

3_25_26 Talk*

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

Rick Hanson: [00:00:00] You may know this teaching from Shantideva, the great Tibetan Buddhist teacher, roughly a thousand years ago. Quite a, quite a innovative and free-booting kind of character. Anyway, he said that it's as if the world is covered with, you know, really, the world is full of thorns and sharp rocks and things that you could step on and hurt you. So what you gonna do? What are we gonna do.

[00:00:29] We could cover the world with leather, because that's what was available back then, or we could put on a pair of shoes. And I think so often in life that we look for these vast fixes, you know, around us. If only other people would be this way or that way. When in fact, you now, maybe what we could do is more of what the Buddha taught about guarding the sense doors, so we don't get so preoccupied with it all, and look to. The interfaces, the buffers between us and the world, whether it's physical buffers, like fiddling with my microphone and finally getting it right, courtesy people who hung out with me during the break, thank you, or turning down the volume on your earbuds so that the Zoom voice is not so intense, right? I think that's a real teaching. It doesn't mean that we give up on doing what we can.

[00:01:26] With the outside world, and I wanna talk about that with you, that kind of balance here. Doesn't mean we give up about that. It just means that certainly we, in Buddhist practice, put a lot of attention on, and we exercise skillful means with regard to our own mind, our own psychology, which is the fundamental buffer between ourselves as we experience being, moment by moment by movement, and what's going on in our physical bodies. And what's going on out in the world. Now, you may know the opening lines from the Dhammapada, translated in various ways, to paraphrase, mind is the maker of all things. Now, to be clear, the Buddha there is not talking about things as they objectively exist, which he accepted and acknowledged. He's talking about things. As they are constructed in our perceptions and evaluations and thoughts and feelings and other reactions about objective reality. So when he says mind is the maker of all things, he's not talking in some magical sense that ooh, we're going to create a pearl necklace or something like that. No, it says that we are constructing. There is an ongoing process of constructing. It's not even that there's someone who's constructing it.

[00:02:58] If you follow his teachings on relaxing the sense of self, it's that there is an ongoing constructing of our own experience, our own stream of consciousness. And in that sense, mind is the maker of all things. And there's something like, to paraphrase it, you know, with a pure and well-intended mind, goodness follows you like a cart following an ox 2,500 years ago. On the other hand, if with poor intentions, and maybe an impure mind, suffering will follow you like a shadow.

[00:03:33] So mind is the maker of all things. Of course, that does not replace acting in the world. So if you've been here the previous two times, you know that I've been teaching essentially a notion of a compassion as a new paradigm, an expanded, you know, paradigm for compassion. I've talked about the basic essence of compassion boils down to empathy, benevolence, and motivation. That's the essence of Compassion. The base case of compassion is that empathy is for those we like who are like us.

[00:04:15] Second, that benevolence is focused on sort of immediate forms of suffering. And in particular, benevolence is expressed in kind of tender and soft ways.

[00:04:27] And then third, motivation to relieve suffering tends to be focused on immediate forms of suffering. Psychological or interpersonal causes. This is sort of the base case of compassion. Beautiful, wonderful. And building on that base case, more and more voices, and I have learned a lot from them, are calling for compassion that is more inclusive in terms of empathy, that is more passionate in terms of how benevolence is expressed, including fears. As Krista Neff teaches.

[00:05:10] And third, calling for compassion that is more engaged, that in fact starts to pay attention to upstream so structural or systemic sources of the suffering we're dealing with downstream. In previous talks, I've talked about first, expanding empathy, including drawing on, you know, what we're learning more and more about how the neural substrates of empathy have evolved and what we can do to expand the circle of us. Because it's quite challenging to have empathy for them.

[00:05:44] Second, last week I explored forms of benevolence that are expressed in ways that may be firmer, including toward oneself, ways that sometimes perhaps are fiery, or determined, or grave, or very dignified and serious, even fierce.

