

1_21_26 Talk*

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

Rick Hanson: [00:00:00] I wanted to offer a comment about meditation and that meditation that will then link into what I hope to explore with you tonight about the neurobiology of fear and anxiety and how we can practice with that, with the wisdom of the Buddha informed by 2,500 years of further research in this important area. I've had a heck of a week. I've a lot to do. Not bad stuff, just a lot. And I found myself dropping into this meditation. It was such a refuge. I'm not saying that it had to be like that for you. Sometimes meditation is frustrating or boring. What am I doing here? I don't really like this, blah, blah blah. No worries. And I have those moments myself. I understand, I get them. And wow. So much of practice is about in a challenging, bumpy, fast paced, even when it's great, it's like, whoa, a lot kind of world and life to find that which for you is a refuge, a sanctuary. Whatever you can find that is that for you is a beautiful thing.

[00:01:27] So as a way into this topic of how do we manage it when we're scared or related feelings like we're on behalf of other people or we have a kind of diffuse, unfocused broad sense of apprehensiveness, uneasiness or dread. That's what I wanna explore with you. This topic is very alive for me personally, because we're living in bumpy times. And as a way into this, I'd like to start, as the Buddha did most fundamentally, with an intimacy in our own experience. Whether it's President Trump wanting to acquire Greenland, or the development of a kind of secret police in America. I have a friend in Uganda who suffered some terrible losses recently due to the dictator there wanting to hold on to power and suppressing any kind of dissent. Or maybe you're worried about something close at home, you know, a health problem. Maybe you, you, know, heard those three words from your doctor. That doesn't look good. The four words. We don't want to hear.

[00:02:50] We start with the immediacy and the intimacy of that experience. So you might wanna pause here for a moment. I'll do it with you. And bring up something that you feel anxious about. Worried, apprehensive, dreading, panicky, the whole range, whatever. And I'm not trying to trigger you here. I'm suggesting first that when you're aware of this, and I'm going to go through different aspects of experience, five major aspects of experiences, and we can be mindful of the experience of whatever we're anxious about. So bring it to mind and start with what are the physical sensations of this? What is dread or anxiety, worry? What's it feel like in your body?

[00:03:57] Somebody wrote, I hope this can help me with my abandonment and clinging to a person I want near me. Yeah, what's that feel like? What are the sensations of that? Or chronic pain? What are sensations of the fear of the pain? What's that feel like? And what happens to the experience when you're mindful of it, when you name it to yourself? When you let it be more impersonal. You might even explore the difference between there is a cramping in my stomach, there is contraction. I am contracted, I am cramping.

[00:05:07] Okay, and then second, with regard to becoming mindful of anxiety, what are the emotions related to it? Like, what does fear feel like? What happens when you say to yourself something like, there is fear? There is feeling loss. There is scared. The miracle of mindfulness is that one way. Get enough space from what we're feeling, to name it to ourselves and know it to our selves, it's not so overwhelming. See if you can stay with what I'm doing here. It's classic mindfulness. Okay, third aspect of experience, thoughts. Beliefs, opinions... Typically about the past, the future, yourself and the world. Particularly

thoughts that make you feel scared. I'm doomed. We're doomed. Can you step back from that thought and not believe it or disbelieve it? The point is not to get sucked into it more by doing mindfulness. The point to get some spaciousness around it. And before we go further, can you have compassion for yourself about what you're experiencing? Can you be kind to yourself? Can you find a sweetness for these thoughts, these feelings, these sensations for yourself? You might imagine a friend or a child who's having these thoughts, these feelings, these sensations, and find your tenderness, your caring for that being.

[00:09:19] So we have a very fundamental practice here in which we step into the fear. We name it, we acknowledge it, we allow it. We're willing for it to be there, and we have compassion for it. And as we do this, usually it's less overwhelming. So in terms of practicing with anxiety or fear, it's really helpful to be mindful of it, to bring mindfulness to it in a searching and fearless way, as they say, and to bring compassion to it as well. It's uncomfortable to feel fear. The things we're afraid of, some of them will happen. They're real. And they will create suffering for ourselves and others. And we can have tenderness and sweetness and kindness about that. We can have compassion about that. A second key practice central to the Buddha's wisdom is to explore refuges that are not the fear or not what you're afraid of. In other words... Is not being. What continues to be beautiful and good. What is reliable in a world with many changes. And people will find different things about that.

