you're trying to help. And we talk about some of the components of the program and how he integrated Indigenous Columbian practices that connect with land and ancestors. He also shares how the ex-combatants really valued learning skills to work with difficult emotions they face, like grief, anger, and shame, and also how they began to approach self-forgiveness as they work through peace and reconciliation processes within their communities. That gets us into a discussion of the general lack of body- and land-based practices in the West, and also a larger discussion of how oppressive systems impact the sense of self. And as we end, Juan reflects on why contemplation matters for justice and equity work, and his current approach to investigating what is needed for peace.

(03:24) I think Juan, in a really powerful and beautiful way, represents this intersection and actually also integration of research, contemplation, and action, that's at the heart of contemplative science. And his central message about peace feels particularly relevant today. I hope you're inspired by this conversation as much as I was. It's a great pleasure to share with you Juan Santoyo.

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**Wendy Hasenkamp** (03:52): Well, I'm joined today by Juan Santoyo. Juan, thank you so much for being here with us.

**Juan Santoyo** (03:57): Thanks, Wendy. It's great to join you guys.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (04:00): So I'm really looking forward to exploring your experiences in this field, because they have been quite varied and really interesting. I'd love to start with just hearing how you got interested in the contemplative world and meditation to begin with. Was that something that was part of your childhood, or did that come later?

**Juan Santoyo** (04:18): Yeah, it's a great place to start. My mind right away goes to my time at Brown [University]. I think that was a pivotal time. When I arrived at college as an undergrad, I definitely did not know this world existed. I had consumed whatever content is in popular media about meditation as a kid... And towards my late teenage years, I think was when I first started encountering very simple things about Buddhism online. I struggled with some heavy cycles of depression when I was in my teenage years, and coming out of that. I was kind of just poking around wildly at, what is out there about grief and anger? And I kind of encountered that briefly. I think at the same time, I had always been interested in medicinal approaches to a spiritual life—the Indigenous grounded psilocybin and psychedelics. And so that interest always was there.

(05:21) Coming to college, I had no idea what I was going to study. My family is not from this country. We didn't know at all—I was raised just by my mom and my sibling—and we didn't know what the college world looked like, what it involved, what the paths there were. I didn't really know what grad school was, or that research existed.

(05:43) And so coming into Brown, I didn't know what I was going to study. I knew very much on my mind was mental health. Growing up in the communities I grew up in Boston, just the impacts of under-cared for communities were present. That was one of the big contributors to the grief and depression I felt in my teenage years. And I kind of knew, I was like, I want to work on this. I want to be around mental health work and see what's out there. And so I started off at Brown taking... Brown was a great container for me because it allows a lot of flexibility. And so I just took a mix of psychology, philosophy classes... And religious studies classes in there as well. So without knowing it, I was kind of already stepping towards a contemplative field.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (06:34): Right, yeah. That's the good mix for contemplative research.

**Juan Santoyo** (06:37): Exactly. Yeah. And coming into contact with some good friends a few years above me, I started hearing about the contemplative studies classes at Brown.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (06:47): Oh great. And this was around what year? Because Brown was one of the first universities to have a contemplative studies focus.

**Juan Santoyo (06:55):** Yeah. My first class was actually with Cathy Kerr. It was Meditation and the Brain, and it was my fall semester... this would be 2011, when Cathy had just started. It might actually have been the first semester Cathy taught at Brown.

**Wendy Hasenkamp (07:10):** Yeah. That was the pretty early days of those programs.

**Juan Santoyo (07:14):** Yeah. And I think I was sensing, I liked the psychology and the science of it. So that's why that class sounded cool. It was great, science and meditation. And then after that class, the next semester I took, Hal Roth's Intro to Contemplative Studies class, where I really got my start to meditation. And it was that semester with Cathy, that semester with Hal, and then a friend connected me to Willoughby Britton's lab where I started working that summer. And I would say that combination, and working with Will that summer, is what really made it all click.

(07:50) I think working with Will and having Will welcome me into her lab that summer was pivotal. It was where I really first saw what research looked like, and where I first saw that research could be used to really guide transformative interventions, transformative work, where you could go from an intervention and from basic science to trying to enact new models for how we're treating things in the world. And critiquing those models as well. So I think that's when it clicked, I was like, this is awesome. This seems like it can have some impact. The meditation was clicking, and that was helping everything kind of combine. And that's how it all started.

**Wendy Hasenkamp (08:35):** Did you find, when you said the meditation was clicking or working for you, can you say more about personally, experientially what you were noticing?

