11_4_26 Talk*

*This is automatically generated transcript, so there are errors.

Rick Hanson: [00:00:00] I'd like to explore with you tonight one of the most helpful ways of being that I think anyone can establish. And first I want to talk about the value of grounding yourself in ways of being. What do I mean by that? Your sense of kind of your fundamental global sense of being, the way you're being, whether you're, this is very close to the third foundation of mindfulness, by the way, if you're interested in that, in your kind of state of being are you scattered and discombobulated. Or are you more collected and gathered together? In your state of being, do you feel really compressed and contracted, defended, beleaguered? Or is there a sense of openness? Do you feel really invasively scared? Or do you fell, even if there's some worry and there's a threat around the edges, that you got this? At least as best you can, you know, that you're just a sense of coping, you're progressing. These are aspects of what's your fundamental state of being. What's your state of Being in an interaction with someone? Is your global agenda to score points or to defend yourself against them, to maybe Prove that you're right. Or is your. Global agenda well-intended and interested in seeking the truth, finding out what is actually the truth and what would be the best thing to do going forward for everyone concerned, including yourself. Is that your fundamental agenda? You see the difference?

Rick Hanson: [00:01:53] And I think a lot in psychotherapy and coaching and self-help, self-improvement in general, there can be kind of a fixation on this detail or that detail or this fix or this cliche or this Instagram meme, this admonition, this kind of to me at least a lot feels really pretty superficial. And the process of engaging this kind of admonition, this instruction with yourself can itself inherently be discombobulating, kind of, where am I really? It all sounds really heady. What's different from that is to just encourage and pay attention to what's your overall kaboof state of being. Whatever it is, it is. Maybe in the moment, it IS fragmented. And obviously sometimes, hey, we're running for our lives, or the equivalent, or we're putting out a fire, or we are dealing with shocking, really bad news. We're really thrown for a loop. Hey, we're throwing for a loop. I'm only talking about when we actually can kind of sort of get our feet on the ground and begin to establish, you know, what's What's my ground here? Where do I want to stand in? What do I find refuge? What's overall state of being?

Rick Hanson: [00:03:40] That question is incredibly useful, because as someone, in my case, who's worked on himself for about, how old am I now, I don't know, 60 years, and who's worked with others for about 55 years, I just have found again and again that one of the most useful things is to help people kind of come home to their state of being. To like fundamentally what's going on. Fundamentally, who are you? Fundamentaly, can you come home to this moment? Can you come to yourself? And so I want to nominate for your consideration the global state of being that I call heartfelt presence. You can choose different words. Think about people that you really admire for their, let's say, practice or who they are in the world.

Rick Hanson: [00:04:47] And I think a lot, again and again, you would find that first, there's a quality of presence about them. They're present. Your grandmother is really giving you her full attention. She's rested in presence. She's present with you in the present, which as they say is the best present of all, presence. You can recall for yourself when you feel like you're really kind of in the zone. I bet it's characterized as a sense of presence. It's not. Cosmic or mysterious. You're there, you're receptive. You're not particularly rushing toward or rushing away from. There's a stability for you. There's balance, kind of evenness. There you are. And there you are, fully attentive. When your mind starts wandering away, you're no longer present. Fundamental variable or factor or characteristic of people's inner development is how rapidly can they notice that their mind is wandering and bring it back.

Rick Hanson: [00:06:20] William James, the godfather of American psychology, has a beautiful quotation along the lines that being able to sustain presence, being able regulate your attention so that your attention can, you know, plop. Into the present and stay there is one of the fundamental underlying factors of personal autonomy and being in charge of your own life, being who you are. Presence. You can see as well that when we are being mindful, while we are being mindful, by definition, we are being present. So my exploration with you here about presence or being present might sound very, yeah, it's simply about being mindful with a quality of recollectiveness here and now. So much of the work of modern mindfulness teachers, such as John Kabat-Zinn, is about what it takes to sustain a sense of presence.