[00:06:04] Tonight, or at this one, I'd like to explore with you what some people call engaged Buddhism, or we could apply that more broadly to many other traditions, you know, expressions of compassion that start paying attention to wider and wider circles of causes. Now when we do talk about systemic sources of suffering, let's recognize that different people have different opinions about what those systemic sources are, and they will have different opinions about prioritizing the influence of different systemic upstream sources of suffering, which are more consequential or not, and people have different opinions about, you know, the proper strategies and tactics. I really don't want to get into that level. Let's try to let that level go because it can get very provocative, very controversial.

[00:06:56] What I'd really rather focus on is at the level of practice. How do we practice with our sense of helplessness, even despair? About upstream sources of suffering that impact all kinds of beings we care about and often impact ourselves. How do we practice with that? You know, how do we practice in our worldly engagement in which we try to make things better in some ways, and it doesn't always work. Come together with others to try to make things better. Oh, we got to deal with all these different personalities. Oh, how do we deal with that? So again, as much as we can, I want to keep bringing this down to earth and your own reflections about the remarkable, remarkable times in which we all have the great opportunity, I think, to live. So I'm going to share my slides.

[00:07:57] So, upstream sources. Okay, so far? So compassion moves us to relieve suffering and to change its causes. So if all we're doing is kind of mowing the lawn or pulling weeds that are growing back, we're not really addressing the causes. In your life, if you keep playing Whack-a-Mole, you know that game where you'd like, you know, in an arcade, a mole would pop up and you kind of whack it, then there'd be another mole popping up. Very often people are moving, you know from Whack-a-mole, one thing after another. But they're not addressing the underlying causes. What is it that's leading, you know, those things to keep happening in your life?

[00:08:37] So we need to pay attention if we're gonna really relieve suffering, not just to its symptoms, its manifestations, but to its causes. Many of us, me included, are in helping professions or other kinds of work in which, you know, we're helping people to get out of the

river of suffering. That's necessary work. I've spent 50 years. At least in that kind of work. And from time to time, you know, you could look upstream. What's pushing all those people in? What can we do about it? So many forces push people into the river of suffering and block them from getting out. It can seem too complicated to fix. But the essence is usually this. For most of the time that humans have walked this earth for 300,000 years, until five or ten thousand years ago, most people lived in small hunter-gatherer bands. Inside those hunter-gatherer bands The human species, unlike any other primate species, evolved a unique way of living together. Scientists call this caring and sharing, which essentially means compassion and justice. That strategy inside the band is different from what's called holding and controlling.

[00:10:05] In other words, alpha dominance, in which the alphas in other primates species bands Hold food. And control reproduction. Strategy of dominance and control, our human and before that hominid bands often deployed against other bands. But inside their band, they operated largely on the basis of caring and sharing because it enabled them to succeed and take care of their children and pass on genes that passed on genes that passed genes. And we have inherited these tendencies today. The tendencies are. Very much to cooperate with us, while being fearful and often potentially aggressive toward those we define as. What happened when agriculture and herding and farming in various ways came in, the general tendency toward caring and sharing and sidebands gradually got eroded. There were larger groups, larger, if you will, towns and large villages in which the fundamental ethos of caring and caring persisted, but gradually, certainly by the time of the Bronze Age and the beginning of recorded history, roughly 5,000 years ago, we see growing concentrations of wealth since farming and herding enabled surpluses and growing concentrations of power as populations got larger and larger, from tiny little groups to villages, to towns, to cities, to empires. And as a result, with some exceptions, it's been kind of sort of Game of Thrones for most people ever since, particularly until the last, hundred or two hundred years, in which gradually forces that have been moving towards civil society, democratization, and a sense of shared interdependence at larger and larger scales have been something of a counter to the tyrannies and corruptions that characterized most of the societies in which humans have lived for the last several thousand years. That's the fundamental source. Of upstream causes of suffering, or the primary source, certainly. Concentrations of wealth and power often accumulated unjustly that act to preserve wealth and powerful and preserve large-scale systems that function as wealth pumps and power pumps, moving resources and influence from the great majority of people into the hands of a few.

