

4_1_26 Talk*

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

Rick Hanson: [00:00:00] So let's see here. The first thing I just want to make a little announcement. A workshop I'm teaching this Saturday, it's a benefit for the Sati Center. Sati is the word for mindfulness in early Buddhism. And the head teacher there is Gil Fronstel, someone I've learned a lot from. I still remember this moment when I was talking with Gil informally in a friendly way at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Northern California. And I asked him, so Gil, you know, as a very experienced teacher yourself, what are you practicing with yourself these days? Right? What's your practice? Not your theory, not your cosmic, this or that, what's your actual practice? And he twinkled, he smiled, he looked away for a moment and then he turned back to me and said, I stop for suffering. So simple and so fundamental, I stop for suffering his own and that of other people. And to feel the weight of it, to give it our full attention, whether it's out there or in the world. And as we stop for suffer, we are moved, as the Buddha was, to practice with it.

[00:01:13] The first noble truth is the truth of dukkha. And dukkha is a word that can have two very different meanings. And this is important in early Buddhism. It was said by the Buddha that living has three fundamental characteristics as well as others. This is not the only three characteristics that has, but it has these three characteristics. Living involves impermanence, anicca in Pali, living involves interdependence. So that no thing exists or arises on its own. Anatta, which is applied ultimately to the apparent self that, oh, thinks it is the big boss, you know, and in charge, oh not so, not so. Anatta and this third word, dukkha. Dukkha being the fact that living includes sometimes experiences that are unpleasant. Living also includes the fact that even pleasant experiences change because of anicca and pass away. And living also includes a fact that because all experiences arise dependently, they're made of parts that are connected and changing, no single experience can be a reliable, permanent basis for happiness. That's just a fact. There's no way around these facts. The facts of Anicca, Anatta, and Dukkha, impermanence, interdependence, sometimes called emptiness, and Duka continue after people are enlightened. The Buddha experienced unpleasant experiences. People around him felt sorrow at the loss of loved ones. There's no escape from that kind of Duka. Then there's the kind of dukkha that is in the first noble truth.

[00:03:13] And that kind Duka, is the dukkha that we construct ourselves based on the application of the second noble truth of craving to the various conditions of life, including the dukha we create for ourselves based on our reactions to the inherent dukkah in living alongside impermanence and interdependence. This is a really crucial point. When people routinely say, Ah, the Buddha said life is suffering, that's wrong. The Buddha did not say life is suffering. The Buddha said there's a lot of suffering that we construct ourselves based on drivenness, clinging, aversion, grasping, attachments of various kinds, summarized with the word craving. That's the suffering we create ourselves. And so this means therefore, something very hopeful and happy. That if we can shift our relationship to and our response to the conditions of life, then we sometimes will feel unpleasant, uncomfortable things, of course. Vulnerable, frail body that doesn't want to die and cares about others and gets upset when there is injustice. But we can relate to all that in ways that are much freer, much happier, more loving, much more at peace, and much more effective.

[00:04:44] And that's the invitation, really. That's the invitation of the Buddha. And it's not some dour, grim, life is suffering, then you die, and you gotta do it all over again, kind of

framing. That frankly is fairly prevalent in some circles, and it's just a mistake in the fundamental teachings of the Buddha that are plainly evident in this huge written record that survived of his earliest teachings. So what do we do with all this? Can be really difficult and challenging. What do we do about it? And I want to talk about something that I think is really central and has been really useful for me personally, which is to say, let go of the pressure by surrendering to Sila. What do I mean by that? And we're going to do a little bit of a journey into some very fundamental and important foundational teachings of the Buddha. If your mind is like my mind, you have goals of one kind or another, then you feel driven toward them, subtle forms of pressure in your body, anxieties about what if I don't get to my goal, rumination about, oh, what about this or preoccupations with past mistakes. All of that has qualities in it of a kind of pressure, an insistence. A demand we put on ourselves, contraction in the body, a kind of a drivenness toward what is becoming. Very normal, very typical, often very subtle.

