

1_28_26 Talk*

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Rick Hanson: [00:00:00] A quick little note about the fourth kind of broad strategy related to managing stressors. It's not the only strategy. These are not the other strategies. The fourth one, sometimes called appeasing or placating or fawning. Recently, it's a man whose name I'm blanking on who was on the Being Well podcast who has written quite a lot about this in response to... In relationship to people who've been traumatized. So that's just a detail. It's kind of off the main track of what I want to talk about with you tonight, but it'll come to me, fawning, F-A-W-N. Some people don't like that word. Find other words, that's fine. So I would like to explore with you both the sort of foundations of mindfulness. What is it, how to use it, certainly what are the Buddhist teachings, basic teachings about it, and then how can we apply that to the things that reactivate us.

[00:01:09] As we would say back in day when I took the S training in the mid 70s, 1970s, we get plugged in. Like plugged into the wall. And you know what that feels like? You're rolling along and suddenly you think about something and you realize, oh my goodness, I left my baby on the bus. Not really, but something, oh, in my case, recently, I've just had a lot to do and certain things have just fallen through the cracks, which I don't like, oh. Or maybe somebody says something to you. Even somebody who cares a lot about you. Going to be married nearly 44 years pretty soon. And you know, still my wife will say something or do something or give me a certain look and or leave her dishes in the sink in a certain way. Can you believe that? And, and then much more intensively material can come up from our childhood or other times in our lives when we are traumatized, we can hear about events, you know down the street or on the other side of the world or the country and get really rattled by it, really affected by it. What do we do about that? What do you do about them?

[00:02:16] So I wanna start by saying that I'm gonna use mindfulness as a way of exploring how to manage reactivation. And I want to kind of create a bit of a frame here that has to do with other people. I think it's really important to walk the high road oneself. The Buddha certainly encouraged that. He certainly encouraged a kind of what I would call unilateral virtue, qualities of Sila, of morality, of good intent, of personal restraint. He really encouraged that as one of the three great pillars of practice alongside mental training, samadhi, and including to a great degree of mental training and wisdom, panya, sila samadhipanya. Sila is the one that's typically named first. So there's a place for that. There's a space for practicing right speech, which has five criteria. It is well-intended, it is actually beneficial, at least for yourself. It is true. It doesn't mean that everything has to be said, but what is said you sincerely believe to be true. It is timely and it is not harsh. People have varying standards for what is harsh, you know, including in certain settings. In my view, feeling strongly about something, being passionate about something being intense, even fiery about something is not inherently harsh, but obviously norms vary. Might be considered harsh, you know, in a coffee shop in Italy when people are talking about politics compared to maybe norms, I don't know, and Sweden or maybe Japan or elsewhere in the world. You know, local norms vary.

[00:04:06] That said, not harsh. You kind of know when you're crossing the line. So those are the five criteria for right speech. And there's a place for that. The sixth criterion is optional, but preferred. And that is to say, the speech is wanted by others. What do we do though, when what we're talking about is not wanted by somebody else? Then we take a look at that. We take a look at that and we check ourselves. Check the first five criteria,

okay? And then we also take a look at impact. And I think this is especially important if you are in any way privileged in your positions in society, and also privileged perhaps by the good fortune that you've had. You know, I carry a lot of privilege in a variety of ways. Privilege has been defined by Ta-Nehisi Coates in a way that I really like as not having to take someone, something into account.

[00:05:07] I was watching this little clip on YouTube recently with a female comic, and I don't know her name, sorry. And she was asked, she was responding to questions from people. And one of the questions was, what's the first thing you would do if you were a man? And people started laughing and she made a little joke. And then she said, quite sincerely, I'd walk around all night. Because as a woman, she doesn't have the opportunity to do that, particularly, or often. And yet, men, and I do, I would feel comfortable, myself, walking around all night, certainly in most parts where I live. And so, I think it's helpful to appreciate our impact on other people, even if that's not our intent. And to try to take into account what they have to take into account, that you don't have to take into account. Including the ways in which certain words, which might have neutral or even benign meanings for you, land on them in a way that's understandably reactivating. I think there's a place for those sorts of things on the one hand.

