

4_15_26 Talk*

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

Rick Hanson: [00:00:00] I wanted to say a little bit about what we were exploring during the meditation and what has been for me sort of a useful understanding or awareness of kind of steps along a path that are on a range of continuum and sort of blur into each other and yet you can mark them along the way. And you might use this as a way of exploring in your own meditative practice, as well as in life in general.

[00:00:31] So I'll just kind of number them, of course, because that's very much my style there. I can remember a list, right? Anyway, so first we stabilize. We steady, we find the ability to stay present, let's say three breaths in a row, four breaths in row, 10 breaths in the row. Most of the breaths over the course of a few minutes. We're increasingly steady. We steady the mind internally, as the Buddha put it.

[00:01:05] As we do that, then in the second step, we start becoming aware of, we could say, beneficial, wholesome, useful currents in the stream of consciousness. Calming in the body, perhaps, a sense of easing, maybe, maybe a disengaging from the busy clutter of a typical day, if your mind is like my mind. We start noticing these beneficial currents. And we start maybe making more room for them, we start noticing them, we appreciate them, we become a little more skillful at allowing them to become more stable and full for us in the second step, certainly among these currents, qualities of heartfulness, compassion, lovingness. In that because our experiences are beyond words. Words are a very rough net in which we try to capture sort of or name that which keeps, you know, being slippery around the edges. Words are approximations. They're useful. They are kind of like useful fictions. The classic line, you know, the finger pointing at the moon is not the moon. The menu is not the meal.

[00:02:26] So when I use a word like spaciousness, some of the words we might use seem pretty clear and obvious like relaxing or gratitude, thankfulness might be pretty straightforward. Spaciousness, openness, what? So very understandably, it's good to kind of clarify that. Spacious or spacious is a pretty common term. Contemplative practice, especially in the more Tibetan flavor traditions, I'm kind of drawing on it here, but it's a sense that the feel. Of consciousness has a lot of space. It's spacious and there could be a sense that awareness itself is very spacious and able to hold anything. It's got a lot space. And then if that word doesn't have an emotional embodied register for you or connection for you, yeah, let it go off into space.

[00:03:28] And then there's another quality or word openness or opening. And you can kind of feel it in your body. It may be more somatically grounded than spaciousness. You know what it feels like to open, open the hand, open your chest, open, open your mind, whatever, opening. And what's interesting is to even play around with the sense of being moment by moment by the moment is that there's an endless opening into the next moment. We are that opening, continuously. We are the ongoing process of opening. Whoa, that's a pretty interesting way to experience yourself as an ongoing opening into the next. Those are two words that I was kind of pointing to that there were some questions about.

[00:04:20] So these would be among, in the second step, I'm still in the 2nd step, of as we meditate or we live in life, we recognize beneficial currents in the stream of consciousness. As the Buddha pointed out, We recognize them, we identify them, we know kind of what

they feel like. We differentiate them a little bit from each other. It's all good. And then in the third step, identity starts shifting into abiding as thankfulness, abiding, as relaxation, abiding as opening, abiding as boundlessness. Without edges to that spaciousness in ways that are real for you, whatever they are, abiding as awareness. And I'm not inventing this myself, I'm kind of walking through, you know, typical steps in a meditative journey that are called out by others, including teachers of mine.

[00:05:25] So in this third step, we start shifting a little the sense of identity and... If we're doing this in an effortful, contracted way, well, it just reinforces the typical contracted personality structures. The feeling of this is a kind of a softening, kind of an opening, oh, abiding as presence, right? And the contracted sense of self, the typical sense of the self starts getting softer, softer as we shift into identity. Who are you? What are, what am I? The eye starts getting very expansive and blur, you know, kind of blurry, and that's good, that's okay, as long as, you can come on back. Function, and then there's a fourth step, which I didn't really allude to, but I do wanna name, and it might be something that is getting, is real, or has been real, or maybe they're moments in life, self-transcendent experiences in which this is very real, in which. We begin to experience that. Identification with is abiding as these qualities, let's say of spaciousness, vastness, presence, love, awareness, a matter increasingly of abiding, as the nature of reality itself.

