



MIND & LIFE
I N S T I T U T E

Mind & Life Connect Transcript

Juan Santoyo

March 30, 2023

Retrieved from [video recording](#)

nischal neupane (00:07):

Welcome, everybody. Hi. So great to see some familiar names. Hi, my name is nischal neupane. I am also known as nisch, friends on this side of the world call me nisch. As most of you know, I am the program manager at the Mind & Life Institute, and Shankari and I, and everybody at Mind & Life, is extremely excited that you are able to join us for our first Mind & Life Connect. The program's titled "Cultivating Trust in the Body", and this is a new format of the program which we've designed specifically for community building. We're hoping all our incredible folks in the Mind & Life Community can come together and be with each other, build relationships, and have some horizontal conversations. We're excited that you are here, and welcome again. I am joining today from Northampton, Massachusetts. It has been Pocumtuc land, and it is still the homeland of the Pocumtuc, Norwottuck, Oronoco, Agawam, Nipmuc, and Abenaki folks. I'm going to pass it over to Shankari, my incredible co-host today. Shankari, do you want to jump on and introduce yourself?

Shankari Goldstein (01:28):

Thanks, nisch. Welcome, everyone. It's great to see all of you, so many familiar faces. I want to acknowledge that I am on the ancestral land of the Monacan people here in Charlottesville, Virginia. The Monacan people have stewarded this land for generations and continue to do so. We honor their elders past and present, and thank them for their contributions to our community and to the world. Grateful to be here with you, nisch and Juan, today.

nischal neupane (01:57):

Thank you, Shankari. And I know we at Mind & Life really understand that there's a lot of debate around the appropriateness of land acknowledgements right now. They're turning into cliches, and we want to be very intentional about how we approach this. We acknowledge that there's a lot of healing and repair work to be done, and there needs to be some material action beyond these words when we are supporting Indigenous folks. Phil, who's helping us on the back end, is going to drop a couple of resources in our chat today, so you can learn about how you can materially help Indigenous communities in the US and outside the US, globally.

(02:41):

For today's program, which is titled "Cultivating Trust in the Body", the plan is we're going to listen to Juan Santoyo, whom I'm going to introduce in a minute here. We're going to hear from Juan and then we're going to break you into a couple of breakout rooms. After our breakout

sessions, we'll come together as a group and you'll get to engage in some Q&A with Juan. We plan to end the program officially at 3:15, so hopefully we can be on time. Without further ado, I want to introduce Juan Santoyo. Juan is an incredible human being. He's currently at MIT. He's a neuroscience and early career contemplative researcher.

nischal neupane (03:21):

He's from Colombia, and he focuses on the neurophysiological dynamics of meditation training and sensory perceptions in humans and mice. He also co-founded the Black Lotus Collective. It's an organization that is aiming to integrate contemplative practices with social justice work. And Juan also is doing some powerful work in Colombia; it's a meditation program he's running to help ex-combatants reintegrate into society there. He's a beloved member of the Mind & Life community. He's done a podcast with us—if you haven't listened to him yet, I highly recommend it—and we are incredibly grateful to have him here today. Juan, I'm going to pass it over to you now.

Juan Santoyo (04:04):

Thank you, nisch. Thank you, Shankari, and thank you all for coming here today. It's exciting to take part in this first Mind & Life Connect meeting. I think it's an incredible intention to help the community of Mind & Life get together, chat, and share ideas a little bit more often. I have 20 minutes and I'm going to share with you guys some little nuggets from the work I've been doing in my PhD, extending into my activism work. And then I'm going to close us out with 10 minutes to practice. But I'd just like to invite us all to just start to settle into practice already, even though I'll be talking. We have 20 minutes, so I think 20 minutes to sit and be present is a good little way to come together.

(04:56):

As I start, I invite you all to get a little bit more comfortable, take some deep breaths, settle into our bodies here together, settle into our presence here together, to share this time and place. And I'm going to give you guys just three quick nuggets from what I'm working on. I'm currently working on Alzheimer's research, and so I'm going to share just some little nuggets of where we are in that field. It's a quickly developing field and aging is relevant to all of us. And specifically I'm going to talk about a systemic view of aging. I think we tend to look at aging as a purely biological or purely individual process. And I think we can dig in more, into how our social and political connectedness contributes to how we age. And I'll close out with a practice to engage that question, a practice with an intergenerational view as an example of how we can do our contemplative healing with this relational and social-political lens.