Rick Hanson: [00:07:37] Here's some very cool, practical, seriously geeky brain science about, I think this is the title of the paper, On the Control of Control. So if you were to

remain present, that means that whatever is in the neural substrates of working memory is staying relatively stable. Maybe what is being held in working memory is a kind of open awareness to whatever's occurring. But you're not getting distracted. You're not getting lost in thought. So what stabilizes the contents of working memory whose neural substrates, you know, include, primarily, upper outer frontal regions in your cortex. What's going on there? They're like buckets in a sense, that when you're present are, you know, have us are sustaining the objects of attention, which could be the momentary flow of consciousness while remaining present with it. Well, those buckets that enable us to stay present and stay focused on whatever we wanna stay focused on to stay president with the breath, let's say, or to stay present with. Flow of emotion over the face of someone we're having an important conversation with, or to stay really present with the internal experience of what it's like to be you, as let's say you explore your sense of loneliness these days. What regulates those neural substrates is dopamine. Dopamine operates and controls a kind of gate.

Rick Hanson: [00:09:34] So when we are staying present with something, the gate is closed and no distracting inputs can pull us away. What keeps the gate closed is a steady stream of dopamine which is associated with a steady stream of reward. So the sense of being present can be supported by you being aware of what feels good about it. What do you like about being present? Notice that as your sense of liking being present increases, it's easier to be present. Whoa, that's pretty wild. Steady-state dopamine helps us stay present with whatever we're attending to at the time. And when dopamine drops, then the gates open, and it's very easy for distracting inputs to move into working memory, bubbling up from within your body or your psyche or coming in from the outside. All right.

Rick Hanson: [00:10:58] The other thing that happens though, is that if some new stimulation comes your way, that seems very rewarding, kind of more rewarding than your baseline that's keeping the gates closed, boom, they pop open again. Right? And suddenly you're distracted. Your mind is chasing after that new shiny object. And I think this is a metaphor from the paper. I just love this metaphor. I'll jazz it up a little bit. Essentially imagine that this machinery, this mechanism, very, very simple, ingeniously simple evolved over millions of years in our primate brains. Imagine being a monkey in a tree or whatever. Yeah, a tree, a banana tree. There you are. You're in your tree and you're eating a banana, yum yum banana. And as long as there are enough bananas in

this tree, the stream of dopamine centered reward keeps coming, yay. But when the rewards drop, then you start looking around for other trees. Very effective.

Rick Hanson: [00:12:07] Or while you're munching on a banana nice steady moderate reward, nice steady moderate streams of dopamine. A really cute other monkey swings on to a branch nearby. Whoa! Who cares about bananas? How are you doing? Right? We attend to the new, even more stimulating reward. This means that if you allow the sense of presence to not be merely mildly rewarding, but if you open into kind of the lusciousness of really being home in the present. The freedom in being present, then the sense of reward will be very high. It'll be toward the top of its range. And that means that other things will not create a surge or spike of dopamine that then creates distractions. This is also why in Buddhist meditative training, there's a real appreciation of happiness and even bliss. Because when you're rested in authentic happiness or bliss, that creates high streams of dopamine reward and prevents other spikes of alluring alternative rewards to come in that pop open the gates to working memory.

Rick Hanson: [00:13:36] So this is an argument, this is a rationale for really encouraging yourself as you rest in presence in whatever you're doing, presence while peeling the carrots. Presence while being with your partner, presence while doing a task, presence while meditating, that it's really good, it's skillful means to as best you can find qualities in it that are emotionally positive and even turn up the volume on them. Another thing that really supports presence and sustained presence is the sense of things as a whole. We can really concentrate on one thing. You know, we could really concentrate on the next move in a chess game or we're working through our taxes or, you know, or trying to get a thread through the eye of a needle. We wouldn't really think of presence as a word we'd apply to that. We might say focused, we might say fixated, but we wouldn't say present. Presence has a quality of opening out into the larger gestalt, the larger whole. And neurologically That makes sense because when we open out into the larger whole, we reduce activity in the midline of the cortex that's involved in mental time travel. We're no longer present when we're mulling about the past or daydreaming or worrying or resenting about a future.