[00:06:17] On the other hand, what do we do when we're in a personal growth context, a workshop, let's say, of some kind, and we're starting to talk about events that occurred when we were young? That were traumatic for us. And the sheer naming of the kinds of things that happened to us when we were young, even just naming them in passing, is for another person very reactivating. What do we do then? Do we ask the first person to stop talking about it, even though they're talking about inside the lines? In a setting in which talking about that kind of thing is appropriate, do we ask them to stop talking about it? Or do we look at the other person and say, well, it's understandable given your personal history that you are impacted in this way here that's very upsetting for you. Are not going to manage your reactions to what that first person is saying by suppressing that first-person, by getting them to stop talking about it. Perhaps you might want to stop listening for a while, perhaps you might wanna leave the meeting and come back later, perhaps you want to marshal and mobilize certain inner resources you might have to deal with it.

[00:07:41] These are alternatives, and they can be offered with kindness and respect for both people. I do think that there's been a certain degree to which the pendulum can swing either way. Historically I think many people in positions of privilege were just oblivious to and were pushy about and dismissive of the understandable impact of their words on other people. It's important to manage that. And I've been on the receiving end of some of that input and had to take it on board. On the other hand, perhaps the pendulum has swung too far the other way in certain settings in which when a person feels upset, they figure that somebody else has done something wrong and needs to change what they're doing because I didn't like that. And I'm not willing to. Look over here or resource myself over here or manage my own reactions, you need to change over there. I kind of want to, you know, name that as something to take into account these days. And you can take it into account in terms of how you communicate with others, you know in this community. Privilege is not having to take something into account. It's a lovely, lovely meaning there. So how does mindfulness fit into all of this? All right. How can we be mindful of both our own process, our own reactions? Skillfully mindful of what's happening around us. How can we do that?

[00:09:22] The traditional definition of mindfulness, and I'm gonna be coming at this topic, I think in some fresh ways, I hope at least. The traditional of definition of mindfulness is very

simple in early Buddhism. And the Buddha did not invent mindfulness. Contemplative traditions existed long before he, you know, began teaching 2,500 years ago. And contemplative traditions exist around the world, including in those... Of the native people, the indigenous people around the world. Mindfulness is basically sustained present-moment awareness, period. Sustained present-moment awareness. Which can be applied to the inner world, the outer world, or both at the same time. That present-moment awareness can be focused including in depths of concentration. It can also be very wide open, very spacious, very all-inclusive. Mindfulness does not push aside making efforts in the mind or out in the world.

[00:10:30] Sometimes people think that to be mindful means you're not allowed to make any efforts, either out in a world or in your own mind. I think that's ridiculous. It's not what the Buddha taught and it's not common sense tells us. It's appropriate to be mindfulness of a big truck next to you on the freeway or the facial expressions, the micro expressions. You know, in someone you're having a real conversation with. That's appropriate. It's appropriate to be mindful of what your doctor is telling you. Decide what to do. It's appropriate, meanwhile, to be mindful of your inner world too. Mindfulness can be directed in both places. And mindfulness itself is a means to an end. It's not an end in itself. Mindfulness occurs dependently. It requires factors of various kinds to be able to sustain that present moment awareness. And mindfulness is in the larger context of what I think of as the three-legged stool of practice, loving, knowing, and growing in the language of early Buddhism, metta, sati, and bhavana. Metta being heartfulness, sati being mindfulness, bhavana being learning. So mindfulness does not exist in its own. We also need to add other qualities that are not inherent.