[00:07:05] And so that moves from my identity is spaciousness, vastness, to whoa, the identity, the nature of all beings, including those meditating with me right now, and the nature ultimately of the ground of all that there's an increasing identification with. A kind of a fourth step. So it's all about what's real for you, and it's helpful if you're going on a journey of awakening, or kind of an ongoing journey of healing, growing and awakening, swirling and supporting each other in an upward spiral for you. It's helpful to have a sense of the markers, milestones, where's this going, and being able to appreciate where you are and, you know, have a since maybe of like, oh, what's the next just-in-reach thing? If it's way out of reach, it's interesting. It could be inspiring or motivating and reassuring to have a sense of, oh, this is where it's going, but you can't yet feel it. You're not yet there. But so what is available to you as like the next opening for you? And then to help that increasingly stabilize for you and yourself increasingly stabilized in it. This whole map.

[00:08:41] So I would like to focus with you on a topic that I think is very real in ordinary life, and it's very real for us in kind of the big picture, which is to mark the distinction between where in our life we are at effect and where in her life are we more at cause. And I want to acknowledge that I got this terminology way back when in the EST training in the mid-1970s. In a larger sense, there's a lot of, you know, teaching and wisdom about this in all kinds of places. I think Kenny Rogers had a song, Know When to Hold Them and Know When To Fold Them. We have the Serenity Prayer, right? Courage to Change What I Can, Inner Peace to Accept What I can't, and then Wisdom to Know the Difference. I'm sure I've mangled that. And then we have from Stephen Covey and this classic book of his, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. It's a little thought experiment here.

[00:09:40] So I encourage you in your mind, and you can do this literally, and as we go along here, this might be one of those talks in which taking notes for yourself could be particularly helpful. And so imagine a circle of all the things that you are concerned about, that you care about or upset you, you're invested in, you know, healthy forms of concern and maybe not so, for you at least, healthy forms of concern, a very big circle. Imagine another circle, the circle of influence, the circle influence. You know, what do I actually have power over? What can I make happen? What can i nudge? Maybe I can only nudge a part of the whole thing, but I can nudge that part. For some reason, I'm thinking of my car

and I can't move the whole car, but I could open a door. So, and then imagine what's the intersection of those two circles. If you overlay the circle of influence over the circle of concern, you can start to see three areas. It's pretty helpful.

[00:10:52] One is the portion of the circle, of concern that you have no influence over. And I just want to put a pin and come back to a key topic, which has to do with bearing witness to that which we have concern over, but cannot directly change. And also want to the effects of good wishes, of deliberate practices, of lovingness, rippling out into the world. Mysteriously, maybe even having some influence that the metaphysics of Isaac Newton could not account for. Although he was a very religious man, actually. Circle of influence, circle of concern, what's outside your influence that you're actually concerned about. Then we have the area of your circle of influence that is not related to anything you care about. It's sort of unused potential. And then we have the intersection between the two, where they cross over. To pull this out of the abstraction, you might think about someone you really care about, I'm thinking about my two adult children. Thinking about the gradual heating up of the world with all the consequences due to human causes, various other things. You know, I'm thinking about my stiff neck. Whatever it is, you're concerned about it. And then ask yourself, okay, this, that I care about. You know, you've got some stakes in it, right? You care about it, it matters to you.

