



## Rick Hanson: Buddha's brain & therapy

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Rick Hanson, Ph.D., is a neuropsychologist and author of *Buddha's Brain: The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love, and Wisdom* (in 22 languages) and *Just One Thing: Developing a Buddha Brain One Simple Practice at a Time* (in 9 languages). Founder of the Wellspring Institute for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom and Affiliate of the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley, he's been an invited speaker at Oxford, Stanford, and Harvard, and taught in meditation centers worldwide. His work has been featured on the BBC, NPR, FoxBusiness, Consumer Reports Health, U.S. News and World Report, and O Magazine and he has several audio programs with Sounds True. His weekly e-newsletter – Just One Thing – has nearly 70,000 subscribers, and also appears on Huffington Post, Psychology Today, and other major websites.

Serge Prengel, LMHC is the editor the *Active Pause* project.

For better or worse, this transcript retains the spontaneous, spoken-language quality of the podcast conversation.

*Serge Prengel: Hi, Rick.*

Rick Hanson: Hello, Serge, and hello everyone who's listening.

*Serge: So, you are a therapist who is also interested in neuropsychology and has had a longstanding practice in meditation. How do all these things fit together?*

Rick: Thank you for asking. Well, I guess I would say I've always been really interested, I think like a lot of therapists, in deep-causes effects, and so it seemed to me that if you could understand the mind through the lens of this very deep analysis of that in the contemplative traditions, and the one I know best is Buddhism—so that's the one I'll be speaking in terms of—that if you understood this very deep model of the mind through that lens and also had some fairly deep model of what in the world was happening in the black box of the brain, simultaneously, then you would have access to a whole lot of skillful needs, a whole lot of capabilities to use the mind, to change the brain, to change the mind for the better, and that's, in a nutshell, what I think about when I'm with my clients. A lot of the time I'm just tracking the flows of the mind, if you will: thoughts, feelings, sensations, desires, object relations. All the usual stuff, but a fair amount of the time I'm also realizing that in a certain sense, I'm not just talking to a mind, I'm talking to a brain. Or, more broadly, really, I'm talking with a body. And, even more deeply, this body here is talking with that body there. And bringing it down to that level has been both very intimate and rewarding, as well as intellectually interesting. And it's given me lots of good tools.

*Serge: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. So, I want to maybe stay with that image to just give it a little bit more space, a little bit more room, that it's not just dealing with certain issue, it's not just dealing with psychology, but it's dealing with mind and it's really actually your brain and just a body and there's*

*something happening in the interaction of these nervous systems there and looking at it that way brings some opening for you.*

Rick: Yeah, I was just reflecting there, Serge, as you were speaking. Right now it's where acting with each other, the brain is so good that's it's easy to forget we have a brain. In other words, there are transitions of thought that are very smooth. Simultaneously I'm looking out a window here, I'm hearing sounds in the background, um, there's sensation in the chair. All of that is arising effortlessly in conscious moment to moment. And meanwhile, there's an unconscious process that's going on that's operating just fine, and it rarely reveals itself. And it's easy to forget, actually, that absent of a hypothetical transcendental x-factor, that everything that we're thinking and feeling, seeing, tasting, touching, smelling and all the rest of it is right now being produced through its final common pathway by billions of neurons inside our skull. And when you bring it down to that level though, to me it's interesting. I know a lot of people who talk the talk of embodiment, but they have no interest in understanding how it is the body produces a mind. And when you begin to appreciate the degree to which mental activity is constantly changing neural structure and then in turn the tendencies of the brain, especially the ancient tendencies—you know—woven into it from the six-hundred-million year journey of the evolution of the nervous system. We start appreciating how those ancient animal tendencies are work in the therapy hour, or navigating an argument between two parents about how to raise their teenage daughter—the session I did earlier today, for example. It gives you a lot of, well, for me, it rounds out the picture. It brings compassion because you realize how much we're affected by these ancient tendencies. It gives you hope for how far humans have come with what they've done with them, and it gives you lots of ways because if you can stimulate the neural substrates, the wholesome states of mind, you therefore strengthen them. Because in the classical line: neurons the fire together wire together.