Rick Hanson: [00:15:08] So the sense of things as a whole bring us into the present. And one of the best ways to establish a sense of things as whole is to have an awareness, including in the background of your body as a whole. Also the environment as a whole, a

kind of bird's eye view awareness floating a little bit in your consciousness from, you know, the 10,000 foot view. Present. So these are different factors of sustaining presence. They're skillful, they're evidence-based. Try them in the evidence- based laboratory of your own experience and see how they work for you. Presence. One thing that presence is really helpful for is dealing with loss. And it's interesting that the sense of loneliness around being an older person. Without a partner. And maybe as we age, you know, sometimes our friend networks fade or break down, others pass away or move out of our lives. There's a lot of isolation, social isolation, not joyful solitude, social isolation leading to loneliness, which as Dr. Vivek Murthy has pointed out, and you may know this, arguably has certainly negative long-term physical health consequences on average.

Rick Hanson: [00:16:40] Loneliness, even amounting to the equivalent in terms of impact on public health of roughly smoking half a pack of cigarettes a day. People might argue about is it really half a pack or a quarter pack? Whatever. Bottom line, in addition to not feeling good, in addition to feeling bad, active loneliness, social isolation is bad for physical health long So we were talking about that. So what happens when you're present, when you're present in the present, for one, you're not caught up in ruminating about your isolation. You're not adding second darts to your experience of loss, let's say, or separate, you know, alongside isolation. Maybe there have been some losses for you. Maybe you've lost functions as you age, certain things you've turned a corner on, you're never going to be able to do that thing again or. Few people move out of your life, children leave home.

Rick Hanson: [00:17:43] It's very interesting to really explore what happens when you come into being present in the present and then with presence, be with those feelings of loss and related qualities of mourning or grieving. I find it's really helpful. I've had, you know. Fewer losses than some and more losses than many in different kinds of ways. And I know what it is like to have experiences of grief or mourning, related feelings sometimes of regret, even remorse. Yeah, there's a lot there. And I just notice immediately when I move into, okay, be present, be here, be open, you know, less caught up in verbal thought. More simply being with what's here. Oh, it starts feeling so much better. Loss is real. There's, you know. We're losing the immediacy of the present moment, offset by the arisingness of the next moment, for sure. And we have bigger losses too, including as we age. And one of the major fields of practice is to practice with all that. We all lose, right? And the question is, how can we practice with it?

Rick Hanson: [00:19:12] And that sense of being present is really, really helpful because then We are resting in the fullness of the moment, which helps us to deal with and tolerate and be healed by the losses that we've suffered and the grieving that we have about them. Lately, I've been really dealing with the edge of my practice around chasing the future. That goal-directed, highly trained, highly rewarded machinery of accomplishing. And it's like there's this really eager puppy in me, except it's the size of like a Great Dane. You can imagine a Great Danes is a bunga bunga puppy. Chases that red ball, sees the red ball. Dogs are a little colorblind, but go with me here. Chases the redball. Bumps into others along the way. Get the ball. Gets the ball! Yes. And then, boop, boomp. Starts looking for the next ball to chase.

Rick Hanson: [00:20:23] Now I imagine that I don't, I'm not the only puppy on the street, right? I'm the only one here. You too might relate to the inner puppy that just chases the ball. Solves problems, takes care of conditions, fixes things, builds things, makes things, virtuously. Great. And there. Often with some stressfulness along the way and a fair amount of self-referentialness along the line. People talk about dopamine nation. That's another aspect of dopamine, that chasing that reward and dealing with the sense of discomfort when the reward stream starts dropping. Oh, I need more of that. And one thing about being present, you can observe it, is it really supports the experience of enoughness. There's enough already. With associated experiences of thankfulness, of receiving. In presence comes thankfulness. In presence, comes a sense of gratitude, even contentment. I think contentment is certainly in the top 10 if not five or three underrated important experiences in life. Contentment. Truly content with a sense of I am content distinct from I am discontent. You know know what it feels like to say to yourself I'm discontented.

Rick Hanson: [00:22:16] And then notice what it feels like to say to yourself, I am content. Notice that we can still be open to positive aims moving through us. We can still pursue our goals. We can Still aspire without attachment since we're already content. And the foundation of that contentment is presence. I don't know how to be content without being, without a sense of presence. So you can see the benefits already of the sense of presence for challenges to our needs for satisfaction related to loss and grief. Presence really helps with that. Presence also really helps, with challenges also to satisfaction in terms of obstructions to our goals, like frustration, or disappointment, or addiction, or contracted drivenness. Presence really, really helps with that. Presence also really helps us have a

sense of safe enough in the present because as we're in rested in presence, we're really tracking threats if they exist.

