



MINDFUL IN MAY

Dr. Elise Bialylew, founder of Mindful in May (mindfulinmay.org) and The Mind Life Project (www.mindlifeproject.com) and author of The Happiness Plan, interviews Diego Perez, also known as Yung Pueblo.

Diego Perez / Yung Pueblo

Diego Perez is a meditator, writer, and speaker who is most widely known on Instagram and various social media networks through his pen name Yung Pueblo. Diego's practice of Vipassana meditation, as taught by S.N. Goenka, has given him a deeper understanding of liberation that inspires his written work. Through writing and speaking he aims to support the healing of the individual, knowing that when people release their personal burdens it helps humanity build a global peace. Through poems, quotes, and short essays, he explores the reality of self-healing, the movement from self-love to unconditional love, and the wisdom that comes when we truly work toward knowing ourselves. His first book is called Inward and he currently lives in New York City.

In this interview you will learn:

- How meditation can be used to help humanity and the world as a whole
- How to deal with the self-doubt that comes up during meditation
- The paradox of how releasing attachments to enlightenment can bring about enlightenment

Elise: Diego, welcome to the program, it's a pleasure to have you here and I'm really looking forward to our conversation, thanks for being here.

Diego: Thank you so much for having me Elise, I am excited to be speaking with you today.

Elise: So, as I said before we started this recording, I came upon you because your book "Inward" was kind of flying around everywhere, on the internet, and then I stumbled upon your Instagram account, which kind of came out and erupted out of the ground and like it's touching so many people and it's where you share a lot your perspectives and insights that link a lot to the book "Inward." And then, I think I saw your name on the Wisdom 2.0 list of speakers, so I was really intrigued to have this conversation. But just before we get stuck into it, for those people who haven't come upon you and your work. I wondered if you could give us a little sense of Diego, who you are, where you've come from and how you've landed in this particular place of writing and exploring meditation.

Diego: Definitely, thank you for asking. So, a lot of people know me as Yung Pueblo and that's a name I've sort of taken upon myself, one, because it reminds where I come from, I

was actually born in Ecuador and I moved to the United States when I was about four years old. So, I grew up in the US and that name Pueblo is particularly... connects with the masses of people, masses of particularly improvised people, so I like to really remember my roots. And also the name to me really connects with something important that, when I started meditating, really dawned on me heavily and it was that, you know, it literally means young people, and I think when we consider the collective of humanity, we're really very young and we're doing a lot of growing up, especially over this twenty first century. I think we have some of the biggest challenges that we have ever faced and a lot of it, you know, through the challenges, and before the challenges actually really started occurring, we really have a lot of growing up to do. And I like to be reminded of that, and also just sort of trying to hold together that collective idea, that we're all sort of maturing and growing and that it's not necessarily, you know, a lot of the things that I am writing about are insights that I am coming upon but they also have a sort of universal aspect. I feel like a lot of people are doing a lot of that internal work right now, so that's why it's connecting with a lot of people and you know we all sort of like feeling and thinking together in a very powerful way. But I'm a Vipassanā meditator and in the S.N. Goenka tradition, and I have been meditating for a few years now, and it, sort of, has really helped me develop an internal understanding of liberation because my background is actually in activism, and it has, you know, I've always understood liberation in the material terms, but when I started meditating it sort of gave it a full circle understanding that of course we have to, you know mould and change our world, reorganise it into something that is much more harmonious and equitable for all people. But there has to be a lot of internal work to address the craving, you know the greed, the hatred that's inside of us, it's actually exacerbating this global collective problem.

Elise: Just out of curiosity can you speak a little bit more about the activism, so where you came from in terms of this... you know, the external work that you doing.

Diego: Yeah, so I started activism back as a youth organiser when I was about fifteen years old, so I'm thirty-one right now, and that to me was just the most formative period of my life. You know, I really started seeing and connecting a lot of the big problems and issues that people were facing and feeling the power to actually do something about it with other groups of young people, and literally organising young people within their own schools, to help make their schools better and also organising young people across the city to literally change the city and to do some serious, either like changing our transportation system, the public transportation system, or changing the guidance regulations within schools and making actual substantial tangible changes. But it also left me with an understanding that we are powerful, but there is something missing. You know, because there are always, as I've studied history there are always been groups of people who have tried to change the world for a better place. But it only feels like now do we actually have the tools widely available and much more accessible than ever before to deeply transform ourselves as individuals alongside that external change that we also need.

