

12_10_25 Talk*

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

Rick Hanson: [00:00:00] The great matter of life and death. Are you ready? Now if this is a traumatizing topic, feel free to get some space from it. I'll start by referring to a story that could be true, could be mythic in terms of the Buddha's own life, raised in privilege. Some versions of the story have him growing up inside the walls of a golden palace. Very unlikely this story to be true. His family were wealthy farmers. He was out in the world a fair amount, but still, as the story has it, one day he encountered what are called the four heavenly messengers, four divine messengers. Wow, that's some pretty special messengers. What were these four messengers he encountered? Well, one was the he saw someone who was getting really old. Wow, aging. He didn't know that was possible, as the story goes. Second messenger, someone who was sick. Oh no. Sick, illness. I never saw that before, as the story goes.

[00:01:15] Third, he saw someone who was dead. Saw a corpse. Wow. Is this possible? Could this happen to me? Could I age? Oh no. Could I get sick? Could I eventually even die? Oh no. And then he saw the fourth messenger, as the story goes, someone who embodied deep personal practice, who was radiant with inner peace, and whose gaze included the other three heavenly messengers and everything else in reality. Wow, that fourth messenger.

[00:01:57] So that's an entry into this topic that I'm titling as resting in what you are. So from the moment of conception, we meet the first messenger, impermanence, aging. To paraphrase Bob Dylan, one who is not busy being born is busy dying. And at some point, and it could be very early for some of us, including even in utero for some, and certainly in infancy for some, at some point we meet the second and third messengers, illness and eventually death. We meet these in the embodiment of others, including non human animals. One of the early losses for many children as the loss of a pet. Sometimes before there's a loss of an elder and older relative, like a grandparent. As your hair turns gray, like my hair, and as wrinkles form. You know, rust never sleeps, entropy, gradual movement of order into disorder is a very powerful force in the universe. You know, you start meeting more people around you who are meeting those second and third messengers, these messengers, sorry, all three of them, you know, aging, illness, and death. So, how do we meet the three messengers? It's a central topic in Buddhism, other wisdom traditions, secular traditions. How do we deal?

[00:03:31] As Albert Camus talked about in the myth of Sisyphus, which our son Forrest, with whom I do this podcast, is very fond, pushing the boulder uphill, and then it eventually rolls back down again, over and over and over again. In many ways, that describes many aspects of our life. How do we live with that? How can we best meet these three messengers? Well, we can meet them with the fourth messenger of practice. So, as Dogan puts it, great is the matter of birth and death, quickly passing, gone, gone. Awake, each one, awaken. Don't waste this life. So, in the spirit of Dogan, I'd like to say that certainly in the Buddhist tradition, and I think elsewhere, how we practice. With the great matter of aging, illness, and death in others and in ourselves, has two aspects to it. How do we awaken? Has two aspects to it. Compassion and wisdom. The jewel and the lotus, love and insight, the two together. I'd like to start here with compassion for ourselves and others in meeting the three messengers, and then I will mainly focus on the aspects of wisdom.

[00:04:59] So I'd like to pause here for a minute, as you like, bringing into awareness people you know who are dealing with aging, illness, or death, or all the above, or facing your own health issues, your own process of getting older. And see if you can find some heartfelt compassion for this. So I'll be quiet for a minute or so.

[00:06:15] You too will eventually no longer be here. Like me, you are subject to aging, illness, and death. And can you find kindness and compassion for the people here? Can you find kindness for yourself and receive the compassion of others here? Suzuki Roshi said once that living is like knowing that is like setting sail in a boat that you know will eventually sink, you know, for others and for yourself. And we are all passengers on that boat in our common humanity, along with all living things. We're all taking the same one way trip. So how about the wisdom aspects?

[00:07:28] I'd like to begin with the wisdom that can give rise to compassion as the truths revealed with wisdom land in the heart. And let's be clear that sometimes when people bring the wisdom aspects to illness, aging, and death, you want to whack them in the head. Shut up with your infinite wisdom. Don't you know I'm upset? Don't you know I'm sick. I got a bad diagnosis. Gook. You know, I heard those three terrible words, four terrible words from the doctor. This doesn't look good. Shut up already with your wisdom. You know, so it's okay if we have that response. And there's just like there's no replacement for, you know, compassion and love, there's no replacement for wisdom and insight.

[00:08:22] So, with that said, I'd like to start with Master Yun Men's. Response to the question, how is it when the tree withers and the leaves fall? What is it that the tree withers and the leaves fall? He replied, Master Yunman, body exposed in the golden wind. This is one of my favorite koans. To live as this body, we must accept the exposure to the winds of time and change. You can't have one without the other. So if we are here to enjoy that which is golden in the winds, we must accept our vulnerability, our frailty, the precariousness of life as we are buffeted inevitably by the winds of change. You might say quietly to yourself here, my body is exposed to the golden wind. Who quoted the phrase, More Fatih, which of all places was quoted in the last episode of a terrible TV show, the third season of White Lotus, and I'm on record as Having that view. But wow, they're quoting Nietzsche in Latin, amorfati. Embrace your fate, love your fate. Well, it is all, it is everyone's fate, it's my fate and yours to live exposed to the golden wind. Can we embrace that fate? Since we are embraced, you know, we are exposed, we may as well embrace that fact.

