

## 1\_7\_26 Talk\*

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**Rick Hanson:** [00:00:00] So in what is the new year for many of us, it seems appropriate to explore the topic of good intentions, which gets at the fundamental question of intentions altogether. I mean, if we are one with everything, what does it mean to have an intention of some kind? And this gets at two things that are simultaneously true. And I'm just going to speak to them fairly briefly and stay out of deep philosophical considerations that I'm not qualified for.

[00:00:36] So we have both universality, the sense of oneness with everything. We also have individuality. Both are true. There is a forest and there is an individual tree. There is the ocean and there are individual waves. Both are two. And My own view is that physical processes are entirely determined with causes reaching all the way back into the big bang of the physical universe. But in information space enabled by a nervous system, potentially enabled eventually by silicon chips, who knows, not going there in any case. In information space there is a freedom of choice of some kind. Within limitations we're constrained, we're influenced, we are affected, to be sure. But in some irreducible sense, there is the capacity to have an inherent freedom of choice. This is central to the view of Buddhism in that if there is not choice, then there's no basis for inheriting the results of our own volitional actions.

[00:01:53] I'm not going to get into the deep philosophy of this, but I am going to quote here from the Buddha and see what you think about this. So if it is deeds that make us holy in the broad sense, if it's deeds that makes us virtuous, we are the chooser of our own deeds. You know, that couldn't possibly be the case if there was not some sense of freedom in our choosing. Otherwise, how could we possibly be responsible, morally and otherwise? Our own choices. Here's another. The Dhammapada. You are your own master. You make your future. Therefore discipline yourself as the horse dealer trains a thoroughbred. Obviously some of these teachings are dated and they come from a culture 2,500 years ago. Then there are issues around translation. See what speaks to you personally, of course. But just that line, you make your future. I think what's the most important minute of your life? It's the next one. It's one you have influence over. And minute by minute, what we make in that next minute sets the course of our life. So that's context here, in my view. We do have a certain amount of freedom in our choosing, therefore we do have a certain of responsibility, including moral responsibility for what we choose.

[00:03:25] And this is true. For others as well. A lot of the anguish that people experience in family systems is anguish about the choices of others or reckoning with the impact on oneself of the choices that others are making. Making some decisions about that. It supports your equanimity to realize that others are the makers of their own lives too. Obviously others are influenced by their circumstances and the impacts of life events including traumatic childhood events and all the rest of that. And yet within some range there is some freedom of choice. And the gradual accumulation of what we choose, at either the high end of that range or the low end of the range, gradually accumulates to shape our lives. And when we look at other people, and also include the fact that we don't know everything that's in the mix for them, we don't know all of the influences. We don't their secret thoughts. Even going all the way back to childhood, I had many secret thoughts that I connect with even today. As a little kid and some of them led to good

results and some of them lead to bad results of various kinds. So, you know, people have their own secret thoughts.

[00:04:54] This line of poetry that I'm fond of quoting, you've heard it, something along the lines of from Miller Williams, we do not know what secret wars are going on down there where the spirit meets the bone. So that can bring us into a kind of equanimity, maybe a grief-stricken equanimity. But a kind of equanimity, a kind of emotional balance that's spacious for the choices of others. So that's contextual here. When we explore this question of good intentions or the topic of good intentions, our own and others, you know, we can do so in the frame that I'm trying to establish here. So then values, what's with values, right? How can you have a value if it's all one? As people say, isn't there some kind of deep teaching about the space, maybe Rumi talked about it, where we go out there and there's not right, there's no wrong, there's good, there is not bad. Things simply are as they are.

[00:05:56] Well, I think that's really true. I think the unfolding of the Big Bang universe is simply what it is. I think that the ground of all is simply what it is. Okay. Living creatures, we cannot escape values. Every cell in your body has values in terms of states of being, its little internal regulatory systems seek to achieve and seek to stabilize them. It has values. The built-in apoptosis, apoptosis, anyway, something like that. So, you know, innate cell death that's baked into our individual cells in terms of their own destiny, eventually. That is a kind of directionality itself. To say, I don't want to have values, well, that's a value. There's no escape from values.