Elise: Can I ask, you know I think what struck me about you and the work you do in the world is that you seem to almost have this like level of wisdom and capacity to sort of turn ideas and insights, articulate them in a way that's so accessible to a large amount of people. That seems almost beyond someone who has lived for thirty-ones years on the planet, that's what struck me and also even you talking about being an, you know getting into social activism at fifteen, like that's kind of quite unique, I think, as well. Can I ask, what do you see as contributed to that for you? Like, how do you get that level of, I guess, agency – or a sense that you can make a difference. What were the contributing factors?

Diego: I think a lot of it has to do with my peers because, so I grew up in the city of Boston and currently I live in New York city. But in Boston there is such dynamic and powerful grassroots, non-profit movement there, where there are so many different groups there, that are just doing fantastic work. So, that was available to me and when I, you know my brother was actually apart of this same organisation, called Boston Youth Organising Project and he was the one who sort of pulled me in there when I was fifteen years old. And I saw what everyone else was doing and I was learning from other fellow young people. So, to me it was actually very normal, and you know I was very lucky to be in a small microcosm of society where young people were like actively empowering each other and sort of like rearing each other up to be like, okay well this is the problem that we see, now let's do something about it, lets actually try to change it. So, to me that was like, just always like a fact of life so didn't think of it as being particularly weird or anything like that. I think when I started meditating you know I think the same thing that happens to a lot of people, I think I may have a skill with communicating in a minimalistic format but I've seen a lot of my fellow meditators, you know, there is a lot of people that I look up to who are inspiring me constantly and the beautiful thing about meditation is, it's no so much about the age but it's about the effort you put into it and that consistency because you know in a way we really like ageless beings and it's a matter of how much can we really sort of dig into that conditioning and allow that like raw clarity of consciousness and beyond consciousness to really sort of shoot forward.

Elise: Just on what you've said, there is a theme that's been coming up with a number of the conversations I've been having for this programme around separateness versus interconnectedness, and I think your story there is such a beautiful illumination of how, you know, we're individuals but were so influenced by all the relationships around us and how important it is to actually take a step back and reflect on, you know, whose around me and what's my environment doing for me. And I think that's such a powerful example for you, of how that really shapes who you are and your trajectory.

Diego: What you saying really reminds me of this quote by Jiddu Krishnamurti that really holds you, and he said that, "The inner creates the outer but the outer moulds the inner." And I think a lot of people sort of you know, want to think of it as just one way either one way, but it's really both. So, I mean your environment can you know can really lift you up or cause you a lot of misery.

Elise: Yeah, I'm reflecting on my own life and I'm thinking about times, you know where I might have been in a job or a context that was not feeling deeply fulfilling, and there was always this advice of, like, well can you change it without leaving your, like, can you make a change internally so that the way you relating to this situation can be different, you know, and I tried that. Then I came to the conclusion, no, I think sometimes you just have to leave, like sometimes there are systems that are actually holding you back and it isn't just inner work. I really like the quote you saying, it's speaking to this need to discern, how much of this is my inner work that I need to do and how much of this is an insane system that I'm in and it's actually not healthy and I need to leave it?

Diego: I really love that you saying that too, especially with, one things that I love about my meditation teacher at S.N. Goenka, he talks about how the point of meditation is not to turn you into a vegetable and then everyone can cut at you and do whatever they want to you, and you're just kind of lifeless. Not at all, It's to make you a very active person. And, of course, over time, you do develop the equanimity to be able to handle situations in a much calmer way. You know, in a much more effective way, but there are still times where you have to say no to harm, where harm is coming your way, and you're like: No you can't do that to me. So either move out of my way or I'm going to tell you what I'm actually thinking.

Elise: And in some ways I think its practice that makes us more courageous and more able to assert ourselves in those contexts. Not, like the opposite of passivity.

Diego: Yeah and I think the powerful thing is that you can engage in those difficult situations without harming yourself, without sort of reinforcing patterns that, you know, reinforce the hatred inside you, or the rage, or you know all of that. Instead you can come forward with a lot of love, cause a lot of people think that love is very passive but it's very active, and love, the way that it's soft it can also be very hard and it can make those hard decisions and hard actions that require your personal protection or whatever it is that you need. I like to think of Martin Luther King Jnr. He dramatically changed the United States and was such an important organiser, and a lot of people look to him like a criminal, but he was really motivated by love, that's how he made things better.

Elise: So, I just wanted to move into your, you said it's not necessarily about the years that you live, it's about effort that you, the effort and the amount that you absorb in and I think, you've, I'd love to hear about your experience in meditation and you've done a number of retreats. Particularly because there are listeners that I think, they may not have been on a meditation retreat before and I know myself before I had, there was a lot of fear and I really quite resisted it because, quite frankly, I was scared as hell to be somewhere for seven days or ten days in my own head. I thought: What's going to happen? Like I could go completely nuts. It sounds like a form of torture! Can you speak a little bit about your experience going into that process, I think I read somewhere that you actually went on an extended retreat for maybe thirty days or something? I don't know if

Diego: Yeah last January or sorry this past January.

