

3_4_26 Talk*

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Rick Hanson: [00:00:00] I'd like to revisit a topic that I brought up a few sessions ago and then expand further with an exploration that's very alive for me personally and invite you into that experiential exploration as well. So here goes. We all got conceived, we all got born, we were all infants once. And if you've ever seen an infant, you can really recognize how... Really dependent, every infant is, every one of us was, on the care and attention of others. And I'm gonna be talking here a bit about early childhood, which for many was painful and neglectful. Later childhood perhaps as well. I'm not doing psychotherapy here. I just wanna mention these topics as a way into practicing with them. And if there's anything that is too upstirring for you, that's very understandable.

[00:01:07] And it's okay to dial back, to turn off the sound, maybe, of what I'm saying, and then come back a little later, or create a kind of a mindful spaciousness, maybe perhaps a bit of a buffer between you and this topic territory. That said, my own teacher, Stephen Snyder, has pointed out that in everyone's psyche, in his view, is what he would call a primal wound, having to do with very, very young experiences inevitably and universally as a newborn in which, among other things, there is an overwhelming sense of helplessness and a sense of not mattering enough to others to get their caregiving. Even with parents and other caregivers that are extremely attentive and nurturing, inevitably in this view, there is a sense of helplessness, even a kind of deep down despair and a sense of not being wanted, not being worthy, valuable for caring to come. All of this infancy, preverbal, precognitive, preconceptual, and yet the possibility is that these early experiences, which again are completely normal, even with super loving and attentive parenting, these experiences get laid into the body-mind in terms of emotional memory as a deep, deep, underlying rootedness. Having to do with a sense of helplessness and not being loved enough. It may be that in you, perhaps, this doesn't exist. When I first heard about this, I said, you know, I've done a lot of inner work and I don't have much sense of this.

[00:03:18] So I began looking further, lo and behold, deep in my own psyche without recalling particular events because that's extremely rare before the age of three, but in a body. Of an emotional memory sense, an underlying sense of helplessness and reactions to helplessness, and an underlying stance of unwantedness and reaction to that. So I talked about this a few weeks ago, and two things I'd like to draw your attention to in your own practice, because the point of all this is to be aware of whatever these patterns were that got laid into you as a very young child. And with the power of mindfulness and practice, we can become increasingly free of them. Thing possibly to be aware of and I've become aware of myself is a compensations for these very young experiences, which by the way may have had their seeds in the first year, month, day, minute after you were born. But then on top of those seeds, other layers get laid down, get set on top them. Know, as we go into preschool and grade school and, oh my goodness, junior high and high school, and then beyond. So you might be aware of the upper layers having to do with a sense perhaps of helplessness in some ways, powerlessness in some way, and also a sense of not mattering enough to others, not being valued or wanted or included or belonging. And that could be, you know, related to experiences including in adulthood. I'm speaking here about awareness to the extent that it can be gradually intuited or uncovered in ways that feel real to you. You're not fabricating memories, you're not making things up, you're sensing into what could well still be there for you way down deep. And then as you do this, A, I think it's helpful to appreciate how we tend to compensate for feeling helpless or feeling unworthy or unwanted.

[00:05:43] And in my own case, I compensated for feeling helpless with a lot of strong drive towards self-reliance and agency and self-determination, self-directedness as a compensation for an underlying fear of being helpless, let's say. And similarly, perhaps an underlying fear or in my case, a fear of not being wanted or mattering enough or included. Know, compensating for that by looking for ways to pile up accomplishments that would win the approval of others. So you can think of strategies of compensation, and these are very normal. They serve their purposes. And yet, as the Buddha taught, as soon as we move into the second noble truth of craving or clinging, you know, demandingness, identificationness, as soon as we start moving into that... Very understandable way of being with these strategies where your suffering begins.

[00:06:46] So you might consider perhaps how you have perhaps compensated for residues inside yourself having to do with inescapable, unavoidable, universal experiences of helplessness and lack of attunement to you from others around you. How much you compensated that in your life? In ways that perhaps created suffering for yourself, maybe for others too, and how might that be the case today? And through insight, can you perhaps reset and not compensate so much for what was true then, but is actually not so true today? Because today, as adults, we are not at all as helpless as we were as infants. And today, hopefully, you have found your way into being with people who imperfectly We'll get to that part later in my talk, but to some real extent, do care about you and do include you and feel that you do matter to them, right? So maybe today, ah, we can lighten up a little and set down that burden of having to compensate for a fear of something that these days is not at all as true as it was actually true to some extent, perhaps, when you were very, very young. Compensation.