[00:06:26] But as your practice deepens and your mindfulness becomes more granular and acute and present, you start to become aware, whoa, increasingly, of this automaticity of craving, basically, as a kind of, I'm calling it, pressure. So what do we do about that? And what do do about if we have ambitions and obligations and duties in the world? We're in midstream. We have a career. We have family. We have world. We're trying to help. You know, we're outraged maybe by this or that. What do we do about all that? Maybe we're deeply concerned about people we love. Maybe we are upset about estrangements, people who've cut us off because they've put up boundaries between us and them. You know? What do you do?

[00:07:16] And so I have a couple of explorations for myself that I just want to offer here and then kind of open it up. Or discussion and application of this to particular situations. One thing we can do is to deliberately practice with letting go of pressure around becoming while resting in being. Now that may sound kind of fuzzy, I get that. What it means is that you can be aware of this unnecessary. Contraction in your body, tension, insistence. That's just unnecessary while realizing that of course you can continue walking toward your goals. You can keep putting away the groceries. You can keyboarding your emails, welcome to my world, groceries and emails. You can do keep doing these things without this burden and squishing on yourself. Can you be aware of that squishing? Can you aware of the tension in your body? Can you being aware of sort of a sense of it must, I have to, it has to be this particular way? And through mindfulness, increasingly soften around it and increasingly let go of it. That's one fundamental practice.

[00:08:44] And then what remains. And here is where I would like to talk about what I'm calling surrendering to Sila. Now Sila, along with Samadhi and Panya, is considered to be the three fundamental pillars of Buddhist practice. Translating, Sila is very often described as restraint or regulation. It typically is expressed in the negative form, as in, you know, do no harm. More broadly, Sila involves our virtues. It involves wholesome positive qualities in us. Perseverance, patience, the so-called perfections or paramis could be kind of lumped together a lot with Sila. We bring a kind of equanimity, a kind moderation. Balance to our everyday life. And then alongside Sila, this sort of practical, common sense conduct with others, we also bring mental training samadhi, in which we really deepen in our mindfulness, our self-awareness, and the acuity of our awareness of what's happening around us, including empathic awareness, mindfulness that's interpersonal, interpersonal mindfulness. Is empathy, and we bring that to others. So we develop in that, we train in that. And we also train in concentration. We train, as we do in meditation here, in deepening our capacity to remain steadily present, you know, and stably present amidst all the disturbances and cross currents of living. And we start opening into non-ordinary

states of consciousness. Can be really quite blissful and purifying and extraordinary and open us into revelatory insights into the nature of our experiences, the nature, of the streaming of consciousness, the nature reality altogether, even the nature the ground of all through our samadhi, through our concentration training. That's the second major pillar of Buddhist practice.

[00:11:05] And as I go through these, the point about this... I think that's really helpful is to listen to the Buddha as coach or doctor or, you know, megatherapist, if you will, maherapist who's giving us practical advice, and then we judge for ourselves if it rings true and if there's something to use. So when you hear me talking about Sila, as I'll do more in a moment, or Samadhi, ask yourself, oh, is there a takeaway there? I can say for myself. That my own personal practice really took off about 25 years ago, ballpark-ish, when I was really introduced to concentration practices by the teacher Christina Feldman, which are central to Buddhist training. But somehow, in my Buddhist light background, I had not become aware of them. They had not really been taught. And so, you know, there's a lot to be said for the depth of training in Samadhi. And then of course we have... In which we develop our view. We develop greater insight. We start recognizing causes and effects. We start understanding, oh, I had a little moment with my wife yesterday where I'm paying more attention to my own posture lately to deal with kind of an issue in my neck. And I was walking past her in her home and she was hunched over her computer and you know, keyboarding this and that. And I said, oh honey, you know maybe you should sit up more. And she turned to me. With one of those looks if you've been married for 44 years or less, or not married at all, but still with someone. And she said, if you keep saying that to me, because I had been saying that her. If you keep say that to every time you walk through the kitchen, we're going to have a problem. So, happily. Third pillar of wisdom was momentarily at least present. And I said, whoops, you're right, guilty is charged. I throw myself on the mercy of the court, won't happen again. And that's a kind of wisdom, a practical wisdom that recognizes causes and effects, or can choose things and be discerning. Like, oh, I'm sorry about that. And she then said to me, just tell me once a week. I'm like, oh okay, I could do that. These are aspects of practical wisdom. So if you're aware of the Eightfold Path, these three pillars of Buddhism are clustered in these eight elements.

