

11_12_25Talk*

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Speaker 1 [00:00:00] First, somebody asked, would I repeat what I consider to be the three fundamental ways to practice, and whether it's with what's out in the world or in your physical body or in your mind. And the three basic forms of practice that I just see again and again, that lots of many, lots of things fall into these three groups. Being with what is there. We simply observe it. We accept it. Hopefully bring compassion to ourselves about it, some curiosity and investigation. It may change on its own, but we're not deliberately trying to nudge it. We're not making efforts to change what is. We're simply being with what is, this is the ground practice. It's fundamental. It's the foundation of everything. And as your practice matures over time, more and more it's kind of what's going on. People are really far along, they're sort of. Hanging out in the present at the front edge of now, receiving what's arising as it passes through, simply being with what's there. But that's not the only way to practice. We have to work with the mind too, not just to be with it. And that's where wise effort comes in. And wise effort has two aspects.

[00:01:12] One has to do with reducing or releasing or preventing that which is stressful, painful, toxic, harmful, unwise in, you know, for yourself and for others. And then there's the third aspect of practice, extremely important, which is growing the good, creating it, protecting it, even increasing that, which is wholesome, beneficial, supportive, nurturing, kind, and so on, for yourself and for others. It's a little bit like if your mind were a garden, we can witness the garden, we can be with it. We can also pull weeds. That's the releasing what's problematic. And also we can grow flowers, cultivating that which is beneficial, which I summarize in three ways as letting be, letting go, and letting in. It's a really fundamental model. And often you'll find yourself, when something has happened sort of moving through all three, you know, first you be with what's there, like, oh, you know my neck hurts, or oh, they said that weird thing, I didn't like that, or oh oops, I'm kind of messed up with somebody. Got to clean that mess up. So you're being with what's there. And then you move naturally at a certain point to letting go, letting go. And sometimes it takes a long time to get to the authentic place, truly of letting go but sometimes it can happen pretty quickly also especially as you get to know yourself better. And then letting in, not just letting go but replacing what we've released with what would be helpful for you. Sometimes. Kind of matched to what you let go of, like letting go of tension in the body and replacing it, letting in relaxation and a sense of calm strength. Let be, let go, let in.

[00:03:07] And then also somebody asked here just a moment ago, in terms of challenging times, how do we, Robert asked this at 40 minutes past the hour, how do we get the balance right in terms of taking a stand versus quote unquote non-judgment? And this is a classic one, especially in the more mindfulness oriented and non-dual oriented and kind of new agey type communities in which I find much of my home, but to be sure. There is this view that somehow we should be non-judgmental. Well, let's be really clear about what we're saying. For one, there's no escape from values. Wanting or trying not to have a value is a value. So we live amidst values, we live in midst goals, there's no escape from it. The only question is what's our relationship to it? And so for me, it's really important to be discerning. You know, you see what is. Oh, you see that the shoe is untied. You see that. And then you bring your values to bear. Oh, do I like having untied shoes? Do I think that's a really good thing? Well, maybe sometimes it is when you're seated and you wanna let your shoes expand. Okay, on the other hand, if you're walking or running, do you really wanna have a shoe that's untied? So your value there might say, nah, better to tie the

shoe. So you have discernment. And you have valuing, discerning and valuing. It's very natural. And then you take appropriate action. Hopefully you tie your shoe.

[00:04:43] Now, in all that, oftentimes people, you are having judgments. It's okay to have a judgment. Oh, an untied shoe is worse than a tied shoe under most circumstances, at least for me. And my tennis shoes, by the way, routinely come untied, so I'm on top of this one. All right, that's okay. It's when we start adding. You know, ill will or criticism or piling on, Oh, stupid shoe, stupid Rick, let his shoe get untied. Oh, why do you keep those old tennis shoes around? Why don't you get some new Velcro tennis shoes? Dumb, dumb, dumb. I'll call that being critical in a negativistic kind of way. There's a world of difference between healthy discernment and valuing and judging in the healthy sense of that criticality, righteousness, superiority, you know, shaming others. There's a big difference. And I think some of these people use the teachings about not being attached to our views and not getting caught up in self. They use that sometimes as a spiritual bypass to overlook real harms being done in the world that are appropriate to see and have values about and then do something as best we can. So, for me the thing is... Are you seeing clearly? Are you discerning? Do you feel good about your values? And do you know what your plan is? And can you do all that without the add-on, righteousness and accusing others and hating others and having ill will toward others?