Elise: Yeah, so, I would love if you could speak to your experience in service of perhaps opening some doors to people that might be listening and thinking, Oh, I couldn't ever do that or why would you do that?

Diego: Yeah for sure. You know, I like to think back to the first time I did a ten-day course which was back in July of 2012 and I think that first one definitely felt incredibly difficult. It felt like it was an herculin effort, like it was so outside of the normal of what my regular life was, and I think that's the difficulty. Is that you literally building a new mental skill set and you kind of starting from scratch, and that, you know, not only is your mind fighting you because it wants to be patterned a certain way – and that's the great difficulty, the moment that the mind starts feeling that, okay this conditioning is actually being peeled back, it will push back and try to find a reason, so that you're okay, thinking to yourself, well I've been here for three days and I think I've learned enough and I'm ready to go. And, all of a sudden, it's funny because I've heard of a number of times where, it's, you know that it's really working when you starting to make up reasons in your head as to why you ready to go. The patterns, like the bigger sort of internal burdens and knots are starting to come up for a release and that's not an easy process because a lot of times we're not quite deeply understanding that there are actual hurts and wounds in the mind that actually need to be cleaned up. Like, these very dense patterns, and ... the letting go happens silently and very quickly, but some of them do come up in such a visceral way, that it feels like the anxiety that you felt during a traumatic situation that happened to you in your life – or the sadness that you felt – it feels so crystal clear that it's kind perplexing and it's challenging. But that's literally what's in some people's way of letting go: allowing these storms to come up from inside you and release the things that have just been bundled up inside you for so many years. And it's quite, you know, when I talked to my friends after I finished the first one, I remember I told them that I felt that I learned more in ten days then I did in four years of college. And, I literally felt like I had lost a hundred pounds, but I lost like six pounds, you know, or like five pounds because you eat

a little less when you meditating and it's a healthier diet. But I was, you know, it was, I just couldn't look back, I felt so many profound effects from it and it was incredibly difficult, but I ended up signing up for another one two months later because I was like basically asking myself what happened. Why do I feel better? What's going on?

Elise: It triggers that, it invites you, it's intriguing, I mean it's a intriguing experience. It kind of pulls you to discover more. Like if that's what I discovered in ten days, what's going to happen if I go again. Can I just, can I ask you, you use the word conditioning and I know what you mean by this, but I would love for you to unpack that a little bit for listeners who might be newer to this kind of language. Sorry, just to clarify we're talking about the conditioning of the mind, which comes up a lot, this phrase in meditation. But I would love to hear your perspective on it.

Diego: When I think of conditioning, I'm really glad that you asked that. Not only is it all of the things that society had sort of imposed on you because you were born in a certain area, these are the things that are prominent ideas in time you've been indoctrinated to believe that okay this is proper, this is right, and so not only what you've been receiving informationally, but you combine that with everything that you think of that comes after the word I, me and my. When you like, my mom, my dad, and that's a simple thing, like obviously on an actual level they are your mother, they are your father but when you go deeper there is a lot more information there that has to be sort of unravelled, and not only is it the associations, the ego's associations, but it is also combining your personal emotional history. Which I think is, the term that I like use is emotional history, because there is so much that has happened to us and that's really what binds us together as human beings. Because we all have very different conditioning, because we all grew up in different parts of the world, and we believe that different things are right and wrong. But what ties us together is, no matter where you've been, or what privileges you have, or what you experience in your life, we all have that same thing in common: that we've all felt intense sadness, we've all felt serious grief at one point or another, we've all felt those different sort of variants in the spectrum of heavier emotions, we've all felt those intense emotions and when you feel those very intense emotions they actually leave a mark in your subconscious and they predispose you to feeling them again, and I think that's a big part of. When I talk about conditioning, I'm talking about peeling back all that emotional history and not necessarily going back into every single memory that you have of difficult moments but, you know literally allowing the mind to be calm and concentrated enough to release that barrier between the conscious and the subconscious so that these things that are bundled up in there can actually be released. And, once that emotional history starts sort of coming out of you there is so much more space in your mind that you can start reforming your, other parts of your conditioning. So that the world has taught you, and asking yourself: ok this is what I've been taught, but what do I actually believe. And, you are opening up a new space to really sort of make yourself into the person that you want to be as opposed to what you've been conditioned into being.