[00:12:35] All right, what can you actually do about it? Where are you actually at cost? And you might think about what somebody thinks about you. You might think about your wish that a particular person would conduct their life a little differently For their own sake because you care about them and you see them Doing things that are not helpful to themselves. What happens when you right now Do this practice here Of recognizing the limits to your influence and to pick up on a theme of a talk a month or so ago recognizing where you are helpless. Finding that which within you enables you to sustain that recognition of helplessness about something you care a lot about. Being able to tolerate grief, despair, sorrow. Anger and injustice, you cannot remedy. Making room, making space, being open to those understandable responses in us in order to face. I cannot make it happen. It's so just so helpful in life and in the process of healing, growing and awakening to be clear about where we do not have influence and where we do and to be clear about situations that to go a step further push on us. We are at the effect of them. Imagine. I've never been very good at it. So you got the pool table, you got balls on the pool table and you know, you have the cue ball, the white ball and you got this stick, okay, whatever. And so now the balls are just sitting there on the table. They're kind of inert. And sometimes in life there are conditions that are sort of inert, right? They're there, they're not harming us directly but we wish they could change for the better. And then we have the Cue ball. That we aim for those balls, let's say somebody we really care about, and we try to influence them in some way. And we realize, you know, I can influence them a little bit.

[00:15:22] Give you an example with our adult kids. Internally, I have a kind of clock that says that I get to offer about one sentence. Well-intended guidance about four times a year, every three months or so. Other than that, worse than useless because it provokes a negative reaction. But I kinda sorta can slip in, you know, that one or two sentences every few months. And I kinda think, well, Rick, you took your shot in February, you gotta wait till May now, you now? So we can influence a little bit, so we do what we can. But what about situations where we're on the table? Other balls are coming at us. Berm, berm, berm. Knocking us here and there. Other people, their looks, right? Their tone, the things they say that are deliberately provocative. Those trolls, people deliberately misunderstanding. Kind of really the plain meaning of something you said. What happened, what do we do about that? And that's where we're at effect. Things happen to us, life pushes on us. And

there's a lot in life that does push at us. We are at the effect in our bodies of aging processes.

[00:16:51] I read semi-authoritatively recently that the body has about 30 trillion cells, roughly 85 billion or so are neurons, so neurons are outnumbered. All those other cells, plus all those other critters, microscopic and otherwise, living inside us. Okay, well let's just kind of go with, did I say 30 trillion? I think so. And every second, something on the order of four million cells are dying and being born. Ongoing processes of change. These are ballpark estimates, I'm sure, from people that really thought deeply about it, da, da, dah, dah. Maybe it's off by 10% in either direction. We're at the effect of that. It's happening, okay? Things happen to us. There's the category of things we are at the effective, including misfortune. The genetic lottery. Other people attacking us. Recently I was on a profound meditation retreat and among other things that was bubbling up. The mind is a cave of bats, as a teacher of mine once put it, anyway, was I started realizing the number of times in this life that I've been attacked, occasionally physically, often interpersonally, and I really mean it, attacked. And I've had a fairly fortunate life and I've walked into it with a fair amount of privilege, right? And still. Attacks. We get attacked sometimes.

[00:18:42] And so we start to realize also that other people sometimes have agendas. They really are out to get you. They really are dedicated to not letting you repair. They really are going to take every possible negative interpretation of your actions rather than giving you the benefit of the doubt. I mean, that's real in this life. So we are at the effect of various things that are real. We're at the affect of our government's decisions. We are at effect of the decisions, you know, of one person in a hospital. My mother's father, my really, really wonderful guy, Ray, bless his memory, was sent home early from a small community hospital. And in fact, that led to his death some hours later. And they should have kept him for observation and potentially been able to disrupt the stroke. They killed him, you know, later that day. So we're at the effect of various decisions other people make. Okay, that's part of life. We try to live with it, we try to recognize it.

[00:19:57] And in terms of our practice for it, I just think it's really important to not be hijacked by the pretense of the rugged individualism. When you're blindsided, you're blindfolded. When you're the victim of something genuinely, there's no dishonor in that. It's part of common humanity. And I certainly try to keep in mind that, wow, probably most of the people who've ever lived have been more attacked by this or that than I've been. But still, we can honor and recognize the impact on us even if it wasn't the intent of those other. Cue balls launching toward us, boom, they impacted us. So having space and compassion for how you've been impacted by what's landed on you is really important. I have to say that as a long-time therapist and in the world a lot, and with people, maybe one person in a hundred is kinda. Too whiny, 99 out of 100 are too stoic, toughing it out, stiff upper lip. I just don't think that's wise, and it's not kind to others, it's kind to yourself.