[00:12:00] In simply sustained present moment awareness. Sustained present moment is morally neutral. It could be used for harmful purposes or helpful purposes. We need to add good intentions, wise intention, and wise view to mindfulness. Sometimes people speak of mindfulness as if the eightfold path is really just a onefold path. Not so, not so. Mindfulness is profoundly, profoundly helpful. The root of the word for sati in Pali, a language, a key language of early Buddhism, is memory, a recollectedness. There's a subtle metacognitive quality in remaining mindful. We're aware of being aware. We're awareness of being present, in a recollected kind of way. I think of it as well as feeling collected. Gathered together rather than divided internally and scatterbrained, you know, scattered apart. Mindfulness is the opposite of that. I'm struck often by people who are very straightforward about making efforts out in the world to change things for the better by altering conditions that are problematic and developing conditions that are beneficial out in world. To do that inside their own mind, that's somehow some kind of taboo. I'm not supposed to do that because of pitfalls. I'm gonna get too goal-directed or it's gonna strengthen and reinforce my sense of self. And I just don't understand that. If it's appropriate to engage in efforts that are skillful and sustained and productive out there in the world, why would it not be useful?

[00:14:01] To engage in efforts inside your own mind. Yes, avoid the pitfalls of being too goal-directed or getting caught up in your own ego about it all. That said, don't fall in the pit, but it's okay to make efforts inside your own minds to cultivate wholesome qualities. Then I want to talk about this refrain in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. So the Sati Paṭhaṭa Sutta, some is typically translated as the foundations of mindfulness. Other people, including Gilfranstal, have talked about it as the establishing of mindfulness, the language of early Buddhism is gendered, I've changed it a little bit here. So think about this for yourself now. Let's slow it down. You know, I really encourage you to kind of look into your own experience here, because that's what will be the most value for you. The traditional

instruction is with regard to mindfulness of the body, and then the other three places to establish mindfulness in the Buddha's instructions to us are in the hedonic tone, moment to moment of experiences as having qualities of pleasantness. We like those. Unpleasant, we don't like those... Or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. You know, we're kind of indifferent to those. Maybe we just kind of space out about those.

[00:15:33] Third, establishing a mindfulness is general qualities of mind. And then fourth is being mindful of a whole number of lists, a variety of key themes in Buddhism, such as the Four Noble Truths. The mindfulness though, in terms of the instruction is the same. And I'll read it here. In regard to whatever you're mindful of, a person abides contemplating it. So there's a contemplation, there's witnessing of, we're not totally hijacked by. There's a kind of separation. There's contemplating and an object of contemplation. In profoundly deep and non-ordinary states of awareness, that subject-object distinction starts falling away. Including very subtle qualities of subjectivity, starts really falling away, but most of the time the person abides contemplating. You're diligent about it, you're making an effort, you're an effort inside the mind to be mindful. And diligence, until it becomes extremely habitual, takes effort. And our great teacher, the Buddha, and the lineage of 2,500 years of teachers and teachings coming down to us, is calling us to be diligent. And you might ask yourself, are you in that sweet spot in which the metaphor the Buddha used to his attendant Ananda was a musical instrument, a stringed instrument and that to tune it, you don't want the strings to be too tight or too loose. Are you finding that sweet spots in relationship to your own practice these days? Have you gotten too uptight in your practice, too hard on yourself, too strict? More commonly, myself included, have your strings been too slack these days? Is there a place for... Raising your game a little bit.

[00:17:55] Maybe think about something you could do, you could commit to doing regularly, one minute a day. Or you could increase the moments or times of coming back home to yourself from one or two a day to a dozen times a day. Whatever that might be, what might be your diligence? Then we have clearly knowing. There's a comprehension of, there's a clarity about, there's sensory acuity about that which we are mindful of. A Shinzen Yang. A wonderful teacher, highly recommend and work has developed a lot of methods and approaches having to do with this particular aspect, as well as others, clearly knowing. You really know what's there. So let's suppose you've gotten upset about something, you're reactivated. Can you sustain present moment awareness? The experience of being upset about something. The thoughts you have about it, the body sensations related to it, the emotions, the desires, the longings, and the behaviors related to that which is upsetting for you, right? Can you clearly... And then we have these two really powerful words, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world.