*Serge: So, I want to slow down a little bit because there's a lot in what you're saying. And a part of it is that since as we pay attention to embodiment it's not just a word, but it's a realization that what's happening in the mind is these complex processes of the brain, so, when you are watching clients and the interacting in this couple you're describing, you are watching these ancient parts of the brain act?*

Rick: That's exactly right. And when you do that, in a lot of ways you don't need to know about the brain. I mean, Freud, Jung, many others—you know—including my recent therapist, as well as teachers, and sages, and just good friends throughout history have helped each other without knowing a darn thing about an EEG, or the amygdala, or anything like that. That said, give me two examples for me that are very prominent and real. One is a real appreciation for how good the brain is at learning from the bad, while being really bad at learning from the good. In other words, the brain has this negativity bias whereby in the ways in which it's continually being shaped structurally by the thoughts and feelings and even unconscious processes moving through it, it's profoundly vulnerable to being shaped in a negative way. Because that's what helped our ancestors survive. It helped them focus around threats, be intensely agitated around loss, help them clutch tighter to us, and fear and attack and exploit them. These ancient tendencies are alive and well today. The problem is that even though positive experiences are the primary source of the inner resources we all need to make our way down the line and often hardware to life, and very much the resources our clients need—you know—what would make the difference for this client dealing with this situation or this issue at this time? It's always a question of resources. In a sense, we're in the resource building business, even if the resource is simply a wider existential frame for one's life and everything else is the same inside that frame. That's a resource, still. People pay money, they pay time because they want to build up certain things. Maybe the resource is a greater capacity to let go of things, that's still a resource.

Here's the problem, though: to get to those resources in the brain, well, we need to go up some resources from negative experiences. The primary source of resources are positive experiences because resources themselves feel positive. It's to have an experience of the resource, that's the primary way to build it. Here's the problem: the brain is a bad learner, in terms of converting positive experiences into underlying positive resources. It's bad at turning positive states, mental states, into positive neural traits. And when I really had that sink it, it was humbling to appreciate how many of the harboring (or hard-earned) moments with my clients washed through their brain, like water through a sift, totally wasted, maybe worth having as a momentary subjective experience, but in terms of lasting learning, which means encoding in neural structure, it may as well not have happened at all. That was very humbling. And what it had started motivating me to do is to work more with my clients to help them quote, unquote take in the good. In other words, to take the extra ten to twenty seconds to let learning land; to help it actually register, particularly as a felt sense, emotionally and somatically; to help it really sink in whatever the particular lesson is. Because if you don't do that, the learning curve is very shallow, if not, flat, but if you do do that, then you have someone's learning curve is a lot steeper and they're growing a lot more radically.

*Serge: So, it feels very nice that examples works for me beautifully at a couple of different levels. One is as a way to reframe for a client why it's difficult to learn from positivity. It's not that you're being negative, or you're bad—*

Rick: You're not failing at therapy.

*Serge: —you're not failing. And the other part for the therapist himself—you know—that example of knowing what happens under the hood helps reframe. It's not, I'm a bad therapist because I'm telling things to clients that they're unable to absorb, but now that I understand better how it happens, I have a way to actually help them in a way that I couldn't before.*

Rick: Yeah, that's exactly right. So, this method, this idea of taking in the good, I say the brain is like Velcro for the negative, but t\_\_\_\_\_ for the positive, and research is saying that if you repeatedly do things like take in the good, you can gradually sensitize the brain for the positive, so it becomes more like Velcro and starts learning more rapidly.

*Serge: So, that brain learns to learn better some things that it has difficulty learning?*

Rick: Yeah, as a lot of trauma research has shown, as you know, the brain is easily sensitized to the negative, so that it becomes more and more affected by the negative and affected more and more rapidly and intensively. Well, the same way the brain can be gradually sensitized to the positive, so that it learns more rapidly from the positive and converts it more quickly into underlying, good neural structure.