**Juan Santoyo (08:45):** Yeah. I can kind of remember some of the first moments practice started clicking, when I was catching myself off the cushion in one of those ruminative loops that were classic depression, and very characteristic of the depression I was experiencing at the time, where you're just in this negative feedback loop. And I think that was kind of one of the moments that convinced me... Like, invest in this, put my time into this, put some discipline into this. Because I caught myself and interrupted it, and it was one of those early fruits that I think many people catch off the cushion and on the cushion.

(09:25) And I think that summer as well, the other big thing that was clicking was just—I don't know why I came upon it or what pointed me in this direction, but I knew the loving kindness practices felt good. I think they feel good for a lot of people. And I was pointed to the *Bodhisattva's Path of the Way*, and so I kind of devoted that summer, I was like, I'm going to practice with this book. And I think that helped also ground it in the tradition and in some discipline. So I think I would say it kind of clicked in those ways. Beyond that, I had no idea what I was doing as a student and adapting to Brown was difficult. It was a very different cultural environment than the one I had grown up in. And I think the other element in which practices clicked for me was in just helping me find some stability underneath me in that new environment. It just kind of gave me the stability, the discipline that then helped everything move forward.

**Wendy Hasenkamp (10:30):** So then through your undergrad time there at Brown, you actually were involved in quite a bit of research efforts, both with Willoughby and with Cathy Kerr (and her name has come up a number of times on different episodes of the podcast). Do you want to share about any of the studies that you were involved in, even as an undergrad then?

**Juan Santoyo (10:50):** Yeah. Just being in Willoughby's lab environment was really important in those first days for me. And it was actually Will, who I can forever be grateful to, she recommended me to work on a study. She asked me one day, "Hey, do you want to help analyze some data for a study?" And I was like, yeah, of course. And it ended up being this project with Jake Davis, with Jud Brewer, and where Cathy Kerr started mentoring me to analyze some neurofeedback data they had, where they were doing this really cool neurophenomenological method, trying to link first-person experience and third-person brain data. And I think that was the first real project I had some ownership over. I analyzed data, co-mentored by Jake Davis and Cathy Kerr. And then with Jud and Kathleen Garrison, who was his postdoc at the time, helped them bring it to publication within a few months. So that was really the first project I fully worked on, fully brought to the finish line. And it was great to just see that scientific process in motion.

**Wendy Hasenkamp (11:58):** Yeah. And that's so great that you were able to be exposed to neurophenomenology work, which is still, I would say quite rare in the field to have a good neurophenomenology. So, that's the idea of integrating first-person information with neuroscientific recordings and things like that. Can you say just briefly, like what the goal of that study was, and a little bit about what was going on there?

**Juan Santoyo (12:23):** Yeah. Ever since that study I've remained really interested in neurophenomenology. I ended up doing my undergrad thesis around the topic, and it's still very ripe in what I'm working on. So for that project specifically, Jud had led this study where they had collected neurofeedback data with meditators, having expert meditators downregulate or upregulate activity in the posterior cingulate cortex—this region that some hypotheses linked to depression and potentially to self-related narrative or speech. They had seen previously that activity in this brain region was downregulated in meditators, potentially upregulated in depression and some clinical symptoms. So it formed a really good candidate for a region to explore if down regulating this region has some link to meditation, and further down the line, some clinical benefit. So for this study, they had expert meditators view a real-time display of activity from this region, and then work on learning strategies to downregulate and upregulate the signal. And while viewing this display, they would pause and describe what, in their experience, was linked to either the signal going up or down. And so then based off of those descriptions of that link, we ran a qualitative analysis approach and drew a descriptive theory of what in their experience was corresponding to down periods of activity, and what was linked to up regulation.

**Wendy Hasenkamp (14:00):** Right. So this is such a cool method. And now that you're describing it, I'm remembering that I think I actually was either part of that study, or I came and helped pilot the setup, because I remember being in the scanner. And so, first I guess for listeners who aren't aware of the neuroimaging world, it's pretty unusual to be in an imaging scanner and be able to see your own brain activity in real time. It's a method that is used more and more, but especially in those days, that was very early days for that kind of technology. So that's quite interesting. And then the idea is to (as I recall, there wasn't really much instruction about how to try to modulate the signal) but you just try different things, kind of mentally or experientially, and then you can see the signal change either up or down, and then you start to learn. So that's the basic process of neurofeedback. And am I remembering from that paper that one of the big take homes was associating an experience of effort, like "efforting," with activity in this particular brain region? And then that might be part of why... Like, reducing the effort is part of what happens in meditation?