[00:19:35] Now this relates to formal practice of meditation where we just kind of disengage. And it's important to appreciate that we're not talking here about pushing away desires or discontents about the world, we're talking about giving ourselves some space. Giving ourselves an opportunity to be not so dropped into that. That's okay. And that in this way then, the person abides independent, not bound, not stuck, independent, not clinging to anything in the world. And again, clinging has to be understood. I was watching a video recently of Alex Honnold scaling the skyscraper and I've done quite a lot of rock climbing and certainly I've clung to the hand of my child, walking across a busy street. There's a place for healthy desires. There's place for being strong in behalf of things that matter. The Buddha here is talking about a kind of intense, pressured, contracted possessiveness that's problematic here. And we're talking about living with a kind of shock absorber or buffer between yourself and the world. So you may have come across these words before, if you have any background in Buddhism. I think of them as instructions from an incredibly

good coach. Who's helping us. It's worth taking, you know, being aware of, okay, this is what I'm trying to do when I'm mindful. I'm abiding. I'm, in other words, I'm sustaining my mindfulness. I'm contemplating. I'm aware of it, clearly knowing, but not hijacked. And I'm staying with it and not getting distracted from what I'm being mindful of with a fundamental quality of independence and freedom.

[00:21:50] Now, in terms of research on all this stuff, there tends to be research on what's called focused attention, where people are mindful of a particular object of attention, like the breath. And if you are prone to destructibility, maybe due to temperament or your history, it can really be helpful to train in focused attention. And when you are training in focused intention, find objects of attention that are stimulating enough to keep you present. Can be really helpful. Over time, that focused attention can enable us to sustain increasingly open awareness in which we are present without... In a muscular way, focusing on any particular thing. Now open awareness is kind of challenging, because it's really easy to get swept along by some flotsam and jetsam in this stream of consciousness. But open awareness is really useful. So people start often with focused attention. If your attention is skittery, I really recommend training in focused attention for a while. My own practice had some kind of major steps along the way and one of the key early steps was starting to train in concentration, focused attention, including to the point of non-ordinary states of absorption leading into the right concentration element of the Eightfold Path.

[00:23:32] And over time, as your attention stabilizes and your mind gradually gets quieter, it takes less and less effort to remain stably present in the present. And you start naturally moving more and more into open awareness. So I'm gonna mark the difference between those. Sometimes people teach open awareness before their students are stable enough in focused attention and they can't really do open awareness, but over time you probably become more and more able to do that. Open awareness leads onward to this extremely deep teaching from Dogen. So early Buddhism had a real emphasis on focused attention leading onward through the step of right concentration into what were called the formless realms and then eventually to cessation of ordinary consciousness, dropping into nirvana. That was kind of the path that was laid out. It was a very focused, determined, muscular path that was hard for people, unless they had a lot of time on the cushion, in most cases. Then, zhup. Yeah, around 1700 years later, along comes Buddhism, moving through China and Chon, Taoism essentially, then moving into Japan with Zen around this time, so forth, comes Dogen, a great teacher. And he did not invent this other way of doing it, but he certainly pulled a lot together and his work is quite extraordinary.

[00:25:25] And he pointed out, as had others, The effort at focused attention in subtle ways can reinforce the sense of the self-world distinction and a sense of self. Dogen talked about another way of doing it, another mode of practice. I wanna say for the record, I think both modes of practice are useful. Traditional teachings about applying attention and being very diligent about it to an object of attention, great. And here as well, we have Dogen talking, saying, including very much to people like me who tend to be very goal-directed, that conveying oneself. Toward all things, including a meditative practice, to carry out practice can be a kind of delusion that reinforces dualism. On the other hand, in your meditative process, having a sense of all things coming through you, carrying out practice can take you into a kind of awakening.

