

4_22_26Talk*

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

Rick Hanson: [00:00:00] I'd like to speak first to the meditation. With regard to two topics. The first is the difference between meditations that are simply about sustaining open awareness. Choiceless awareness is sometimes called in which we remain present while everything just kind of flows along, flows through awareness. And there might be related qualities of sort of vastness and spaciousness and presence.

[00:00:34] But in general, all we're trying to do is simply to be with whatever is appearing and allowing it to flow. Great. There are many other meditations that are essentially about resting attention on something, often with a sense of inviting it or evoking it, such as resting attention on compassion or loving kindness or gratitude or tranquility or happiness or bliss as, you know, factors of deep meditation in the Buddhist tradition. There's a place for that. And so in this practice here, we started with quite a lot of just sort of open awareness to kind of come home to the present. And then I encouraged a gradual focus on a releasing of any unnecessary anxiety.

[00:01:30] Now, doing that can make a person anxious. So now I'm on to the second part of my point here, not about absorption practices in general, or sometimes called shamatha, or concentration practices in generally, in which we seek to become absorbed in something, which becomes increasingly concentrated in us, like a very concentrated, oh yeah, like a concentrated sense of peacefulness. But in particular, I'm talking here about anxiety and fear. Now, Why would it help you suffer less to release unnecessary anxiety? How might it help others around you to suffer less if you release unnecessary anxiety? Now you get to decide whether it's necessary or not. You know, if you're walking through the forest and a tiger suddenly jumps out, starts running towards you, you ought to be anxious. If it's very understandable that if you are dealing with a medical condition, for there to be a kind of primal anxiety about it, a primal. Uneasiness. You can't see, it's in the camera, but I'm putting my hands on my belly here for in terms of my own primal uneasiness. That's, that's, I'll call that necessary. That just part of being human, right? But then there's all the stuff we add to it. The ruminating about the future, the difficulty and accepting our helplessness.

[00:03:05] I gave a talk about radical helplessness, radical trust and radical acceptance, you know, some some weeks ago. Might be worth looking at that. You know, we don't like to be helpless. We don't want to realize how powerless we are and so all kinds of reactions. I'm afraid of being helpless. Well, if you are helpless, you may as well accept that as best you can and release unnecessary anxiety about it. So you get to decide, of course, what is unnecessary anxiety? And what I'm personally very aware of is this sort of ongoing trickle from well-intended mother nature to keep me anxious, to keep my on my toes. But what if I don't need to be anxious to stay on my toes? What if I didn't need be anxious, to be reasonably vigilant in the life that I have? If we're living in a war zone, if we're running for our lives, If we're growing up in what's like a war zone, okay, we ought to have that ongoing trickle. So that we're always on kind of threat level orange.

[00:04:13] But if it's not actually threat level orange in the immediacy of your life and you get to decide if it is not, well, what's the value add of that ongoing trickle of anxiety just to kind of keep you on your toes? For me, I don't like it. And that ongoing tickle of unnecessary anxiety primes us for overreacting to. The challenges of everyday life.

[00:04:41] So if you buy into this idea that there might be some merit in freedom from unnecessary anxiety, it's worth exploring. You know, the sense of peacefulness and tranquility and confidence that gradually replaces unnecessary anxiety. Unnecessary uneasiness, apprehensiveness, you know, defendedness. Guardedness. The sense of peacefulness and tranquility and confidence that replaces all that feels really good and is a blessing for other people around you. You know, as we approach other people while being strong in our own base and also not afraid of them and not needing to be attacking you or they're not actually threatening you. You know, when we're rested in that place of feeling unthreatened and not being threatening, other people soften often and become easier to deal with in lots of ways. You know you've heard me frequently quote perhaps this lovely proverb that one is truly wise who is peaceable, friendly and fearless.

[00:06:06] So If you are interested in this exploration, you might join me in having taken several years with this actually, of really exploring unnecessary anxiety and shedding it. Not just intellectually, that's the tip of the iceberg. Shedding it in your belly and your bones. Whew. Releasing so you might like trying that and then in terms of a meditation like we did sometimes you try it and it just doesn't Come and in fact sometimes if you try to be less anxious it makes you more anxious Because you're afraid of not being anxious Because it was when you were not anxious and you thought everything was fine that kawak bad things happened when you are younger Okay, and then you can help yourself if you want you can do little experiments You can tune in to the body sensations of contraction and anxiety, and see if you can afford to soften them for a single breath. Even for a single breath, can you recognize when it's true, as it usually is, that you are basically all right right now in the present? If you're okay in the president, can you let yourself feel okay in present? For one breath, and then you build out from there.