[00:21:18] That said, what about those situations in which we put ourselves at the effect of others? We're the ones who enter into interactions or sustain interactions or relationships or situations in which we are increasingly at the effect of others. What about those situations? You know, maybe we, as we doom scroll our way through social media, we rest our attention, which is our most fundamental property, our attention. We give our attention, others take our attention. How do you feel about them taking your attention? That's why I think it's really part of SILA, part of good conduct to be very respectful of the attention of others before we take it, knock before entering, if at all possible. And sometimes we do take it. But ideally we know what we're doing and we feel principled about it and non-harming as much as possible. In any case, we often will put ourselves in

the situations where suddenly our whole mind stream has been hijacked and occupied and poisoned by all kinds of other stuff. You know the Buddha as you know had this beautiful phrase that you know painful upsetting feelings arose but they did not invade my mind and remain. We exercise causality in the innermost temple of our being and regulate what we let in there to a growing degree.

[00:23:03] And so in this life, just think about the number of times that we borrow trouble. Before we began formally, I was using the metaphor with our son when he was about 10 and his sister would do stuff that bugged him. And then he would drop what he was doing, which he liked doing, because she kind of bugged them. And he'd get into this long wrangle with her, which. Very often brought his parents into the room. And I used the metaphor that she was baiting him. She was dropping the bait in the water, and then he took it and then she hooked him and dragged him away. So then he was at the effect of her because he had chosen briefly to be at cause and take the bait. So think about in your life, I suggest, where this happens for you. And I'll give you a few examples.

[00:23:55] One example is that I've been in two significant and high stakes situations in my career in which I was, you know, very wronged by someone. And I had a choice between really getting into of a long and complicated justice-seeking process with them. Disengage, take the loss, walk away. And with a lot of reflection, I chose to take the loss and walk away because I knew I had a lot more causality. I had lot more influence around outcomes if I did that. But on the other end, if I stepped into the arena as it were. Significant conflict. There was so much about that that was out of my hands. Other players would get involved. Other decisions would be taken out of hands. And it was kind of like, categorically, I was recognizing massive cue balls flying or slamming into me from all directions I had no influence over. At least over here, I had some causality. That's an for me personally.

[00:25:13] Another example is kind of an interesting one, comes from the electric Kool-Aid acid test written by Thomas Wolfe about Ken Kesey and the Mary Pranksters. I've used this story, I'll be summary about it. So what the Mary pranksters did, this was a bunch of hippies, 1964, they got a giant bus, which I think is in the Smithsonian, they called it Further, and it was driven by Neil Somebody, who was a main character in. Jack Kerouac's book on the road, this amphetamine popping Cassidy, I think, bus driver. Anyway, they went from San Francisco through the American South on their way to the East Coast deliberately and flagrantly flying their freak flag as it were. And routinely, according to Thomas Wolfe, they would get pulled over by a traffic cop. And you can imagine the scene right out of the movies. And they were making a movie themselves, a documentary of their journey. So Here we have this traffic cop on the motorcycle, mirror, sunglasses, big belt, coming up to them. Whoa, what are you hippies doing here in my county? And, oh, your tail light this or your registration that or your license plate was crooked. They would not resist him. He had a lot of power and they were at the effect of his program. They did not challenge it directly. You know, they were respectful. They showed them their registration, their driver's license. Meanwhile, the camera crew stepped out of the bus and continued to film this interaction between the driver and, you know, the police officer. And they would do little things naturally along the way, like, sorry officer, could you please say that again? I don't think we had the mic levels right. You know and the officer would say it again, or, you now, they'd. They would move around and so forth. And they were gradually stepping out of, in other words, the script, the classic script. I've gotten my share of tickets. The class, none for many years. The classic script of a traffic stop being pulled over. And they had the privilege being basically a group of people,

mostly college educated white people. You know, you can imagine how things. Could have gone differently in other settings.