Rick Hanson: [00:23:31] And often we're aware of the fact that in this moment, I am not being attacked. In this moment it's threat level green, in this movement, not threat level orange. Presence is really helpful with that. See the value of presence, isn't it? You know, helps us feel safer and stronger, helps us to feel more content, more rested in satisfaction and fulfillment in life, and presence really helps us deal with our sorrows. So the cultivation of presence is a major, major value. So much of Buddhist training really boils down to a sense of presence. I have been watching little short video clips of monastics of various kinds. And one of the hallmarks of people with a pretty solid practice is you feel their sense of presents. They're not going anywhere. They're not scanning your phone while you're talking. They may not be agreeing with you. In the back of their mind, in their sense of presence, could be a little bit of cognitive process that's reflecting on what you're saying and considering a response to it. And still, 98% of them is over here with you, they're present with you. Think of the present we give to others by being present with them. This is especially important with people that we have long-term relationships with, like my wife.

Rick Hanson: [00:25:20] And... I find that there's actually a place for deliberately moving through habituated tuning out to a real sense of presence with your partner or your whoever you wanna say, your neighbors, your kids, people you know. And one of the great aids to that that also supports presence is to bring a quality of curiosity or beginner's mind to it. Like you just don't know what they're going to say next rather than sort of filling in the blank of what they're going to say next. Just see if you can find a curiosity, almost like you tilt your head and you look at them, you know, not derisively, but more like, oh, what strange beast are you? Wandering into Babylon. Who? What? Who are you, what are you wow. Find new things to like about that person. Suddenly you could be more present with them. So that sense of presence again is very helpful in relationships. There. So. I wanna speak just a bit about heartfelt presence, this quality of it. Now presence per se is neutral. And this goes to a technical point, I hope you'll forgive me, it'll be quick.

Rick Hanson: [00:26:36] There are different views about whether awareness is inherently loving. I don't think it is. I think awareness is a... Biologically constructed, incredibly helpful for survival and evolution capacity, capability that humans share in simpler forms with other animals that have simpler nervous systems. I mean, is your cat aware? Yeah. Is

awareness a kind of field through which the experiences of your cat. Or your goldfish are passing, or you are passing. Yeah, I don't think that field, which can represent anything, has itself a loving quality. Maybe it does, I'd defer to people who may think it ultimately does, but for me it's more like, oh, it's simply awareness.

Rick Hanson: [00:27:41] So I find it really helpful to add qualities or to be in touch with blends such as heartfelt presence. That's why I think training in mindfulness or mindful self-compassion adds value to training in mindfulness alone. I don't think training and mindfulness alone inherently activates heartfelt qualities. It may open room for them, but I don't think it inherently necessarily brings them along. So that's why think it's helpful. As the Buddha taught, he distinguished mindfulness. From compassion. He distinguished compassion from kindness. He distinguished kindness and compassion from happiness at the welfare of others because it's helpful to differentiate these so then you can integrate them.

Rick Hanson: [00:28:35] So back to heartfelt presence. What does it feel like for you to be rusted in heartfelt presence? And can you develop heartfelt presence as a trait? I really encourage the development of heartfelt presence as a trait. One reason I encourage it is that it's a relatively safe place to be. Because when you're rested in heartfelt presence, you're much less likely to do or say something that you'll regret later and will cause trouble between you and other people. Right there, safe. When you're rested in heartfelt presence, you're already strong. You're, you are already supported, nourished. You are already at your best. You are all ready pulling in a lot of information when you're resting in heartfelt presents. You're not distracted, you're not lost. You're rested there. And the heartfeltness itself. Is feeding you and nourishing and protecting you. It's like all you got to be is heartfelt presence. And then it takes a load off a lot of the time. You don't have to do any tasks. You actually don't need to do anything.