[00:08:12] And then another thing to be aware of is transference, by which I mean taking some of the intensity of understandable early experiences and then applying it or transferring it to settings today in which it's that intensifies your reactions today. Speaking of myself, I don't like feeling helpless at all. And so if I'm in situations today where I feel kind of trapped or controlled, like I'm stuck in somebody else's plan and I don't have my own transportation and I can't get out of the setting or the table or the gathering or the car for a while, ugh, I'll tend to transfer into that setting reactions that are excessive in proportion to what's actually the case. So we tend to transfer into the present, understandably, the emotional residues from our past, including potentially very early childhood. So you might ask yourself, huh, today, am I transferring into current settings some of the turbocharging and biasing that comes from early, early experiences of helplessness? Powerlessness, immobilization, despair, and our understandable reactions to them. In the present. Similarly, might there be perhaps reactions from being younger to being excluded or left out, narcissistically wounded, as we therapists put it, ignored, made invisible, devalued, etc.? Might there be some reactions to that which did indeed happen when you were transfer it into the present. I know for myself that I can get very prickly. When I feel dismissed, unseen, or devalued. We're at a proportion to what's actually happening.

[00:10:25] A little earlier today, I was sharing with a friend of mine some topics I'm interested in these days, and I thought, oh, those are pretty cool topics. I'm pretty, you know, that's pretty cool, right, that I'm coming up with that stuff. And my friend just responded by a text in a way that was kind of cool and little even almost dismissive. Ooh. I was reacting to that, you know, and I've done a lot of practice and still there was a turbo charging and amplification of my reactivity to that. It was out of proportion to what really happened and I can trace it back. So what do we do when we get stirred up in these

ways? Classically it's so helpful to be aware of it and then with awareness you can get some space between you and that reactivity and even some insight about it. You start to realize, Hey. That was then, this is now, on the zero to 10 Yuck scale, it was, my friend was innocent. You know, maybe my friend was a little insensitive, a little clueless. Maybe it was a 0.6 on the 0 to 10 yuck scale. But boy, my reaction to it was more like a three to a five. That's out of proportion to what really happened. Okay? That's kind of background. That's a quick recap. Lots to go with that.

[00:11:51] I invite you to explore lots of other things. If you like, that might be relevant. At my website, I have tons of freely offered material. Other people have a lot of material on that topic territory. But I want to take it a step further. Alongside conventional, pretty well-trod paths of self-awareness, self-help, healing, personal growth, psychotherapy coaching, and so forth with that material. I'd like to explore practicing with it in a more fundamental and even radical way. At the heart of which is recognizing our inherent vulnerability in this life. I alluded quickly in passing, I'll do it again, to a Zen teaching that just floored me when I first heard it and felt into the implications. I was talking about some difficulties I was facing in my life and my reactions to them and perspective about them. And a friend of mine who's a long time Zen practitioner said, Hey, Rick, have you heard this teaching from Master Yun Min? I said, no. He said, well, one day, I don't know when, many centuries ago, a true story, Master Yun Min was asked in a Zen context, what is it that trees wither? Leaves fall. He replied, body exposed in the golden wind.

[00:13:29] Now, in Japanese culture in which he was teaching, there are connotations to golden wind, and I kind of took it sort of at face value that if we are to live and enjoy that which is golden, we must also be exposed to the winds, the worldly winds of praise and blame, praise and criticism, gain and loss, pleasure and pain, fame and ill repute, praise and blamed. We're exposed, we live exposed, we are inherently vulnerable in this life. And as we age, we become more and more aware of our intrinsic, inherent, unavoidable vulnerabilities. So how do we practice with them? And here's where I invite you into feeling into three kinds of practicing. Golden winds. The first is to practice with radical helplessness. Now to be clear, there are certain things that we're not helpless about. And I'm not talking about just giving up globally. I'm talking about turning a blind eye to injustice and not doing what we can about it. You know, I love the teaching from Leonard Cohen, longtime Zen practitioner. Bless his memory. You know, ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in. That's certainly true. And then we have this teaching this, the, you know, the finishing to his poem, Fern Hill, from the poet Dylan Thomas, who says at the end of this poem about his childhood, time held me green and dying, though I sang in my chains like the sea. So we keep singing in our chains, like the sea. Yes.