[00:07:23] If you have any kind of history, which I have not had of being significantly traumatized, it can be really a project to release unnecessary anxiety. But over time, more and more, you're free of fear, free of unnecessary fear, free of that background sense of dread that weighs you down, free of the mood of anxiety, the mood of apprehensiveness.

[00:07:51] And that's an opportunity, if you want to, to build up in your practice. In particular, and I'll finish on this, when I said, you know, Ken, in the meditation, Can you imagine a mind that is completely free of fear, if only for a moment? I was watching some people here who I respect and like shaking their heads vigorously during the meditation. I saw you, if you had your camera on, and I appreciated that feedback actually, and I get it. And then you may recall the next thing I said was, okay, can you be aware of a place inside that itself is free of it? You know, a depth in you of stillness that is undisturbed by fear. A depth in that is utterly at peace. That is actually often available if nonetheless around the edges of awareness is still this kind of crackling of uneasiness that's pretty deeply ingrained, even a kind of habit. We can think of anxiety as Judson Brewer really brilliantly explores. And his work is worth checking out, Judson Brewer, B-R-E-W-E R. He's a psychiatrist and a longtime meditation teacher and deeply knowledgeable about the brain at Brown University. And he talks about and writes about the habit of anxiety and using habit science to help free oneself from habits of anxiety. If that's an issue for you, that's a really wonderful resource.

[00:09:30] So anyway, there may still be around the edges, habits of anxiety, and yet deep down it's always true that there are levels within you in the field of awareness itself, for example, that themselves are not afraid. And you can tune into them and identify increasingly with those depths within you as a version of this practice as well of becoming free of fear. And then last, the heart. The heart is a great ally. In liberating yourself from

needless anxiety. Because as we feel increasingly connected with others and as we the strength of the outflowing of our own large heartedness in ways that are very biological and grounded in primate evolution. A sense of anxiety tends to dissipate. As the sense of the heart increases, the sense the fearfulness tends to fade. Maybe it doesn't disappear entirely, but it tends to diminish. And that's another great ally in this journey toward really truly cultivating a mind that is indeed peaceable, friendly and fearless.

[00:10:48] Okay, well, I don't know about you, but the main thing I've been afraid of in my life. Other people, especially powerful people, dominator people, people with credentials I don't have or authority I don't have or big, loud, bombastic, aggressive styles. Growing up as a kid who skipped a grade very young in school, late birthday as well, and kind of late to puberty and shy by nature and... Kind of dorky and, you know, nerdy. Wow! You know, the alpha boys really scared me. What to do about them? And then that version of them, you know, 50, 60 years later, whoa, it's social hierarchies, right? So you think about that for yourself. And it's interesting that it was said about Freud, Sigmund Freud, that in his own groundbreaking work, which was brilliant for his time, Now 100 years later, we can see some things about it that we could tune this way or that, or we're just a little off the deep end. It was said that he sort of surfaced and exposed this major taboo topic in Victorian society in that part of the world in which he lived that made sexuality a great taboo, including the sexuality of youth.

[00:12:24] Comparably, others have said that in our times today, In many ways, the topic that is left out of polite society and is sort of avoided in many quarters to talk about is power, power, power, structures of dominance, who's on top, who's the bottom, and the uses and misuses of power. This is a very real topic in everyday life. You know, there's a place for social power that is legitimate. If you're going through medical treatment, there is a place for the appropriate authority and expertise, you know, expert power that's earned through expertise and through virtue, virtuous behavior toward those that are less powerful. If one is in a structure in which there's an asymmetry of power Generally speaking, those who are more powerful have duties of care of different kinds toward those who were less powerful. And when those, when power is abused though, when it's not rightfully earned and it is used to harm others, to benefit from oneself, then we have a problem.

