

12_17_25 Talk*

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Rick Hanson: [00:00:00] So I'd like to talk with you about grieving. And I'm deliberately using the word grieving as a process rather than grief, which sounds sort of like a static noun thing. So in that context, I'd like to start with five questions from Tibetan Buddhism. You may be familiar with them or not. And I invite you to consider these questions freshly with beginner's mind, newly, if you have heard them before. Here we go, there's no right answer, there's just the answer that is real for you.

[00:00:43] If you can, be aware of both the cognitive, conceptual, language-centered answer to the question, as well as what does it feel like in your body? What does it like to be you offering an answer to this question? Here we go.

[00:01:05] Is it given to you in this life to avoid illness? And you can extend the meaning of the word illness to include things like injury, disability.

[00:01:38] Second question, is it given to you to avoid aging? And for example, if your answer to that question is no, then you can open into the implications of that that arise for you.

[00:02:24] Third question, is it given to you to avoid... Your own death. How do you feel about that one?

[00:03:03] Fourth question. Is it given to you to avoid being separated one way or another or one time or another from all that you love?

[00:03:38] And, last question, is it given to you to avoid inheriting the results of your deliberate actions? How do you feel about that? I love the description from the hippie 60s from Stephen Gaskin of karma as hitting golf balls in the shower. Imagine a large tiled shower. For better or worse, some of those golf balls are really beautiful and we inherit those results. Other golf balls, not so much, and we inherited those results as well. So we have these five reflections or classic reflections. There might be some variations on them, but I think there's That's the essence of it all.

[00:04:41] And what is it like to realize that, wow, unavoidably I will, you, I will. We will be dealing with the consequences of illness, aging, death, loss, and... Inheriting the results of our actions. We will be dealing with that. We will dealing with other things in this life too, but we will be deal with that, how does that feel? It's helped me, these reflections, especially the last one, to be a lot more thoughtful about paying attention to short-term gain and long-term pain. That short-term gain of indulging myself physically or emotionally, you know, might feel good in the moment, but what will be the long-term cost that I will inherit tomorrow or in that relationship with that other person that's now permanently changed because I lost my temper in that way, let's say. That's really helpful. Doesn't make you walk on eggshells. It also makes you really ask yourself, what are the seeds that I am sowing today of future benefit? To myself and others. What am I investing in, in myself today, in my inner practice, in my health practices, in my relationships? What am I investing that will bear fruit tomorrow? It's a deep question, this last one. You know, we are also affected by things we did not deliberately set in motion, for better or worse.

[00:06:17] This question focuses on, as the Buddha really focused on volitional action, deliberate action, because that's the source I'll stop. Karmas that we inherit in this life and, who knows, potentially in future ones as well. So that's a start into then. One way of appreciating all this has to do with the kind of the response from Master Yun Men, a Zen master, who was asked, what is it that trees wither and leaves fall? He replied, body exposed in the golden wind. We live exposed in a golden wind and one of the things we are exposed to is the losses of others or losses of things, opportunities, doors closing. We're also exposed to making mistakes. I do not know anyone in this life who has not made a catastrophic mistake, me included. How do you live with a catastrophic mistakes? If you're going to live, you're living with a catastrophic mistake. How do you live with that? So we're exposed. We cannot be present in this life with all of its beauties and all the gold and the winds, without being exposed to the winds as well.

[00:07:35] There's a story that I talked about last week, probably a true story, in the early life of the Buddha. His companion and cousin and friend, Ananda, came to the Buddha... To summarize the story, saying that a dear friend of theirs, a very senior teacher in their gathering, had died. Sariputta. And Ananda was very sad about this. And the Buddha essentially said to him, Ananda, what did you expect? I've taught about impermanence since the day you walked in the door. I'm paraphrasing. What did you expect? And the Buddha was not angry. He wasn't remonstrating. With Ananda, but he was bringing a little tough love there. Now, that may not be everybody's cup of tea. As I've joked, I kind of imagine sometimes the Buddha as Jack Nicholson or Robert De Niro. I also imagine the Buddha as a woman. And what would, you know, a woman Buddha have been like and taught? I mean, the truth is the truth, but the expression of the truth has affected. By things like gender and culture and so forth. So in any case, the Buddha said those things and then he continued. And he said, Ananda, everything that's subject to arising is subject to passing away. You cannot rely on, it will change. What you can rely on is your own practice, what you do yourself in your practice. And then the Buddha went on to, you know, remind Ananda of the four foundations of mindfulness and deep forms of practice.