[00:12:52] Now, I wanna be really clear. I am not saying that all wealth and power have been acquired unjustly, not at all. And I'm not saying that those with wealth and powerful all act unjustly. But if we look out into the world and we look at the fact that only about 6% of the people on our planet live in a functioning democracy, a high functioning democracy which does not include America which has actually slid downhill in the last several years in terms of general ratings of democratization. Probably 80% of the people in the world don't live in any really functioning democracy eight men Hold as much wealth as four billion other people There's eight men Elon Musk Jeff Bezos and you know six others individually have as much well as The poorest four billion people on the planet That's the world in which we live Roughly a trillion dollars a year are spent on bribes influencing government action corruptly. Also, when you think about major problems and catastrophes facing humanity as a whole, such as global warming, you can see the effectiveness of concentrated wealth and power to act in its own narrow interests, including its allies, its close allies, but in ways that are not in the interest of most people living today and certainly

not in the interest. Of people who will be living for thousands of years to come. These are just facts. So what can we do about it?

[00:14:35] Access to my slide set. I won't bang away on this too much. I really want to stay focused on what are we going to do about it. So you can see what I've written here. The extraction in the last couple centuries of wealth from colonized countries and as well as on the backs of enslaved people is quite extraordinary. It's many trillions of dollars were stolen, ill-gotten gains, and now circulating. In the economies of the wealthiest countries in the world. Don't mean to be too depressing, but you know, this is the world in which we live. It's full of opportunity, right? There are historically unprecedented changes that give all kinds of opportunity in this century to start to reset these extraordinary, you know imbalances of wealth and power into something a little, you know more approaching a level playing field. We have tons of opportunities for that. We have to do something about them. And if you look at factually, what has actually changed, right? Systemic sources of suffering. It's always been collective action. I go back to my own youth in the 60s and 70s. And during that time in America and in many other places in the world, there were major movements towards civil rights, women's rights, gay rights. Environmentalism, anti-war, pushing for more transparency and accountability in central governments. These were major forces and they were accomplished through collective action. Much as in their small bands, our ancestors solved their problems together. That's how they controlled the bullies and the freeloaders who dominate in all other primate species, bullies, and freeloaders.

[00:16:40] But inside our human bands, with our advanced social capabilities and living together in daily life, the many were able to regulate the few for the common good. We've seen examples of this at much larger scales than a band of people of 50 or so who live together their whole lives in terms of environmentalism and other things. Now in the body, enzymes speed up positive reactions. In humanity altogether, I think it's a fact that collective action will be like an enzyme that accelerates positive change. So I think, in many ways, the main determining force in how this century turns out, in terms of its promise and its peril, will be essentially the amount of collective action that we can mobilize together. For the common good. Accelerates collective action. What drives collective action? Multiple things. The central driver of collective action in our hunter-gatherer bands was compassion. We were moved by actual suffering and we were moved to prevent future suffering. Deep in our biology, it is compassion that brings us together. And it is by coming together that we can change the world. I really invite you to consider what I've said in terms of your own interest. In taking action with others to improve conditions. And this can happen at a very small scale.

[00:18:26] I think there's an in-between place between individual action, you know, to pick up some litter on the street, and central governments. I'm all for doing what we can, you know? To influence central governments, and yet very often change is slow to come by, And, you know, often central governments are the problem, not the solution. And I see people sometimes banging their head or railing against, you know, the weather. Like, ah, helpless outrage is not good for the body mind. Or relationships, generally speaking.

[00:19:01] On the other hand, there's an in-between zone in which two people can decide to do something together. Maybe they decide to help some other people. Who are dealing with systemic sources of suffering and help other people from their own place maybe have advantage or privilege. Beautiful. Maybe people can come together in neighborhood groups in which there's a shared interest. I in my own little neighborhood in a suburb in which I live, there's been a shared in turning this kind of ugly culvert that runs down the middle of the street that used to be a creek into something that looks a lot nicer. So people

collectively came together and bugged the city council until it finally allocated some money to doing this. And now a lot of nice plantings are around it and it feels much more like a little creek. Nice. And there are many other examples like that, including about situations, you know, that are much more dire, much more serious. And then you can scale up from there.