*Serge: And that's where we get to the neural plasticity?*

Rick: Yeah, that's right, you know, the classic saying: neurons that fire together wire together—I think we're all going to be singing that <both laugh>. It's very heartening for clients to appreciate that if they're skillful, they can actually make changes in their own brain over time. I'll say one more thing if I could, just that it's been a very practical takeaway from the embattle of this, is a whole new level of appreciation of the power of fear. And what I mean by that is: you think about it, the primal emotion was fear. Rule one in the wild is: eat lunch today, don't be lunch today, right? And if you get eaten

there, you can't do anything else. There's no more point to anything at all. So, it's absolutely, primarily (or primly) important to evade predators. It's interesting, for example, in Poly-Vagal Theory that the first branch of the vagus nerve is par-sympathetically oriented, which has to do with calm and coesence, but it also has to do with freezing or feigning death. We have, of course, excessive par-sympathetic activation today after trauma when people are just frozen and hypo-aroused, opposed to hyper-aroused. So, it really emphasizes my point here about the power of fear, and it's striking to appreciate how much we experience living in a condition of threat while \_\_\_\_ even when, actually, you're alright right now. Realizing that fear is probably their first emotion, the circuits for fear are clearly present in the brain stem. Even before reptiles there was a capacity quite likely for fear, and fear is with us today. So, we have this ongoing sense of background anxiety to make us vigilant because Mother Nature wants us to be afraid, so that we'll be constantly looking around. Animals that were very relaxed and confident—SHOOMP—they got eaten. The ones that survived were always cranky and irritable and paranoid and we are their great grandchildren today. So, walk across a room without any sense of fear whatsoever, it's very, very difficult, but it's a kind of lie. In the language of Buddhism, the Three Great Poisons: greed, hatred, and delusion—it's a kind of delusion because the truth is, most moment of most days for most people, they're actually alright, right now. They might not be perfect, it's not a million dollar moment, but you're basically alright, right now. So, with my clients this has highlighted my focus on anxiety, and really had me help my clients a lot to do little practices, like noticing you're alright, right now, or challenging the tendency of the mind to overestimate threats and underestimate resources and opportunities, and to develop more and more of a feeling inside of moving through life when it's appropriate without a sense of fear.

*Serge: So, the fear is like that overprotective parent that we have outgrown, but still keeps clinging and that's a \_\_\_\_ you can do without <both laugh>.*

Rick: I love that metaphor, Serge, that's a great metaphor. I guess I think of that because I'm a total geek and Lord of the Fl—*Lord of the Rings*, not *Lord of the Flies*, is what I'm thinking about here. You know Wormtongue, that character in the novel's who's always whispering lies into the ear of King Thèoden? We have a kind of inner Wormtongue that, well-intended, but still the road to hell is paved with good intentions, right? Mother Nature is well-intended, but she creates a lot of unnecessary suffering in terms of making us feel more anxious than we really need to. When you're anxious, for me, there are three great needs or motivational systems in the brain to avoid harm, approach rewards, and attach to others, and the most ancient of those is to avoid harm. It's the one that's most developed in the brain stem and it trumps the other two. As soon as we start feeling anxious what happens is that people start muzzling themselves, they start playing small, they stop dreaming big dreams, and they also tend to clutch tighter to us. Tribalism, it grows (or goes) up, us-them thinking, splitting increases, people feel afraid. I've done a lot of personal practice around fear and found it very fruitful and with my clients, as well, I'm very zeroed in on helping them kind of lower the meter, the fear-o-meter, the "fearometer", if you will, to bring it out of orange or even red, back into yellow or ideally green.

*Serge: So, from that place, you're not just in a place of treating, but you're in a place of retraining and having people experiencing what it's like to first maybe think of the possibility of no fear and let themselves have a little bit of a sense of it progressively?*

Rick: You know, it's funny, Serge, a little helpful framework for me has been to think in terms of three ways to engage the mind, I think there are just three ways. The first way is to just be with what's going on. Feel the feelings, experience the experience, hold it in open spacious awareness without trying to

interfere with it, I mean, investigate it, explore it, feel it, bring it into the body, but don't try to change it in anyway. That's one important way to engage the mind. I think that's the most fundamental of all because it's the foundation of the other two. The second way to engage the mind is to try to reduce the negative. For example, let go of body sensations that are problematic, vent emotions, see through pathological cognitions, etc. But then there's a third very important way to engage the mind, which is building up the positive, building up the resources there. I, myself, am very interested in that focus with clients. I try to pay attention to the first two, but I like the third because it's often underrepresented. I think it's been generally underrepresented in clinical psychology. There's a lot of emphasis on awareness practices, mindfulness practices of different kinds. There's also a lot of awareness of letting go of the negative, getting rid of the crud, but there hasn't really been that much focus on how to cultivate wholesome qualities, skillful resources, powerful, resiliencies. The mind is like a garden. You can be with it, number one, you can pull the weeds, number two, or you can plant flowers, number three. And I'm very interested in planting flowers in the garden of people's minds, which means their brain.