[00:09:15] Part one of my talk tonight is that I think what the Buddha said is true. In this life there will be losses and knowing that fact helps us bear them. It doesn't change them, but it allows us to bring wisdom. Also, I think the Buddha's right that it's really important to pay attention to what is reliable, which most fundamentally is your own practice, rested in potentially some things that are eternal and unchanging, such as the unconditioned source or ground in which the universe, including us, is unfolding. That's true, too. And... As some people wrote me who listened to my talk last week. Come on, Rick, that's a little hardcore. Is there more? Come on, what else? What else? I think that's fair. So I want to talk about practicing with grieving, practicing with loss, that is in addition to the insight-oriented, the more cognitively-oriented tough love that the Buddha was offering there. And I invite you to consider what's helpful for you in all this.

[00:10:41] The first thing I want to say is that grieving is normal. Given that we are all exposed to the golden wind, we will all face losses. Grieving is really normal. Sadness is normal, you know. I've cried really deeply at the loss of a beloved cat, for example. It's normal and it's not a problem. In fact, if we suppress our grieving, if we suppress or sorrow, it gets kind of worse. It gets all, you know, kind of tangled up, a little rancid, maybe all pushed down there in the shadows. It's really important to allow the flow, to allow there to be a natural flow, to allow, you know, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross talked about responses to death and dying and involving, you, know, shock, bargaining. Outrage, despair, and serenity. Maybe not always in a one-by-one sequence, but certainly as rooms in the house of grief. Those are all really normal. What happens though when you start to,

you know, you feel stuck in it or it's there and you know it's pretty unpleasant. How can we practice with grief and grieving and loss in ways that build on the great wisdom of our teacher the Buddha?

[00:12:24] First suggestion is to really pay attention to the habit of rumination across the board, because the tendency toward rumination tends to keep drawing us back into There's a in grieving that doesn't feel like it's flowing. That's the kind of grieving I'm talking about stuck grieving. This is going to be a little exotic for you, maybe from complex systems theory, but they talk about strange attractors or basins of attraction. So you imagine like a rubber sheet that represents all the possible states of being. And in that rubber sheet are various divots or basins. Some of them are very deep. Some of them are shallow. Some of them are very small, some of them are very broad, and where your attention is in any moment, what you experience in any moment, has to do with the basins of attraction that your mind stream is moving through. That's kind of a metaphor. Well, if people are stuck in grief, it's as if they're stuck in a basin of grieving and it's easy to fall back into it. Well, what predisposes us to get stuck in various basins of grieving or anxiety. Or anger or complaints about others or our case about others, which are all forms of our general predisposition toward rumination. If you are increasingly less likely to ruminate, you're less drawn into the meta-basin of rumination, then you're likely to be drawn into particular forms of stuckness, including grievances against other people. This is a very powerful idea and principle.

[00:14:18] So one thing you can do is be aware of the somatic markers of ruminating. What's it feel like? To kind of drop into a certain kind of reverie, or you're looping through an interaction with someone, or you just like, you know, you're kind of stuck in shame and remorse and guilt about something. What's it feel like in your body? And then increasingly, interestingly, as soon as you're aware of what that's like in your body, you can help to change your bodily condition. Think about something else, you can do something else. You can move out of that broad tendency toward rumination. I think that's a very powerful suggestion. It's useful to think about things again and again. It's normal to give grieving its due, to give loss its due. The question is, am I getting stuck in it? Or even am I just getting drawn back into thinking about that, you know? And you know, it's not helpful anymore. It's just pain. I have a dear friend who lost his son at age 19 to cancer many years ago. And I've known. Him a long, long time, my friend. And I was in graduate school, I think, at the time. I was kind of big for my britches, like, oh, I really know something about clinical psychology. And I said to my friend, you know, friend, if you want to talk about the loss of your son, you know I'd just be happy to talk with you about that sometime. And my friend looked at me and he likes me and we're still friends. And he said, well, Rick, you know, I did that therapy stuff. Every time I think about, he named his son, I cry and I feel terrible and it doesn't change. Processing, it doesn't process. It's always horrible whenever I get in contact with it.