[00:12:08] One is in your own personal practice. Are you able to get in touch with a kind of underlying depth in yourself that is intact? Is aware, loving. Peace wise. Can you find that in yourself? That's really fundamental. Meditation is a good training in this. Being in certain settings, like by the ocean, or looking out into vastness, like the sky, whether during the day or at night. The shakier the world, the more important it is to find our footing inside ourselves in what is unshakable. Is qualities of awareness, presence. And an innate goodness and lovingness in yourself. It doesn't change atrocities out in the world. Helps to stabilize us so that we're not so overwhelmed by them, and in fact we can cope better with them. And we're more able to be helpful to other people. Thich Nhat Hanh, bless his memory, told stories that are quite well known now of essentially refugee boats leaving Vietnam related to the war-torn conditions there and running into storms or difficulties, pirates. Different kinds of challenges. And he basically said that if there was one person on the boat who was able to stay in touch with their own inner balance, their own roots and sources of being deep down, that would spread to the whole network of the boat and be beneficial for other people. So we do these practices for others as well as for ourselves.

[00:14:40] So I just want to kind of pause here at the second kind of major thing I'm talking about, which is finding refuge, certainly locating refuge inside yourself, and then other sources of refuge for you. What are they for you? I'll name some for myself and I'll them as a kind of question for you. Can you find refuge in knowing something of the many good intentions you have had in this life? And let's remember, finding refuge strengthens us to open to pain, open to injustice and strengthens to do something about it. It's not a spiritual bypass. And it's not either or. You know, feeling some sense of support and replenishment by, for example, recognizing some of your, you know, the long stream of good intentions that you've had and have lived from in this life. That's not a way to avoid dealing with problems out there in the world. Is that a refuge for you? Is beauty and the recognition of that which for you is beautiful. Is that a refuge for you? Many kinds of beauty, the laughter in a child's face, a blade of grass breaking up through a city sidewalk, flower. Is that a refuge for you? Many kinds of beauty. And then other people list other refuges. I won't belabor this point. Trees, the natural world. Is life altogether a refuge for you?

[00:16:49] Knowing that species come and go, I'm not trying to minimize anything about species extinction, and yet life endures, life will persist on this planet. For a long, long, time. Eventually our sun, two, three, four billion years from now will become a red giant and expand and swallow up. Mercury, then Venus, then Earth, all gone, and then gradually shrink back to the size of a white dwarf. But that's a long way away. I think life will persist, certainly at least until then. Is that a refuge for you? Is the Dharma a refuge for you, is wisdom teachings a refuge for you is science a refuge for you. Is knowing that. Tens of millions, hundreds of millions of people and organizations around the world are doing things generously to make a better world. Factually, that's true. Is that a refuge for you? Is it a refuge to know that there's so many good-hearted people doing real things to make the world better? In medicine... In civil society, in the arts, in acts of service, ordinary simple acts of services, raising children, teaching children, health care. Civic organizations, non-profits. Is that a refuge for you to know that that's happening? And quite possibly you're part of that mighty stream. Is that a refuge for you? It is for me.

[00:19:09] So that's the second major theme, in terms of dealing with anxiety. Mindfulness and compassion, first, second. Refuge. Refuges. What are your refuges? Even little things, you know. A major refuge in my very busy life is about an hour and a half of B plus TV with my wife most nights. Occasional A's, always open for recommendations. I have to say, Landman, the second season kind of blew me away, especially after the first season, you now. And especially compared to Yellowstone, we won't go there. Anyway, okay. Major theme. Take action as best you can. You know, as you get older, health problems come along. What are you doing about them? Do you have a plan? I saw people worried about finances. Yeah. Are you doing what you can? And there's a limit to what you do, but are you going to that limit in realistic ways? There's so much research about the value of the first two things I've said, and the third one, taking action as best you can. Gives you a sense of agency and efficacy and not helplessness. You know, you're not immobilized. You're, you are acting. It can really help to be quite concrete about this. You know, making lists.

[00:20:59] I've been having the dubious pleasure of cleaning out our garage because we changed our office and stuff like that. And I've stumbled on all these intentions I wrote and plans I did and all this stuff I did 20, 30, 40 years ago in my, you know, work and career I'd totally forgotten about. And it was like, wow, yeah, I tried, you now? So, in your case... There's just a lot of value in making plans, making lists, gathering resources, trying to see if you can connect with others, getting expert opinions. These days, you have to be a little careful about them, but wow, the use of AIs like Chad GPT or others to research options for yourself and pull together. Relatively expert opinion about different courses of action. That's a pretty amazing resource for, if you want to get your own personal plan, 20 bucks a month or maybe less, take it with a grain of salt. But my point being, you might ask yourself, in terms of the things that you're anxious about, what actions are you taking? And here's where I'd like to talk a little bit about, I think obvious lessons from history about taking action.