Elise: Wonderful, thank you so much for that description. I think for me, it kind of reminds me of, it's not me that invented this metaphor but, the fish in the water it like really is, the fish in the water just doesn't know that they in water. Cause that's just....

Diego: That's right, exactly.

Elise: And, like for me the conditioning is that sense of, where all these individuals have had different stories, different emotional histories as you call it – and it's like that's normal for us and we don't realise we kind of, we're surrounded by this water, which I will call these core believe or thoughts, or who we think we are and what we're entitled to in the world. And, so it's... I feel like meditation helps us to see the water and go, kind of, hang on. Is the water

clean or am I swimming in mud water or do I want a fresher bowl of water or...? So, can you speak to how, in your experience – because this idea of thoughts and how imprisoning our thoughts can be around this sort of thing of conditioning – how you've found meditation to kind of shift your relationship to thoughts. Can you speak to that?

Diego: It's been a big shift, I think not only is there – I think a lot of people who do a variety of forms of meditation, not just the ones that come out of the Buddhist traditions, they end up finding that they're not their thoughts but they're the observer behind the thoughts. So, that's like a very big thing, but one thing that has really helped me with my own personal progression and freedom is also understanding that this thing that you think is the observer is also a dynamic situation that is composed and is also ever-moving. And because a lot of times I feel like my personal misery has been exacerbated by my idea of finding an authentic self within myself. Like you know, who's the real me? And, instead what I found is instead of trying to focus on what the real me is, because who I am is always changing, why don't I instead focus on relieving the patterns that are causing me sadness and misery and delusions, and then things will become much clearer. So, I think my relationship with my thoughts is not only: is there a bit of – I would call it like positive distance – where you know I'm being able to observe my thoughts, and if they get chaotic I can also much more easily, calmly observe them and know that if I'm feeling intense in this moment that's also going to you know, that's not going to last forever. No storm lasts forever so this is also going to change. And obviously sometimes I also definitely get taken away by my thoughts, like I'm not perfect at all, I don't ever claim to be, but there has definitely been some progress where sadness may come up or anxiety may come up, like it used to. But it's not in the same intensity as before, because you're literally just cutting down these patterns and they don't have that same potency as they used to. Which also alleviates the thought pattern, but you know that difficult thoughts come and go and it's more so not about exactly trying to change your thoughts but just being able to have a positive relationship to them that doesn't completely identify with them. You know like I'm not every single emotion that I'm feeling. I'm not every thought that I'm having. What I am is essentially change.

Elise: Yeah, that's so true. I think that's so much of what you learn in the practice right?

Diego: Mm hmm.

Elise: Everything is change.

Diego: Everything is changing, yeah. It's the best.

Elise: Yeah, what about the, so can you tell us about the longer retreat, what was that like?

Diego: It was fantastic, I'm actually pretty excited I've been, I'm going to go and do my second thirty-day course January 16th to February 16th, so I'm gearing up and you know getting everything ready for that in my life and just like personally / mentally preparing for it. But I'm excited because you know it's, it was a tremendous experience, I think I was able to get so much work done, because after you get accustomed to sort of doing the ten days and you sort of deepen your practice, you learn the technique a lot better. It comes to a point where you feel like oh if I just had a little more time, I could go even deeper, like get even more work done or now I'm actually working efficiently so let me like try to put some more effort in there. So, it really gives you that space to just go so much deeper and to really see what the mind can do, because we live our lives doing what we good at and what we're taught to do which is read, write, speak and communicate, and that sort of external fashion. But we don't really give ourselves time to cultivate awareness, to be able to actually feel what's happening inside the body and to deeply observe nature like that. So, it feels like a very fortunate to be able to have this space in my life, to have this opportunity but it's, you

know I really recommend it to people, especially if they like learning. There is just so much that I learned and just giving myself those thirty-days, those continuous thirty-days that, I think changed my life forever for sure.

Elise: Can you speak to some of, you know in the ancient text they talk about the different obstacles of the mind that come up inevitably on anyone's journey in meditation. Can you share maybe, I don't know an anecdote or your own story about dealing, navigating an obstacle that might have come up, like an inner obstacle, or any kind of I guess teaching or from a teacher, anything that was given to you that really helped you navigate a particular obstacle?