(06:06):

And just to begin, just a little bit more to add to the generous introduction from nisch, I've come into my PhD coming out of a few years of work trying to engage with the different shapes social-political strife is taking in our communities. As a Colombian, I was very, very pulled to the peace building work in Colombia. And as an immigrant growing up in the United States, I was also very, very much feeling the raw energy, the wounds that have been present in the last few years here.

Juan Santoyo (06:45):

And so, as I came into my PhD, I knew I wanted to study the molecular and brain circuit changes that underlie the impacts of adversity—adversity broadly, including violence, inequity, lack of resources, and just chronic exposure to discrimination. And I felt the urgency of this. And yet, it was a bit of an unexpected turn to find myself in a lab that has great expertise in Alzheimer's. And it was unexpected, and yet has felt extremely powerful, extremely valuable. My contemplative training is in Buddhist dharma, and part of some of the framing that's given as impetus for practice, is that aging and sickness are inevitable.

(07:36):

We will all age, we will all get sick. And yet I sometimes find that we will focus a little bit more on, “all right, what can I do in my mind?” Not, “what can I do with this thing that is coming, with this inevitable struggle in life?” And it became interesting because aging is an inevitable stressor; that yes, there are disparities in access to resources and the discrimination we experience, and there are disparities in so many things. And yet, aging makes us all human. We're all on that path from the moment we're born. And so, I'll take a pause to breathe there, because aging is personal. We're all in a different stage of that path, and we all have encountered the pains of loss in some way or another. And so, I just pause to breathe, to not push through that too aggressively. It can be tender, and many of us will engage with these difficulties in different ways.

(08:48):

Now, just a brief bite and download of what's going on in this field of research. It's one of the most interesting fields. I think it feels like we should be able to address some of the difficult ways in which our brain ages. It's one of those problems in neuroscience that feels tangible. And yet, it has some clear mysteries where even though there are clear genetic and biological alterations that drive unhealthy aging, these alterations can show up in many people that then age just fine. And so, one of the current edges to this mystery is looking at how aging involves a whole body-mind alteration, a holistic change that includes other mechanisms like inflammation in the body, lipid and cholesterol accumulation and metabolism, cardiovascular health, and sleep, just to name some of the big candidates of interest. And I can even just ask you guys—if I name those things and ask you guys: what's the medicine for inflammation, for lipid cholesterol metabolism, for cardiovascular health?

(09:57):

We all probably have some ideas of things we can do to be a little healthier on those ends. And while these are some of the new leads the field is focused in, I mentioned that my interest is how adversity impacts aging. And this is the interest I've engaged in the field. We are individuals, but we're kind of an iceberg; we are also our relationships, we're our interactions with the social-political world, we are the economy as well. And so, one of the big datums I first encountered that brought the importance of this question to mind, was looking at racial disparities in Alzheimer's dementia incidence. It turns out that at the certain age where these issues start to show up, they're twice as prevalent in Hispanic and African-American minorities here in the States.

Juan Santoyo (10:52):

Connecting that thread, we're also seeing that early life stress and exposure to chronic stress are going to largely increase the susceptibility to unhealthy aging. And so, it's important to consider how it is that aging is not just individual. Aging is also how our society and the political sphere will impact us. In research, one of these factors of adversity that most often impacts aging is isolation. And so, we can think about the different ways in which communities are isolated as we grow old. And it also brings up an interesting question, of what is the difference between being isolated but connected? The way we can go to the mountains and practice and feel really connected, and yet we can be in the city and feel really isolated. And so, these social factors are playing a role in here. And I think this is where it's important to bring in what people describe as a systemic view, recognize that we age not just as individuals, and therefore the responsibility for healing is not just an individual responsibility.