[00:15:30] And meanwhile, we can recognize that we live utterly dependently. As the Buddha taught, all that is subject to arising is subject passing away. We live dependently on countless causes and conditions. Just consider your own body. Trillions of cells. In your body, incredibly complicated, each one of them, with all kinds of little molecular machines inside each one them. And we are completely dependent, continuously as a body on that going well. We live dependently on the exhalations of green growing things, giving us the oxygen we breathe. They live dependantly on sunlight. We live dependently in all kinds culture. Our conveniences, modern medicine, just whew. We are helpless about so many things. Can we embrace a kind of radical helplessness and surrender to it? What's the feeling of that?

[00:16:41] I find that in the embrace of a radical helplessness, in the sense that I mean it here, is enormous peacefulness. Is great peacefulness. We are helpless in so many ways. We rail against it, I think to some extent as a compensation for the experiences of helplessness as a child that we did not like at all. What happens when we just realize, I am helpless to get people to like me or love me. We are, we can't make them. We're helpless in the face of trying to get people to repair with us, who won't? Pretty helpless, if not, we're entirely helpless with regard to certain actions on the world stage in the immediate moment. Maybe over time we're not so helpless as we join with others, such as in a global compassion coalition to form the collective action that can actually do something at scale. But in the moment of something occurring, we're helpless about it. You know, in the moment of the present arising in your consciousness... You are helpless to change it as it has arisen. And what happens when we embrace a kind of radical helplessness at the root of it all? I think there's peacefulness and joy there.

[00:18:15] Second. Can we embrace a kind of radical trust, given that we are profoundly helpless with regard to most things, what do we do about it? You know, do we live our life as if we are continuously walking on thin ice? Placing our feet, or do we embrace a kind of radical trust that as we fall back moment to moment to moment, we will be caught and held by that which is golden in the wind. You know, one of the scariest things I ever did as a kid when I was about 11 years old was with friends to play a game in which we would stand on top of, as it turned out, a propane tank at a home in North Carolina in, I think, the summer of 1963. And we would fall backwards and be caught in the arms of the father who lived there. Really wonderful guy. And man, just to stand there and go, okay, and fall back. So thrilling to trust that you'll be caught.

[00:19:32] Now, none of what I'm saying here is about foolish trust. One of the things that leads us into radical trust and what's useful about it is to realize that we can trust ourselves to the extent we can to discern who's actually reliable and who's not, and to disengage to the extent we can from what's not reliable, because that's the foundation for trust. I'm referring to a kind of... Deeply rooted, much as our helplessness is deeply rooted in the inherent conditions of living as we are being made by countless processes. We could shrink from that helplessness. We can contract away from it. We can try to dilute ourselves about it because we don't want to believe it. We don't wanna see it, right? What happens when you do? Suffering ensues. We can respond to the actuality of our great helplessness with all kinds of piling up of possessions and protections often at the cost of others as we do that. What happens then? More suffering ensues. Or we can choose, these are choices, we can choose to live, to take a chance on trust. And to see what it's like to adopt a stance that says essentially, as long as I live, I will trust the living into the next moment. As long as I live, I will choose to trust the arisingness of that which is coming next. It's a funny stance to take. Feel into what it's like when you do, I find that when we make the choice of living with a kind of radical trust in the fundamentally in the deep conditions of existence, you know, the deep trust in your own depth of being, trust in your innate goodness, trust that you will be the arms that will catch you.

[00:22:15] Ultimately, as you fall backwards, even in the last days of your life, you trust in yourself and in the catchingness, and even trusting, as the Buddha taught, in the ultimate, unconditioned, timeless ground of reality, ultimately. That's a choice. And I think if we decide as a choice, gosh, will I live on the basis of pervasive mistrust? Or will I live on the basis of a kind of fundamental trust? With my eyes wide open which will bring you more happiness and love and joy in this life. And again here I'm not at all trying to persuade anyone into foolish trust. It's an exploration. What does it feel like to rest in radical helplessness and the meaning of that for you? And what does it feel like to rest in radical

trustingness as that means for you. I would just say that as I look into this in my own practice, that to do that, it surfaces just the poignancy and the sorrow, you know, of the ways in which our trust as a child and as an adult was betrayed. This invitation to explore, living on the basis of radical trust, surfaces past betrayals, understandably. And in a funny kind of way, I find that the choosingness around trusting yourself and trusting the ultimate ground of everything, trusting in your own deep being, trusting in, you know, the refuges in this life of various kinds, including the three classic refuges of it is some. Trusting in the teacher, the teaching, and the community of the taught, Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, that as we do that kind of trusting, it can ease and heal the woundingness, the wounds of past betrayals of your trust. This is an invitation. See for yourself.