**Juan Santoyo (15:10):** Yeah. So there was an effort element that we found there. I think it was two elements that we saw were linked to decreased activity. One was just concentration. And so that linked to existing literature that saw that when people are focused on a task, activity there went down. But then this novel thing that popped up is that it also had to do with states of low effort. Which I think connect to the meditation practices where you just rest in awareness, where concentration is just sitting back and letting go. And the presence is the presence that is always there. So I think that was really interesting to find, to pop out of this study. It was a novel hypothesis and yeah, like you said, it connects to what people often discuss in meditation where maybe practice starts off with some effort, with some pushing, some holding the mind in place. But the place where we want to move to is the place where we are just resting in what is. And that doesn't require changing anything.

**Wendy Hasenkamp (16:18):** So then this informed your own undergraduate thesis, which you went on to do more neurofeedback work. Do you want to share anything about that?

**Juan Santoyo (16:26):** Yeah. I became mostly interested there in the method side of things, the idea of neurophenomenology, and that's what I wrote my thesis around. So neurophenomenology is this idea proposed by Francisco Varela that in order to move forward towards a science of consciousness, we need to focus on a science that links together neurophysiological signals with data about experience, phenomenology, with the rich history of the philosophy of phenomenology.

**(17:02)** The idea was that, first, so far as we're ignoring lived experience, we have a very incomplete science of consciousness. Consciousness is first and foremost about experience. And second, that by linking phenomenological data to neural data, we're linking the experience to the machinery, the biology that gives rise to experience. And in terms of a method, we're also creating a constraint so that whatever data about experience we generate is linked to that brain data, in a way making it easier to replicate, making it easier to relate across people. So that potentially if we have a link between an experience and a brain signal, we can have some confidence that the experience we're talking about is similar, or the same in nature, because we have the same corresponding change in the brain signal. So I became really interested in this method. And so I still have plans to do an experimental study on a model for neurophenomenology, building on what Jud did.

**(18:07) – musical interlude –**

**Wendy Hasenkamp (18:31):** So I also want to talk about some work that you did through a Mind & Life Think Tank project, a quite different project with ex-combatants in Columbia, bringing contemplative practice to them and other forms of Indigenous practices, and then looking at outcomes to try to help them reintegrate into society after the peace agreement in Columbia. How did this come about for you? How did you get this idea to do this kind of project?

**Juan Santoyo (19:02):** Yeah, so this project in Columbia began around 2016, 2017. I was still doing research at Brown, I was kind of just getting some further training. And it was around this time that the Columbian peace process had been unfolding. Columbia really had been in peace talks with the FARC, one of the main insurgent groups, for quite a few years. And around 2015, 2016, it seemed clear that they were honing in on agreements that would involve, in large part, the demilitarization of the FARC fighting force. I think at the time it was well over 10,000 members that had spent decades fighting an insurgency, largely in rural Columbia, very mountainous jungle type of territory. This had kind of caught my attention. It was interesting just because, I think a peace process is always interesting. It was

particularly interesting because this was in Columbia, in my home country, and the instability there had always been present in my life.

**Wendy Hasenkamp (20:10):** Yeah, how old were you when you moved to the states?

**Juan Santoyo (20:14):** Yeah, I was seven and my sibling was 10. Yeah, it was like 98, 99. And so, one of the periods where things were heavier in Columbia, the mid nineties, late nineties, early thousands. It wasn't until the late thousands that there was kind of a shift in tide in the conflict, leading to the peace agreements in the mid 2010s.

**Wendy Hasenkamp (20:37):** Okay. So your childhood was very affected by this conflict.

**Juan Santoyo (20:42):** Yeah, I think the conflict and really the broader instability in Columbia. That instability in Columbia being linked to both the conflict and the war on drugs—that kind of just creates an environment that makes it easy for corruption, makes it easy for violence. And my mom at the time was working a government job where coworkers in her department were starting to receive threats more and more often. And she had found herself in already dangerous situations. And she was widowed with my sibling and I, and I think she just decided she couldn't be risking her life while she was in charge of us. Yeah, so from there she took the leap to bring us here. We landed in Boston and that's where we then continued growing up.