[00:26:40] So let's apply that to the example of getting reactivated by somebody else. So, in terms of the focused attention aspects of mindfulness, they're very useful to investigate what you're experiencing. What's getting stirred up here? What are the secondary

cascades of blaming the other person for getting stirred up? What's the deeper material from childhood that's getting stirred up here. The factor of investigation is one of the seven factors of enlightenment in the Buddhist tradition. You can bring focused attention to exploring your own material. And in that exploration, very interestingly, implicitly is a kind of responsibility for your own materials. It's not so much that you are creating it or that you like it or want it, it's that it's yours. It's that other person's. It's what's arising in your mind. And other people hearing that other person who's plugged you in, they're not having the reaction stream that you're having. It's your reaction stream. And the focused attention and investigation you're bringing to it can underline in that way of experiencing it. It's really helpful, it's really helpful. What about open awareness? How is that helpful?

[00:28:17] As we start shifting into open awareness, efforts start reducing. We're still making an effort to be in an open and allowing and accepting mode, but more and more, we're just letting it flow. We're not trying to resist anything we're experiencing. We're not resisting what's happening around us. You can feel it. Sometimes people use language like welcoming. Galen Ferguson, a practitioner and professor at Naropa, talks about welcoming, receiving, allowing. Tarabrag talks about radical acceptance. You can feel that even just as you drop into allowing, accepting, receiving. There's a pacifying, there's a tranquilizing that starts coming in. And in that can be a kind of shift that is available in the Dogen approach, the open awareness approach in which you start realizing that what is streaming through you is living you, including the things that are unpleasant. Our being, moment to moment to movement, is being made by the universe altogether, including being made by those things that we don't like. That awareness, that knowing, the knowing of this as true can be increasingly freeing and liberating. And it starts shifting our relationship to the world altogether. In which we experience ourselves as living in the giving of the moment to moment arising of everything.

[00:30:28] And that shift is one of the great fruits of practice. It's much broader than becoming less upset about particular things. Being able to do this is hard if you're totally plugged in. And sometimes we need to do intermediate practices. We need to build a raft, you know, to carry us across the river. And then when we get to the other side, we don't need to keep carrying the raft because our vehicle has gotten its job done. Sometimes what we need to do is to do very foundational work with ourselves. Soothing the body. Taking care of immediate needs, doing some therapy maybe. Deepening our understanding of ourselves, developing factors like self-compassion and a sense of being on your own side, being kind to yourself, you know, we develop those. But then on that foundation, there is a kind of progression and you can mark where you are of steadying the mind through focused attention training and then broadening the mind, Opening the mind. Through open awareness, and then freeing. As you recognize increasingly non-separation being lived and buoyed continuously, living in the giving of the arising moment at the front edge of now.

[00:32:10] Now there's some people who've had such radical breakthroughs, self-transcendent experiences, awakenings, they're living, they're in that third place. I don't live all the time there. I'm a work in progress. It's helpful to learn from people who are more and more stably there. And still, you can acknowledge for yourself, you know, how's it going with focused attention? How's it with being able to sustain open awareness much of the time, even as you engage in daily activities? And how's going as well with having those moments of awakening? Multiple times a day, in which you suddenly feel, you feel the knowing, you know the feeling of being lived by everything, and continuously arising and passing through you. And I do wanna underline that it's a lot easier to do this if you feel like your basic needs are being met, if you're not running for your life from. One thing or

another, you know, if you've repeatedly internalized a sense of basic okay-ness, if you have the presence of mind to kind of go wide, to expand your view, to rest in the green zone as I talk about it, these are very supportive factors. And I think there's a kind of humility that's involved in realizing how terribly vulnerable, vulnerable to fear, the scared monkey of the body is. Really, really focusing on comfort and tenderness and kindness for yourself. And on that foundation, you know, these three qualities, right? Focus the mind. Open the mind, free the mind. I'm quoting a teacher whose name escapes me right now.

[00:34:24] Someone has asked, What's the Buddha's definition of love? I think that's a really, really interesting question. Well, we know what the Buddha taught and thought is basically given in what's called the Pali Canon. It's this collection of written records that there's also versions of them in Chinese and Sanskrit and so on. They're quite extensive and they were written, the surviving written record came several centuries after the Buddha died. So there are approximations to what he said or thought and so on. There's some recent scholarship in which it seems that what he is teaching includes love as a wholly sufficient path of practice alongside certainly, you know, personal virtue and wisdom and mental training. So the main words for love typically are metta, which kindness comes from friendliness. Karuna is compassion. Udana is happiness at the welfare of others. You know, those are kind of the main words that come through. I'm not sure I've ever read the word love in good translations of the Pali canon. Maybe other people know about that. I think it's a really interesting question.