Diego: Yes, I can think of two things. I think one of the biggest ones for me is doubt, doubt often comes up and I feel, either I'm like doubting myself, like am I worthy, am I doing this correctly and I forget, it's one thing to experience what's happening inside you while you actually practicing. But it's another thing when you sort of examine your life from that external perspective and you start noticing well yeah, over time I have become a calmer person, over time you know I do produce less harmful actions, like I'm not as vindictive or vengeful or anything like that anymore. I have a lot less hate and I'm actively giving more love to people. So, when you examine yourself through your actions, you're actually seeing the technique that you practicing is working but, in the moment, when you like in there and you like practicing for hours and hours, you like man is this even working at all. You know, you really start doubting yourself but, so that's a big one for sure that comes up and that's like in the text, it says to watch out for that it's definitely one of the five enemies.

Elise: So, what do you do with that? Like how do you manage that? Have you got any ways that you...?

Diego: Just recognise it for what it is and then either if I like need to clam myself then I practice *anapana*, which is breathing awareness. So, that really helps sort of settle, anchor the ship in the storm. Or, I try to just keep practicing, because a lot of times you're, when you get caught up in the doubt or you get caught up in whatever storm you know you get taken away into like this mental area and you totally forgot what your actual objective was, to keep practicing. So, then being able to know this, oh wow I'm getting over, I'm over here when I'm supposed to be in here. So, like just actively having the patience to bring yourself back. Try again, try again that's been really helpful.

Elise: And you mentioned that there were two things that came up. What was the other one?

Diego: Oh, the other one was, I remember I was talking to teacher and I think, you know and this is particular to the Vipassanā technique that we practice, but I was telling him the different things that kept coming up and he reminded me that, you know it actually doesn't so much matter what you experiencing, because the moment you start identifying with what you're experiencing, you're attaching yourself to it and you're reinforcing that pattern really grows. And, it's like when you in those moments of very deep meditation, then it's more so about taking a step back and actually observing not the contents of the mind but actually the object which is to see what is the nature of reality. So, not so much, oh I'm so sad right now, it's like okay yes, I'm sad but is this sadness impermanent, you know does it also change, like what's also happening here, what's the greater picture, focus on the impermanent's or you know the aspect of dissatisfaction or the aspect that there is not substantial ego. And I think that profoundly helped me. Especially in that course which was definitely some difficult moments but understanding you know this is happening but, don't worry about it too much keep focusing on what you're doing. Which is like keep meditating.

Elise: How do you find that; how do you find that what you've learnt in these retreats and then gets kind of applied or integrated into everyday life challenges? So, like literally you're moving through the world and it's inevitable that challenges are going to come up either internal, external, relationships. How does that play out for you? Tell us how it looks?

Diego: I think it plays out, I think one of the most powerful ones in everyday life is meta, you know, practicing love and kindness and there are so many difficult moments where, you know, living in New York city there is like tons of poverty, tons of you know the homeless population is immense. So, you know there are times when I am able to support other people monetarily and I can give change and there is sometimes where I like literally don't have anything on me, but I see someone suffering and when I'm passing by them instead of, like you know in the past I remember when I was little I would actively like try to avoid seeing their misery and now like actually coming in contact. And, not like literally necessarily speaking to someone but just being like okay this is happening to this person and let me send love. You know, at the bare minimum that's what I can do as I'm like moving about in my own life. So, like actively not ignoring what's happening and meeting it with love is like the, it really changed the game because in New York city, I mean it's a wonderful, beautiful city but there is also a lot of misery here. So, coming across other difficult people that I've encountered or difficult situations that I've seen from afar you know you just try to beam that love out and it really helps. It helps calm you and it helps keep your mind clear and I think it also helps the situation, you know get a little less crazy,

Elise: For those that might be newer to loving kindness, do you want to just speak about what that practice is and also how you make it feel more yours. Because you know I feel, like I don't know about you but for me when I got introduced to it, it felt a little bit, it just didn't feel like fit me, like it was a bit airy fairy or flowery. So, do you have any, do you want to say something about what it is and like how you've found that, that practice feels authentic to you. Like what you say to yourself or what you actually do in the practice?

Diego: Sure, yeah, I mean. I would just like to note that I am not a meditation teacher, so from just my own personal experiences. But to me I can definitely relate to that feeling, when I first learnt the practice of meta it didn't feel quite right. But then over time, I guess more of that space opened up in my mind, where not only was I able to actually feel love for myself, like may I be happy, may I be peaceful. But then, you know, starting to think about my loved ones, like may my mother be happy, may my mother be peaceful. And then that space, that circle just sort of widens and then opens up and you eventually get to the idea of may all beings be happy and that is something. I don't actually talk about the practice of meta. But, at the end of every post I make on Instagram, I always say, you know, sending love to all beings, may we all be happy and free. And whether people know it or not, some people do know that's meta that I'm sending out, but it's nice to sort of see that, feel that in myself and give a little something to other people, and also seeing other people catch onto that and doing it themselves. Is like pretty cool to see that, there is a lot more people involved giving meta nowadays then you know maybe like six years ago.