[00:10:21] And then I'd like to share with you a very memorable conversation between the Buddha and his primary attendant, his cousin Ananda. If you've read anything in the Pali Canon, you've come across passages that begin, Thus have I heard. Well, that's the voice of Ananda speaking from memory, and he apparently had a remarkable memory, as many people do who grow up in very oral traditions, as was Buddhism, certainly in his first few centuries. And Ananda is often a kind of a character in dialogs with the Buddha. He's very well intended. He's not quite as awakened as the Buddha, but he's still trying. And you might want to take a look at this particular sutta. It's fairly short, and there are two translations. I'm going to refer to the one translated by Tani Sarobhku, and I'm going to also read it to you. So this is Samyutta Nikaya 47.13. These suttas, which I personally really enjoy, are written in a very traditional way. The language is highly gendered. At the time, the monastics were entirely male. And so there is that aspect to it. And of course, these were handed down orally for centuries, two or three centuries, before a written record survived. And so some noise has probably slipped into the signal in these suttas of

various kinds, and probably some editing later on by various people who are trying to, you know, get their view in. All right.

[00:11:59] Still, I think when you're dealing with situations or suttas that are very grounded in events, they're probably pretty darn close to what actually happened. I myself really enjoy this sense of these real people whose friend has just died, are you know speaking to us down across the centuries? I'm going to unpack some of the, you know, kind of maybe more obscure meanings of some of these passages here, and then we'll kind of have a little discussion about it. So to go through this, and now I'm going to essentially read key portions of this sutta, this encounter between the Buddha and Ananda. So on one occasion, the blessed one, the Buddha, was staying near Savati in Jeta's Grove. Anattapendika's monastery. So suttas typically begin, they're located at a time and a place. And Kunda, the novice was the attendant of Sariputta, who, along with another senior monastic, Mogolana, was one of the Buddha's, I would say, two primary students. Sariputta was highly respected. And Sariputta attained total unbinding.

[00:13:28] So I want to flag, first of all, the notion of unbinding. It's the idea that we live bound up in various compounded ways, and eventually we can become unbound, which actually has implications, if you care to go here, of the underlying unconditioned ground of all, which we settle back into when we are unbound from the various forms in conditioned unfolding big bang reality. Okay. So then Kunda tells Ananda, Sariputta has died. Ananda replies, Kunda, we should go talk to the Buddha about this. So they go to see the Buddha. And Ananda says, Buddha, just now, you know, we've learned that Sariputta has died. And when that happened, Ananda is speaking here, it was as if my body were drugged. I lost my bearings. Things weren't clear to me on hearing that Sariputta had died. Then the Buddha replies. First point of wisdom. But Ananda, when Sariputta died, did he take with him virtue? The aggregate of virtue. Did he take with him concentration, discernment, release? You know, did he take with him the knowledge and vision of release? No, Lord Buddha, Ananda replies, he did not take those things with him. They are still present. We have not lost them simply because Sariputta died.

[00:15:35] Then Ananda continues, it's just that he was my instructor and counselor, one who exhorted and urged and roused and encouraged me. He was tireless in teaching the Dhamma. He was a help to his companions in the holy life. We miss the nourishment. Of his Dhamma, the wealth of his Dhamma, his help in the Dhamma, Dhamma being teachings. Then the Buddha again replies here's the second teaching of wisdom. But Ananda, haven't I already taught you the fact that all things dear and appealing will eventually be separated from us? Haven't I taught you these things? What else is there to expect? It is impossible that one could forbid or stop anything that is born, existent, fabricated, and subject to disintegration from disintegrating.

[00:16:34] So at this point, as I quoted this teaching to my wife earlier today, she said, I don't want you to be thinking like that if I die before you. Not just some collection of compounded parts that has become unbound. There's truth to that. That's where the first dart of the animal body does not want to die and does not want others to go. Of course, we don't want them to go. That's okay. And there is something a little austere and I gotta go here. A little Masculine in the Buddha's kind of take. I started, I'm sorry. It's a generalization, and etc., etc., etc., etc. Okay. Yes, that's true. And okay, let's see if wisdom helps us alongside compassion and spaciousness and tolerance and kindness for the soft animal of the body, as Mary Oliver put it, that doesn't want to go and wants to be special and doesn't want people to bring their new age enlightened hair hairy fairy bullshit to the fact that we're really sick and we don't have long to live. Absolutely true. Stipulated

for the record here. And then onward with the wisdom of the Buddha. So then he uses the metaphor about, you know, just as if a large limb were to fall from a tree, the tree of our community is still here. We have not lost that. And what do you expect? All the limbs of that tree, right? Will eventually pass away. What did you expect?

