

SHINZEN APPROVES of RICHIE DAVIDSON'S VISION

00:00:00 One of the main laboratories for affective neuroscience, neuroscience that is looking

00:00:17 at human emotion, is also one of the main laboratories for contemplative neuroscience.

00:00:27 And both of those terms, affective neuroscience, the neuroscience of human emotion, and contemplative

00:00:34 neuroscience, which is turning the lens of science towards contemplative experience,

00:00:40 both those terms as far as I know were coined by the same person.

00:00:44 And that person's lab is one of the main places where this kind of research goes on.

00:00:53 And who is that person and where is that lab?

00:00:57 That's Richie Davidson at the University of Wisconsin, my alma mater actually.

00:01:04 I did my undergraduate work at UCLA in Asian languages, but I did Buddhist studies at the

00:01:10 University of Wisconsin back in the day, when it was still weird to be interested in Buddhism.

00:01:23 But things were beginning to change.

00:01:26 So there was no contemplative neuroscience at the University of Wisconsin in 1970.

00:01:34 That's all of course much, much later, but there was Buddhist studies.

00:01:39 You want to know why the University of Wisconsin in my day was the premier location for the

00:01:49 academic study of Buddhism?

00:01:51 Well, it's like Wisconsin, why Wisconsin of all places?

00:01:56 I mean, you might think Berkeley or Harvard or something.

00:02:00 Why was the first PhD program in Buddhism at the University of Wisconsin?

00:02:05 Well, it's a nice little example of what in Buddhism is called pratityasamutpada, the

00:02:13 causal net, how this being that is, this being that is, this being that is, leads to some

00:02:21 interesting consequences.

00:02:25 By the way, it was a magic time.

00:02:30 Let's see, I must have gone there in 68, I think, is when I, yeah, probably that's right.

00:02:36 1968, Madison, 68, right?

00:02:39 Well, you know, it was crazy, right?

00:02:41 I mean, it's like the Vietnam War was raging.

00:02:47 My Buddhist education, three years of graduate school, paid for by the DoD, the Department

00:02:57 of Defense of the United States government.

00:03:00 Why?

00:03:03 Why are they giving out like huge endowments to study Buddhism?

00:03:10 Yeah, they realized there were political consequences to Buddhism in Southeast Asia.

00:03:19 Now there are political consequences to Islam, so there's lots of money if you want to study

00:03:24 Arabic.

00:03:25 Well, there was a lot of money available if you wanted to study Buddhism.

00:03:29 So yeah, the Department of Defense paid for my PhD education in Buddhism.

00:03:36 And I paid them back by being in all sorts of anti-government demonstrations, which Madison

00:03:44 was very famous for, if you know the history of the time.

00:03:51 It was pretty wild.

00:03:52 I mean, I didn't do violent stuff.

00:03:54 Some people got really violent, blew up one of the buildings on campus.

00:03:59 I don't know if you remember that history or whatever.

00:04:02 It's pretty crazy.

00:04:05 And I loved it.

00:04:06 And we got one of our people, a dope-smoking hippie elected mayor.

00:04:13 Yeah, it was a pretty interesting time.

00:04:19 And that's where you would get a PhD in Buddhist studies.

00:04:26 And now, if you look around, the people that are now retiring academics in the Buddhist

00:04:36 field, those are the people I went to school with.

00:04:41 So I see these books published by this one and that one.

00:04:45 I remember he was really crappy in Sanskrit.

00:04:48 I had to help him out.

00:04:52 It's sort of fun.

00:04:54 But I didn't go down an academic course.

00:04:56 I got shunted, as you know, into something else.

00:05:00 But I still have those sanskaras.

00:05:02 You guys have to put up with dozens of languages and all sorts of arcane factoids that I find

00:05:12 amazingly interesting.

00:05:14 And it's probably pretty irrelevant to a lot of people.

00:05:19 So Madison, when I was there, there was no contemplative neuroscience.

00:05:28 But there was Buddhist studies.

00:05:30 So why Wisconsin?

00:05:35 What arrows can you line up that point to Wisconsin, of all places, being the premier

00:05:43 location for Buddhist studies?