Elise: Beautiful, I wanted to pull a quote out of your book, you wrote in the book "Inward" – it was around the idea of self-love, so I'm just going to read it out. It say, "self-love is a meeting and a balance of two critically important ideas: loving who we currently are and simultaneously transforming into the ideal version of ourselves. Though these ideas may seem contradictory, they are both required for our ultimate success; without acceptance our transformation into a happier and freer self would be highly difficult." Do you want to speak to this idea? I thought it was just such a beautiful quote and I have often reflected on the kind of paradox there in and in order to change we have to accept.

Diego: Absolutely, that's something that kept popping up in my life. I remember before I was able to meditate daily, I knew that I had the aspiration I really want to be able to meditate every day. You know, I had already gone off to four or five ten day courses and I still wasn't quite able to bring back the practice to my home, and I was kind of beating myself up about it, like I was really just like: why can't I... kind of being a little harsh with myself. And eventually it was really the moment where I was able to accept, okay, like, that is what I want but this is where I am. And, the moment I started treating myself more gently, things really quickly fell together, and it almost felt like that was the missing piece for me to really move forward into where I wanted to be, was to literally just accept exactly where I was in a loving way without trying to necessarily push myself faster or anything, and just be like okay, this is where we are, and that's great and that's fine. But understanding that... and it's funny because a lot of life is a paradox, as you meditate you know, like you and I are here but what are we at the ultimate level, it's like a rapid phenomenon of change that is happening. But we also two people, you have a name and I have a name and we talking and we having this conversation in this moment. But it's an important one to understand because, you know, whether you want to change yourself or not, having an underlying layer, a foundation of love, will help you move forward in whatever direction it is that you wish, and I think that's really important.

Elise: Thank you. The other things that I wanted to pull out is this quote you write, "stress and anxiety are the children of attachment. They are both forms of craving that take us away from the present and into areas of imagination that steal away our peace". Can you just speak to what you mean by attachment and just share anything that you've experienced or learnt about this and how our relationship to attachment, kind of, either imprisons us or offers us freedom?

Diego: To me attachment is ...we have... I mean, we have a lot more attachments than I think we are aware of and I really feel that an attachment is something that gives you a strong amount of mental tension. Because absolutely it's fine to have goals to have aspirations but we don't quite realise that our cravings are not actually goals and they not aspirations. And, a lot of the times when we crave the thing that we want to be it delays it, it pushes it away, and the moment we can sort of purify our attention and be like, okay, I do want to move in this direction but when I'm not there, I'm not going to make my happiness dependent on this future outcome. Let me see if I can be happy now. And these are really, you know, it's a really important thing to understand that these attachments, I mean there is just so many of them and I mean how you know if something is an attachment if it's causing you mental tension. If you can't actively deal with it peacefully in your own mind then there it goes, there's another one. There is tons of things that cause mental tension because we don't realise how actively we're placing expectations, trying to control the world around us and the other human beings around us. So, attachments is a big one.

Elise: Have you found that the meditation has helped you that?

Diego: Yeah, it's really helped me let go of controlling my life and, you know, like in a paradoxical way: control my life more. You know, now that I have a better understanding of my own mind that I'm training it, you know the situations outside of me don't necessarily dictate how I feel, so if a difficult situation comes up, I have a bigger opportunity now to decide, you know, okay this is my initial pattern that comes up, oh this is anger. You know someone outside of me is giving me anger and initially I want to respond with anger, but is that actually what I want to do? Because you know a lot of times our initial sort of, that blind reaction, is what comes out first. But that's not always what we want to be doing, sometimes you know you actually want to take a step back and decide for yourself. Okay well I've

responded like this with anger tons of times, it's never worked out for me, I've like burnt away hours of my life being angry, so why don't I just know walk away or say my peace and then go away. Or you know there's so many other options, but I think the amount of, that tightness, that the attachment makes and that sort of rapid reaction, over time when you meditate it decreases so that it allows that space for you to get to decide and really live in a new way.

Elise: You know when you talk about that anger and those reactions, I'm thinking it's just fascinating how as humans we're kind of like, part animals and part conscious thinking being, and I feel like the journey of meditation is to kind of move us from reactive unthinking animal state to using our brains, our brains and hearts. And, their fullest capacity gives us a capacity to actually govern out behaviour rather than be driven by our reflexive automatic responses.