[00:18:33] And so then here comes the next really important piece of teaching. Therefore, Ananda, each of you should remain with yourself as an island. And I'm going to get to what does yourself mean. Each of you should remain with yourself as an island, yourself as your refuge, without anything else as a refuge. Pardon me. Remain with the teachings as an island, the teachings as your refuge, wisdom, in other words, without anything else as a refuge. And then he goes on. How do you rest in yourself as a refuge?

[00:19:10] And the section here, then he continues essentially with the four foundations of mindfulness. Remain focused on your body in and of itself, ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Similarly, in the other three foundations of mindfulness, rest in awareness of the hedonic tone of experiences, those are what they mean by feelings. Also rest in awareness of general qualities of your mind.

[00:19:43] And last, fourth foundation of mindfulness, rest in awareness of major themes in the Buddha Dharma, such as the seven factors of awakening or the four noble truths. That's how you practice. So he's being very practical here. He's saying, rest in your practice, in the reliability of your practice, and that is how to be with things that arise and pass away. So here's a really important point. What do we mean? What does he mean by rest with yourself? Okay. And by the way, I really encourage you to engage this topic in an emotionally centered way, rather than spinning out into philosophical, you know, canoodles of thought. So what do you mean yourself? Here what is meant, I believe, the Buddha is saying, rely on your practice. Rely on what endures. Take refuge in what endures rather than passing conditions, including other people. Including, by extension, me as a teacher. The Buddha kept returning people to their own responsibility and agency for their own practice. Rest in your natural wakefulness, your innate goodness. Rest in the four establishings, moment by moment by moment, of your own mindfulness. Okay? That's what we can rest in.

[00:21:35] Now, the nature of that resting is described in dualistic ways. The Buddha is saying, bring your attention to your body, bring your attention to the pleasantness or unpleasantness of moment-to-moment experiences. And then the other To foundations of mindfulness, be goal directed in that sense. There's a place for that. A lot of people have become awakened in nothing more than the practices that the Buddha laid out over the last 2500 years. And also, there are some pitfalls in practices that are goal directed and dualistic. In the Mahayana traditions that emerged through Tibet and then moving through China, infused with Chan, becoming Zen in Japan and early roots in China as well, the dualistic framing got critiqued.

[00:22:32] And it got challenged with a profound alternative that is summarized here in two sentences that hit me personally like a bolt of lightning in a retreat that I was on several years ago. This is from Dogen here. Conveying oneself toward all things to carry out practice enlightenment is delusion. Dogen is critiquing and understanding of what the Buddha is saying in the previous passages as delusional. Rather, all things coming and carrying out practice through the self, that's realization. And as someone highly trained, In conveying oneself toward goals, in my case, completing tasks, moving through a checklist, getting an A, getting a pat on the back, getting a PhD, getting some money for all that, whoa. It's a tough habit to break. And yet I know that and knew when this thing hit me

that Dogen was right, that there is an inherent stress in that orientation of being a separated, beleaguered self, acting upon the world as best one can. The effort to get to it keeps pushing it farther and farther away.

[00:24:17] So as we approach the great matter, you know, of aging, illness, and death, there's a real place for softening, surrendering, accepting your frailty. Your body and my body have probably several hundred trillion cells, each of them comprised of trillions of trillions of it. Atoms all swirling around. So much can go wrong at any moment. That's reality. You know, all these things are coming through us. We live dependently. And while that can be initially very shocking and disturbing, actually, it can become a broader sense of kind of falling back into the arms of reality and being lived by it altogether until eventually the causes and conditions that are living you as you gradually change and disperse. And then the body eventually falls away with the ordinary mind along with it. It's a little bit like in the common metaphor of the wave in the ocean. That wave you is being made continuously by all things coming. Since that's the truth, we might as well open to them and allow them to move through us and encourage them to move through us as our practice.

[00:26:17] And Tina asks really well, what is how does that relate to? Everything's connected to everything else. He meant it really metaphorically. There's also a common metaphor that nirvana, nibbana, is like an island in the stream of suffering, island in the stream of ordinary condition reality. And so it's a double metaphor there. You know, he doesn't mean you should live separated. There's some languaging and translations like you should be a lamp unto yourself, separated from the darkness, separated from others. Those are poetic but troublesome in their inaccuracy metaphors. So that's a quick response here. So to continue here, yeah, check out that quotation from Okumura. In other words, and these are sentences that I personally have spent a lot of time with, kind of marinating in them, meditating on them, coming back to them. We cannot practice by ourselves. The subject of practice is not one particular person.