[00:16:32] So I don't deliberately go looking for it. If it comes up, it comes but I don't go looking for it and that's what we're talking about here. So my first suggestion, building on the Buddhist suggestions, is about the global tendency toward rumination and doing what you can so that you catch yourself ruminating in general. You become aware of the somatic qualities, the bodily sense of rumination, and you start increasingly stepping out of it. Also tuning into mindfully the state of your body, the Mindfulness of internal sensations will kind of snap you out of the default mode network activations that are the neurological basis for rumination. Also coming into the present. What's it like right here, right now, in what you're being? We'll snap about a rumination, which is very much typically grounded in mental time travel about the past or the future. These are various ways to reduce the

habit of rumination. In its way, rumination is like a cozy warm blanket. Yeah, what you are ruminating about doesn't feel good, but ruminate itself. Is like a, you know, a nice cozy blanket. Sorry, not good for you. Pulls you out of the present, pulls you into your own mind, traps you in some basin of suffering. Not good. Termination.

[00:18:16] Next suggestion, fill your life with what is not grieving. You know, give grieving its due, but ask yourself, what are the other basins of attraction for my attention in my life that are meaningful to me? Very often, grieving and depressed mood, let's say, bereavement, melancholy, they sort of settle in to the background in the wallpaper of the mind or the inner atmosphere and that's very normal. Maybe that's true for you. And also, what can you populate in the foreground of your mind that you're really engaged with? Like weirdly, I'm starting to do more cooking. My wife is a major beneficiary. You know, I think about it. Other things. What are you reading? What are you doing? What, what are, what do you do in your home to make it beautiful? Grieving is typically about some form of loss that cannot be changed. Irrevocable, irreparable, often loss. Okay. So you can't change that. Where do you have agency? What can you create elsewhere in your life? Really, really important. You know that's, that's a, that a big one, right? It's a particularly big one in the holidays.

[00:19:34] Have talked about grief in the holidays. You know, people we've lost who are not with us at this time, estrangements are a major source of grief. And it's so easy to be captured by them, to be sucked into that basin of attraction for that particular sorrow. And one major way out of it is to acknowledge that, okay, what else is true? What are you cooking? Do you, how are you decorating your home? Who else are you spending time with? What fun things are you doing for yourself? Maybe it's time to break out of your scripts about how you spend the holidays or this time of year and do something different deliberately. I have a friend who commented that on, you know, holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas or Hanukkah, things like that. He's a physician. He says, oh, I take shifts in the ER because I don't like most of my relatives. He just makes a choice. He like breaks out of the script and he's getting paid triple time, too. For working on, you know major holidays So, okay. That's my second big suggestion. What else are you growing?

[00:20:46] You know in the attentional field the third suggestion I have is one that in a way summarizes the rest of them and it's very close to my own heart. Because as I've shared I've spent a lot of time in the last several years Reflecting on my past, you know appreciating many aspects of it. But what has helped me get to appreciating it is facing up to mistakes including you know a couple catastrophic ones and What helped me is when I gradually realized that as I was opening to sorrow and guilt and remorse and loss, to hold them or to carry those wounds into love. You can carry your wounds into love. They are not any less, but they are held in something that is more. The field, the stream, it can feel like a stream moving through you, that it can be the container for these wounds. You know, your sorrows, your losses, your sadness, your grieving. Can you hold it in a context of lovingness? And this is where it's really interesting to appreciate.

[00:22:14] Grieving is loving, because we're grieving something we love. There's a loss. If we did not care about it, we would not grieve it. Grieving, is a form of loving. And even other forms of reactivity, like remorse or grievances about others who have hurt you and let you down and attacked you, let's say for real. Aggrievedness, anxiety, anger, sadness, have love immersed in them at their core, because in every case, they are an attempt to find what you do love, happiness, flourishing, thriving, positive relationships, inner peace. These are we we love these things. We care about these things and we seek And so in what is seemingly all kinds of negative reactivity is the seeking of what we love. The innate

goodness in us, the innate upwelling, uprising, lovingness in us is what is moving through negative emotions like outrage and anxiety and sorrow. It's a way of understanding this, but it's a way of pointing to you discover for yourself what I'm saying.