(12:11):

It's not just: meditate so you're less stressed; it's not just: eat better and be more and do more exercise. It's: how can we take better care of each other? How can we build communities that going into old age are more connected, and how can we address the issues of early life stress and the persistent discrimination that different people experience to different degrees? And so, this is the framework I think I wanted. This is the cornerstone of the work I'm doing in my PhD, a very quick distillation that I can give you guys here. And I wanted to transition from there into a framework for practice. Aside from science, my other grounding is in contemplative practice and contemplative practice as science as well. And there's one framework that I think really engages well with this idea. And it's the framework of intergenerational practice. Growing out of Indigenous knowledge, if people have heard, such as the seventh generation principle: that in all of our decisions we need to steward, we need to think forward seven generations. Intergenerational exchange of healing and trauma has been studied in sociology and in neuroscience richly as well.

(13:32):

And one of the beautiful expressions I see of this concept as practice today, and I particularly engage with it in Black and brown contemplative communities, is a framing of seeing ourselves as ancestors in training. This is the part where we can start to recognize that we are all aging, we are all in this process, we all have a place in lineage. We are all inheriting from those that came before us and creating for those that will inherit after us. So, we can recognize our joys and the pains that come with being embodied as ancestors, we can hold the impermanence that holding this requires, but just as importantly, we can be playful in shaping a vision of the love we will give, the love we pass on to our heirs, and importantly the responsibility we have to those that will inherit the world.

(14:32):

And one final note to drop here, a unique magic that can come with framing ourselves as ancestors in training is that as we begin to frame ourselves in this way, we can see ourselves as equals to our ancestors. Often our ancestors are so imagined that it's easy to revere or demonize them in ways that definitely just don't represent who they really were. And what happens when we see that we are their equals? We can have more frank discussions. They

don't need to be either angels or demons. They can be humans that just like us, had strengths and weaknesses, that did the best they could; or sometimes didn't, sometimes did want to cause harm, or sometimes just caused harm out of human error. And in seeing ourselves as them, as equals, it can also be a conversation grounded in love. Just as we can engage our own shame, our own pains, from love, from compassion, if we equalize ourselves with our ancestors, we can similarly hold them accountable but do so while still treating them with tenderness, with gentleness and forgiveness.

Juan Santoyo (15:55):

And so, I'll pause there taking another breath. Thanking you all for listening to me for those quick little bites. And we're going to close out with just a few minutes of practice. I'll invite everyone to settle in where we are.

(16:21):

Taking a position that's comfortable, wiggling the body around as we transition from listening to being present in ourselves. Perhaps closing the eyes, settling the hands, settling the body, and starting to take a few deep breaths, arriving where we are, and arriving in our bodies. Feeling the expansion and contraction of the body with each breath and slowly checking in with our body where we are, a gentle hello. And slowly settling.

(18:08):

And we're going to step into a moment of practice, carrying the thread where we just were. We're going to allow ourselves to imagine or think of a revered ancestor. Imagining one of our ancestors whom we can recognize for beautiful, for strong, depth. Whether it be someone real or just letting our imagination form a mythical ancestor, a culmination of the strengths of our ancestors. And imagining this figure, fully visualizing how they look, how they stand, with kindness, with openness. And breathing in their presence, feeling their beauty, their gentleness, their kindness radiate towards you.

(19:35):

Perhaps imagining little things they carry, things they wear. And extending a little breath of gratitude to them, saying a thank you. Thank you for your work, for your love, for your forgiveness, your resilience. And though you have passed, may you be well; extending kindness back to this ancestor. Wishing them joy, wishing them peace. And little by little imagining that they come to rest beside your body, sitting, standing, laying down. Their peace, their kindness still buzzing out, blowing out to you.

(21:07):

And slowly we'll invite just one more person to our imagination. I invite you to imagine, to think of a known ancestor, an ancestor that you do know: a parent, a grandparent, another family member, or perhaps just a mentor, a relational or spiritual ancestor of yours, but someone whom you knew as human.

(21:37):

And just begin to bring them here, inviting them into this same sphere of gentleness, of kindness, imagining their appearance, a warm facial expression, and feeling what it feels like to

call them to mind. Letting whatever comes up, come up. And again, feeling their beauty, feeling their radiance and love. Breathing it in on their behalf and then breathing it out towards them. Kindness, gratitude.