[00:20:03] One of the best ways to scale up is to look for organizations and people that you like already. Maybe they're very involved with animals. You know, non-human animals that you care about. I volunteered some time at our local Humane Society. We don't have to reinvent, we don't not to invent things necessarily. Also, if you're involved with some kind of nonprofit organization already, what can your organization do collectively, collaboratively with other organizations at a scale that's big enough, you know to be strong enough to change some of these upstream forces? It's kind of a... It's an aggravating, for me, fact. I'm still working on the inner shoe or leather between me and this fact. But anyway, if you look at business interests, they thoroughly compete at the marketplace level. All right. But at the political level, legally or corruptly, they pool resources together, singing kumbaya. For example, in America, in the last 15 years or so, the fossil fuel industry has spent about two billion dollars legally. In campaign contributions in our American system. And they've gotten what they paid for, to block climate change legislation and elect their preferred candidates. So there's a lot of resources there. They band together, but what do do-gooder organizations do? They tend to be very friendly at the street level. They go to each other's parties, they're friendly with each other, but to get their boards of directors to agree to do some things together. It's an upstream battle. And so there too, I think there's a lot more possibility.

[00:21:56] So I wanna finish here by just really highlighting the very good news that it is in our deep nature to act on the basis of compassion and justice at the foundation of societies. Now in our ancestry, those societies had maybe 50 or a few hundred people. The question becomes, now, in the 21st century, how can we expand what worked so well for most of our time on this planet? How can we extend the foundation of compassion and justice, caring and sharing, to include the whole human tribe, all eight billion of us? And the only way we're gonna be able to do that is by combining, elevating individual consciousness alongside collective action. I have a lot of friends in the consciousness elevation business or world, and it's fantastic. Yeah, let's all meditate. Let's all deepen in our practice. And that alone has never changed systemic sources of suffering. Always we must have collective action alongside elevating individual consciousness. And I see a lot people who really are anguished by the state of the world swerving away from the necessity of collective action and kind of. Doing a spiritual bypass as they sort of hide out in their meditative practice or teaching a meditation. I'm being pretty blunt about that here. Okay, what do you think about all this?

[00:23:33] Dawn talks about the dawn of everything. It's a wonderful book. I have it down there on my bookcase about how even in larger societies, there can be a foundation of compassion and justice. We see a lot of models of this, by the way. Not perfectly perfectly, as people in those countries would tell us, but the Nordic countries are pretty established in compassion and in justice. Some other countries in the world, and they take pretty good care of their people. In other words, it's not some kind of utopian pipe dream to have a modern society with market economies to some extent, you know, people competing, new businesses emerging, room for innovation. You know, people can keep at least some of what they earn. We can have countries and societies like that, but we need to really exercise collective influence to start nudging countries in that direction.

[00:24:28] One thing I can say that I'd like to add is that I have experience. A fair amount of helpless outrage in my lifetime. So I, as I said, I grew up in the 1960s. I went to college, 1969 to 74. I was 16 when I started, so I was pretty young. And during that time, I saw all these major movements that had very real political consequences and important, you know, still a work in progress, but important improvements in a number of areas. And then I just saw that. Stall out in my lifetime. And then meanwhile, I've seen over the course of my lifetime in America I would say general improvement in consciousness in some ways, you know, psychotherapy has become more normalized, mindfulness has come in, the Eastern traditions have come in. You know, people are more prepared to talk about things like trauma, addiction, bullying and other. There's definitely been, you know, more awareness. Oprah Winfrey, all kinds of good stuff has happened. And I think many of the people in that space, me included... Sort of assumed it somehow as there became more and more emotional intelligence certainly in some spaces that public policy would follow. I think in America we've seen a decoupling of an elevation of average emotional intelligence to the extent you could kind of measure that and arguably it's been going downhill or certainly a sense of mood has been going down hill over the last decade or two. But certainly there haven't been equivalent movements toward greater compassion and justice at the foundation of American society. If anything, we've moved away from that.