[00:27:38] But the key point here is they took the initial script, the movie, classic traffic stop, and then gradually drew the police officer into their movie. And eventually quite often the police officer, typically a man, he would say, ah, just get out of here, get out here, just keep going, get outta my county. And they would keep going. I think that it's really helpful to ask yourself whose movie are you in? Are you in their movie or your own movie? Very often, we are completely at the effect of something and it's foolish to not recognize that. It's foolish that you have the basis to challenge. You are at effect, you are helpless in that situation. And in no way, shape or form am I counseling people to do things that put yourselves or others at risk. Absolutely. And as much as possible, I really encourage you even here to ask yourself right now, where's your attention resting? And is it productive for you? Because you are at cause about where you place your attention, but very often then we are at the effect of what we rest our attention on.

[00:29:17] So again and again and the Buddha really recommended that we claim sovereignty over our own attention so that the mind increasingly becomes, as he put it, malleable and wieldy. It can learn, malleability, and it can be useful. You can ask yourself, huh, where am I at cause, where I am at effect, and what do I want to do about that? I'll just say that the classic line is that what we resist persists. And I find myself in my own personal history often caught up in trying to influence what other people are thinking or feeling. And more and more, it just seems to be really helpful to make the offering as I can. And after that, realize that I'm not at cause. About what they think, what they feel, including toward me. Can I release that increasingly?

[00:30:28] Briefly, a story there is a friend of mine who was giving his very first Dharma talk in San Francisco Zen Center, which is an urban center. This was maybe 35 or even 40 years ago. And I knew that I'd read in the newspaper that some unhoused people living on the streets would come into the temple there for the warmth and the You know, maybe the coffee and without much interest in the talk. And I was kind of envious of this fellow. And I teased him a bit and said, you know, how do you feel about the fact that some of the people in the room are not going to be interested in what is so precious to you, what you have to offer. And he looked at me like I totally didn't get it because I didn't. And then he gestured at my feet. We were sitting facing each other in the back room while a party was going on elsewhere. And he said, Rick, I just make the offering. After that, it's out of my hands. I try to make a good offering, maybe with some jokes to kind of keep their attention and comes from my heart, but it's not my job. My job is to make the offering. Their job is, to make use of it. And if they don't want to do that, that's okay. It doesn't affect my offering. And that's a very deep way to think about where we are causing this life and what we can influence and what can't.

[00:31:48] To finish here, drawing on the Buddha's last words. In which it's been translated different ways. I really liked this translation from Stephen Batchelor. Things fall apart. Tread the path with care. And I love the word care that Stephen chose because of both its connotations of conscientiousness, diligence, resolve, persistence, and with its qualities of heart, holding your own path with tender care. That's our opportunity to shift out of where we are at effect and helpless and can't do anything and to shift toward treading our path with care. That's a great opportunity. And as we do that, we help ourselves and undoubtedly in ways that ripple outward, we help many, many, other beings as well. And as disengage from doomed quests, fruitless struggles. We have so much more energy and time and attention and life force for where we do have power, we do of potency. We are at

cause rather than effect. Sometimes we accept an injustice. For the sake of our own greater good, and sometimes the greater good of others. And I think it's tough sometimes to just, rawr, we wanna, and you know, there's a place to push back and I'm not someone that, you know. You know, I stand up, et cetera, I stand on behalf of others too. And sometimes, you know, the fix is in, the referee was rigged. We're not gonna be able to fix that one. You know, I've known people like in school districts who would rail against the district and expend a lot of effort to try to get, you know, an hour of week of not very helpful help for their child in school. And if they had taken that effort and energy and put it elsewhere, they probably could have, you know produce more benefit over there. And I find people who do that, by the way, the school is to be heroic and well-intended and wonderful. I'm just kind of making a kind of a pragmatic comment. Based on some things I've seen as an example.