[00:06:47] So I'd like to ask you this question. What are your key values this year? What do you care about? And here, try to keep it simple, if you could. What are you leaning toward and what are you leaning away from? I'll offer a little quotation here as well. The teaching says essentially, if by renouncing a lesser happiness, one may realize a greater happiness, let the wise one renounce the lesser, having regard for the greater. Or to put it succinctly, wisdom is choosing a greater happiness over a lesser one. A lot of us face choices between... You know, lesser happinesses, like getting angrily riled up or not sitting on the couch yet one more day rather than exercising, indulging ourselves in ways that are momentarily pleasing, but carry a price the next day. Those are lesser happiness. How can we lean away from them into forms of fulfillment and wisdom and happiness that are greater for you? So I really invite you to Face this question, like if there were one leading value for you this year. What would it be? What is it? Maybe you know already. Maybe there are two, or three, or four leading values for you. What do you most care about? It's been very real for me, and I think for many people, that there's such a difference between top-down shoulds and bottom-up. Longings, values, or purposes simply living through you.

[00:09:02] Your innermost wisdom can guide you in, okay, this here, what matters most. Is like a central touchstone for you. You can return to and take refuge in and know is true. What's one thing that you know is really important for you this year? You might write it down, you might get an image of it, you might know what it feels like in your body to be lived by that value, to lean into that value and away from what is not yet. What's important for your? We can be guided by the wise intention or right intention element of the Eightfold Path. It has three parts to it.

[00:10:01] One part is called non-harming. I'm going to put a quotation here. As I am, so are others. As others are, so am I. Having thus identified self and others, harm no one, nor have them harm. In this, my implication is non-harming toward oneself. This is a very powerful consideration. How do we harm ourselves in the present and also setting forth

ripples that harm ourselves and the future with our acts of thought, word and deed? The Buddha focused on volitional acts that have at least some intentionality behind them. You know, if... You blink, if someone comes to your eyes really fast, that's not a volitional act. That's a reflex of some kind. But that which we do deliberately, in thought, word, and deed, that which, we reinforce, we follow after, we fuel and feed, well, we inherit the results of those actions.

[00:11:15] So it's quite powerful to ask yourself, what are the actions that you took yesterday or last week, or... Many years ago that are still harming you today. And what can you learn from that about the actions you'll take today and tomorrow? Speech, you know, words, words you've used in the past, how have they come home to roost, you know, to harm you, that you've inherited. I can think of words by spoken anger that I'm still deeply ashamed of today, 30 years later, and I'm still reaping the whirlwind, in part, of what was produced by those words I spoke. The best I can do is to learn from that. The best we can do, is to learn from the things that we've done in the past that have harmed us, so we don't do them again.

[00:12:13] And then, of course, we have thoughts. What sort of thoughts, mental actions, yesterday, or a week ago, or 20 years ago, are you still inheriting harms from? Are you still paying a price for it? The costs are continuing to land. I can think of examples where I hastily chose one path or another, where I quickly gave up on something or I endlessly stuck to something and erred in either way. So going forward, right? What actions of deed, word and thought can you be careful about this year so that you don't harm yourself with them? This is really powerful and profound. We tend to routinely think about how not to harm others, partly because they're yelling at us, wanging their finger at us or giving us some good advice. But we don't often think so much about how to avoid harming our future self, not harming their. That's a real inquiry this year.

[00:13:22] And then the second major element of right intention in that 8-fold path. Is disengaging from ill will. Now it's one thing to discern what people are doing and to have values that are relevant and to sit in moral disapproval and because you have a view and you have values and on the basis of that, you see things about other people. There's a place for that. The Buddha, there's pieces in the early written record. Of Buddhism in which he addresses someone, oh, foolish man, you know, he's calling out foolishness. He's admonishing people. There's a place for that. Again, how to do is skillfully and all the rest of that. On the other hand, that's really different from ill will, the intent to harm, the intent of punish, the cruelty, scorn, malevolence, vengeance. That's ill will. And it's easy to get caught up in it, you know, payback, right? To people in your own family system, or friends, or acquaintances, business people. It's easy to get caught up in it politically, you know, to be captured by hatred. And as understandable as it is, and as human, as big primates, big monkeys that we are, you know wise intention is to disengage from ill will.