(21:33) So all of this made me interested in what was going on in Columbia. I was following just what I could read about the peace process. And it really caught my attention. I started noticing... There was really interesting proposed support for the ex-combatants in terms of trying to help them return to labor, like find housing, just return to civilian life. And it caught my attention that in all of that, I wasn't seeing anything about mental health support, and it was just kind of just a gap in what was planned. I think in the end they did receive some government support, but it was very little, by very few under-resourced, understaffed people. And I think most ex-combatants kind of just had occasional check-ins with therapists.

(22:26) I saw this, and at this point, I'm familiar with a body of therapeutic interventions that could potentially be really helpful here. I know how they work. I know how they run. I know how they could be deployed here. And potentially I have a network of people around me that can help build those up. So from there I kind of needed the first thing I did was call my sibling and we started talking about it from there. So my sibling, Juliana, and I built the project up together from the beginning. And one of the first things we did is, along with starting to look for funding, was look for people that could support us. I think we recognized that maybe the idea is good, but we are both very early on in our paths, and maybe we do have good intuitive skills, but let's get some more support. Let's get therapists, let's get scientists, let's get socially engaged workers, and let's get some more support.

(23:22) So we started bringing people together. One of the first pieces of funding we got was the Mind & Life Think Tank grant. And that helped us to really bring together people that could help us think about the context, think about what type of support is feasible and think about how to carry it out and research it. So that Think Tank meeting was in 2018, 2017, so like two years of unfolding to get there. My sibling and I started working on putting together the curriculum out of that Think Tank meeting. So that by, I guess it was mid-2018, I moved to Columbia to start to roll the program out.



(24:07) And so arriving there, we had some initial relationships with the government agency in Columbia that had been managing the reintegration process, as well as with a local Zen center that had been working with ex-combatants. And so those were our initial fronts to work on, but really the first period of time there was building deeper relationships to get this off the ground, putting together a team, and piloting the program. So the first pilot we actually did was with our research team, which was a great way to also just bring together a team under a shared vision.

(24:48) So that then, yeah, I think by the time we were ready to run things, the final piece that came together around late 2019, start of 2020 was a deeper relationship with the FARC community. Originally, we had been working with this government agency to start to contact and work with the FARC ex-combatants. That had been difficult, first because it's a government agency with many other responsibilities beyond helping us. And the FARC ex-combatants seemed to have mixed relationships with them, and mixed experiences with them. There was kind of not always full trust. I think we started seeing that it wasn't the best avenue to reach through. And at one point we were able to just kind of start talking and building with the community itself.

(25:41) And I think at that point, so this was in early 2020, that we were finally kind of communicating with members of the, now the demilitarized FARC, the FARC as a political organization. And the first thing was just, they were very interested in this. So this was the response we got at the beginning; it's the response we keep getting this year. They recognize that they are under-supported when it comes to mental health. It takes very little discussion for them to say like, "We need something. We have gotten very little support, and things are tough." So I think that was always good. It was first, just good to have them engaged and good to know that what we were trying to do was a mutual interest, and not just us coming in with this outside idea.

**Wendy Hasenkamp (26:34):** Yeah. I know you said that one of your key learnings from this process is this long process of working with the local community and involving them in the project itself.

**Juan Santoyo (26:44):** I think I want to just reiterate that. Yeah, one of the key learnings as we started was something people are more and more turning to in research, which is the use of participatory methods—where you work with the community you want to work with very early on to define what the intervention is, what it's studying, how does it meet their actual needs, and how does it meet their existing resources? I think one of our team members in Columbia, Paula Ospina, was excellent in just saying like, "We need to make this a concrete part of our approach." And then she led a lot of those efforts. And yeah, I think it was vital to our work, we continue kind of reiterating through that process as we move through it. And I'll just advocate for it being vital to anyone who wants to be doing research with communities like this.

**Wendy Hasenkamp (27:38):** Yeah. I know you've also as part of the curriculum, I saw that you incorporated and centered and lifted up Indigenous practices from that community. Can you share maybe, were they contemplative practices, or I'm just curious what kinds of practices that you thought would be helpful?

**Juan Santoyo (27:56):** Yeah, from the beginning we were interested in not just bringing in mindfulness-type contemplative practices, but in incorporating Colombian Indigenous elements, as well as having strong liberatory pedagogy elements. The contemplative elements we started building up through the pilot, where we got to work a little bit more closely with colleagues from a local university that has this wonderful program called the pedagogy of the Mother Earth. It's a PhD, Masters, and undergrad degree

at a very strong university in Columbia that was crafted by Indigenous community—originally designed primarily for Indigenous nation members, but now open to general public. Really a beautiful program, I just want to lift them up. And so we started working with one of the professors from that program. He worked closely with us in the pilot and helped us to think about what elements from these traditions could be brought in. And we worked with a contemplative teacher in our retreat as well. Largely a lot of it is returning to how we can do contemplative practices that really bring in ritual that connects us to land, to our ancestors, so that we are held in practice by all of this. So that we are not alone in our practice, but really resourced by these powerful elements in the healing work.