[00:22:20] First point, sometimes. We get defeated. Sometimes injustices will never be rectified. We can never unbreak the glass. We can ever bring back lives that were lost. Irreparable damage sometimes does occur. I'll get to some perspectives again, the Buddha taught that could be helpful with that. That part is certainly true. It's also really true that collective action, coming together with others in some way is the only way to change upstream systemic sources of suffering. Through collective action of some form.

[00:23:16] Now, one of the best ways to act collectively is to support people who are already acting, finding worthy organizations, worthy individuals, worthy causes, and to the extent we can, supporting them. I do this with time, with good words, sometimes with a little money. If you have a lot of money, sometimes with a lot money. That's it. We're not dead in the water. You know, I've been in, I have to say many gatherings with people who wring their hands about the state of the world and they recognize the problems. They recognize good solutions. They want change, but they don't do anything about it. Take action, a third of the adults in America are not registered to vote, particularly younger people who will most inherit the future, you know? I think it's a waste of time to argue with people who are committed to driving you crazy, you know? Who are committed to trying to talk you out of what you know, plain as day is the actual truth. You know, I don't think that's very useful. But on the other hand, there are a lot of people to talk with. Around the world, gently, in ways that bridge differences and move them along. In other words, there are a lot of things we can do. We're not helpless. The fascists throughout history, the dictators, the tyrants, the warlords. Throughout history, have tried to dispirited people. They've tried to make them feel helpless, to feel intimidated. And sometimes we have to be very cautious. I have friends in Uganda who have to be very cautious, sometimes you have to be cautious. But deep down inside, typically, usually, there are many, many things we can do, and we're not helpless. We can stand together. We can make changes happen. I've seen them in my lifetime and I've seen them throughout history and never underestimate the human heart. Never ever underestimate what our ancestors and native people around the world living today know deeply that when we come together as one single band in our ways, that collective action is really, really hard to stop. It's how our ancestors came together to live through very, very harsh conditions, and it's what we can do today. And it goes back to what I said before we began here about the power of sangha. As the whole of the holy life. So taking action. Reflecting on yourself. Is to have a wisdom perspective. There's no replacement for that.

[00:26:40] And you know, the Buddha really taught that there is no end to dukkha. Dukkha comes in two forms. There is the dukkha of the first starts of life, including tyrants and plagues and foolishness and cancer and poverty. And... People who will not repair in their relationship with you, there is that dukkha. There's no escape from that kind. And then there's the dukkha of the first noble truth, which is the dukha that arises when we crave or cling or in one way or another. This is the second dark dukkah that we construct ourselves. The wisdom of the Buddha and so many other people point out that there will be hurricanes, there will be earthquakes, there will be volcanoes, there will be tyrants, there will be misbehavior, there will be injustice, there will be disease, there will be aging, there will be death, there will be loss. In no way, shape, or form does it reduce. What's happening in Minnesota, in America, now in Maine, it doesn't reduce the inevitability of global climate catastrophe to recognize that it is a condition. But wisdom tells us that our relationship to that condition creates a lot more suffering, and it creates a lot more difficulty for other people as well.

[00:28:29] One thing that's really beautiful about the first three things I focused on here, mindfulness and compassion, refuge and action, is that those three things tend to undermine the craving that produces second-dart suffering. We're still with conditions as they are, which could really suck, terrible. I mean, beyond words, I am so appalled. The kind of practice I'm describing, and I think it's consistent with the Buddha, is can include profound outrage and rage in the outrage. You know? We can be disgusted morally. There's a place for that. It's just that when we get captured by it and we start getting very contracted and pressured and righteous and saturated with self about it and attached to certain outcomes about it and then when ill will and hatred poison our heart, that's when

we can get into trouble. So how can we watch the news? How can we be heart sore, heart sick, and what is happening? Innocent people and potentially happening to ourselves. Can we feel that with compassion? Can we let it be simply a first dart? And then if we throw the second dart, can we let that second dart we throw ourselves become a new first dart that we don't add further dominoes falling of reactions to? That's wisdom perspective. And in our wisdom perspective, can we recognize also the interdependence of everything, the oneness of everything. Everything is entwined together, and in that recognition and insight, can we find more peace? Because when we realize it's all really one, then we don't separate from conditions and rail against them. This might sound kind of cosmic, it's just the truth. There's only one reality, right? There's one planet Earth.