*Serge: But in a way it's different from, say, the traditional or, maybe, widespread understanding of what mindfulness is, which would be just the observation and this is an action and there's two levels of action there. There's the pulling the weeds and also the planting the flowers. And when you plant flowers it makes it harder for weeds to come back?*

Rick: Precisely! You're great to talk with, Serge, and also your point about mindfulness. You really are naming something that I've seen very much in the culture. I teach mindfulness routinely, I'm a Buddhist teacher. I'm a deep student, not a perfect student, but a pretty far along student. The polygamy, those are the Buddha's discourses. There's a deep misunderstanding of mindfulness that's prevalent in the culture and it's very prevalent in the psychotherapeutic community. Just being with the mind is not itself mindfulness. In other words, the first of the three ways to engage the mind, just be with what's there, is not itself mindfulness. And it's a category error, and a serious one, with implications too conf\_\_\_ it with mindfulness. Mindfulness is to be present under all conditions. It is to be present simply if you're allowing the stream of consciousness to come and go without doing anything about it. Mindfulness is to be present if you're pulling weeds. And mindfulness is to be present if you're planting flowers or playing tennis or walking and chewing gum or making love with your partner or just staring out into space, right? And I've had a lot of people actually push back and say, "Oh, no, if you try to make delivered efforts inside the mind, that's not mindfulness." Or, "That's not non-dual awareness." Or, "That's egoic." Or, "That's striving." And I think, wait a second, even as great a fan of mindfulness at the Buddha allocated at least half the elements of the noble path to very deliberate efforts inside the mind. Like right speech, or right action, or right effort, or right intention, right livelihood, where you can even argue that right view is about cultivating a certain positive view, a certain accurate, useful view inside the mind. Long story short, I'm a total fan of just being with the mind and a total fan of mindfulness under all conditions, but there is a place for getting into the garden and pulling weeds and planting flowers.

*Serge: And planting flowers is a skillful means, it's not just planting flowers, yeah?*

Rick: The other thing is that planting flowers on a foundation of appropriate, being with what's there. Staying with it, not doing a spiritual bypass as John Welwood talks about, jumping over the pain. On a foundation of what's appropriate, I like planting flowers a lot because at the end of the day flowers are the point of life. So, it's kind of the direct path. We pull weeds to create space for flowers. If all life was about was in a medical model, not sick, well, that would be a pretty crummy life, I think, a

pretty barren one. So, flowers are the point generally. Second, including the flowers of profound serenity oneness with everything, but that, too, is something to cultivate. Second, to just be with the mind, just to hold it in open excepting awareness, you need to build up some serious resources inside. Otherwise, it's like popping open a trap door to hell because you're not resourced to feel the feelings or bare the pain or open to your own experience. So, planting flowers aids being with the mind altogether. And then third, planting flowers is motivating. How many therapists does it take to change a light bulb, right? Only one. The light bulb has to want to change. How do I get this light bulb to want to change? There's a place for the hard, primal screaming, what have you, of letting go of the crud, pulling the weeds, but it's not very motivating to feel all that pain and help it release. Whereas it's very motivating to plant flowers because that's usually based on a more pleasant experience. So, I find clients are more eager to participate in therapy and be the light bulb that wants to change if part of the focus of the therapy I'm doing with them is on cultivating flowers.