[\(29:31\)](#) – *musical interlude* –

**Wendy Hasenkamp** [\(29:49\)](#): And so within this curriculum, is it still ongoing? Or how has it unfolded?

**Juan Santoyo** [\(29:55\)](#): Yeah, so the curriculum is still ongoing, and I think we've had a few rounds of iterating through refining it and potentially we can continue refining it forever. And then I think it's good for programs to be flexible. We ran an initial pilot with our own team, and then we started running the program with ex-combatants in 2020. So it kind of coincided perfectly with the start of COVID.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** [\(30:22\)](#): Oh my goodness.

**Juan Santoyo** [\(30:23\)](#): Yeah. Yeah, our first cohort was scheduled to run at the end of March. So it was completely disrupted. We had just recruited participants, like brought together a group. We had just collected all of the pre data, and we had actually already had our first in-person meeting the week before we went to quarantine. So that we had a moment of just kind of, well, what do we do? Do we just kind of pause and wait, maybe this is only a three month pandemic. [laughter] And I think one of the people I was working at the time was just like, "No, let's just run it. Let's do it." We were still in those weeks in close communication with the participants, one of the main co-facilitators for the program, Luisa, was just kind of checking in on them. And she was reiterating that the needs are not lower now that the pandemic has started.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** [\(31:18\)](#): Right. Probably more, yeah.

**Juan Santoyo** [\(31:20\)](#): Yeah. Especially with the community [being] financially very vulnerable. So as soon as they couldn't go to work, as soon as they couldn't get basic things, stress levels shot up. Along with the stress we were all experiencing at the start of the pandemic. And so, it was like, yeah, this could still be really important. And it seems like a lot of this we can adapt to a virtual format. So let's try.

[\(31:45\)](#) So we did that. And we maybe only waited for three weeks. I think it was probably mid April or late April that we started. And we ended up running two full cycles with a virtually adapted version of our program, which was great. I think we ran those two full cycles in 2020 during that first year of pandemic. And then when things were a little bit more calm in Columbia, in January of 2021, we still ran the in-person retreat that they had been offered. They were still very excited to have that in-person retreat. And it was fun, and then rewarding for everyone to just get together in-person.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** [\(32:27\)](#): Yeah, that's awesome. So have you been able to... I know part of your hope was to also do research on some of the outcomes. Have you been able to do any of that yet, or is that still forthcoming?



**Juan Santoyo (32:39):** Yeah, so with that study, we ended up having 11 participants. So kind of a statistically underpowered for a lot of quantitative measures. But we still ran interviews with them. So we're planning to put together something out of the qualitative data that came out of that, that then we're using to shape and guide hypotheses for the next iteration.

**Wendy Hasenkamp (33:03):** Any anecdotal outcomes that you want to share from some of the ex-combatants?

**Juan Santoyo (33:08):** Yeah. I'll say kind of two fruits and a highlighted difficulty. But I think first, one big fruit was just the program as a vehicle for building community and for connecting them. A lot of them already knew each other because they're involved with the political entity that is now peace time FARC. But 10 years ago they knew each other as comrades in arms. Now they know each other as political comrades. They're very focused on political work, and what we've seen is that this hasn't really involved space for emotional connection. They're not used to talking to each other about what's hurting, and what's feeling good. And so creating that space was really valuable, that felt really important. And just creating that space and creating practices for them to find ways for it to feel comfortable and normal to talk about the difficult things, and not just focus on getting things done politically. So that was one big fruit that was present in the interviews.

**(34:20)** The other big one, they really enjoyed the more emotional, compassion and loving-kindness practices. I think half of our program centers around those practices. And they really honed in on part of the modules where we talked about, how does this combine with processes of grief, of rage, of confusion, shame? And how does this combine with processes of forgiveness? I think this was really salient to them, on two fronts. First, just seeing how not being able to engage with these difficult emotions of grief, anger, shame just serves to oppress us further. It kind of just serves to keep us from being fully ourselves, and being fully ourselves in a way that tends to challenge the status quo. Usually, our indignation is guiding something.