[00:23:47] See for yourself, as the Buddha taught, of course, see for yourself if what I am saying is true. That in the grieving is loving, in the anger, in the fear and the anxiety and whatever, in the ruminating, ruminate itself is an attempt, is a seeking of what we love. Love is a driver throughout this whole. Process and so we can really hold our wounds, our losses, our griefs, our grievances, you know, carry your wounds into life. That's a major suggestion here. It's been really, really helpful for me. It doesn't mean that you have to deny what's happening or make peace with people in a very phony way because you got to love them. No, you can be rested in love while, in a funny way, I find for myself, feeling rested in love gives me permission to see people clearly. And sometimes what I clearly see is a real difficulty over there.

[00:25:01] A real limitation, a real ill will, a real commitment to harming others. But it's easier to see that somehow when my mind is not cluttered by what is not loving. See for yourself what rings true about this. And then related to this would be another suggestion, not my last one, is to give yourself permission when it's time to turn a corner. You know, cultures vary, people vary, it might seem disloyal to not be grieving for a certain period of time. In certain cultures, the expectation, sometimes a gendered expectation, is for grieving to continue for a period of a time. You decide for yourself what feels right for you. In my opinion, it's okay to make a choice at a certain point. You are going to deliberately turn a corner. What do I mean by that? I do not mean resisting the road you've been on. I do mean that it's a bad road. It's just that there's a certain point where the habit of the mind keeps poking. It is like having a cold sore inside your mouth and your tongue keeps poking it. And every time it hurts, why do I keep poking it? Oh, it still hurts. I'm still poking it, you know, there's a tendency of sort of the habit of the mind to keep going back over certain things, or when they arise, what do you do, you know, in the beginning, you give that memory a lot of room, you explore it, you open to it, you feel it, you give grief, it's due. All right.

[00:26:55] But at a certain point, it just comes up, right, or someone reminds you of something. You walk down a hallway, you see a picture of someone you love that's no longer alive maybe, and you feel some sorrow about that. What do you do then? And I think it's appropriate to, when it feels right, to give yourself permission to turn the corner. To basically say, you know, I'm going down a different street in general. I'm deliberately helping myself give that loss less and less attention. I'm not resisting it, I'm non-suppressing it, it's not a spiritual bypass. I'm just helping myself, you know, get out of that particular basin of attraction to that particular topic. You know, I've processed it, I've, you now, apologized, I acknowledged things, etc., etc., I'm giving myself permission to turn a corner. And a lot of people feel they don't have permission to turn a corner. They've internalized the rules, the dicta of their culture that says, you know, you're a fill-in-the-blank, you are not allowed to turn a corner. You always need to feel horrible about that. Well, why? Does your feeling horrible about THAT, even a catastrophic mistake you made, even a mistake that ended in a loss of life, potentially, or really harmed somebody?

[00:28:27] If you've really plumbed the depths of it and done all the possible inner work and there's literally no more gain from the pain, what's the point of the pain? What is it about? Is it somehow a punishment? A sentence that you must bear in this life? Past any value? You know, you've rehabilitated yourself, you've repaired everything you can, there's nothing else you can do. Why keep imposing punishment? Yourself I particularly you know

when your heart has been so changed myself I just don't get that I'm not going to get into policy about the criminal justice system and you know the fact that America has more people incarcerated per capita than any other country in the world I'm staying focused here on the individual. I don't see the point in punishing yourself past the point of any value for the sake of some kind of penance. Maybe do your penance, pay your price and then turn that corner.