[00:13:48] So in terms of the way the list is typically described sequentially, the first two, wise view and wise intention in the Noble Eightfold path, that's the fourth noble truth, have to do with wisdom. Wise view and why is intention have to deal with wisdom? So we locate that pillar of practice there. And then we have these three in the middle, which are right speech, right action, and right livelihood. These are expressions of sila, practical, everyday conduct and ethics. Wise action, wise speech, wise livelihood, or right action, right speech, right livelihood. All right, see Sila there? And then in the last three. Right mindfulness, right effort, right concentration, we see the training of the mind, the purification of the heart and being altogether that is the Samadhi pillar of practice. So we see this structuring. All of these are ways to take the pressure off and all these are way to live in the world with its difficulties. Without creating suffering for ourselves and for others, ultimately as developed and perfected over time to the point of complete awakening and liberation.

[00:15:20] So now focusing on the element of SILA, S-I-L-A, as it's typically spelled. A simple form of Sila are given in the five precepts of Buddhist practice, and they take the form in ways that can be translated from the original Pali, like a key language of Buddhism, as I undertake the training precept two. To abstain from, so these are expressed through negation, to abstain form killing living beings. You know, I'm gonna paraphrase a little bit as I go through here. So, the first precept typically is to abstain from killing. That has

complex implications as you really become more and more aware of how we're entwined with life, you know, and that our actions, even consuming vegetables, involve deaths in one way or another of living creatures and these larger systems we're part of, their complexities I'm not going to get into about this right now. But the first precept, thinking of it as aspirational, is to abstain from killing. I personally extend that to almost all insects. I really go overboard to try to prevent their death if I can inside my home. And the framing on this is not as a commandment from on high. But as a way of being in this life that has pragmatic benefits for yourself, that when you stop killing or reduce the harms of killing, that's good for you. It's also certainly an expression of kindness and compassion for others.

[00:17:10] Second precept is to abstain from taking that which is not freely offered, to abstain from stealing. This can be extended interestingly in everyday life in terms of where your eyes go. I began to realize that when people had their journals open around me, you know, it was not freely offered to my gaze. Sometimes, you're learning information about another person that they'd rather you not know. If somebody is trying to offer it to me, I don't know if I really want it. You know, you can extend it. Minimally, you don't shoplift, you don't steal, okay? Third precept typically is expressed as not lying. I abstain from lying, from falsehoods. That does not mean that you say everything you think, but it does mean that what you say is actually what you think. Even if you're picking and choosing some, you know, and leaving out some other things that you also think. My wife may have had some other thoughts in the moment when I advised her about her posture that she left out of skillful means, okay? And then we have the fourth precept, to abstain from harming others through sexuality, sexual misconduct. Again, you can define that in ways that seem right to you, including when applied to oneself. And then we have the fifth precept, which is a really interesting one in our current times, the precept to abstain from intoxicants. And I wanna say a little bit about the exact wording of that precept and then connect the wording of this precept to, as best we know, the record of the Buddha's literally last words. A kind of detailed translation of the fifth precept about intoxicants is I undertake the training rule to abstain from fermented and distilled intoxicant that are causes of heedlessness. Heedlessness is a key word here.

[00:19:13] So at this point, we have two different ways of understanding this. One way of understanding this is, I undertake the training rule. We're doing this to train ourselves. That's the framing. Okay, I undertake that training rule to abstain from intoxicants. The context here is, you know, distilled liquid, alcohol, essentially. I undertake to the rule to abstain from them if they cause heedlessness. In other words, I abstain from the ones that cause heedlessness. But otherwise, sure, that's one way to hear this. Another way to hear it is, I undertake the training rule to abstain from intoxicants because they cause heedlessness. See the difference? In the latter, it's an absolute. They cause heedlessness. Heedlessness is not good. Actually, this word heedlessness or on its antonym being heedful are used throughout the early teachings of the Buddha is very important words. You know, the Buddha is always very practical. And if the deep root of suffering and harm is ignorance, a major form of ignorance is being heedless. Not paying attention to, not recognizing, not taking into account, not appropriately valuing and prioritizing that which really matters, right? That's what it is to be heedless.