[00:06:27] And when you look at people who historically and presently really rested in both wisdom and activism, the intersection of those, they're clearly rested in their heart and they combine assertiveness, appropriate assertiveness with a heart centered kindness and compassion for others. And I think as long as we're rested in that sweet spot, appropriate action tends to follow and it's much more effective typically. Than if we get all cranky and pissy and, you know, quote unquote, judgmental in the negative problematic sense of that. Now onto my primary talk here about empathy and compassion. Empathy is the capacity to basically tune in to other people. Non-human animals have this capacity in various ways. Empathy in your brain has these three fundamental circuits, one in which we simulate over here or we create over here some sense of what it's like over there in terms of actions. These are the so-called mirror neurons or mirror-like networks. We tune into the actions of others. Then there's empathy for the feelings of others.

[00:07:46] This has to do with another part of the brain, the insula primarily, on the inside of the temporal lobes in which we resonate with the emotions of others and then last, there's the neural circuitry mainly located behind the forehead, which really doesn't tend to come online until around the third birthday in which, we tune into and create a sense of the thoughts broadly stated of others So we have these three empathy circuits, actions, emotions, and thoughts. Empathy for actions and emotions are present at birth. They're also quite present in some ways with the non-human animals. There's an interesting study done recently on bumblebees in which they will track the sort of emotional state of another bumblebee and be affected by it. And this is. Established scientifically. It's a fairly simplistic kind of empathic attunement, you know, at the emotional level for a bumblebee with maybe a million-ish neurons compared to our 85 billion or so inside the coconut, but it's still empathic attainment. It's only later on that the capacity for what's called theory of mind where we really can track the motivations and thought processes and values and covert agendas even of other people that tends to come later and if people start de-menting or Going into pretty serious cognitive decline with aging those theory of mind Capacities may gradually be lost while retaining empathy for the vibes The attitudes the feelings of other People that's why I think it's really important if you're around people who are gradually losing their grip that you stay rested in a fundamental kindness as best you can because they can still pick up your quote-unquote energy. Okay empathy.

[00:09:52] Empathy capacities are fairly innate. Some people are innately more initially empathic and porous. Some people describe them as empaths. It's true there's normal variation and then life lands on us sometimes contracting. Our empathic capacities other times expanding them. And then with training, with training we can get better and better at tuning into the actions, the emotions and the thoughts of other people in part by becoming more mindful and attuned to your own bodily sense of action, your own inner emotional life and the subtleties even of your own thought processes, not just language based, Also, imagery processes, memory processes. Inside your own being. You can become more empathic with training. There is such a thing as empathy fatigue because we can become burned out if we get too flooded by the way it is for other people. We can become overwhelmed by it. That is actually a case if we are too porous and we have too little a sense of, you know, me here distinct from you there. And then there is compassion. Now, empathy alone is morally neutral. Con artists, con artists, interrogators, dodgy characters, they're pretty empathic. They can track what's going on, they can read you. Just because they're empathic doesn't mean it's good. It's when we add good intentions to empathy and that becomes compassion. Compassion is an empathic response to suffering, combined with benevolence, a caring stance, with the motivation to help if we can. That's the nature of compassion.

[00:11:53] And the evolution of compassion is very interesting. Very kind of basic animals with fairly simple nervous systems are pretty good at mirroring. Or empathy for action, tuning into the behavior of predators and prey. That's pretty basic, right? Our nearest primate relatives, the chimpanzees and bonobos from whom our family tree separated only about six million years ago, they're empathic to some extent, pretty motivated around getting what they want. They're really not very compassionate. Generally speaking and then inside their bands they tend to be organized not on the basis of caring and sharing compassion and justice But on the base of alpha dominance what anthropologists call holding and controlling Holding on to food and controlling reproduction with alpha dominance Okay So humans though This is so cool. The brain is roughly tripled in volume over the last roughly three million years And I kind of mark it. You go back to when our hominid ancestors with brains roughly a third our size became clever enough to manufacture stone tools. And then during that period of time, the volume of the brain increased dramatically, all right? Our hominidae ancestors did not dramatically increase sharp claws or sharp teeth, you know, for so forth.

[00:13:27] They dramatically increase the size of the brain. Huh, how come? The brain is an incredibly costly, metabolically costly organ. Uses, even though it's 2 to 3% of body weight, it uses what? Around 20 or 25% of the oxygen circulating in your blood vessels, the glucose, you know, the food we're processing. It's a hungry, hungry beast, that old brain. Whoa, how comes so big? Why is it so busy? Why is this so thirsty? An adult chimpanzee's brain is about twice as big as a newborn chimpanzees' brain. An adult human brain is about four times as big as the brain of a newborn infant. The time period that was required for the brain to literally get bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger, created the longest childhood of any species on the planet. Long childhood and during that long childhood, including the first years, the first few years, that infant and toddler and then the equivalent of a preschooler back in the Stone Age was completely dependent for survival. Even longer.