*Serge: So, that's in the sense of being in the experience of changing for the better and seeing it?*

Rick: Yeah, that's a great point you're making too because, I think, I forget her name, but there's a psychoanalyst, I guess in the thirties or forties, no coincidence I think, a woman reviewed to the Male Psychoanalytic Establishment. She said: the client or patient does not need a new idea, in other words, a perfect interpretation. The patient does not need a new idea; the patient needs a new experience. And you well know, Serge, experiences are fundamental matters, fundamental teachers. We're wounded in our emotions, our sensations, in our desires. Thought follows them. We are going to be healed in our sensations, our emotions, our desires, and our behaviors as a result, and thought will follow that, as well. There's a place for insight, there's a place for cognitive work, but at the end of the day where the work has real traction is down in the belly. And that's where, to me, belly learning is what I'm very interested in. How do you help structural change to a curve in the subcortical and brain stem regions of the brain, which are the primary source of our emotions, our motivations, the craving that leads to suffering and harm? Our dictions, our bone-deep sense of our bonding with other people, our fundamental sense of worth, ourselves, and our sense of energy, the healthy passions. That's down in the subcortical and brain stem floors, three floor structure house of the brain. And the way to change structure in the subcortical region and in the brain stem is to have experiences that tap subcortical processes and brain stem processes very much because you create structural change by having insistence that you want to change by having experiences that draw on and activate those systems. It's really hard to change those systems when you're not activating those systems. Because activating those mental systems is the doorway to turning a mental state to a neural trait. That's why I think work that you do so importantly is great because it activates useful states that tap people very viscerally, which then becomes an opportunity for building up very important neural traits.

*Serge: So, in other words, these older, subcortical parts of the brain do not speak the more sophisticated language, they understand experience, and so, by providing experience they have something to work on and assimilate?*

Rick: Well said. You said that much more elegantly than I did.

*Serge: <laughs> As I summarize, yes. What comes up a lot in what you're talking about is there is a vision of not just treating people, but a sense of actually having a vision of what it's like to be a human being and transmitting that experience in a way that helps your clients build resources?*

Rick: Well, thank you, I think that's really true. If you think about the relationships that have been transformational for oneself and what was it in them, I know for myself that very often is that I was with someone who saw something beautiful inside me and often it was something that I had not seen inside myself, or I had lost faith in, or I had lost my nerve about really living from that part of protecting it. And in the same way I think as therapists we give our clients an enormous gift by seeing what's beautiful in them. We need to see the whole mosaic, all the tiles in the mosaic, but to be in the room with someone who, very authentically. I mean, the way I look at it, they buy my time, but they don't buy my mind or my heart inside that frame. And very authentically, I'm seeing something that's true in them, as you are with your own clients. And to be in the room with someone who sees what's beautiful about you is just a profound gift that we can give our clients. And it creates a vision of the positive possible that can be if they just keep going in that direction

*Serge: Yeah, but so, the converse of it, or what you're saying, is that as a therapist the focus is also to be open to the possibility of something good and be on the lookout. You know, actually focus on what is wrong, what is not functioning, but have that openness that there is something good and that it is of great value to see it and reflect it?*

Rick: Yeah, for example, I was talking with someone earlier today, and I'll disguise the details very slightly, but this was a parent, a father, who was locked in a wrangle with his son. And the truth was the dad had, while the son was a teenager, been way too critical, way too harsh, had really lost his temper. He was not in a category of reportable abuse, but he was definitely way too driven and demanding and intense and negative. Now, years later the son is really at odds with the father and the mother is allied with the son against the dad. And they keep banging on the dad to really take responsibility for his impact on the son when the son was a teenager. The dad says wait-a-wait-a-wait-a-wait-a there's all this other truth. I was a good guy, I wasn't a bad father. I was tough, alright, I lost it a few times, I'm not going to deny that, but it wasn't as bad as you're saying. And so they go round and round and round because the mom and the son are banging on the dad's door. Hey, dad, you just got to get it that one slice of the pie of a whole big picture had to do with you being way too harsh and getting way too caught up in your own trips about how your son would be. And I can see that, as well. There's a \_\_\_\_\_ in the system. I'm seeing all the players in various ways. To help the dad, though, get in an unreserved, wholehearted, undefended way. People are alike when, for example, they're sober and have been sober for a number of years. They're very open about their alcoholism or drug addiction. There's an undefended sincerity about it that calms everyone else down. For him to get to that acknowledge of that slice of the pie he has to feel seen by the rest of the pie. It's about him being a really good guy and also about his son having issues that have nothing to do with him, personally. Paradoxically, what worked was that I really named and I could see authentically ways that he had been a wonderful father, that his nature was to love, and he was a very loving person. And, I think, in his experience of really seeing those really beautiful qualities in him he could then be able to own his slice of the pie, or honestly he'd been kind of a jerk.