[00:24:52] And then, third, in this exploration, and it's very real for me, is to realize and to Surrender to the fact that sometimes when you trust and fall backward, you do not get caught. Ultimately, those cells in the body start breaking down. You know, people do not always come through. And this takes us to the third choice, to live on the basis of radical acceptance. And it's quite wild, isn't it, to realize how helpless we are, to choose to live trustingly. In the sense I mean it here, while knowing that sometimes you will not be caught. I find in that... Is a deep freedom, actually, and stability of inner peace. It's akin to the teaching around groundlessness, that even as we fall backward with trust, there's, you know, an inherent kind of groundlessness in reality, things, phenomena occur emptily. And yet, how else will we live? In effect, what I'm talking about here is it's not that I'm... Giving you recommendations, it's that I'm naming invitations. I'm saying, huh, in this world of wonders, as a teacher of mine a long time ago put it, what do we do? I propose that a lot of depth and peace can be found in living on the basis of radical helplessness, in the sense I mean it here. Surrendering into radical helplessness, surrendering into a radical trustingness, and surrendering to radical acceptance.

[00:27:17] Now, sometimes I'm able to prepare a talk that, in which I have all the T's crossed. I start it. Other times I frankly roll in and my eyes are like wide and I'm like, wow, I'm, you know, riding the wave of this one personally. That's the offering here. So I want to take a look at what's been written. I got some wonderful comments or from, and I am going to paraphrase this because it came to me privately. I'm gonna paraphrase what this person wrote me and they will recognize this, okay? Because I thought it was so useful, right? Different kinds of trust. There's trusting yourself to take care of yourself. There's trust in your good heart and good intentions, especially when you're feeling helpless about a person, place, thing, situation or circumstance. And something this person learned from a therapist, trusting your instincts. And your feelings as your true guides. And finally, trusting in the path. I'm so glad you said this one too. Trusting in your path, trusting in the paths as your North Star. These are examples of what we find, the refuges we might say for, you know, living on the basis of a radical trustingness. Trusting and these, trusting and these. Thank you for that one.

[00:28:45] So what happens when we're not caught? This person wrote me privately. Well, what happens is first factually we're not caught, they let you down. Or you trust your body to keep taking care of yourself and then you get a diagnosis that some of your cells have gone awry, they've gone rogue. And now you're dealing with that. It's a fact. So I would say that when that happens, fighting the fact of what's happened is not helpful. That's where radical acceptance comes in. Like, whoa, you know, in terms of Bayesian thinking here, you're updating your prior. Your prior was that, oh, all my cells are going to keep working fine. Or, oh that person will keep their agreements And then they don't. Well, you're updating your prior. Your prior belief was that they'd keep their agreements and now you're updated your prior about that person. Maybe you double check, did they really know that

there was an agreement here? And did they just really casually blow it off? Then if so, ba-boom, you're update your view of that person, I mean, all that sounds kind of rational, but certainly that's part of the practicality of it. And then along the way, oh yeah. We hate being betrayed, of course. We hate falling back and flopping. We don't like it. And when, you know, the consequences of reality not catching us are substantial, sometimes mortal, of course the soft furry animal, the body doesn't like that. Of course we don't that. Understandable. Those are first starts of life. The Buddha distinguished between things that are inherently uncomfortable, including horribly, horribly, horrible. So they're part of life, and that's where radical acceptance comes in. Sooner or later, there are these reflections in Tibetan Buddhism. You may be familiar with them.