**(35:22)** On another front, as part of the peace building process, they are very engaged in reconciliation work. They regularly meet with communities where harm was done, and go through a reconciliation process where they talk about... It's kind of mirroring some of the truth and reconciliation elements of other processes. They try to establish, backtrack and go over, what actually happened, who did what, and try to come to some type of reconciliation around that. First, they were interested in how these practices might just be a resource for them in how they arrive to these spaces. And second, a lot of these processes have focused on, can this person forgive me, or can I forgive this person? And I think it was almost a whole new concept of, can I forgive myself? And I think the self-forgiveness side of things was very salient, in part because of its novelty, and in such a big container. And I think that was one of the things that also jumped out in their interviews. So on one hand it was useful just to get some data on what was working, but it also tells us what some of the things we can focus in on the next iterations of the program are.

**Wendy Hasenkamp (36:47):** Mm, yeah. Just as you were speaking, it occurred to me, I'm wondering if you... When you talk about self-forgiveness and that not really being a concept. Just for me, I can imagine, and some of my own experiences around that too, of such a constriction in my body, on an energetic level around that. Then that made me think also of Cathy Kerr's emphasis on the body. And I'm wondering if you brought any of that into this curriculum, or if you have experiences around the role of the body in these types of healing.

**Juan Santoyo (37:24):** Yeah. I think the body for them, for everyone, was really present in this work with those difficult shadow emotions—the grief, the anger, the shame. And that's kind of where a lot of the forgiveness practices come in. I think in every level of our shaping of the kindness-, the land-, the ancestor-based practices, it was always with a strong somatic focus. I think in this, I'm also drawing on trauma-informed principles, that if you don't intentionally make it somatically focused, it's going to unintentionally be somatically focused. And so the container needs to be shaped to be able to hold that. So it was very much present in the practices and the way they were held.

**Wendy Hasenkamp (38:19):** Yeah. It strikes me too, when you were speaking about the Indigenous practices that you incorporated into this program (the Indigenous Columbia practices) being connected to land and ancestors, which is also very similar to other Indigenous practices in other communities that I've heard about... And it's also just so salient how absent those kinds of practices are in the way that mindfulness has been taken up, at least in the US community. Just wondering if you have thoughts on that.

**Juan Santoyo (38:52):** Yeah. It's definitely really, really interesting how it has been dropped away in the US, European mindfulness communities. And at the same time, something people seem obviously in need of. It's an element that was very present in the traditions. Sometimes I almost think that part of the problem was that it was too intuitive in the traditions, that it became under-emphasized that we do this practice first and foremost where we sit. And where we sit is with earth and land. So I think, the West with its very cognitivist bias, just focused on the mind, and how can I train the mind—forgetting the body, forgetting the body that is the land. So I think, yeah, that's very interesting. I think it is one of the paths for growth for mindfulness here. I think there's many people working on that. And I think a lot of people, as they work on that, are as you named, returning to Indigenous practices that have always held this at the forefront.

[\(40:00\)](#) – musical interlude –

**Wendy Hasenkamp (40:20):** I feel like so much of your work is at this interesting intersection of the contemplative world and also equity and justice in those spaces. And so I'd love to hear your thoughts about that intersection. You wrote something in a piece about that project in Columbia, basically about your own recognition of how systems of oppression and domination basically create this "distortion of self image," you wrote, and a "destabilization of connection and collective power." So I'm just curious to hear more about how you see systems of oppression distorting self-image. I thought that was really interesting.

**Juan Santoyo (41:00):** Yeah, I think that's a really interesting point. This process, this distortion of self-image, it's present in Columbia, but it's not unique to Columbia. It's something that's present everywhere where we have systems of power that impact people in different ways because of their identities. It creates systems where, if the system is implicitly or explicitly putting some identities above others, it's a wound to anyone that holds the identities that are being oppressed. And beyond that, I think there's this excellent paper, it's called the *Phenomenology of Whiteness*. And it talks about the experience of being a person of color, which I think the author hones in on just the common experience of not being white, of being in a space where you are different than the others. I think the author frames one moment in her experience of being a Middle Eastern woman and stepping into, just entering customs in a US airport, or maybe it was European, but just the moment where it becomes salient that you are not the dominant identity.

(42:20) I think for myself, in a way, being in Columbia doing this work, brought that phenomenology to the forefront, in how it eased away. And how perhaps a tension I was holding of being different in these spaces where I exist in the US suddenly wasn't there. Suddenly I was in a sea of people where I didn't stand out, and feeling that relax and ease way. That was really salient, as is always returning to the US. And even just the transition between one flight to the other, where suddenly I feel that difference. And sometimes it's a difference that can feel calm and fine, but sometimes it can put you on edge. It can be an extra sense of unease you're holding—whether it's fear or anxiety or whatever shape it might take, it creates this extra stressor you're kind of carrying around with you.