Diego: I really agree, I think one thing that when I give talks, I like to talk about how obviously evolutionarily, that's a big part of our conditioning to, you know to be fearful, to have hatred, you know that like greedy aspect of sort of human habit, I like to call it. Because we have been conditioned in this way because this is what helps us survive. You know, these things are no way going to help or support your happiness, but it will help you overcome a difficult situation and keep going, even though you may be miserable it will help you keep going and that's what evolution wants from you. You know, obviously to procreate and keep attempting to live, but when you start doing meditation, a lot of it is literally just taking your own evolution into your hands and you start literally peeling back those layers, releasing that conditioning. And a lot of people think, oh you need fear, you need greed. But you don't understand that love can actually fulfil a lot of those functions without all that mental tension, without harming yourself or other people, and you can still be very very active. You know be mindful of your survival and now you also have the opportunity not to just survive but thrive, and, like, literally be happy. So, a lot of people forget and maybe they don't know how diverse and how potent love really is.

Elise: Beautiful, do you have a favourite story that has come from the ancient teachings that you've heard that's really touched you or really opened something up for you around the understanding? If not that's fine but like...

Diego: I'm thinking, I'm like going through a library right now.

Elise: If you want to share more than one that fabulous, but whatever comes to mind.

Diego: I think one of the big ones that really has stayed with me and teaches me over and over again is, right after the Buddha passed away, there was about five hundred of the oldest Atta Huns, that's what they were called, fully enlightened beings. They gathered together to, to sort of reconfirm what the Buddha had taught and there was one person his name was Ānanda who was the Buddha's cousin and his attendant for the last twenty-five years of his life. Who he like literally spent the last twenty-five years of the Buddha's life with him and heard every discourse and Ānanda had this like weird sort of like really good karma where he could like just remember everything. But Ānanda was only a little bit enlightened, he wasn't fully enlightened. He had only sort of crossed that first barrier and was Vipassanā and he spent like seven days trying to become fully enlightened because he didn't have time to actually work on himself because he spent so much time serving other people. Just like literally supporting other people, he had literally, he himself had taught people to become fully enlightened even though he wasn't. And he, when it was his time, you know the other five hundred, they went to him Ānanda, we could really use you as a part of this meeting because you remember everything, you were there next to him, you remember the most

discourses. So, you know we going to give you a week before we have this meeting and then Ānanda tries his best and he unknowingly becomes so attached to the goal, I have to become fully enlightened. And it was only in the moment where, you know, literally, like the last day was ending he was up all night. The suns coming up and he is like you know I am just going to lay my head down to rest and I'm not fully enlightened it's totally fine and the moment he lets it go, you know, and that's sort of goal that he had, he released the craving from the goal and he just lay down – and boom it happened. And, he became fully enlightened and then he joined the meeting and then they sort of codified what the Buddha had taught. But that story just stays with me because it's important to really understand that you know it's totally fine to have a goal, but you know that it's not a goal if you working towards it and you don't get it and then you immediately feel miserable. You like, ah I didn't do it and you know, you start like revving up those patterns and repeating them over and over and treating yourself harshly. But you know there is a way to be able to move forward to work on yourself in a way where you gentle with yourself and you like okay, I didn't do it, let me keep trying and you know you keep at it.

Elise: Ah wonderful and that's a great story. I think it speaks to that driving that you hear about a lot, like the, which always used to confuse me, like, we shouldn't be striving in the meditation practice but at the same time it does require a lot of commitment and effort and it's okay to kind of want to do something. But it's like where is the drive coming from, where is the drive coming from?

Diego: I had a friend who once said something so wise and he was like we're almost like we're striving to finally learn how to not strive.

Elise: Yeah, apart from your own book would you share a couple of books that you've read that have touched you or really excited you or opened your mind in some way, I know there must be many but whatever just comes to mind now?

Diego: Yeah, I think there are four books. In terms of mindfulness and Buddhism I would say the Buddha's Disciples by Bhikkhu Bodhi is a fantastic book to have, that historically puts together the biography of the Buddha's main disciples and stories of men and women who became full enlightened, and it's just, it's shockingly powerful, and I think when I first read it, it really sort of you know gave me a little more energy to like just keep going, doing my best to move forward on my path. And, outside of the Buddha tradition there is the Hua Hu Ching and I think it's fantastic and it's not the Dao De Jing, the Dao De Jing is a very popular one. But apparently the story of Lao Tzu allowed codified a teaching under the name the Hua Hu Ching that was specifically for more his personal students, who were trying to reach enlightenment. And, it's in a similar format, very minimalistic but it's so powerful and you can get it online, I think my favourite translation is by Brian Walker, and I absolutely love that book, it's super, the wisdom was just oozing from it. And, in terms of, like, I really enjoy reading history and one of my favourites is Sapiens by Yuval Noah Harari, who is also a big-time meditator, and his newest book which I only have a chapter and a half left, called "Twenty-one lessons for the twenty-first century" – that book is astounding. I really think that this guy is, like, he is like an Einstein of the social sciences, you know he is really so brilliant that it's remarkable.