00:05:47 Just in North America.

00:05:52 Doesn't seem to quite compute.

00:05:54 So when you think of Wisconsin, besides the Green Bay Packers, what else do you think

00:06:00 of?

00:06:01 Cheese.

00:06:02 You think of cheese.

00:06:05 And why do you think of cheese?

00:06:08 By the way, it is related to cheese.

00:06:10 Dairy.

00:06:11 Well, dairy.

00:06:14 Dairy is part of farming.

00:06:16 And the University of Wisconsin had the best agriculture programs.

00:06:23 It specialized in agriculture science.

00:06:28 Because big agriculture state.

00:06:31 So there was a science specialty in agriculture.

00:06:39 Now the country of India has had a perennial problem.

00:06:47 And that perennial problem is feeding itself.

00:06:51 So lots of people came over from India to study agriculture science at the University

00:07:00 of Wisconsin.

00:07:02 So now there's a general tendency in the academic world, if you have a lot of people from a

00:07:10 certain region of the globe, for whatever reason, are coming to your university, well,

00:07:16 it also sort of makes sense to have area studies for that region at that university.

00:07:25 Case in point, USC.

00:07:30 What is USC's specialty as far as area studies?

00:07:44 Well it may be different now.

00:07:48 But in my day, USC was where you went for Islamic studies.

00:07:54 Middle Eastern.

00:07:56 Why?

00:07:57 Because a lot of wealthy people in the Middle East could buy their way for their kids into

00:08:04 USC.

00:08:06 So you had a lot of people from the Middle East and you had a lot of money

coming from

00:08:09 the Middle East.

00:08:10 So there's big center for Islamic and Middle Eastern research, at least there was 30 years

00:08:17 ago when I used to use the library there.

00:08:20 This big Islamic center.

00:08:22 So it made sense because we had a lot of people coming from India to the University of Wisconsin.

00:08:28 Well let's make Indian studies, not Indian in the sense of American Indian, but East

00:08:34 Indian.

00:08:35 So Indian studies.

00:08:38 Studies of Indic civilization.

00:08:41 And as people got interested in Buddhism, well that is a product of India, so Buddhist

00:08:48 studies make sense at the University of Wisconsin because it has an area specialty in India.

00:08:55 So yes, cheese is responsible ultimately for all of this esoterica, these weird languages

00:09:08 that you have to endure me talking about.

00:09:12 Because I was in a PhD program for Buddhist studies.

00:09:17 So anyway, now when we think of Wisconsin, we have affective neuroscience and contemplative

00:09:25 neuroscience.

00:09:26 How cool is that?

00:09:27 And that's Richie, Richie Davidson.

00:09:30 And some of you actually know him pretty well.

00:09:34 Most of you know him by reputation.

00:09:39 So the first time I ever visited Richie, the first thing he laid on me when he was showing

00:09:44 me around his lab, which wasn't nearly as big as it is now because the Dalai Lama gave

00:09:50 him a couple million dollars.

00:09:53 They're really doing pretty good, but he still had a pretty substantial, he had a whole building.

00:09:59 And he was showing me around and he laid out this vision that he had for what his graduate

00:10:08 program in neuroscience would be.

00:10:12 And the phrase he used was a science sangha.

00:10:17 Science sangha, a nice, yeah, a community of meditation practitioners who were also

00:10:26 scientists.

00:10:29 So I don't know if it was required, but certainly everyone that I knew that studied, that was

00:10:38 a neuroscientist in Richie's program was also a meditator.

00:10:46 And the idea being that it's not just, well, we need to understand these experiences, so

00:10:53 we have to meditate.

00:10:55 But his idea was that this is going to make us better people and specifically better scientists.

00:11:04 So that's a model right there.

00:11:09 It's actually happening.

00:11:13 Something that meditation can bring.

00:11:16 If I didn't have all these other responsibilities, if I had a lot of spare time, what I would

00:11:26 probably do is develop meditation courses specifically aimed at geeks and scientists.

00:11:37 Yeah, it's like, just bring that in.

00:11:43 So that's something that enlightenment or meditation can give to science that will help

00:11:58 science do its job better.