(43:20) So I think that's one answer to your question. There are multitudes of ways, systems of oppression work their way into our identities, that they don't let us hold our identities fully. With the Colombian population, we were just talking about Indigenous practices, but one way this shows up is the way their Indigenous or African identities are held. A lot of the people we worked with, a lot of the members of the FARC are either of Indigenous nations, or they're mixed, or they're black Colombian. And these are, the Indigenous and black identities, are very... they're oppressed in Columbia. And it's a subtle racism because people are so mixed, but definitely what is valued is the closer you are in the spectrum to a European identity. That is what is most valued, and that's kind of present in media and in how we treat and talk to one another.

(44:14) So being able to just of name this and talk about how people have experienced this was important and novel because that conversation was happening a lot here. Like what is it to have racialized identities? But it's not really happening in Columbia. So just introducing that conversation was important, and working on ways in which we can, just kind of talking about how we can reclaim and hold those identities with love, with pride, in healthier ways. So I think that's one dimension in which it was really important for the ex-combatant population.

(44:52) And then the other way is just their particular identity as ex-combatants. They're still very isolated from mainstream Colombian society. I think Colombian... It was a conflict between government and this insurgent force. So as happens in any conflict, you draw up the other faction as non-human, as evil. And so I think a lot of Colombians grew in this environment where that was the image of the FARC. And a lot of them still feel themselves perceived that way, and in the real world are met with violence around their identity. I think that was one of the other edges to work on. That's a difficult one for this program. I would say that one really extends beyond the scope of us working with them, because really that's a healing process for Colombian society as a whole that needs to happen.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (45:46): Right. And I would imagine that that reconciliation process that you mentioned that's undergoing is a big part of that healing, hopefully.

**Juan Santoyo** (45:54): Yeah, ideally it is, and I think for the specific communities that engage in this, it is. I think for mainstream, for the people living in the cities, I think that's a little harder, because cities are a bubble everywhere. I think we feel that in the US as well. But perhaps because of the, I don't know, there is a stronger social and economic divide in Columbia between city life and rural life. It's easier to be isolated and have that bubble phenomenon in the cities there.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (46:32): Right, right. You spoke about this, a little bit earlier when you were speaking about the program and your work with the ex-combatants, but I'm curious your experience and thoughts about particularly the role of contemplative practice in the work of equity and justice.

What is it about the contemplative path? Does it enable particular things, or certain skills or mindsets that are particularly valuable in justice work?

**Juan Santoyo (47:03)**: Yeah. I really think it does. I think perhaps the contemplative approaches have elements that other therapeutic approaches don't, that help with that. I think first, just the approach that contemplative methods can have on working with those shadow emotions—some of the big ones being rage, grief, and shame—that are so at the forefront of equity healing work, of diversity healing work. From all directions, from people that may have been victims of oppression, to people that might have been perpetrators of oppression. And CBT-type therapies can help us work through perhaps unhealthy habits of mind, but these are really somatic, spiritual, for lack of a better word, they're existential emotions. They go to our core, and they're not just habits of mind in that way. They are existential, we feel them deeply. And I think that is where contemplative practices that can really engage with that depth of feeling, that depth of heart, might have a really important ingredient to help with the deep pain of those emotions. Because I think as many have stated eloquently, the big first and difficult step is just being present with all of that. Being able to hold our imperfections with love, and being able to hold our imperfections in messiness as well. I think that's one big way contemplative practices can really help us there.

[\(48:42\)](#) The other big way is in the opening up of our sense of self that comes with practice, the feeling... Again, Indigenous practices do a good job of bringing us to this shared ancestor and medium of Mother Earth, the shared lineage of ancestors. But I think contemplative practices have this other, this is the other way they can help us with equity work—by grounding equity work in mother nature, in our shared ancestors. In working with Indigenous communities in Columbia, often I saw that one of the first questions that would be brought up in trying to open up a project was, how can this benefit Mother Earth? And how can this benefit the healing of our communities? And I think that is a vital framework for how we do our equity, diversity, and inclusion work, how we do that healing work. It both grounds us in this mother figure that is loving and caring, but it grounds us in this mutual shared mission that really, we're just trying to find a way to live together peacefully and live together in a way that we take care of our planet.