Elise: Yeah, I couldn't agree more. I just completed the trilogy and....

Diego: Oh yeah, nice!

Elise: Homo Deus as well was pretty amazing, I mean that's more forecasting but wonderful. And, interesting to hear him talk about meditation as well.

Diego: Yeah, he's great, he is also in the Vipassanā tradition, but he is in the same one I'm a part of, but he has been meditating a lot longer than I have, he has been like twenty-one years or something like that.

Elise: Was that the four, I don't want to miss a little gem here. You said the four books. I think that was four.

Diego: Yeah that was four, The Sapiens and The Twenty-one lessons.

Elise: And finally, I wanted to ask you if there was any sort of – given your own experience in meditation – if there was any advice or suggestions that you would give fellow meditators that are starting on the journey, to help them? Anything that's landed for you that you would like to share?

Diego: Oh, that's interesting, I think I also have advice for people who haven't picked something up yet. I think that one's really valuable and it might also suit other fellow meditators. But I think it's really, really important to find a tool or technique that is challenging to you without being overwhelming. So, you want to find that sweet spot where it's hard enough that you becoming stronger but not so hard that it just derails you and you don't want to keep going. So, finding that sweet spot for you, which is very different for a lot of people, you know will sort of help you meet, find a tradition that best suits you. Because there are so many different meditation traditions within Buddhism, outside of Buddhism – there's tons. And, you know, I think there is definitely something out there for you and if you have the courage to find it. And for fellow meditators consistency is everything. Like if you already have your technique, you already know the tradition that you're, that you know you connect with, I think being able to meditate on a daily basis and having the courage that even though, you know maybe like all your friends might not be meditating or something like that. But just having that courage to be okay with, okay this is what I'm interested in, this gets me excited, you know I'm going to continue doing this even if other people may think I'm weird or whatever. I'm going to go away for thirsty days even though it might scare everyone else around me. You know, just be okay with that and not worrying what other people are saying and just doing your thing. But yeah consistency and courage.

Elise: Beautiful, I think on that note I just wanted to add something there for listeners, that a lot of people often ask me what practice should I do and you sort of find people jumping between practices. And, I feel like that's a real case of our Western novelty seeking mind and I just remember one of my teacher's saying, if you just do the breath meditation every single day that will take you on the road to enlightenment.

Diego: For sure.

Elise: You don't need to be jumping around to a billion different practices. So that was really like a very important message to hear, I think.

Diego: I really, really agree. A lot of people sometimes ask me, you know what do I do to heal myself, what so I do to cultivate my freedom, and when I tell them that I only Vipassanā, there like what, you like only do one thing and I'm like: Yep. And, I'm, to me I am happy with that decision that I've made because one thing that S.N. Goenka said during his ten day course, even if you not going to continue practicing Vipassanā, don't spend your whole life just jumping from one thing to another like you were saying, and he used the analogy of, you know, someone try to dig a well and they dig a little bit here and they dig a little bit over there and then all of a sudden they have like all these little tiny holes all over the place, and if only they had kept digging in one hole, use that same effort to just keep going they would have eventually hit water. So, you know pick something and obviously there is that period where

you like trying things out and everything, but eventually being able to master one technique can really take you far into your own personal freedom.

Elise: Thank you that's such a powerful end of conversation story, I think – really, really powerful and also connects with what you were speaking about earlier, which was around meeting the resistance, which is the part of the process which is digging deeper and deeper. Like that's the challenge always going to have those uncomfortable eruptions that you need to deal with, otherwise you just going to go on and dig something else.

Diego: Yeah, right it's not all about bliss. A lot of people think that this whole field of wellness and meditation is like, oh I'm just going to give you, here is twenty dollars and I better get my bliss. But you know, it's not quite like that, there are ups and downs it's not linear and difficult moments come. But they come for our own good, so that we can release these things that have been so wound up inside of us and are really causing us misery.

Elise: Thank you so much, it's been such a pleasure to have a chat with you and wishing you well on the road and on your upcoming retreat.

Diego: Thank you so much to, this has been wonderful.

Book Recommendations

Buddha's Disciples by Bhikkhu Bodhi

Hua Hu Ching by Lao Tzu, Brian Walker translation

Sapiens by Yuval Noah Harari

Twenty-One Lessons for the Twenty-First Century by Yuval Noah Harari