[00:13:55] So if you think about this in a Buddhist context, it is said that the three great poisons of the mind, or to use an even more ancient metaphor, fuels. There was a lot of focus on fires and ritual fires in the time of the Buddha, and also a lot of focus since he was a farmer in his origins on fertilizers, nutriments, that which fosters the growth of that which is beneficial and enjoyable and wholesome, or that which fosters the growth or fuels that which harmful, unwholesome, painful, saturated with suffering, right? Which is it?

[00:14:40] So we have these three fuels of suffering, poisons in the mind, typically translated in English as greed, hatred, and delusion. So you might think about that applied to this topic of power. And to go a little further to ground this in some very extensive psychological research, you might harken back to your own childhood and the ways in which power was manifested in your world, justly or unjustly. So we have parents and peers and older siblings. Adult authorities of different kind, wielding power toward us. And we understandably get shaped by that in the ways we are today, both in ways that we might, let's say, identify with that style of power coming at us and enact it ourselves, perhaps with our own children, raro, or with other people, or we might really bristle. Against that kind of power and resist it, even in ways potentially that are harmful for us. I grew up with well-intended loving and traditional powerful parents and punishing often with

their power to try to help their kids grow up and be good people and so forth. Still a lot of power and my innate rebelliousness and feistiness You know, sort of threw the baby out with the bathwater when I entered my 20s, and a fair amount of good advice that my parents gave me with a powerful topspin, I just rejected, and then it took me several decades to realize that they were actually right about things like, start saving money when you're young. You know? Get your act together, that I, you know, came to the party a little late. So that's another version of how we can react.

[00:16:47] So then the question becomes, is the power that's coming at us coming from greed. In other words, are people using us as a means to their own ends, out of their own greed? They are, in the language of Martin Buber, treating us as an it to their thou. They are using us as a mean to their ends. That's a flag for problematic power. When you start to realize that you're being Bullshitted you're being manipulated. You're being hyped. You are being sold. You're being bullied You're, being intimidated You're. Being seduced as a means to their ends Right? And it can really help when we recognize that to feel the suffering in it ourselves without blaming ourselves. It's really easy to blame yourself for the mistreatment of you by other people. And we can be both on our own side to learn lessons, to stay out of those sort of situations in the future, to leave more rapidly, to see them coming over the horizon and go in a different direction. Sure, we can learn, but that's really different from blaming yourself for how they mistreated you. They're very touching and important thing, right?

[00:18:26] So, one thing to look at is... One of the three poisons, corrupting power, coming towards you, and recognizing it, recognizing the greed coming at you in a way.

[00:18:44] Another poison is, of course, hatred, us against them, anger, demonizing coming at stigmatizing coming at you, contempt coming at you, dismissal. As unworthy or not mattering, or not having standing, as expressions of, in a broad sense, hatred, ill will coming at you. It's quite startling to realize that sometimes other people really are out to get you. They really are to kind of undermine you, or they really are out to take you down a notch, the death of a thousand paper cuts, if they can do it, and to really see that. To really recognize the antipathy, the hostility coming at you. It could be that there are other parts of the person, you know, there's goodness in them let's say, there are things going, but certainly part of it is they really are against you. To recognize that and not be in delusion yourself about it.

[00:19:56] And then third, the delusion piece, sometimes you can look at people who are not hateful and they're not greedy, but they have power and they are just really wrong about some things in your mind. And you get to decide if they're really wrong. Sometimes people in positions of authority in companies or organizations or communities or social groups or really attached to their views about something, and there's nothing evil about them, but. You know, they're just wrong about something. And being able to see that for yourself and not doubt yourself too much. You know take a moment to reflect on it or some days or weeks and so forth. Is it really true?

[00:20:48] But if you really conclude that they're just off, well, wake up from the delusion that is overly credulous about their authority. I see this in medical context routinely in which On the one hand, I see people who are just really quick to throw out, you know, potential treatments or help or perspective on their own healthcare conditions because it, you now, comes from mainstream medicine. And I say this as someone with deep roots and complementary and alternative medicine myself. All right. So on the one end, we can fault ourselves by being just quick to throw stuff out. All right?