[00:14:56] At a minimum, see if you can rest in less ill-will, and then even no ill-will, and then perhaps even moving toward compassion. And then the third element of right intention in the Eightfold Path is disengaging from attachment to desires. So those are the three non-harming, non-ill-will, non-attachment to sense desire, to pleasure. Those might be something that you might think about in terms of your values this year. In Buddhism, we have many aspirational, value-centered teachings. These are three of my personal favorite quotations. The first is that fundamental value of self-caring, of getting on your own side. Of being an ally, a friend, loyal to yourself, much as you would be to another being.

[00:15:50] This is a fundamental value, and one that I learned as a young therapist. It took me about 10 years to learn it. By then, I was no longer young. That many, many people, probably half the people I saw, maybe that was one of the reasons they were in my office, or at least half of them, they were not on their own side. They were not for themselves. They might have been for others. They were not on their own side. So the first one, if one going down into a river, swollen and swiftly flowing, is carried away by the current, how can one help others across? We need to find a stability in ourselves, we need to fill up our own cup, we need put on our own oxygen mask first, so that we have the possibility of taking good care of others. This is a value. You might take a look at yourself this year. Myself, the last year, which I'm happy to put behind me, has been marked by an extreme outpouring of effort. It's been one of the most demanding and pressure-packed and time-urgent and often upsetting periods in my life since some very major ones, you know, 10 or 30 years ago. I've been really busy, and one of the turnings for me is to kind of increasingly disengage from that. You know, and to be on my, you know to take into account the impact on, you know, myself. You might look for yourself about what it would mean to be more on your side this year. Okay.

[00:17:25] Another value-centered teaching, one of my absolute favorites, train yourself in doing good that lasts and brings happiness. Cultivate generosity, a life of peace, and a mind of boundless love. That's pretty darn aspirational. And then we have, very practically, there are those who do not realize that one day we all must die. But those who realize this settle their quarrels, including those quarrels inside your own mind with people you're not talking to or because they won't talk to you, but you're still in the inner quarrel. You know, I have a little thing I wrote once about getting out of the war inside your head. That quarrel there. And I, of course, want to put this in, from Zen Master Hakuen, as a very serious and lofty value, pointing directly to the heart mind, in other words, looking directly at your own being, see your own nature, and become Buddha. I'll just leave that one right there.

[00:18:40] So now, how do we implement our values this year and at any time? Well, concretely, what would it look like in your daily life to implement what you are recognizing in this conversation or at other times that you truly most care about is truly most important. You know, it's what you need to make room for and honor and bow to in your own life. How do you implement it? The book Atomic Habits, for example, addresses this question and has been on the bestseller list for, I don't know, a couple years now. You know, it's a deep question. There's a lot of research on this. I'm gonna name some of the major factors, five major factors in actually implementing what we most care about.

[00:19:31] The first is to set up your physical circumstances to support you. Get certain foods out of your pantry or your freezer or your refrigerator. You know, arrange, you know, things in your life, including other people, you know, a support system that will support your intentions, you know, the physical locations in where you work, how you get stuff done, to the extent you can arrange your circumstances so they support your intentions.

[00:20:01] Second, your schedule, if it would really serve you to get up half an hour earlier. That would really serve you, if it would serve you to disengage from work by a certain time every day. That kind of schedule would serve. My wife Jan has put me on the clock for certain things because she knows if she doesn't do that. All kinds of other things will occupy and hijack my attention. Schedule, that's number two.

[00:20:29] Third, support of others. Getting people, declaring your intentions to other people if that's useful so that they will support you in them. Finding people in your life that you are aligned with who support your values, spending more time with them and less time

to the extent you can with those who don't. That's... You know, very helpful as well. Number three, social support. Four, periodically reestablishing your intentions. Like one of the two things I suggested as formal practice at a minimum every day is to reestablish your own fundamental purpose in life or deepest values, maybe when you first wake up. The other one I suggested was to make sure you did something contemplative for a minute or more every day. Those two things, just right there. Will change your days and eventually change your life, okay?