[00:34:22] Another piece of it is that, where are we a cause? Well, we are a cause with what we see, what we value, and what we plan. In other words, what's our take on a situation? Can we see someone clearly? No one can stop you from doing that. Yes, our takes evolve over time. Yes, it's sometimes hard to really figure out what in the world is going on. Generally speaking, if you want to discern what other people value, observe what they do over time, the net vector sum of the various motivations, pulling them in various directions, is revealed in what they actually do. The most powerful motivations are revealed. So merrily in what people do, that's really true for us too. So over time, when you start to realize you can discern, oh, okay, that's what they really care about. That's how good a friend they can be. That's so much they'll come through for me. And sometimes we realize that we've underestimated people and we can afford to invest more deeply with them. Other times we realize, you know. Resize this relationship to just this big based on discernment and my values and my plans for what I'm going to do. All that we can be a cause of. How do we deal with anxiety?

[00:35:46] Okay, so a couple things here. A lot of anxiety is about trying to get blood from a stone. We can't do it. It's trying to carry five quarts in a one gallon bucket. I know what That's like trying to get 10 hours of stuff done in an 8 hour or 3 hour. That will make you anxious, for sure. And trying to make things happen that you don't have control over, like, wow, I'm aging. My friends are dying, et cetera. You know, when we get caught up in that, that will make us anxious. So the teaching here, if you will, around identifying where we're helpless and finding a way to come to peace with it, including coming to peace with the ultimate perhaps bad event, then anxiety releases. We're anxious, anxiety is anticipatory. We're anxious about what might happen, you know? I may never get well, this may get worse, I may die. So we feel and we help anxiety shift into sorrow and then shift out into spaciousness and thankfulness for everything else. That's kind of a genuine process. We might be left with residues in the body-mind, including going back to sometimes trauma that will always be with us. We carry, it's like having tinnitus, you know, that background ringing in the ears, I have tinnitis. Chronic pain in the back, you know, maybe there's just background anxiety and we come to recognize that like tinnitus or, you It's not informative. It doesn't mean anything. It's just there. It's perhaps unpleasant, but we don't have to react to it.

[00:37:54] So that to me is a reasonable goal for the residues of anxiety that may remain while helping ourselves accept and be okay with. And I think in my own experience, by the way, path into often a necessary step in the path to accepting the ultimate involves grief. Like satan does. I don't know about you, me. I'm kind of interested. 10,000 years, I'm pretty interested, you know? And if it's, you know, just likely to be horrible for some period of time ahead, okay, I would think newly about it, but. I'd still like to wake up tomorrow.

Probably you would too. And eventually it won't happen. You know, how do we come to terms with that? So there's often some sorrow around the fates that face us, understandably. And can we balance that sorrow with thankfulness? And can balance that with a knowingness of our own goodness? And ultimately, you know, as your practice matures, healing, growing, awakening, you increasingly identify with the ground of all. Which is unchanging and timeless and the ultimate resort. It's easy to get philosophical about all this or something or other or get caught up spinning out. It's usually pretty obvious. You know, where can I make a difference? Where can't I? You know you realize you make your offering and interaction with someone, you look at them, you realize they're bound and determined not to understand you. There's a line from, I think it'll come to me in a minute, who said, paraphrasing, it's gendered from I think the 1920s, you cannot convince a man of something that it is his paycheck not to believe, not to understand. Yeah, sometimes you just realize that's the truth about other people and you kind of move on. All right. So think about this in everyday life, down to earth. Think about ways that you put yourself. You stick your finger in the socket, you know, you step onto the stage yet again, in that familiar ritual, kind of with another person, that familiar script, you know where this conversation is gonna go, and see what it's like to claim for yourself increasingly the freedom. Step out. Let that pass.