[00:29:37] So I really invite you to see if you have residues inside you that say, oh no, you cannot turn a corner. You still have to feel horrible. Well, maybe it's okay. To not feel horrible anymore in the remainder of your life. At this point, who do you have duties toward? Among our duties to others, I believe we have a profound duty to the sentient. Who will wear our name tag tomorrow and a year from tomorrow. If you are so compromised and so sucked into grieving, and the past, and in ways that are problematic, that are beyond kind of healthy processing and flowing, like that's the topic here. If you're kind of stuck there, and it's a self-imposed stuckness, does that serve your duty to the you that you will be tomorrow, or next week, or a year from now? I don't think so. And I think it's really quite telling open up to a kind of absolution, a kind of balm, a kind of soothing balm coming through you that lets you step forward into your future in a clean way without a lot of baggage because you will be much more able to contribute to others without all those tin cans rattling behind you, yelling at you. And you'll be able to fulfill your duties better to the future you. I think at this point, if it's okay, I'll start responding to some of what's come in through the chat.

[00:31:38] So I'll just start with a question from Stephanie, who writes, what can one do if they are grieving the loss of their mobility from declining health, age, and injury? Yeah. So what I was talking about tonight was when we're dealing with a kind of stuckness. Now, there are many. Healthy practices around grieving and probably at the bottom of the foundation of them is acceptance. So if we are aging and losing mobility and opportunities and all, it's natural to feel sad about that and to face it squarely and to really let it land. And it's completely normal. I'll just share briefly that I had a diagnosis of skin cancer. About 10 years ago that could be very serious. And there were some days there where I did not know the outcome. Eventually, happily, modern medicine, they actually, it was in the surface, it was melanoma in situ. They got good margins, they cleared it out. I'm cancer-free, I'm okay. Sunscreen is my friend and quarterly mole checks. But for some days in there I didn't know what would happen and my mind was as if it were in three layers. My surface layer was problem solving, analytical. You know, what do I do? The next layer was like a scared, sad, furry animal that just wanted to curl up and get hugged, right, in the corner of the cave. That is the natural first art the Buddha talked about of ordinary reactions. Ananda came to the Buddha with an ordinary reaction. I wish the Buddha had said, Ananda, you're in the middle of a first dark, it's perfectly normal. Feel your loss of Sariputta, feel your love for him, feel the ways in which this is sad for you, and be mindful of all that. Be mindful of the body sensations of that. Be mindful what's pleasant or pleasant about all that, you know, witness your own mind stream while accepting it and allowing it, and bring some wisdom to it. Including a sense of perspective about the inevitability of loss. Da-da-da, da-da. I wish the Buddha had done more of that. He wasn't a trained therapist.

[00:34:00] So to me, in terms of loss of mobility, things like that, it's natural. And I think it's really important to feel those feelings. And for me, my third level truly was like complete inner peace, complete sense of well-being under it all that. It felt tapped into something really quite, quite deep and unconditioned. It also is, I think, helpful to just have a framework of gratitude, you know, sooner or later we're going to run out, you know, Suzuki

Roshi described living as like setting sail in a boat that you know will sink. I hope to live long enough to have the problems of old age. That's where it's going. So the context though of gratitude for both the past and the present, I think could be really helpful too. Support from other people, recognizing that it's hard for you, I think that's really important. Illness and aging tend to be isolating. That's why I think it's important to invest in relationships before things totally fall apart and then do what you can if they have fallen apart to find relationships. And in the middle of all that, Keep remembering, you know, that you are not the deep you, the core you, is not mobility. The core you is not immobility. The core You is not illness. The Core You is Not Dementia. The core you is untouched by those conditions that are the inevitable result of living exposed to the golden wind. You are not those things.

[00:35:48] There's a certain kind of loss that Grace F. Talks about, 19 past, that is the loss of the good that would have been so good. Yeah, it would have been so good if my parents had not grown up in the depression in a certain kind of authoritarian, anxiety-grounded, fault-finding, well-intended culture, yeah, that would have been good. It would have good if I'd not been such an introvert who became socially awkward when he was very young going through school. Things would have be good. It would have been really good, for example, in ways that we get it. To have not been attacked just about everybody is attacked in multiple ways and multiple times crazy to realize and including in horrible ways let alone fairly you know mild ones for fairly privileged people like me we get attacked okay so it would have been really good if something had happened and will it will never have happened how do we grieve that and i think sense of common humanity is helpful for perspective? Like, yeah. It does not diminish what happened to me to realize that the same thing has happened to millions if not billions of other people and to realize even much worse. Like that puts it in perspective. I think it's also really helpful to appreciate what a badass you've been. For real. What you've done with the cards you were dealt in this life, to be here today. Like, to really track that. It's so easy to lose sight of, despite X, Y, and Z, you know, I stayed true to what's really important. Yeah, I wavered, I got sloppy, I drank too much, I overslept, you know I kind of, I kicked the dog. I never kick the dog, but anyway... But still, through it all, you persevered, you know? Like, that's a really important thing to remember, too, despite the things that you didn't get.