[00:21:22] So that's the fourth factor shown by research, reestablish your intentions. Maybe put up little things around you. I make collages, for example, or I'll put quotations up around me that sort of reorient my mind toward them. And then take in the good of the results, right? That we're deep down, we're like I said, big monkeys. It's important to internalize. The fruits of your efforts. In a tradition, a spiritual tradition, that has quite a lot of stoicism in it, Buddhism is really clear that it's important to find gladness in your goodness. I'll quote the Dhammapada here, well done is that action of doing which one repents not later and the fruit of which one reaps with delight and happiness. Enjoy it.

[00:22:17] So quick recap, these five research-based factors that support implementing, actually implementing what we care about. Number one, just arranging your circumstances physically as much as you can to support you. If you want to brush your teeth routinely, leave the toothbrush out on the counter, stuff like that can really, really help actually.

[00:22:38] Number two, shifting your in a way that supports you. I find for myself the single probably most significant factor in the day I have has to do with the time I went to bed the night before. So schedule, really useful.

[00:22:55] Third, the support of others in various ways as best you can.

[00:22:59] Fourth, re-establishing your intentions, maybe by looking at something you've written previously, maybe resetting your intentions every day in your journal, reestablishing them.

[00:23:12] And then extremely important. Take in the fruits of your labors. Let it land. Oh yeah, you know this was a this was a good enough day. Yes, I can feel good about myself and good about my day when I finally go to bed. And then so far, so okay.

[00:23:34] And I would add as well to repeat something I said previously, in terms of your purposes, I find that top-down in purposes are useful where you're giving yourself instructions, but much more powerful and much more sustainable is to open to that which is good within you and let it live through you. So you have a feeling of the current. Of your wholesome purposes carrying you along. Know the difference between top-down intentionality, which has a place, the executive systems in your brain giving you instructions. Okay, great. But that's kind of effortful after a while. Willpower fatigue, they say. What's it like to fall back into the arms of your better nature to be carried along by it?

[00:24:29] And then here, I want to raise a pretty tricky and charged question about moral sensibility. This is where we can ask ourselves, what are our intentions toward others? And what can we discern about and how can we understand their intentions toward us and toward other people as well? And non-human beings too, of course. I've been reflecting a lot lately about how... Many interpersonal issues, conflicts, at all scales, including at the highest level of politics or the largest level, if you will, or scale, interpersonal issues boil down often to ethical issues. What are your interpersonal ethics? And for example, how do

we balance duty to others with duty to self? What do we do when it's clear that our own best interest is to walk a certain path that another person will not like or in fact will have costs for another person? For example, by what right do you apply for a job or pursue a romantic partner? In a competitive environment in which if you prevail, if you succeed, others will not get the prize they want. And do you have the right to pursue that? How do we think about that? Or more broadly, who is in your circle of moral concern? This is a deep question.

[00:26:05] And my own view is that what really troubles the world a lot these days are not really political questions, but moral questions. You know, how wide is our circle of moral concern? And what standards do we hold ourselves to? As much as we can observe our own moral or ethical standards and conduct, we can observe that in others as well. And it's been personally very helpful for me recently to start to kind of go back to some of what I knew as a psychologist and graduate student and dust off some material about levels of moral reasoning. There's a lot about this, levels of moral reasoning, and you can look this up in Wikipedia. There are people who write about it in different kinds of ways. And it's not so much that there's a right or a wrong, but it's more how do people come to a moral decision.

[00:27:00] So I wanna give you a thought experiment that is quite common in this area. So imagine that you are a parent and you have young children who are going hungry. Because you're living in poverty, maybe, and it's late at night. This dilemma was faced, I think, by Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables*, or one of those books by Victor Hugo. Anyway, and you're walking along the street and you see a bakery. It's late night, no one is watching, you know you can get away with it, and behind the glass window are many loaves of bread. Your children need. So you decide to break that window and to grab some loaves of bread and run away and feed your children. On what basis did you do that? How did you reason about it morally? How do you justify what you did? Researchers have discerned different levels.