Juan Santoyo (22:46):

And as an ancestor we have known, whose humanity we know, breathing love and acceptance for their humanity, their flaws, their weaknesses. May we be well. May we hold each other with understanding. Slowly releasing effort, letting the thought or image of this person rest so that we can rest for a last minute in the remaining presence of these two ancestors. Mixed together, our own being, our own growth into ancestors, held between them.

(23:56):

And slowly returning, opening our eyes, still holding that energy a little bit, just ending with a final wish of wellbeing to each other's ancestors, each other's place as ancestors in training. Just acknowledging this community of people here and acknowledging this shared path we're on as ancestors in training, this shared interval between those that came and those that will inherit what we do.

(24:34):

And just dedicating, saying thank you, thank you to all of you. Thank you to everyone for sharing the space, making the effort to be here and dedicating this work outwards. And I can close out passing back to Shankari. Thank you.

Shankari Goldstein (24:55):

Thank you, Juan. That was really lovely. I love that visual of being isolated but still connected in nature. That was really, really nice. Be resonating on that a little bit today. As nisch shared earlier, the purpose of Mind & Life Connect is to generate community discussions and solutions to lead to planetary healing. In addition to hearing these great insights from Juan that we just heard, we're going to open up our breakout rooms so that you all as Mind & Life community members can begin to connect and discuss these topics around ancestral healing, body, stress, and trauma further with one another. And we're going to split you all up into groups and we'll give you a prompt to help guide your group discussion. And you're going to be in your breakout rooms for a total of 10 minutes each; we're going to try to get to two breakout rooms today. And we ask that you limit your comments to two to three minutes each, and practice stepping forward and back to allow everyone time to share equally.

(25:58):

And just a reminder that our session today is going to be recorded and made available to all of you as registrants, and just allow one week following this event for us to edit and process that recording. And the final recording is going to contain Juan's talk plus Q&A with our live attendees, but it's not going to include these breakout sessions that you're about to go into. Just wanted to let you know that. And Juan, if you'd like, you can share the first prompt with them and we'll also put it in the chat for you.

Juan Santoyo (26:29):

Thank you. Yeah. And so, the little taster of practice I wanted to give, I invited us to engage with a revered and a known ancestor, but the practice follows, many of us know—in loving kindness practice, we often also invite in our difficult figures. And so, you can all imagine how you might extend this practice to work with your difficult ancestors. And so, here the prompt, the question is, how can we hold the duality of beauty and strength or pain and shame that can come up when we consider our ancestors? And are there specific qualities on either side of this duality that we would like to engage in more deeply as ancestors in training?

Shankari Goldstein (27:21):

We've got everybody coming back now. Welcome back. Thank you all for your patience. And we want to leave as much time [as possible] for you all to spend with Juan today, so we're going to opt to not go into the second breakout room and move directly to our Q&A portion with Juan so you can engage in some dialogue with him. What you're going to do is you're going to search the bottom of your Zoom screen, the features, and go to your reactions and select the “raise hand” feature in Zoom. And at that time you may be selected to voice your question directly. Alternatively, you can add your question in the chat for our team to capture and bring forward. If we can have people begin to raise their hands now, if you're interested in coming up on screen and asking your question to Juan.

Question 1: How do you see contemplative practice and social activism intersect to create positive change?

Juan Santoyo (28:30):

Contemplative practices do some of the best jobs of engaging the body, the lived experience of who we are when it comes to healing. And while medicine, the medicines we take are great, are needed, very few medicines engage the existence and the embodiment of who we are as deeply as practice does. I think it has that unique strength. And then practice is uniquely communal. Fundamentally, we practice in community. And I think that's the other element that western medicine really struggles with. It's really individualistic, it's, "Take this and go and do your best." And I think a lot of the wisdom is the turn towards social-based approaches to building resilience to and to healing.

Question 2: Can you share more about your Alzheimer's research?

Juan Santoyo (29:46):

It's an urgent question. It's either in our path or in our families. It's something just so close to all of us. And I think understanding the social factors both helps us understand what leads us to these destinations, but also, how can we shape a better world? And yeah, I think I mentioned that there's a racial disparity, but one of the other big known disparities is a gender/sex disparity, where women have a much higher incidence rate of dementia. And again, I think with both that and the racial disparity, there's a lot of work into whether some of that's biological, there might be biological differences that might underlie that. But in part I was suggesting that some of the racial disparities might be due to the stressors and adversities that we hit. And I think we can definitely see that that might also be a contributing factor in women.