[00:27:21] So as you follow the Buddha's advice to trust in yourself and practice in yourself, the deeper meaning of this is to practice or to open in your own location and case, to practice as a process of the universe moving through you here and now. That is a complete shift in the frame. Okumura talks about practice as all things carrying out practice through the individual's body and mind. We participate with the whole universe as it practices through our individual bodies and minds. We don't practice individually to improve ourselves. Rather, we settle down peacefully within the network of dependent origination and allow the universal life force to practice through us for all beings. Can you feel the deepening of this? And it's kind of an enormous relief. Wow.

Rick Hanson: [00:28:41] The universe is practicing through me for all beings. This then goes to a classic metaphor in Zen, moon in a dewdrop. If we see the moon reflected in a dewdrop, that reflection is individual. And yet the light of the moon shines everywhere in the understanding here metaphorically. In other words, as Okumura continues, the simultaneous existence of individuality and universality in our lives is the truth of our existence, the wave and the ocean, the dewdrop and the moon. And when we awaken to this truth moment by moment, Buddha is manifest. In other words, our true nature. Manifest Buddha. And again, there are depths to this, and there's a certain zen spin on this that you kind of have to feel your way into. But you can see that this, and I'm offering it here, and this is something that I'm personally growing into and becoming more established in, this mode of being and mode of practice. So it's a progressive process. And if it's initially inexplicable or like woo, that's really okay. As I think someone is writing here,

Zophia, just resonating with this, you know, is our intuition. So moon in a dewdrop, the dewdrop and the moon, both and being both, standing up for yourself as the dewdrop, while lightening up, both lightning and being enlightened by the light of the universal true nature of moon. Both and lovely quotation here from Li Po. We live together, the mountain and me, universality and individuality, until only the mountain remains.

[00:31:39] And it could well be, as Brenda says, the languaging here, and including in different traditions, can feel very kind of alien and aloof. For me, what's helpful and is to feel a kind of tenderness in the heart when we realize dewdrop, impermanent dewdrop, sweet, beautiful, you know. I don't want you to go, and yet you will, and moon, moon reflected locally in dew drop, both and both true. And to feel yourself as the moonlight, while drinking water and eating food and watching TV shows, you know, driving a car, all the rest of that as the dewdrop, both and. It's a good combination. And to live only as the dewdrop is pretty scary, isn't it? Because that dewdrop is so fragile. And yet, when we live in the knowing of the way that the whole universe has conspired to make the dewdrop in that moment, full of the light of true nature of the moon, true nature being oneness with everything, rested in a mysterious, unconditioned ground of all. It's a lot easier to be the dewdrop.

[00:33:16] So to be clear about it, Leonard Cohen here. All this fancy lingo aside, as he puts it, I know your burden's heavy as you wheel it through the night. The guru says it's empty. That doesn't make it light. You know, the dewdrop can be in great pain. I was talking with someone earlier today whose child is going to have some a serious surgery soon. That's scary. I know people who are grappling with, you know, an eventually terminal illness of some kind. We face these things. We we know that we will lose those we love. It's real stuff, you know. It doesn't knowing that it's empty doesn't make it light. Of course. And and yet knowing that it's empty helps us bear it better.

[00:34:08] So I want to finish here with a couple more comments or quotations. This one from Thomas Merton. May we all grow in grace and peace and not neglect the silence that is printed in the center of our being. It will not fail us. I think that's what the Buddha was really, really pointing to. That silence, that unconditioned stillness in the center of our being. That timelessness is a ground in which time proceeds. I think that's what he's pointing to as our true refuge, rather than placing our faith in impermanent things. Two more quotations. This comes from a story I heard about the person or the body that was the previous Karmapa who has purportedly been reborn. I'm prepared to accept that as actual. Let's see, as a current Karmapa. In any case, the previous Karmapa was dying, and the students were extremely sad and upset. And as this I believe the account goes, he turned to them and said, with regard to his own impending death, don't worry, nothing changes. Wow. You know, can we be so rested in an underlying unchanging ground of all that we can manage the inevitability of our own changing?

[00:35:58] And then last quoting here, a story about Suzuki Roshi, toward the end of his life, a student came to see him. And Suzuki was very weak and close to death. And then they bowed to each other. And Suzuki Roshi turned to him and said quietly but firmly, don't grieve for me. Don't worry. I know who I am. To finish my talk here about this great matter, and acknowledging that many more things could be said about it, may we all know who we are. May we all know what we really are and rest in the knowing of the good news of who and what we really are. May you know who you really are, what you really are, through and through. And may other beings and eventually all beings rest in the knowing of who and what they are. And may we know that our own practice of this knowing of who and what we are is very beneficial for other beings around us, rippling out into the world. So

thank you for your kind attention and thank you for your own practice and process of knowing more and more deeply who and what you really are.