

Scott Neeson

Ahimsa Day 2012

My Lords, Hon Members, friends

I still remember wanting to be a train-driver when I was young. It was either that or becoming a policeman. Today's generation is more likely to ask how they can win x-factor, play premiership football or live in Hollywood.

Our guest today, Mr Scott Neeson, was the *king* of celebrity. After 26 years in business, he had reached the pinnacle of his career. He was the man that lived the dream, a Hollywood penthouse, fast cars, boats, pin-up models for girlfriends and the ability to make or break film careers. He was President of 20th Century Fox, and was responsible for producing such epics as the Titanic and Star Wars.

In 2003 he decided to move to a new role at Sony Pictures and found time to take a short break in Cambodia to see Angkor Wat. It's usually when you expect it most that life surprises you, and it's decisions in these moments that make your destiny.

On his way to Angkor Wat he stopped in Phnom Penh and saw its notorious garbage dump, which was home and workplace for several thousand of the region's most impoverished and neglected children – they survived by picking plastic and metal out of the mountains of burning, hazardous waste and selling them to local recycling centers.

He was unwilling to walk away, or to buy his conscience with a charitable donation. Within a year, the home, the boat and the cars had gone. So had the Hollywood lifestyle and glamour. In exchange, there was a startup charity looking after 45 children. A short nine years later that has grown to feeding, clothing, housing and educating 1,200 children, as well as helping their families and communities.

As Jains, we count ourselves as fortunate that we were born into a religion that teaches compassion and renunciation from materialism as ideals. For most of us, this is little more than ideology or the material of stories of how in centuries gone by, this was practiced by the few.

Yet here is a man who through his actions has shown us how these principles are still relevant in this modern world. A man who was at the height of the materialistic lifestyle and the cult of celebrity, and yet found his Ankor Wat in building a sanctuary for society's poorest and most vulnerable. A man who had the world's attention and instead opted for the attention of a few loving children who saw him as their savior. In his own words:

"I wouldn't change a thing. I truly believe I have found where I am meant to be. Alter any part of the path that led me here, and I might never have reached this point."

Ladies and Gentlemen, I am honoured today to announce that the Board of the Institute of Jainology has awarded the 2012 Ahimsa Award to the Founder and Chairman of the Cambodia Childrens' Fund, Mr Scott Neeson, for his compassion for the poor, his charity for those in need, and his drive to eradicate poverty through education.

Please welcome HE the High Commissioner of India, and Mr Nemu Chandaria, Chairman of the Institute to present Mr Scott Neeson with the 2012 Ahimsa Award.