[00:37:59] And including in that what Grace is saying, they let you down, don't let yourself down, you now? And then what can you do? I can't do anything about the past. I can do a lot about today, all right? And when you go to bed tonight, can you know for yourself, heck yeah. I was a mensch today. Given the constraints, the limitations, the aging, the illness, the immobilization, whatever, still, you stood tall, you... Take refuge in the knowing of that. I think it's really useful. I had a teacher who said that basically sorrow opens the heart and he talked about keeping the wound of the heart open. So I think there's a way in which we can appreciate our grieving as a form of loving that connects us with other people. People have asked what do I mean by that kind of heavy duty phrase, catastrophic mistake. I invite you to see for yourself, there are different categories of mistake. I have a friend who's a physician at a very high level and with very, very, at risk people. I don't think, he said to me, you don't have a medical career at that level without making errors. They're not malpractice, but there's an inherent error rate. Errors kill people. And you have to know that. You're in a system where if it wasn't you, it would be somebody else who's highly trained, highly trained. Incredibly devoted, very intelligent, inevitably. And there happens a catastrophic mistake. Maybe you make a decision about whether, you know, parents, they've heard that there are sneaker waves. They've got an exuberant 10-year-old. You know, they're out near the beach. Everything looks kind of normal. Their kid plays maybe 10 feet farther than they are really comfortable before they realize it. And then, boom, the

sneaker wave comes, catches their kid, carries him out to sea. People in the military, certain environments, in command, it's their job. Let's say for the... Under whatever conditions, you know, but it's their job. Well, their job includes sending people into situations where you know statistically a significant fraction are gonna die, and yet it's your job to do that. How do you live with that?

[00:40:38] So there are levels of catastrophic mistake, and you can decide for yourself what is catastrophic. For me, there are a couple where I just feel. I'm messed up, and then how do you live with that? There's another piece of this I'll maybe finish on. That's very Buddhist. It's the recognition of interdependence. In other words, everything exists as a process in relationship. I have to say, serious geek that I am, I do wonder about things like, does the speed of light? Well, light does exist in relationship and light moves. Oh, okay. I don't know. Maybe there are one or two exceptions, but basically everything pretty much is a process in relationship. What that means is that even that which we grieve can be deconstructed into many parts. We grieve the loss of our mother, let's say. At this time of year, or we grieve the loss of access to our grandchildren because there's an estrangement in our family. That's unfair. Whatever that is, is made of parts that are connected and changing. It is like a cloud swirling, not like a static forever brick. That's the nature of it. And bringing that kind of insight to whatever it is that we grieve can be really helpful. As part of that, in the mix of what we grieved, often are complications with other people. And when we look at those other complications, we realize a lot that they're not about me. They're about those other people, they did not need to do that. Those things are not my fault. Those factors that led to something that I grieve. I don't own them. That's very helpful as well to realize that in the mix of decisions that may have been catastrophic, there were many factors that were not your own. In the mix of certain kinds of losses, often those losses get turbocharged by the crankiness and smallness and neuroticism and pettiness and cruelty. Lack of responsibility and character by other people, that's not about you. That's really often helpful to appreciate, including in these complicated, messy family situations at this time of year. If I were to underline one word from this talk tonight, it would be absolution. Which I really like because it implies a solution that is like a solvent that dissolves that which is stuck and hard and jagged and painful. And absolute draws us into the absolute, right? But to bring absolution to yourself, to let go, to release, to let yourself be washed clean as you step forward into the next day. May you be well. And I look forward to seeing you next year. Come on back next year! Okay, take good care. That's it for tonight. And I just feel tremendous appreciation for you and hard. You know, you buoy me. Really, you do. You buoy me as I grapple with my own grievance.