[\(49:57\)](#) – *musical interlude* –

**Wendy Hasenkamp (49:58)**: So now you are in graduate school at MIT, in the Brain and Cognitive Sciences program, so you're kind of back in the world of neuroscience and cognitive science. I'm just wondering what's most alive for you these days. What are you most interested in from that domain?

**Juan Santoyo (50:38)**: Yeah, it's exciting to be back in research full time. Right now, I'm enjoying the experience; it's both challenging and stimulating. And I see a lot of cool paths in front of me. I think related to what we were just talking about, to the work I'm doing in Columbia, one of the questions that's kind of at the forefront here is, how can our basic science work have that socially engaged element? It's often really hard to see that. You know, if we're working on understanding the neural circuits underlying trauma in mice, how does that actually help us change trauma in the world? So I'd say one of the things that is alive right now for me is just the sitting with that question, and being present with that question.

[\(51:28\)](#) Oftentimes I think basic science, in its quest for deep rigor—which is vital, it's important—doesn't want to engage with these messy questions of society, of social relationships, of social problems. But I think one of the things that has emerged in me from working in Columbia is wanting to focus on

peace, on asking this question of what do we need at the individual, relational, and collective level, to build peace? And so, I'm trying to find that in rodent level work, that's what I'm doing at MIT. But I'm trying to see how I can build from rodent level work to human intervention.

(52:10) I think right now I'm focusing in a little bit on how the factors in our environment—how things like stress, like violence, like resource adversity—impair normal cognitive function. And how can understanding this better help guide how we heal? So I'm continuing to do the Columbia work while I do this rodent work here. And what I'm sitting with is trying to see how these can become kind of a dance between one another, so that the physiological here can inform a very real lived experience there.

**Wendy Hasenkamp (52:48):** I love it. I love that you're bringing together these worlds that, as you said, so often are completely separated. As basic scientists generally don't engage with the messiness of the world, because it doesn't fit the model or the paradigm of control and experimentation. And I think oftentimes work that happens in the world doesn't incorporate the scientific information as much. So I really love that you're bringing those together, and I think it's a beautiful flowering of all of your experiences so far in your life. Do you have anything that you want to share that we haven't spoken about, or any take home thoughts?

**Juan Santoyo (53:30):** Yeah I think, like I was just saying, this work in Columbia really helps me to focus in on this question of, what are the conditions we need for peace? What do we need for peace as individuals, internally with ourselves? What do we need for it in our relationships? What do we need for it collectively? This is the question that I started to sit with in Columbia. This is the question I'm bringing into my PhD. And I think the feeling that drives that is just, this is urgent. This is what we need to learn how to live with each other in a way that's sustainable, in a way that is human, that is healthy, that we can be happy with 100 years from now. I think going through this shift in culture that the pandemic kind of allows, the pandemic kind of breaks up culture so much that it allows us to redefine how we're returning. I think it really made this question feel urgent, that if we don't dig into thinking about how we can live together well with ourselves and with our planet, we're going to be in trouble.

(54:45) I think we're seeing that today. We see that if we make our guesses of what the next 10, 20 years look like, we know we need tools for healing. We know we need tools for building peace. And so I think that's, just closing out, I think that's what's at the forefront of my mind. And I'm trying to see how the tools and opportunities I have at my disposal can help me move towards that question. But really it's a collective mission we all need to hold. We all need to ask, how are the tools and opportunities we have at our disposal able to help us understand this question and work on it together.

**Wendy Hasenkamp (55:28):** Thank you so much, Juan. This has been really wonderful to chat with you, and your work is so inspiring. I'm so grateful that you're in the world.

**Juan Santoyo (55:37):** Likewise.

**Wendy Hasenkamp (55:38):** And thank you for taking the time to talk with us.

**Juan Santoyo (55:41):** Yeah, thanks Wendy. It was fun to connect with you. And Mind & Life has been a great community and container is work to grow within and throughout. So I'm always grateful for that.

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**Outro – Wendy Hasenkamp (55:57):** *This season of Mind & Life is supported by the Academy for the Love of Learning, dedicated to awakening the natural love of learning in people of all ages. Episodes are edited and produced by me and Phil Walker, and 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](http://podcast.mindandlife.org). If you enjoyed this episode, please rate and review us on Apple Podcasts, and share it with a friend. And if something in this conversation sparked insight for you, let us know. You can send an email or voice memo to [podcast@mindandlife.org](mailto:podcast@mindandlife.org).*

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