*Serge: So, what struck me as you described this is that you used a word "undefended sincerity" and it captures very much that place where the resistance, the tightness, the not moving, the stuck-ness, is going to come from a place of needing for a defense. Seeing the beauty in this person and in this person's behavior is the way to open that up?*

Rick: I think that in a funny way for many people the last to do is to claim and own that they're actually a good person. That's like the hardest thing. It doesn't mean you're a perfect person, you don't need to wear a halo and all that, but you're a good person and it's very interesting to work on that, as well,

and to help that, again, take in the good, help it land, help it convert to neural structure. You actually are deep down, a well-intended, caring, justice, fairness, kind of person. And you could really see people's faces change when they have that sink it. I know, for myself, as I've gone down my own path that the claiming in myself has really made a big difference for me.

*Serge: So, in a way, the gift of having a therapist who is able to see the goodness in the client, and that probably is more possible because as a therapist we see the goodness in ourselves?*

Rick: I think you said is again very, very well. Yeah, and then again, to help it sink in again, and again, and again. You know, in a funny way, a recurring theme in my own engagement with evolutionary neuropsychology, or as I call it sometimes to myself when I put my geek hat on, applied neuro-dharma, and I engage that, one of the themes that keeps coming forward again, and again, is around modesty, or humility. In other words, if you're really modest as a twenty-first century mind, you appreciate how much that mind is arising out of a paleolithic brain, a stone age brain, in which really is arising out of a crab-like or fruit fly-like nervous system. And that's humbling and it kind of brings you down to your roots. You realize you really have to take care of the whole \_\_\_\_\_ inside your skull, not just the high-\_\_\_\_\_ twenty-first century, urban, on top of the world character, but the inner cave man, cave women, the inner monkey, the inner squirrel, the inner rat, the inner crocodile, the inner crab, the inner worm, right? That we have to take care of all of those characters and surrender to being that entire image as who we are. That's who we are. And there's kind of an animacy about that, you become animate with yourself, you become humble, you become a lot more compassionate with other people. \_\_\_\_\_ has become a very important piece of this and in a way it hasn't made me feel inadequate, it's brought me home. It's helped me feel a oneness, really, with all of nature. Naturalizing the mind doesn't work, you're embedding it in nature altogether.

*Serge: So, it's owning what is? So there's a calming effect in that you don't have to live up to a pretense of being something else, then the squirrel mind?*

Rick: I know there's a kind of self-acceptance that happens when you do that. And also, though, as with this humility, you realize that our clever ideas that we focus on so much in therapy, you know, the correct interpretation, I always train psychoanalytically, as well, and other modalities, I know about it. And for most of the brain what really matters get internalized, needs a lot of repetition to internalize. In a sense as you go down the brain, you go back in time, and as you go back in time those earlier structures have less and less neuroplasticity. In other words, it's harder and harder to get them to change, which means, therefore; they need more and more repetition and more and more intensity of learning for them to possibly change, which of course is what we're going after in body psychotherapy, positive change. Well, I've realize it is. I don't know about you, Serge, but I have for myself, that a lot of my clever yap just is egoic on my part and not helpful to my client.

*Serge: I know it and I still do it <laughter>.*

Rick: I love telling my clients how to think about things <laughter>. I admit it.

*Serge: So that feels very nice that there is something you're talking about this or there is a lot of transmitting the outlook, that richness of having thought out things from different perspectives, but also that what I'm experiencing is the presence of you being in the moment and not just spouting out ideas.*

Rick: Well, good. Thank you, thank you. You know, they say in Tibet if you take care of the minutes the years will take care of themselves and I think that's part of the humility too. To realize that what's within our reach is probably the next five seconds <laughter>.

*Serge: So, thanks a lot for sharing with us.*

Rick: Thank you.

*This conversation was transcribed by Rachel Vitale.*

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