[00:14:46] Initially the care of his her it's their mother initially so the mother had to take care of that little baby you know if you look at pictures of chimpanzees or gorillas with infants they're holding on to their mommies human babies can't do that they got to be

carried okay well that create the dependency of the infant now having a longer and longer childhood to enable a bigger and bigger brain. Required a growing dependency on its mother, their mothers, who themselves became increasingly helpless, and I won't say impaired, more like occupied, or they were busy taking care of this little baby. They needed the protection of their mates. And increasingly, in their bands, the so-called village it takes to raise a child, these processes centered around passionate care for the baby gradually drove the process of the evolution of the brain, because those processes that enabled the brain to become bigger and bigger and develop the capacities of the so-called social brain with compassion, a response to suffering, to care and to tend and to keep alive, all that drove the processes of brain evolution. That have enabled us to be here today. That's the nature of compassion. Really interesting. Grounded in the mother-infant caring system and then gradually elaborated in pair bonding and then elaborated further in the village it takes to raise a child.

[00:16:35] So we have empathy and then we have empathy plus benevolence and motivation equals compassion. Good so far. There is no such thing as compassion fatigue. Compassion is bittersweet. There is the opening your heart to suffering. I've been with people in, you know, Buddhist-y worlds, I won't name any names, who just phoned in their compassion. You know, yeah, they wished I didn't suffer, yada, yada. But they could not be bothered to be empathic. They could not bothered to let my own troubles, some of which they were creating, huh, land in their heart. It's really important to be big enough and brave enough and resourced enough, you know, so you're stable here so that you can open to others to really let them land. You know, the fundamental question of empathy is what's it like to be you? What's it like? You know, it's a powerful thing in your key relationships or those you work with or walking down the street or imagining people, you know, on these divisive days who are on the other side of the political aisle. What's like to be you?

[00:17:56] And sometimes it's quite poignant to realize that what it's like to be them is to enjoy making other people miserable. Or that what it's like to be them is to be, is doubling down on some ridiculous position because they won't admit they're wrong. Empathy isn't all sunflowers, you know, and fairy tales and puppy dogs and all that, chocolate chips. No, sometimes we're empathic. We realize that what's going on over there is they are actually out to get you, or they really don't care. And that's some of what we come to. We also sometimes with empathy, we just tune into what's beautiful in another person, what it's like to be them, their good intentions, their kindness. The ways they're working with their pain, the ways they are trying to work and practice with their issues, you know, empathy. What is it like to be you? And then when we apply the sweetness of compassion to the bitter of empathy for suffering, that sweetness protects us, even neurologically releasing different reward neurochemicals that kind of buffer us. They create shock absorbers between us and the impact of the suffering that we're empathic for. So research shows that actually, when you really look closely, while there may be empathic fatigue, And while there may be caregiver burnout and other kinds of burnout, compassion fatigue per se is actually not really a thing or it's very uncommon. So when you're working with compassion, it's really important to tune into the sweet amidst the bitter. That's really, really important.

[00:19:41] Compassion includes self-compassion. Compassion for the being who wears your name tag who happens to be stressed and tired and hurting and suffering. It's okay to bring compassion to yourself. It's a good thing. Compassion, for yourself, research shows, makes you stronger, makes you more resilient. People who can bounce back or recover from or just survive traumatic experiences. Are protected and energized and fueled by the compassion they have for themselves. For myself, when something happens that rattles

me, I have this sort of four part, it's a kind of first aid that I'll walk you through right now, you may like this, that you can do really, really quickly. First, I notice that I'm getting triggered. I notice then I'm rattled by this. I'm revved up, I don't like it, kind of frozen, whatever it might be. Notice it, be with it, number one.

[00:20:38] Number two, there's a natural response of a kind of sweetness, a kind of tenderness, like ouch, that hurts, ooh. You know, classically, the little kid running around, you know, trips and falls, skins her knees, comes back, comes to the parents, oh, they kiss the owie, they make it all better, oh. You know there's that natural response, that's tender, even to yourself. I wish I didn't suffer this. I wish it wasn't so mad right now. I wish wasn't hard on myself that I forgot that thing. This loss, yeah, is heavy. That's the second response.

[00:21:20] And then third, a kind of muscular response. Okay, what are we gonna do about it? How can we learn to bear this pain, or even what can we do to actually address it, reduce it, relieve it? And then based on that kind of muscular response, there's a making of a plan. What's your plan? What are you gonna do? Really important. Being with what's there, self-compassion, kind of a muscular getting on your own side. And then making a plan. That's good first day. And very often you can move through each one of those four steps in a dozen seconds. A few breaths maybe. Interestingly, compassion can be trained. Someone made a note there, Jamie did about compassion cultivation training. Their training's now mindful self-compassion, wonderful training. Emory, my friend and former GCC board member, Lobsang Negi at Emory University is created with others, kind of a cognitively-centered and ethically-oriented compassion training.