[00:28:09] The most basic level, extremely concrete, and self-interested, it's very simple. I need it, I want it, I can get away with it. Malevolent, it's not trying to destroy the baker. It's just, I want it, I see it, so what? It's mine, boom, out of there. This is sort of the most concrete level of moral reasoning. It's the most basic. It's still level of more reasoning in sociopathy. It's not malevolence, but it's completely self-centered. Does not care about impact on others. And then you could... Move up the ladder of moral reasoning to something like basically you know there are these rules like it would be a sin to steal so you know I did it while knowing I'm violating some basic rule that's kind of mid-range moral reasoning and then we have at the very kind of broadest highest level of moral reason kind of brought abstractions about the greater good of all utilitarianism a willingness to take the bread for your children by while at the same time being prepared to pay a price. You know, if you get caught, you get punished. I accept the consequences, you know, and I did all that with all that taken into account. The point is, how do you think about, you now, this sort of stuff for yourself and others? And I've been really startled often by people who really did not give a damn about others. You know? They're not actively trying to harm others, But on the other hand... They just don't care. They don't want to be bothered by expanding their own circle of moral concern. So I just, I want to kind of name this. I want to name how you think yourself ethically and how we understand other people. And just kind of put it on the table.

[00:30:16] Obviously there are pitfalls around this in which we could get defensive on the one hand or very self-righteous on the other. No, I'm really trying to separate that out and

ask yourself, as I'm asking myself this year, what are your good intentions, including toward others? How do you want to operate toward others. Who do you wanna include in your own circle of moral concern of us, rather than. Just that. And how can you protect yourself from people that are functioning at lower levels of moral reasoning? And frankly, will not go out of their way to hurt you, but they don't really care about their impact on you. They just don't care. If they're forced to treat you nicely, they will, but otherwise they just really don't care. It can be kind of shocking. I've experienced some of this recently myself to realize, wow, they really don't. And they're prepared to operate in ways that you couldn't even imagine doing yourself. It's very useful to see this clearly and to not be naive and to project onto other people a moral sensibility that's yours. But they just don't have.

Recognizing pitfalls and thinking you're superior, whatever, setting that aside and just trying to clear seeing. You may know the parable of the scorpion and the turtle. The scorpion comes to the turtle on the edge of a river and says, hey turtle, will you carry me across? And the turtle says, no scorpion, because you'll sting me. The scorpion will say, no, no. I won't do that. I won't do that because if I did that, we'd both drown, right? Okay, the turtle says, well, hop on board. Halfway across, scorpion stings the turtle who starts dying and sinking into the water. And as the turtle sinks beneath the waves of the water, says the scorpion, why, why why? You're going to drown too. And the scorpions goes, it's just my nature. You know, there's a place for recognizing Just what other people have done and will continue to do to protect yourself and other people.

[00:32:40] All that said, all that said. As you reflect on your own intentions, I really invite you to consider your good intentions in this life. You know, what are the motivations in you that have carried you along? Not necessarily perfectly, probably not perfectly if you're like me. And what have been your own good intentions in this life? You know deep down, even when we're upset, love is in the mix because we are trying to love into being a different feeling, a different experience for ourselves, a different kind of relationship with others perhaps. Those are good intentions. I recently came across a picture of myself taken when I was 14. It startled me, because I could just see in the face of that kid, this kind of shy, sweet 14-year-old boy, a lot of good intentions. A lot of intentions. You know, it was a family picture. I could see in, you know, my brother and my sister and my mother and my father, a lot good intentions as well in their faces. I invite you to ask yourself, wellspring of inner goodness has lived through you in this life. It's a really important thing to pay attention to, including good intentions sort of at the surface level, and then at the deeper level of your innermost being, and who knows, maybe even a kind of goodness that rises ultimately from transpersonal notes. What happens if you open up to knowing your own good intentions? I see a lot of people who get very squirmy right around now, like, like, oh, I'm going to get all arrogant or egoic or, oh well, I'm ashamed of this or that, acknowledging whatever you have remorse about or whatever you're sincerely trying to do better from now on.