[00:21:02] On the other hand, to be heedful, it involves approaching life with care and conscientiousness and reverence and duty and holding it in a tender heart. That is what it to be hateful. So. In terms of the technical meaning, yes, the actual technical, arguably, I'm not a poly scholar, but this is, I think, you know, a reasonable view, is that the literal meaning given in the words is to refrain from intoxicants that lead to heedlessness. And

we could extend the meaning today to intoxicant like other drugs, marijuana, psychedelics, other caffeine, you know as an intoxicante when taken to extreme. And we could even go further and explore the intoxications of righteousness. Whoa, or the intoxication of pornography, or the intoxication of getting really swept away, you know, with something or other, you know? And being intoxicated with our own self-importance. These could be intoxicating as well in the sense that they are toxic through their impact on heedfulness. They are toxic because they lead to heedlessness, which is harmful for oneself and others. In the times the Buddha taught, it was fairly taken for granted. And certainly this was how this precept is interpreted for the monastics that were the core of the sangha, the core the Buddhist community at the time the Buddha Taught with lay people around it who were also invited into the process of awakening. But certainly for those who most stood for and most represented his practice, no intoxicants at all, it was understood. That all intoxicants, by their very nature, cloud the mind and lead to heedlessness.

[00:23:07] So in that context, there is a pretty firm stand here, and frankly as someone with an alcoholic grandfather, I pay a lot of attention to the ways in which my brain likes certain molecules and kind of wants them. Where you are with this and is, you know, is where you are with us. But I wanted to, you know, emphasize this fifth precept, both because I think people can play kind of fast and loose with it, me included, certainly in the past, because it opens up a very interesting inquiry. So the Buddha's last words include the word to be heedful, to be full of heed. And I love the translation of the Buddha's purported last words from Stephen Batchelor. Things fall apart, tread the path with care. He's translating heedful as care.

[00:24:15] And so, here we have, and I'm seeing things that really come through the chat, which are beautiful, about the fact that the frame here is not, you know, the big bad finger wagging at us, the Buddha finger from an eye. No. In a way, it'd be so much easier if it were. No. This is an invitation. To really reflect on the grounded realness of our actions in thought, word and deed and their results. I can watch my mind trying to talk me into things. And it's so seductive. And yet, if I go down those roads, that clouds my mind and leads to a broader heedlessness. And if we start really taking responsibility for the consequences of our actions and thought, word, and deed, which is really what Sila is all about, then we are naturally moved to making wiser and wiser choices. Not because we're following the rules, but because we really recognize what's in our best interest, and what is the real fulfillment of our duty of care to our future self, the one who will inherit tomorrow the results of our actions today. This is really the heart of SELA. And it's both really encouraging and kind of terrifying, because it leaves it up to us to take existential responsibility for our own choices here. Leading onward. Sila opens us up into a consideration of what it really is to tread your path with care, with both conscientiousness, that aspect of care, and with heart, with tenderness, with treating your life as both nothing and everything, you know, as dear. How do we treat that which is to us.

[00:26:39] Well, if we tread our path with care, we treat... The path as dear to us. And we treat ourselves walking that path as near to us and we treat the person who will inherit the results in the next step of the steps we take right now. Beautiful, really beautiful. And so then relating it all the way back to pressure. In our own complicated lives, right, where we're trying to figure out our priorities, we have our lists, we do this, we that, ah, what a complicated swirl of plates to keep spinning. An alternative, in effect, is to surrender to Sila. By which I mean, really, surrender to the wisdom that emerges in you when you tread your path with care, when you are heedful. And you just simply look inside, okay, what is Sila now? What are the five precepts in my life these days? More broadly, what non-

harming? This interaction with someone who's really annoying. What is non-harming here and now? Non-harmy of them, non-army of me. And can I surrender to it? And that surrender sometimes is very complete.