[00:22:25] There are a number of these trainings out there, including trainings for. And teenagers, and there's increasingly good research behind them that's showing, you know, what people would say who go through them, that yeah, this stuff works. You can train, you can cultivate compassion. I find for myself. Upset with someone who has wronged me, and really wronged me, you know, and I've concluded based on discerning and valuing that, yep, they did wrong me, or somebody else. I only get free of it when I find my way into whatever was my own responsibility in the matter, which may be zero. But I'm willing to recognize more than zero. And second, I only get for you when I find compassion for them. And we can train. I have trained in that growing capacity for compassion.

[00:23:21] Quick recap, we have empathy, three neural circuits, we have compassion and the evolution of compassion, and the fact that it's trainable, and the focus on the sweetness of the caring response alongside empathy for suffering, enables us not to be fatigued in our compassion. It actually feeds us as it flows through us. And then the question becomes, and it's a hot one, in circles of so-called engaged Buddhism, or other areas, wow, what do we do about the causes of suffering? Not just the suffering itself. If we care about suffering and we are moved to relieve it, huh, by extension, does that call us to look at its fundamental causes, including in broad scale systems like poverty, wealth inequality, injustice, tyrannical rule. Prejudice Economic systems. These are systems that create a lot of suffering.

[00:24:27] Well, I can say for myself that my own career and I kind of started sort of young because I was unhappy and I wanted to do something about it. Certainly around 50 years. I've been focused on relieving suffering at the individual level and through my work including here my books programs doing therapy with people and so forth. Many, many other people have also been engaged on relieving suffering at the individual level. Incredibly important work, I think it's noble work, health care providers, emergency

situation responders, all kinds of people around the world. We pull people out in effect. We do what we can. We help people get out of the river of suffering. And increasingly, it's important to ask yourself and to ask ourselves, what's pushing people into the river of suffering upstream? What are the upstream causes of the stress, the loss, stuckness, the bias that people have to deal with the overheating of the planet? What are the up stream causes? Of 100 million tons a day of CO2 or CO2 equivalent gasses being excreted into our atmosphere. What are those upstream causes that are inexorably, inevitably like a giant greenhouse? That's why they call them greenhouse gasses heating up our planet. What are the upstream causes of wars? What are upstream causes of very, very wealthy people? Making sure that the world runs, you know, according to their own personal, you now, desires.

[00:26:21] Well, the only way we're gonna be able to address those upstream causes is by coming together. You can't address those upstream causes on your own. You have to join with other people. And that's why for myself, I've been really heartened by a growing clarity in the world today, grounded in compassion that we need to form new collectives and take action collectively at all kinds of scales, whether it's two mothers organizing to get a streetlight installed in a rural area in Kenya. So that when their daughters walk home from school, they are not being harassed, you know, by the teenage boys. That's collective action. Collective action also happens when people come together to improve a healthcare system or to organize a neighborhood group or to increase the fundamental institutions of civil society, like a relatively free press, or the right to organize and gather and assemble yourself without needing to get a permit. The local police department to do so. These are the sorts of things that are alive in the world today. There are many powerful forces doing them and we can join with those forces that are already happening. Worthy non-profits around the world or start your own as I did. What was I thinking? I thought I'd retire three years ago. Collective action with others.

[00:27:56] So I really invite you as I finish here to reflect on three things here one Your own capacities for empathy and how it might serve you to cultivate them and expand them Especially when you're dealing with challenging people Empathy is not agreement. Compassion is not an agreement either, right? Empathy. Second, compassion. You know, can you respond to suffering with compassionate concern and a tender wish that the suffering ease, even if you don't agree with that person? Can you expand that? And third, can you look to the causes upstream of so much needless suffering, so much What's up? In the world today and gather together with others and look for ways to come together with other, whether it's in the Global Compassion Coalition or in other forms of collective action to address the upstream systemic sources of so much needless suffering. That's my offering. Somebody asked an interesting question right at my alley. As a psychologist, Saul, does ADHD symptoms make it more difficult to not be so empathic? I'll address it this way, do the aspects of distractibility, impulsivity and stimulation seeking, you know, kind of being skittery, jackrabbit-y, does that make it harder to be empathic? Actually, I think many people who are on the normal range, temperament, toward the spirited slash ADHDN, they tend to be actually extra empathic. They actually tend to be really quite open. To stimuli, including stimuli coming from others. Sometimes it's almost overwhelming, so they start distancing excessively perhaps to manage all the input. So paradoxically, by developing healthy boundaries and a deeply bodily grounded sense of me here, then you can be more open to you over there. Particularly if you're more toward a distractible permeable, you know, fast moving end of the normal temperamental spectrum. Okay, let's see if there's anything else finishing up. Empathy, compassion, and addressing not just the effects, but the causes, the systemic sources of suffering as best you can collectively with others. Those are my main themes tonight.