Juan Santoyo (30:57):

It's some of the work we plan on doing. And part of it is looking at how... Luckily we have a few decades of research on stress and early life adversity to lean on. So we already know how all of these neurochemical cascades that get set off by stressors—we already know that they have heavy impacts on the body. And so, that's where we're able to pick up, starting to look at how things like cortisol, HPA access, dysregulation, sleep dysregulation, how these different factors might... Let's start looking with what's already known. And so, we're starting with those known impacts of early life stress, of chronic stress, and seeing, how might these have key interactions with the pathways of Alzheimer's? And maybe in those lines of work we can find, here's a place we can intervene. And yeah, that's the work we're doing right now.

Question 3: "Aging to Saging", or utilizing one's living experience and the creativity of young people is an important intersection. What are your thoughts on this?

Juan Santoyo (32:10):

Yeah, "aging to saging" sounds really cool. And I think it sounds like at its core, it's a similar idea to framing ourselves as ancestors in training. It's looking at how we can be sages as we develop on the path, how that can be part of all of our paths. And yeah, I definitely agree with your request for more intergenerational spaces. I think it's something that it's easier in some countries; in South America, in Colombia, it's easier to find spaces where you are with young kids and with grandparents. It's much harder in the States. I don't know as much about how it is in Europe, but it feels healthier to be in that space in Colombia where we can play and share across generations. Yeah, definitely lift that up.

Question 4: How does your research account for individuals that are outliers (e.g., Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama)?

Juan Santoyo (33:19):

Two things come to mind. One, just central to your question, is one of the key mysteries in Alzheimer's research. There are two proteins that people started linking to dementia. They started seeing people diagnosed with dementia, and when they looked at their brains when they died, they tended to have these two aberrant, unhealthy proteins. But then the big mystery was that they started looking at more people's brains after they had passed away. And many people would have the same unhealthy proteins, and yet were just as healthy. Actually, these outliers are really important. In the scientific sense, they're really important because they show us that the picture isn't so simple, that it's not just these two proteins acting alone; and that there has to be a convergence of other factors that manage to protect us from what had been thought to have been a driver of Alzheimer's.

(34:19):

And so, yeah, it's part of that mystery. I think the cases of where we age healthy need to be just as studied as where we age less healthy. And I can dream of a study going forward where we look at some expert agers, people who... and I think like you named, practitioners who practice into old age. I think anecdotally, I've seen and I hear of a lot of maintained sharpness of mind. And so, it'd be really interesting going forward, to dream of a research study that could help us see what was protective for them, and how can we use that to support more people? It's really a

rich area.

Question 5: How do we deal with the duality of preferring healthy aging and the practice of “Holding no preference”? And how do we help care for those that are aging in both healthy and unhealthy ways?

Juan Santoyo (35:21):

I think in some models of aging and practice, the framing I see is more, how can we get to that last breath and arrive there in peace? And I think you're right that maybe that is a healthier aging. Even if our sharpness of thought or concentration or memory changes, maybe the more important question is, how can we arrive to those changes from a place of peace? There's a beautiful question there to think about how we could age and even have these faculties change and still be at peace with that.

(36:09):

Yeah. And at the same time, yeah, I feel your same instinct, that I also want to buffer that. Yeah, interesting. In my dives into the Buddhist literature around this, aging is little talked about. It's talked about as this inevitable stressor that will come, but I haven't found too much of a prescriptive dialogue of how to better encounter aging. More just, it's part of the diagnosis, but the cure is a different chapter. And what can we do as we get there? I think again—our participant mentioned how he's encountered difficulties and been pretty resilient—I think being socially connected, eating well, our diet, our exercises, the things we know; but also if we can regulate stress, inflammation in our body, I think those are some of the leads I'd like to follow. Inflammation and stress seem to contribute, to speed up these processes. And so, perhaps as they start, being able to maintain balance, in mind and body, can actually help buffer the process.

Question 6: Does any of your work reflect learned factors (e.g., needing to see a face to know that they are there) in order to be part of a community?