[00:34:57] I think one of the great taboos is to recognize that you're actually a good person. What happens when you do? I think something very powerful happens in people, when we look at ourselves and go, wow, I'm mainly a really good person, work in progress, but mainly, wow, really, I've tried, you know, I make efforts, I don't want to harm people, I want to help people, I care about other people, you know? I do the best I can. And so I ask you, what would it feel like to, in a sense, take refuge? In your own good intentions to sort of give over to the good intentions moving through you. You might feel it as a lovingness, you might feel it as amending, moving through you, you might feel as contributing, giving joy to others. Whatever it might be, it might feel like opening to the expression of your talents, actualizing the gifts you have. Can you take refuge in knowing your own good intentions? I think it's very powerful to do that this year. What do you think about this? This

idea of acknowledging your good intentions in the past and acknowledging your intentions in present and living in the midst of them. Feeling carried along by your own goodness. And having faith in it. You know, disengaging from quarrels with others in which you're trying to impress them or prove your worth. Disengaging from others who, they're gonna do what they do. Haters gonna hate, as they say. And yet you don't have to play that game. You don't have to be part of it. You don't in a way have to even almost care. You have to deal with it, but it's just not what you're about. You're about living in the middle of your good intentions.

[00:37:28] So to finish here, I've been really struck by the good intentions of you and everyone who comes here. Over 400 people typically, wow, you know, community of practice. It's not the same 400 people every night either. There's a larger circle of people who come once a month or once every few months or every other week, whatever. But it's really, it's people who care. I've been also struck a lot by realizing around the world, millions and millions of people and organizations, tens, hundreds of millions, actually are doing little things we hardly know about to make a better world, to mend the fabric of humanity, to stand up against tyranny and ways large and small. Wow. Thank you. So I just want to thank you. I recognize your goodness. You wouldn't be here if goodness were not living through you. I think it's also very beautiful to recognize goodness in others, to look over there and to see that behind their snarky tone or pushy manner is a love. Longing for something good to come into being. There are good intentions behind, you know, unskillful actions, even harmful actions. Can we look over there and see that goodness in them? And then what happens to others in relationship with us when their goodness is witnessed by us deliberately? When we look there and we kind of smile and go, wow, you have good intentions. There's a goodness in you. It may be like 14 layers back behind their personality, but still, oh, I can see that in you. Lifts your heart to do that, doesn't it? Our sincere intentions need to be put into practice, to be sure, and our intentions alone do not. Change harmful actions by others. We can be very aware of those harmful actions and our hearts can sorrow. And meanwhile, what is the current of goodness living through you that you are aligned with and given over to? I'm seeing comments coming in. Did the person taking the bread care about the baker and the baker's family? Exactly. I had a teenager. And again, we. Developmentally, teenagers and young children tend to be particularly self-referential in their moral reasoning. All right. Still, I was giving an IQ test to this teenage boy, and one of the questions and one of the subtests of a previous version, some of you might recognize this, basically is a question about practical common sense. And the question is, what should you do if you see thick smoke pouring out of the window of your neighbor's house? What should you? He paused and he looked at me for a moment and asked quite sincerely. Do I like them? That's like baseline moral reasoning.

[00:40:34] Okay, finishing up here, good intentions. You know, I do think that it's easy to be morally lazy. Our evolution inside small hunter-gatherer bands enabled us to be more really lazy in that we were pushed by the circumstances of living our whole lives with 40 to 50 or so people to be compassionate and caring toward us. But what happens when that sense of us starts to really fade and evaporate and we're surrounded by vast oceans of them. I think holding ourselves to a higher standard, deliberately, is necessary. And giving ourselves over to the innate goodness inside us is really important as well, especially in a world in which, you know, we're living together with eight billion other people in the one whole human tribe. Without the pitfall of guilt tripping or getting on your own case, just finding yourself this year, what really are your good intentions for this year? And then really enjoying being lived by them. I think that's a good summary of what I've been exploring here. And I thank you 10,000 times over for your own good intentions.