[00:26:27] And so I think it's important to appreciate Improving individual consciousness does not itself alone lead to changes in public policy that change upstream sources of suffering, number one, and number two, to be real about whatever you have experienced as helpless outrage, which I've definitely. Out of compassion for myself, and out of a broader circle of compassion for others, I've gotten really interested in the last four years in the Global Compassion Coalition and other forms of collective action to make a better world. They may fail. But I sure do feel better making efforts in that direction, doing what I can in that regard. And so for your own sake, especially if you've been grappling with helpless outrage, understandably helpless outrage about this or that, zeroing in on how you can come together with others at any scale, including just local scales, to make some things better. Is an expression of compassion for yourself, to relieve some of the suffering in helpless outrage, not making meaningless gestures, doing real things that send ripples out, that touch the lives of real people, even if they don't change necessarily who's running your government at the highest levels. And that's been really personally important for me, to be honest about my sorrow and grief, to move from outrage kind of to grief, or to move grief to outrage. And then from, you know, outrage to action, that could be something, you now, to reflect on here.

[00:28:12] I should add, too, that if you look at the structure of bullying, which predominates in all other primate species besides us, I mean, there's a certain amount of cooperation. You know, they get along, but it's pretty alpha-dominant, and there's no punishment for freeloaders. So there's not basis for evolving altruism, generally speaking. Those other species. One of the ways in which bullies exercise power is they pick off outliers and they basically threaten others that you too will become a pariah. You too will become someone we pick on if you step out of line. And also there's a kind of performative cruelty that you can see really. Increasing in politics in the world, certainly in American politics, and bullies exercise their power by intimidating people and by trying to make them feel helpless. In some ways, sometimes there aren't not the causes and conditions to challenge the bully directly. You don't have the numbers, you don't know the money, you can't hire lawyers, whatever. What we can do though, is exercise power where we do have influence, which is very often at local levels. Inside organizations, medical systems, other kinds of systems, educational systems at the local level. Local politics, and just taking action on your own, collectively with other people.

[00:29:52] And it's important to claim the power that we do have and to stand up against the ways in which the bully wants to get into our head and make us despair. Make us feel helpless. We can't do anything. And helplessness and despair is a slippery slope to depressed mood. And to the extent that it reactivates early trauma material in which we were helpless and despairing because we were little and we could not escape. Helpless to spare is not good. So the antidote. Taking action and very often taking action with others who provide mutual social support. It's when the betas band together that they can actually stand up to the bullies. And that's certainly true in primate bands, including human bands. And I think that's really true in our societies today. And the beginning of that is to claim the power that we do have in the arenas in which we have it. Right, I'm gonna respond.

[00:30:54] Nina offered a really interesting comment. It's 17 minutes past the hour. So she writes, yes, collective action sounds good, but also convincing is that change comes from one individual at a time. Is that necessarily bypassing or maybe both approaches are necessary together? If I follow you right, if we bring it down and we think about simple examples, so let's suppose that you are, as many people are, involved with some kind of nonprofit organization that's addressing some kind a problem. Most likely, there are other different nonprofit organizations that are also addressing that same problem. But simply different facets of that problem or with different strategies. Those various organizations have a mutual interest in the causes of the problem. And they have a neutral interest in telling the truth that for all of their efforts, which are worthy and noble, heroic and important, the problem is not getting better. They're mowing the grass, and the grass keeps growing. They're whacking the mold today. Good job on that mold today, and another pops up tomorrow.