[00:28:15] Really, when I walked by my wife, I mean, it was an easy, it's a low bar to just, oh yeah, sorry honey, won't do that again, I get it. I don't like getting advice myself. And so You know, sometimes you just, okay, but very often when we surrender, it's partially, okay. It's incomplete or it's about just one part of a whole thing, all right. Maybe we surrender to precepts around intoxicants by, you know, having a social drink, relaxing, watching the subtleties of the clouding of the mind that come in and, you now, leaving it at that, learning along the way. Maybe that's our expression of sila right then and there. It's okay if our surrender, in other words, is not complete, and yet I've really found a lot that it simplifies so much. You just kind of know what the higher road is. Usually we know what higher road is with another person, with ourself. It's not that complicated, you know? Pick up your garbage. Take responsibility for the costs we push on others. Would that corporations would do the same. It's not that hard to stay away from falsehoods in our speech. You find yourself starting to exaggerate. You always, you never. Well, that's not, you know, that's a falsehood of a kind. You know, we often know what is the higher road. We often know what the higher is in terms of our own sexuality. It gets complicated again, but if you know for yourself, If you have a position of... Privilege in society.

[00:29:59] If you know for yourself that where your gaze goes, you know, as a man, can have painful, harmful impacts on others. Maybe you know that your higher road is to take heed and to be heedful of where your gaze goes. So very often, in ways large and small, we do know pretty well what is sila in our own particular life, including the sila of not harming our future self, right? The sila of taking care of an aging body that is really benefited from exercise, for example, or restraint around staying up late with my current addiction to YouTube shorts. It's like a slot machine. You just go to the next one in the algorithm. You know next thing I know 45 minutes have gone by and i'm going to bed groggier than I really want to be All right, so I think i'll finish on this point That to me, it's a blessed opportunity that is so simplifying to Draw on the wisdom of the buddha And draw on your own best knowing of what is sila for you? You know, what is the simplicity of Sila? What is the restraint of Sila? What is moderation of Silas?

[00:31:28] And additionally, and here's where I want to really share something super cool with you, to take the original five precepts that are stated in the negative and consider them in the way that Thich Nhat Hanh, the great Thich Nat Hanh considered them, bless his memory, in a positive form. So I'll read them here. In terms of the first one, it's titled reverence for life. I commit to cultivating compassion and protecting life in all its forms. Number two, true happiness. I commit practicing generosity and not taking what is not freely given. True love. I commit to acting with responsibility and care in relationships, protecting the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families, and society. Loving speech and deep listening. I commit to speaking truthfully and kindly and to listening deeply in order to reduce suffering and increase understanding. And five, nourishment and healing. I commit to mindful consumption, taking in only what supports peace, wellbeing and clarity in myself and in the collective. Beautiful.

[00:33:04] So I'm finishing here with a bit of a recap of my sprawling talk. We begin with differentiating between the dukkha of the three characteristics of existence, along with impermanence and interdependence, distinguishing that from the dukha, the suffering actually in the first noble truth that arises based on applying craving in the second noble truth, driven nurse. You know, insistence, pressure to the conditions of life, including

Dukkha in the first case, the first meaning of Dukkha, when it appears, all right? So then what do we do about that? Well, we can engage in the three pillars of Buddhist practice, Sila, Samadhi, and Panya. I'll call it virtue, mental training, and wisdom. And I talked about that in terms of the eight elements of the Noble Eightfold Path, the Fourth Noble Truth. And their cluster of those three great pillars of practice. And then we explored SILA, including in its five basic precepts and a way of understanding that, with a particular unpacking of the fifth precept, having to do with intoxicants and heedlessness, with an appreciation of heedfulness is very central to practice, both as a cause of benefit for ourselves and something that is the result of other factors, such as mindfulness. Taking it all the way out to the Buddha's final words, his admonitions to us, his instructions, and helpful advice to us before he died. Things fall apart, tread your path with... Heedfulness in terms of conscientiousness and heart.

[00:34:52] And then I finished with the possibility of surrendering to your Sila, knowing what is best for you and others. Surrendering to it, giving over to it. Letting go into it, letting it carry you along. A lot easier to let it carry you along than fighting against all those other tendencies. Surrender to Sila. And in the process of that, you find, I think, a lot. That the pressure you put on yourself, including, in my case, around goal-directed drivenness, starts to fall away, becomes much simpler. You know, surrender to Sila. And even surrendering to Sila, not just in the form of what you abstain from, and also, as Thich Nhat Hanh teaches, in the forms of what commit to, in their positive form. Well, we have some minutes, and I wonder what questions, comments do you have?

