Mindfulness and the Brain
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Intent of the Class: The Neuroscience of Transformation
We’re at a stage on our collective evolution as a planet where the contribution each one of us needs to make is more critical than ever. I’ve seen time and time again how mindfulness and healing expands the capacities of individuals to go deeper on their spiritual journeys and to also make a meaningful impact on the world. Each of us belongs to communities, large and small, where healing needs to take place. It is my fondest hope that the knowledge and skills you learn in this course will touch others, in whatever ways are needed. This is an important part of the spiritual path as your wisdom deepens and matures, that it impacts others and contributes to our collective evolution.

Class 1:
The Foundations of Mindfulness: Embodiment and Emotional Regulation
It’s such an exciting time to be learning about the science of healing and spiritual development. Mindfulness practices are coming out of the caves and monasteries and coming into laboratories.

In this first class, we will discuss some foundational mindfulness practices and review some of the basics of how these practices affect the brain and how it explore the breakthrough discoveries of the last two decades, reviewing the research of Ritchie Davidson and Dan Siegel. We’ll discuss the underlying neurobiological mechanisms through which these profound psychological and spiritual changes take place.

This understanding forms the cornerstone of the meditation practices of many contemplative traditions. The groundbreaking research of scholars like Jon Kabat-Zinn, Matthieu Ricard, and Rick Hanson, has demonstrated the effectiveness of traditional meditation practices in promoting these levels of mindfulness. This research has shown how mindfulness gives rise to the development of greater compassion, empathy, and emotional balance for many practitioners.

The core techniques we’ll be studying are based on the very exciting new research in the field of neural plasticity. This is the study of how the nervous system specifically the connections between the neurons changes over the course of our lives. These new discoveries are showing us that there is extraordinary potential for the nervous system to rewire itself.

Class 2:
Recent Breakthroughs in Mindfulness: Relational Dynamics and Interactive Regulation
In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of scientific studies that are informing us about the how interpersonal relationships effect the development of the brain. These studies come from infant research as well as research in psychotherapy, the treatment of trauma, and numerous neuro-imaging studies of brain measurements of spiritual practitioners involved in mindfulness practices. They all point to one conclusion:

*Humans need interaction with other humans to help us develop optimally.*

One of the best ways to understand why we need others to help us develop is to look at the highly respected work of Dan Siegel on what he calls *neural integration*. In this class we will discuss how the brain heals and develops through relational mindfulness. It will also shed light on a cutting-edge spiritual practice: *Embodied Relational Mindfulness*. It’s a way of paying attention to your body with the mindful, compassionate attention of another person. This not only helps us re-connect with our own bodies in a mindful way, but there is extensive research indicating that *working together in relationship* helps us *integrate* our healing, so that the transformation we experience becomes more permanent and not just a passing inner spiritual state.

Class 3:
Traumatic Wounds and Emotional Healing

The interest in healing trauma has gotten a lot of attention in the last decade and for good reason... We’ll discuss how the new and exciting discoveries in neuroscience and somatic based therapies have really helped people recover from emotionally devastating events. We will explore the discoveries of Peter Levine, Pat Ogden, and so many others who have given us such powerful tools for healing - and see how this knowledge has changed the lives of so many people.

There’s a growing consensus among my colleagues who work in this area professionally that it is these overwhelming, shocking, or tragic events that open us up to profound spiritual experiences and new domains of awareness.

It turns out that the potential for neural plasticity is actually optimized under conditions of extreme emotional and instinctual intensity. This means that when that when life pushes us into the extremes- and this is exactly what happens in traumatic experiences- there are profound opportunities for spiritual transformation.

Class 4: Evolution, Instinctual Intelligence, and the Frontiers of Spiritual Practice

Recent discoveries in the fields of evolutionary science, psychology, and neurobiology are radically transforming our understanding of the human instincts. Across the globe, there is a new interest in the healthy expression of the natural energy of life. Modern researchers are unlocking the secrets of the emotional and instinctive systems of the human body. This state-of-the-art research has revealed the sophisticated capacities of the nervous system to adapt to the infinite challenges and opportunities that life has to offer. This research has shown us that we are born with specific instinctual programs, gifts of every ancestor who survived to reproduce another generation. These basic instinctual programs have an innate intelligence that helps us to survive and thrive in an unpredictable world.

The basic notion of instinctual intelligence is not just a modern phenomenon. It has its roots in the esoteric teachings of the world’s wisdom traditions, where many ancient cultures sought to harness the hidden power of human energy. In recent decades, these secret teachings have been introduced to Western audiences, and are increasingly accepted as valuable sources of human knowledge. The Buddhist Tantric and the Taoist traditions, for example, developed sophisticated methods for bringing instinctual energy of the body into alignment with the higher aspirations of the human soul. In the last decade, scientists have invited spiritual masters from many traditions into their laboratories to study the neurobiological basis of spiritual transformation. We’ll explore how they have discovered that these spiritual traditions also developed extensive knowledge of how to recalibrate the nervous system at the deepest levels of instinctual consciousness. Through these practices, the most primal impulses are brought into alignment with the most precious of human qualities like compassion, generosity, patience, and intelligence. Modern scientists are finally acknowledging what the ancient mystics have always known: Our basic instinctual programming can not only learn and adapt- it can actually evolve.