[00:35:37] It's also interesting to appreciate that in the setting of the time, community and neighborliness and really deep bonds of connection were just presumed unlike the world in which many of us live today in which we have to actually work to, you know, create those kinds of bonds. I would say as well that what many people observe, and this is a teaching that's much more foregrounded in Tibetan Buddhism, is that as people comment here, including Jovian, when we start recognizing that things exist emptily... And in that recognition, we start having a sense of the ground of all. Because emptiness, the fact that things exist, emptily, which is to say they're made of parts that are connected and changing, that nature of all things is not itself conditioned.

[00:36:31] So the recognition of emptiness, the recognition of the empty nature of things, is a portal into a recognition of the absolute, that which is not conditioned. And so what happens then is really interesting. People don't go numb when they recognize emptiness, the empty quality of things. They exist, emptily. Okay. When that recognition occurs, people don't space out. They don't check out. They're often almost ecstatic. There's a joyfulness and it's a lovingness that arises. Now why that is? Some would say it's because lovingness is innate in the ultimate ground of all. It's a little above my pay grade. I'm not gonna assert too much there. It feels true to me that that's the case. But in any case, you can just see what happens. What happens when you recognize that you're upset with somebody is occurring as an experience, emptily made of parts that are connected and changing, therefore empty of absolute existence, empty of the absolute identity. An eddy in the stream, a momentary patterning of your mindstream embedded in, you know, the unfolding of the universe. Love starts arising then.

[00:37:57] We're wrapping up here. I hope this hasn't been too out there. I want to recap. Things happen and we get reactivated. Sometimes it involves other people and I think wise practice in relationship involves looking over here To what's gotten, you know to our personal conduct if someone has gotten reactivated by us What happened, what did I do over here? And how can I sort out what happened over here in different ways, including is there any correction to put in or is there anything I should do differently? And I think there's

a place for unilateral virtue, wise speech and all the rest of that. And still at a certain point, you have your own rights. And just because what you're communicating is unwanted by that other person does not necessarily mean you have to shut up. On the one hand. It's also true that there's a place for thinking about our impact on other people. And if you're on the receiving end of someone who's done something, there too, you can sort out in your own mind, okay, what did they do that I think could be more skillful in the future, if anything?

[00:39:19] And meanwhile, over here, how can I take responsibility for my own reactions and use mindfulness to practice with them? If I'm going to use mindfulness to practice. I can recognize that mindfulness is about moment to moment recollectiveness, sustaining present moment awareness of the outer and inner world, moment to movement. And I can train in this kind of three-step process over time, or even engage it in the moment, including whether in a meditation or just kind of working through the 10 minutes of an upset with somebody else. I can engage a practice of initially focused attention. That has an investigatory quality to it. And then soon enough I can start moving into the big picture, the bird's eye view, open awareness, which does good things neurologically to relax the self preoccupation, pulls us out of rumination to go into open awareness. And then even further, I can help myself increasingly experience what I know to be true, which is that I am being lived by all things. Flowing through locally. Summarized in the teaching of, you know, focus the mind, open the mind. Free the mind That's good practice.

[00:40:58] And I'll leave you with this recurring phrase in the early teachings of the Buddha that someone who is a sincere practitioner, like you, is someone who has ardent, which is heartfelt. Courageous, wholehearted, enthusiastic, ardent. Diligent. Resolute. Mindful. Those are four good words. Can be put up on your wall, little stickies, yellow stickies. Kind of rotate. Over four days, oh, if it's Tuesday, it must be ardent. You know? Oh, if it's Wednesday, it's resolute. If it's Thursday, it is diligent. And if it is Friday, it's mindful or not. You know, ardent, resolute, diligent and mindful.