[00:32:20] So one thing we can do in those kind of settings is to start raising the question about are we actually changing the fundamental conditions that we're dealing with here, and how can we band together with other organizations and other forms of civil society, civic. Groups of one kind or another to address upstream causes. Can we, for example, simply write, you know, a letter, a public letter together, all of us agreeing that, yo, one of the major reasons why there are, fill in the blank, you know uncared for dogs and cats, or why, you in America lives below the poverty line. And so many organizations are dealing with the downstream effects. So many organizations or environmental and they're dealing with the downstream effects of global warming. What can we do together to change those upstream causes? Just to raise that question, I think is really is a very doable thing. And so to do that, of course, we have to address the individual forces and the psychology and the incentive structure of the leadership in those different organizations. We have to adjust that, but we can also be courageous. You know, an expansive form of compassion involves courage, in which we can say, look, we can keep doing what we're doing. We can keep, you know, appealing to our donors, while also increasing our impact by forming alliances, networks, coalitions, movements with others toward the common good. I think that's full of opportunity.

[00:34:04] I'll give you another example, since I'm on a roll here, I hope I'm not being offensive. Many, many non-profit organizations have to be non-partisan. Okay, the Global Coalition, the Global Compassion Coalition among them. I'm involved with a number of organizations, you know, in the Buddhist space, that have to non-Partisan. Leadership in these various organizations and we could add other kinds of organizations that deal with individual well-being. Mental health agencies, people who are teachers in the self-help space or the self improvement or coaching space, they have an interest in individual well being, relieving individual suffering. They often realize together that various systemic

structural forces that could be changed at the ballot box. Are maintaining, if not worsening, upstream sources of individual level self.

[00:35:06] One of the nonpartisan ways to address upstream sources of suffering is by increasing civic engagement in countries that have elections by increasing voter turnout. Voter turnout is a nonpartisan activity. Civic engagement is a not partisan value. So it would seem obvious that many pro-social organizations would have an interest in increasing civic engagement and would be interested in simple measures like putting a link on their home page or their website that would send people to a very nonpartisan organization in America, it's vote.org. Very non-partisan. Lots of resources, easiest thing in the world to do, to put that little link and to basically say, get involved, heal democracy, be part of the solution. Don't just sit on the sidelines, right? Easiest thing in world to. And yet, I've been directly involved when trying to get that to happen in the last election cycle in America, no interest whatsoever. No interest whatsoever in going on record as encouraging civic engagement in nonpartisan ways. That's a really telling example of, I think, a lot of internal inhibitions that enact what could be called the beta swerve or people who have very clear pro-social values and They themselves are very moral and very outraged by certain things. Swerve away from accessible forms of collective action to change or at least attempt to change or to make efforts in the direction of changing those upstream systemic forces. So being mindful of the beta swerved, observing it in people, watching people move away from acting together to change things upstream is a very useful thing to be aware of.

[00:37:28] Now obviously there are pitfalls You know, we can disagree with people and take action to change things which they don't like without having ill will or hostility or vengeful fantasies toward those other people. We don't have to get caught up in purity tests so that people have to jump through all kinds of hoops to be inside our tent for the kind of actions we're taking. We can avoid those pitfalls as well, right? But deep down, I'm gonna finish on this point for you, to what is your heart move? After you, you know, for most people, this is toward the evening, for some it's in the morning. When you kind of settle in and you take a look at what's going on in your world and you look at what your values are and what you really care about, what might be for you? Doable range efforts.

[00:38:34] In the category of joining with others to address upstream sources of suffering. It might be making a small donation. It might be getting together with another person or a small group. It might volunteering a little bit of time for organizations that you really care about. It might making the effort to become more informed. It might extending yourself to a relative. You know, the voter turnout rate is lowest among young people who will most inherit the results of government policies, you know, in the next year, in the decade and so on. You know, that might be your form of action, whatever it is, without guilt tripping on yourself, without pressuring yourself, without doing more than you really can. What ancient currents swirling around inside you going back to our deep nature as beings who are organized around caring and sharing, compassion and justice, what deep currents, what deep wellsprings within you move you. To do what you can to address upstream sources of suffering. That's an inquiry that I would nominate for you and encourage.

[00:39:58] So that was my barn burner of next week. I'll probably explore a more conventional topic, but I just feel that without really talking about what Bhikkhu Bodhi and others would talk about as engaged Buddhism or broadening it out to a more expansive view of compassion, I would not have done justice, frankly, to the current moment in the world.