Juan Santoyo (37:43):

I can't say my work engages with this directly, but I think it points to a good... I think what I brought up at the end, [that] isolation is an exacerbating factor in aging—I think this highlights how not all minds are the same, and not everybody's mental health needs are the same. And what's connection to one person might drive anxiety for another person. I think it points to some of the nuances, and how it can help us to build models of connection, build models of peace as we were talking about, that hold different minds equally. I don't think my work directly engages with the question, so just some speculation.

Question 7: Are there any societal models in which elder experience is used to help others, and if so, are there any research findings to share from those cases?

Juan Santoyo (38:55):

What comes to mind is just, what's here is a call for both humility and creativity. I think we need to be humble, that we don't have the right answer yet. We currently are not employing the best model for being a community that ages. And we can be creative in doing that better. We can

within ourselves try to think of new models. But I think what you named is really rich, that there are communities outside of the American, European, western sphere that perhaps do this a lot healthier. And I named—my home country is within the western sphere, but still, to me, seems to engage across ages a little bit more healthy. I think this question steps outside of my more physiological expertise, but I think it's on the mark, of the type of changes we need to see.

Juan Santoyo (40:03):

And what I do see is just that isolation alone is going to be one of the strong driving factors that speeds up aging. And so, if we can build up more connected communities, that's going to help a great deal. And I think even just the investing we do here as a community, in practices that build connectivity, should also be fundamental. I think in the studies that look at isolation, the real problem is the feeling of disconnection, of being alone, and perhaps the person alone in the forest meditating alone, but deeply connected with the world, experiences that differently. But it's a good question for us to engage with.

nischal neupane (40:56):

Thank you so much, Juan, for all that wisdom and thank you all for all those amazing questions that you asked. Juan, before we close, do you have any closing thoughts you want to bring up to round off the conversation a little bit?

Juan Santoyo (41:13):

No. I think just a bow of gratitude, again. It was fun to practice with you guys, to share this. This is a very living, breathing stage of my work. A lot of this is unfolding, and I think one of the places I haven't had time to circle back to in this work is the contemplative frameworks on aging. I'm currently immersed in the physiology of it, and I know there's going to be a lot to gain there. I think a lot of that came up in this conversation. I enjoyed the book recommendation and I think this final question that came up, this fundamental question that came up of, not just how do we slow aging, but how can we also just reach that place and be at peace when we get there?

nischal neupane (42:09):

Yep. Great. Thank you. Thank you so much, Juan. Thank you so much. Juan's an incredibly human being, obviously. We got to a portion of what he presents to the world. If you want to know more about his work, I would highly, highly recommend listening to our podcast with him. He talks about his work in Colombia, which I think is incredibly impressive, and more about his research as well, so please check that out. Thank you all for being here. Again, we are so grateful to have you as a part of our community. Thank you for staying for an hour and a half, which is incredible on a Thursday afternoon. We are really, really grateful. There's a couple things I want to tell you about before we leave.

(42:54):

Once you leave, there's going to be a survey that's going to pop up on the screen. If you have a couple minutes to let us know how this went, we can take your feedback and improve on our next programs. And by the way, registration is open for our two other Mind & Life Connects already. The next one is on April 27th at 2:00, the same time, with Dr. Inger Burnett-Zeigler. And the session title is "Our Emotional Lives: Exploring the Complex Relationship between Stress, Trauma, and the Body". And then we have another one lined up for May 25th with assistant

professor and psychologist Dominique Malebranche, and it's going to be on "Trauma and Resilience". We are really hoping to see you there.

nischal neupane (43:39):

We are going to send out a recording for today's session in about a week, so please keep an eye on that if you wanted to look at that. The program's going to officially end in about two minutes. Thank you so much. We are so grateful to have you here. Yeah, so much gratitude. Take care. Have a wonderful afternoon.

Shankari Goldstein (44:02):

Juan, do you want to lead us in a closing practice?

Juan Santoyo (44:07):

Yeah. I think for those that are still here, I think we can close out this last minute.

(44:14):

Just settling back in, taking a deep breath, letting the breath take its own rhythm and just evoking a little gentle or strong sense of gratitude. Sharing that out to everyone that participated with us, that shared their own stories or just held our presence. Thank you. May they be well. May I be well. Thank you all. Pleasure to be here. A wonderful day to everyone.