[00:35:50] Catherine asks, is it beneficial to love another knowing that they cannot love you back? I think I heard you say this is still beneficial for self-growth. Yeah, no, it varies, of course, details. You know, if loving someone, you know, can exist alongside appropriate boundaries and appropriate self-care, yes, indeed. And that said, it was very freeing for me to realize that. I could love beings who were very positional toward me and, you know, stingy and withholding and even hostile. And I found a kind of inner freedom in being able to love them in ways in which that did not drain me but actually fed me. So in that sense, I would agree with what you're talking about here. And I love the idea of preserving an inner freedom. Interestingly, as I settled into that inner freedom, I became more able myself to get a little space between me and this other person and not be so upset about it all. That, and then ice cream, yes. Reverence and stewardship, responsibility. I wouldn't think of them as exact equivalence to Sila, but certainly encompassed by Sila. You know, reverence, a sense of care, stewardship, a sense care, sure, including toward your own life. Future self.

[00:37:20] Janet asks, can I expand on a definition of Sila? The common translation of the word is restraint. And restraint is negation, right? Impulse control. It takes the form of don't do this, don't do that. Don't kill, don't t kill, don't steal, don't lie, don't abuse people sexually and potentially including yourself, and don't use intoxicants. And it's pretty foundational, you know, and I frankly really appreciate the fact that early Buddhism has such a moral foundation. Notice, by the way, that when we don't kill, we don't steal, we don't lie, we don't cheat on others, and we don't get drunk, we reduce our harms of others. And even more broadly, we reduced our harms in larger systems that we're part of, okay? So it's really foundational. So that's one way to understand it.

[00:38:18] Morality is another way to translate the word sila. That word is a little fraud in some circles. Ethics could be another way to think about Sila. I like the word virtue because it's pretty broad. And as an aging boy scout back in the day, and I love the fact that my troop was full of juvenile delinquents because I needed that as a goody two shoes

kind of boy. You know, virtues, right? A scout is thrifty, brave, clean, reverent, something else, you know, virtue. I like that. And self-respect. Selah is that also furthers your self-respect. You know, you are guarding your own sense doors and you're guiding yourself and... Get ready to cover your ears. I'm gonna use a swear word. Someone shared with me recently this yin-yang meme that apparently is quite popular. I had never seen it before. You know, the yin yang symbol. There's the white and the black. And the top part, you know, and I looked at it as I was scrolling down my screen, so it was perfect. The top part of the ying yang said, do no harm. And the bottom part said, take no shit. And maybe that's, you know, part of CELA too. Is coffee an intoxicant? Well, does it cloud your mind? Does it lead to heedlessness? This goes to psychotropic medication. You know, if I'm on retreat and trying to meditate, let's say, and I'm getting a headache, I can meditate through a headache but I'm kind of there to open into other things so I'll take some ibuprofen. I don't think it clouds my mind, if anything, it clears. I've known people whose mind became a lot clearer after they used skillfully some psychotropic medication under supervision of someone who's licensed to prescribe it.

[00:40:22] And I think also, here's where I might get myself in trouble, but... Does LSD cloud the mind? Does it lead to heedlessness, to psilocybin, or other plant medicines, entheogens, they're sometimes called? Well, maybe there is sometimes a clouding of the mind, an altered state of consciousness that over time leads to greater. Treading your path with care, leads to greater heedfulness over time. There's pragmatic decisions about this. As I said, to really emphasize a key point here, bad news, good news. Bad news, we cannot evade responsibility for our own choices by taking refuge in simplistic rule following. The Buddha tells us. Sorry. The good news is that this opens up tremendous opportunities for freedom in our choosing and deeply touching inner sense of earning over time the fruits of our own responsible practice, the fruits, of the wise choices we make, grounded in our sila, our mental training, and our wisdom. Fantastic.

[00:41:49] Okay, well, just finishing up here, the next time, and I'll try to remember this myself, you're starting to feel pressured about, oh, I gotta do this, and gotta get that done, and I've gotta get 10 things done, but I only have time for seven, and you know, when you're feeling kind of squished around all that, ask yourself, what is Sila now? What is my Sila, now? And as you become aware of it, you know that wise voice inside tells you, what is my sila now? Then can you let go into it? Can you disengage from other things and open out into. What you personally, responsibly recognize as Sila for you in this moment regarding this whatever. Is a really good practice this coming week. And I'll see you next week. Thank you very much.