[00:31:05] And in that, with wisdom, can we also see that all phenomena, even terrible phenomena, are made of parts that are connected and changing. And when we see that, we recognize more of their fluidity, their dynamism. The sorrow doesn't change, right? But we're more able to deal with and to live with conditions when we recognize their fluidity and their emptiness. Can we bring that kind of wisdom to it? Sources of wisdom, by the way. I'm teaching in a Buddhist frame here. You know, I've come to appreciate, raised as a casual Christian, in my youth as a Casual Methodist, you know, I've really, I have friends who are deeply appreciative of the wisdom in the Christian tradition, particularly close to the teachings of Jesus. And I have friends also in other traditions as well, including in native traditions, that have so much wisdom there. The Buddha had no monopoly on wisdom. So that's the fourth, the fourth if I will suggestion here which is around find wisdom, find perspective, find a way to hold it.

[00:32:29] My fifth and last suggestion. And I hope it's clear I'm in the middle of this myself. Lately, I've been reflecting on the word relinquish. And in the Dharma, there's some key words that show up particularly in later stages of practice. And I get really interested in later stage. And why not use the later stages in the early stages, relinquishing. And it's a funny word. It comes from the root leave, to leave behind. And you might ask yourself, As we move into my fifth suggestion, what would serve you to relinquish these days? And I think particularly as we get older and this is an older group with some exceptions, we start relinquishing certain things like can you relinquished accomplishing? Can you relink wish righteousness? You know, I think of the wisdom of... The poem, Ash Wednesday, I've quoted it, teaches to care and not to care.

[00:33:42] And then the fifth suggestion, it's really about, in the days that remain to you, really being good to yourself. We have limited influence over the state of the world. And if there's any time and any place, it's now and here. To help yourself have as good a life as you can in the days that remain to you. Not as a way of bypassing or letting others down. It's just live well meanwhile. That's the fifth teaching. Mindfulness and compassion, refuge, action, wisdom, meanwhile. Live well, meanwhile, you know, I think that for myself and I think for so many people. In the next minute, they could be a lot nicer to themselves. Could you relinquish? That's been pressuring you. You know, we started tonight with me pointing out that in many of us is a kind of a core wound, as my teacher Stephen Snyder would put it, that deep down inside we feel a sense of helplessness and unworthiness, as well as perhaps other things that then we embark on various strategies of compensation for. Which then we identify with and which creates secondary issues, which we try to solve, da-da-da. And the root of it is this understandable conclusion that infants and toddlers acquire, that at some basic level, they're separated from a world that is against them and there's something wrong with themselves. Otherwise, why would the world be treating me like this? How about relinquishing that? I'm relinquishing any sense whatsoever or position that you are damaged goods, that you're anything other than really beautiful and good and

well-intended and unique. How about relinquish a mood of complaint? And instead, realizing that no matter what burdens you've been carrying or difficulties, your life, any life, is an extraordinary and unique gift in the whole universe. Relinquishing a mood of complaint. We can still be determined to get other people to load the dishwasher properly. I'm still working on my wife to put the dishes in the sink in a way that they'll actually stack rather than throwing a bunch of little cups on top of plates so you can't put plates on top of them, but don't tell her I said that. Can't we relinquish our plans for other people, including our adult kids? And can you relinquish being hard on yourself, criticizing yourself, you know? Can you relinquish unnecessary anxiety? Can you relinquish some kind of attempt to stave off the inevitability of your own personal passing away? So that's the fifth suggestion. Meanwhile, live well meanwhile.

[00:37:33] I had an interesting experience. I think it was the next to last time I took LSD. Oh, people are suddenly paying more attention now. Anyway, I was in Joshua Tree. We call it, I call it the monument. It's now a park. And what I noticed, I was hiking alone. Wonderful, beautiful hike up a dry gully, something I'd wanted to do for a long, long time, totally off trail, you know, no one was out there. And I kept noticing anxiety arising. And there was no reason for it. I was safe, I had water, I knew where I was, I knew what I was doing, my friends knew where was, they would come get me if I wasn't back after dark. And yet that trickle, that auto anxiety. And it became really interesting for me to continuously relinquish anxiety and to realize that I could be vigilant, I could cope, I could move through hazardous conditions, giant boulders, scrambling. Ducking under this or that sharp cactus, many opportunities to twist my ankle. I could do all that without anxiety. So that might be something to relinquish as well. And we can also relinquish false hopes. False hopes of escape. We can relinquish the hope of some kind of justice. If it's really clear, no, there will be no justice for that, among many other things.

[00:39:06] So I really wish you well, and I hope that what we've explored here tonight is not any kind of a band-aid, or it's not any effort to push away what you're experiencing, or to minimize threats and bad things in the world. It's not about that at all. I'm not trying to talk you out of your anxiety at all, I'm just really trying to share five Wellsprings. Functional, effective coping, wellsprings of effective coping and relatively sustainable well-being. Each one of these is an invitation into deep, deep awakening, as well. Each one of these five. So thank you for your kind attention. Take care of yourself.