Rick Hanson: [00:30:17] And it's very interesting to explore heartfelt presence with wholesome purposes moving through you. You're rested in heartfelt presence while you're brushing your teeth. You're resting in heartfelt Presence. While you're really interested in what someone is saying to you. Try it! Really try it. You know, there's a range too. It's really easy to just be rested in a heartfelt presence while you're meditating here. Oh, great, or heartfelt presence with your cat crawling into your lap or your dog, what have you, or whatever, your granddaughter. What about heartfelt presence with someone who's just

talking to you and you rest there? What about heart felt presence with someone whose got a complaint about you? What about that? People are asking there how to cultivate heartfeltness. Great question. Tons of stuff about this in Buddhism and in clinical psychology too. Just deliberate practices of compassion.

Rick Hanson: [00:31:24] Polyvagal theory speaks to this too. People talk about ventral vagal. You know, the anatomization of all this is kind of controversial these days, but the experience certainly is not. Of a sense of opening your heart, resting in your heart. I like the word open-hearted. I don't necessarily agree with what's over there, but there's an open-heartedness. I'm not being motivated to cause harm. My heart is not closed to them. You know, open-hearted. You might choose different words. You could put your hand on your heart. These are different ways to cultivate trait heartfeltness and related to that trait heartfelt presence. And then more and more, it becomes your default. It becomes kind of where you already are, heartfelt presence Try it, really try it.

Rick Hanson: [00:32:14] Okay, I'm going to take a look at how would I define heartfelt presence? Well, I think I've defined presence, right? Presence and I think also in a sense of presence is that all of you is present and Heartfelt means that you're benign and you're in touch with your heart at the time Yeah, and you're blending qualities of mindfulness and kindness, friendliness, compassion, lovingness, heartfelt. You're sincere when you're in heartfelt presence. You're grounded in your own goodness when you are in heartfelt present. I think goodwill is a good quality. I would encourage you to keep bringing it down into your body. And to presume that you already know what it is to be heartfelt and present. And then explore it for yourself. Presence is sustained mindfulness. And sustained mindfulness with qualities of the heart mingling, that's heartfelt presence.

Rick Hanson: [00:33:46] Someone asked, if we are to integrate everything, what is the goal of differentiation? Well, I think integration is certainly useful and in all, you know, the universe itself is a whole. So there's a place for that. And when learning anything at all, it's helpful to differentiate. You know, when you're learning, let's say to ski or a toddler's learning to hold a cup and drink out of it, you can break that task down into multiple parts. So it's helpful to differentiate on the way toward integrating it as a whole, both end, both ends.

Rick Hanson: [00:34:25] So, question about presence. M says, I have avoided meditating for a long time in spite of knowing many of the benefits. Part of it is that staying quiet for a while and working on presence feels kind of sad and lonely to me. Is that a phase that people go through? Is it extra hard for an extrovert? This is great. Am I touching something existential and scary by being alone and quiet? And is that the same as presence? Thank you, wonderful question. It is certainly true that aspects of meditation can associate with painful material, grounded, often rooted in our history. That's why, as people like Willoughby Britton and others point out, mindfulness is not a universal medicine, it's not a panacea, and intensive forms of mindfulness, such as sustained meditation retreats, are not for everyone. And it's a little bit like exercise. You know, exercise is good for most people. And for certain people under certain conditions, certain forms of exercise are contraindicated. Doesn't mean that exercise is not of value to many, many people. It just means be skillful about this and take good care of yourself and maybe get someone who can help you, like someone who knows about exercise or weightlifting or holding yoga poses or Pilates, or in this case, mindfulness and meditation. So part one.

Rick Hanson: [00:35:54] Part two, it could well be, and it sounds like, that for you, just sort of being with yourself feels sad and lonely. So I would ask you to see if you could differentiate, differentiation, or disentangle the primary simplicity of mindful, of being yourself, just who you are right now, is it, it's not inherently lonely. To simply be quiet, being quiet with yourself. It's not inherently lonely. Many people enjoy being quiet with themselves while not experiencing loneliness. So how did it happen in your history that sadness and loneliness became associated with being by yourself? There's probably some history there. And it also may be true that there has been not just the presence of the bad, perhaps, but the absence of the good. Know, maybe for you after you were by yourself as a younger person, it wasn't like you could then return to some nice nourishing family vibe or dinner or best friend or, you know, comfortable inclusion in some group of kids roughly your own age. Maybe that was lacking, the absence of good. So then being, you know, on your own. It was associated maybe with certain kinds of pain and it did not become associated with certain kinds of good, like the return to the community or a sense of being with others, or return to this secure base of being with others. I encourage you to see if you can tease these apart. This is a fundamental skill, to be able to explore associations that we presume and gradually disentangle them so we don't feel that we're so caught by them. We don't feel so implicated or bound by what the brain, trying to help you, has

associated with a neutral experience of just resting and observing, let's say, the passing sensations of breathing. Part one.