[00:31:02] You ask yourself these five questions. Is it given to me to escape? Is it given to me to escape illness? Is it giving to me, to escape? Is it given to me to escape being separated one way or another, one day or another from all that I hold dear? And is it given me to to escape inheriting the results of my deliberate actions? There's no escape. Sooner or later, you fall back, ba-bum, and you're not caught one way or another. Of course. Is a real thing, and we feel it. But if we add resisting to it, if we had, how dare reality do that to me, to it. You know, the Kubler-Ross stages of, you know, protest and you know anger and denial, despair, we don't add. That doesn't help us. You know? In a way, these three invitations into radical helplessness, radical trust and radical acceptance. Our way to move to the final stage in the Kubler-Ross progression of serenity. Living with serenady. Yeah, with people with chronic illnesses. I'm glad that's been called out. You know, I live with people who have chronic illnesses, and you know... I'm developing a chronic illness, aging. I don't mean to make light. I don't have a chronic of anything like what other people do, happily. I've been lucky in that regard. Yeah, I do think that this combination of realizing that there's so much that we are helpless about, you know, that an individual cell is so complicated. We're helpless with regarding just getting an individual's cell to kind of like do the right thing. Come on. Come on there, buddy. No, we're helpless. I can't make it do the right thing. We're helpless about the particular strands of DNA that we inherited in the moment of conception.

[00:33:15] So there's, I think, accepting that helplessness and surrendering to, meanwhile, trusting all that we can and trusting the unfolding and trusting our own finding out which is trustworthy, I think it's helpful as well for chronic illness. Your efforts. Chronic illness. A fantastic book from Tony Bernhard, How to Be Sick. What a title. How to Be Sick, Tony Bernhard. The work of Vidyamala Birch, B-U-R-C-H, also fantastic about especially dealing with chronic pain, applicable to all kinds of chronic ailments of different kinds. And then this applies as well to the chronic losses, if you will, the chronicity of losses, because if there's a loss, it's... You know, now I'm living with the loss, I'd say, including people who won't talk to me anymore that I would love to repair with. That too is a kind of chronic condition and there's helpfulness in these sources for that. I've just found for myself in my own exploration of, you know, wounds, some of them self-inflicted, that there's some kind of deep peacefulness available in surrendering to helplessness and choosing to live in trustingness of that which is trustworthy. Recognition of ultimate acceptance of groundlessness of existence and the inherency of impermanence. Sooner or later the conditions that hold us together will eventually fall apart. Central metaphor for me as you may know from my book Neurodharma is the idea that everything, every thought, everything is an eddy in the stream. Swirling together or coming together transiently of a patterning of a river That's a literal physical eddy or a pattering of the underlying neural substrates of Consciousness as a thought or a perception and desire and memory and image. There's a pattering of that That's another eddying in the streaming of consciousness And then we have a patterening such as a cloud in the sky. That's an

eddyeing in the atmosphere or patterning of a different kind of cloud, Milky Way galaxy amidst a trillion or more others. These are all eddies in the stream and all eddy's disperse eventually. You know, in the eddying, while singing in our chains like the sea, as Dylan Thomas put it.

[00:36:03] To me, there's just such... It's funny if you really open into all this, I think, you know, you come, you don't come into despair. You come into a peacefulness, because you know that you're being buoyed by everything until you're not. And so how do we live in the buoying? How do we life as eddies? Eddies of eddies of Eddies, you know, one body, eddying... Containing trillions, hundreds of trillions of cells, another quadrillion or so, probably other little microorganism critters, eddies of eddies, of edgies, streaming along until we're not. Living with gladness and kindness along the way. That's a lot better than the alternative, you know, of trying to freeze the whole process or turn it into a bunch of things. And, you now, being grumpy about it all. We can make other choices. I want to say as well that I find for myself that facing that which I'm helpless about moves me into where I do have influence. And that is relevant for me in terms of my individual life and in my circle of relationships and in my community, my country, and my world, including my species relationship with all of life.

[00:37:53] So for me, there's a continuum that connects recognition of helplessness at all those levels with a recognition of where we still have influence and a choosing to take action to relieve suffering at all of those levels as best I can. For me, the personal is very connected to the political and the political is connected to the personal. In this setting, I focus on and I ask you to stay focused on the personal level. In terms of your own practice, while recognizing certainly the ways in which personal level suffering and personal level opportunities are very shaped by larger and larger systems. We can certainly take those larger systems into account as our focus here is on action at the individual level and the interpersonal level. So for me, that's kind of a way of describing all this. And I find for myself that when I face where I'm helpless, that leads onto where I'm not, and can be helpful, and facing also that which is untrustworthy, unreliable, disappointing, leads me into where I can take refuge, who I can count on, the people in my life who really stand up for me, and recognizing the inevitability. The dispersal of all forms of the breakdown of different kinds of things, including governments and large communities. The inevitability of change at that level personally takes me into doing all that I can meanwhile to help things come together in good ways. These are connected.