Rick Hanson: [00:38:12] Part two, see what happens when you bring in more qualities of heart into the meditation. Pure mindfulness can feel very dry. Many people. Historically, you know, the movement of compassion and the Bodhisattva, so forth, and the Mahayana developments were kind of a counter to the increasingly dry and sort of scholastic, analytic aspects of the Abhidhamma and other developments in Buddhism after the Buddha himself died centuries, now centuries later. So, for your own sake, maybe bring in more heartfeltness. Maybe meditate? On some form of loving kindness. There are many structured ways to do this. You may be familiar with them. Working with phrases and with individuals, phrases like may you be safe, may you healthy, may you happy, may live with ease, those four phrases. People like benefactors, people who have really given to you. It's easy to feel loving toward. Maybe people who are more your friends. How about people that are neutral. Maybe even people who are challenging, at least a little, and even yourself. Those are five types of people, four classic types of wishes. You can go back and listen to this recording if you want to pin those down. Traditional instruction, so you could try that.

Rick Hanson: [00:39:32] And then you may find that the cultivation of heartfelt presence doesn't feel sad, doesn't feels lonely, feels actually really good. And you can even raise the intensity. Of heartfelt presence so that your dopamine levels are at their ceiling top range so you can really sustain that experience by turning up the intensity, the juiciness, the yumminess of heartfelt presents. Okay. Yeah Okay, I'm gonna finish in just a moment here, I don't know I hope this was useful for you it's been so useful for me recently to Simplify my practice Because I'm fairly knowledgeable about it, you know a lot of tools in the psycho spiritual warehouse coming back to your state of being, your state of being is the origin for how we manifest in the world. So getting really rested in a fairly good state of being with an associated sense of identity, it's the origin point. It's a little bit like an inverted cone, you know, with the pointed top. Now being the bottom, as the sense of your state of being and identity, from which thoughts, feelings, and actions kind of fan out, spread out into the world. But that's the origin point from which they keep arising. It really shapes them. So a sense of you're ground of being or state of being has increasingly rested in something like presence. And a presence that's not just neutral. But is warm, is caring. Benign, whoosh, that can have a really big impact on everything else.

Rick Hanson: [00:41:38] Okay Well, thanks for hanging in there with me. I'm gonna look forward next week to have you report back. Hey Did you try it? Did you remind yourself? Did you help yourself kind of rest increasingly in a quality of heartfelt presence almost like the wallpaper of your mind or? Your kind of ongoing background way of being as you walked across a room or used an elevator or just kind of we're present with others around you in the coffee shop or, you know, in your home. What happens then for you? What happens when you're rested, increasingly in authentic heartfelt presence? And don't push yourself to feel something or be something that's not right for you or not appropriate in a setting. You know, there's certain. Settings where resting in heartfelt presence is counter-indicated. I remember sitting across the dinner table with our kids when they were teenagers and I was really marinating in heartfelt presence and kind of getting a little googly-eyed, I'm sure.

Rick Hanson: [00:42:44] And one of our kids said, hey, what are you doing over there, dad? And I was like, whoa, you don't really like it when I'm just kind of rested in heartfelt presidents. I'm not pushing it on you. I'm just kind of looking at my plate. And feeling so grateful for the tomato there. That really bugged one of our kids as a teenager. I won't say which one. And I just kind of learned, oh, okay. I needed to disguise what was really going on inside me as skillful means. You know, and I'm prepared to exercise parental authority. I'm not a wussy and so forth, et cetera. But it was just like, okay, okay it's not really wanted. I don't need to create a big controversy here. Challenging enough with adolescents, so heartfelt presence may not be called for all the time. Don't do it if it's not called for. But anyway, check it out. Check it out and have some fun with it. Okay? And I look forward to hearing from you.