[00:21:32] On the other hand, I've just known a lot of people who grant too much authority to different voices or individuals in healthcare settings and don't listen to that funny little feeling deep inside that the doctor, the nurse, the occupational therapist, whoever, you know, missed something or wasn't really taking something important into account or wasn't open-minded enough. To really listen to you when you were telling them something important. That's a very important example of ourselves putting up with delusion. I'm using the word delusion very loosely. Attachment to view that's just wrong in other people. We grant them more power than they really have earned because they're just wrong about something or incomplete about it. That's really worth paying attention to in medical contexts. Okay?

[00:22:34] So I've given kind of an overview, if I could, of working through the so-called three poisons, you know, greed, hatred, and delusion, in terms of our relationship to power coming at us from others. And then we have the reality of social life in which as big social primates. It is in our nature to both seek alpha dominance because it's reassuring and forms group identity. We kind of gather around that alpha dominant leader. We have that tendency and vulnerability in us based on our evolution. And on the other hand... We also have very much in our evolutionary history, particularly as the human species emerged, in that our last common ancestor with chimpanzees and bonobos was about six million years ago. We've been on our own kind of branch ever since then. And our ancestors started manufacturing stone tools with brains about a third our size around three million years. Whoa. And as hominids, became humans, human species, anatomically modern humans arose around 300,000 years ago. And until only around five or so, or 10-ish thousand years ago, every human and hominid, certainly, lived in a small hunter-gatherer band. Humans gradually evolved inside these hunter-gatherer bands with our increasingly social brains, the capacity for the many to come together to regulate the few. The betas banded together to regulate the alphas who are exploiting them for their own alpha-ish agenda. So you see these two tendencies in human society.

[00:24:41] On the one hand, the tendency to seek the order, law and order, the reassurance, the purity, the protection from the dirty others, to seek that. To seek the simplicity of just believing the authoritarian leader. It's simple. You just believe whatever they say. You don't have to think. They're always, you know, they're right. Sometimes endowed with spiritual authority, even. You know, we see that tendency. We see that tendency in playgrounds. Harking back to junior high school. You know we see, to generalize, more masculine expressions of that in, you know adolescence, more. Feminine expressions of this tendency to seek an alpha dominator and organize a group around that person. We certainly see that. We also see it in our politics, and we see people who are very clever throughout history at manipulating our vulnerability to appeals to grievance and authoritarianism. Right? I see that. We also see in ways that are certainly very consistent with the teachings of the Buddha, the opportunity and even the tendency to form collectives of various kinds to gather together with others for the common good in ways, that stand up against these selfish Authoritarians who abuse their power for their own gains. Their own hatred, their own greed. And instead, groups come together, much as they did in our social, in our hunter-gatherer bands.

[00:26:36] For most of the time, the humans have walked this earth, people coming together to recognize and call out bullies and freeloaders that abuse their power and externalize, they dump their costs on others. That's what freeloading basically is. And that too, is very, very, very, very much in our nature. Obviously what I'm talking about has huge timely implications in American politics and the politics of other countries around the world.

How do we strike a balance in other words, and this is where early Buddhism I think has many wonderful lessons for us, how do we the human species, the whole human tribe, all eight billion of us in the 21st century have the best of both worlds. How do we create ways of living together that contain the efficiency, the simplicity, the orderliness, the protections, the safety that are enabled by hierarchical structures of power that are legitimate. How do we do that while also making sure that those in power use it for the greater good, not at the cost of the many, for their own sake? How do we have both of that? And you can see great examples of that in the Buddhist tradition, certainly in early Buddhism.

[00:28:12] Clearly, the Buddha had a great deal of authority, and it was earned authority that, as best we can tell, I mean, obviously the historical record is pretty spotty about events 2,500 or so years ago. As best we can tell, he did not use his power for his own gain. He did not act out of hatred, or greed, or delusion in his dealings with others. And while there was a certain amount of hierarchy, I mean, monastics had a certain significant authority relative to lay people in terms of guiding them in the practice, it was well understood that when it came to enlightenment, it was a level playing field. With monastics and householders having equal opportunities for awakening with an understanding that the intensity of monastic practice could be really helpful. And with some arm twisting from his mother and other relatives, the Buddha opened it up for, you know, women as well as men in terms of the level playing field, in terms opportunities for awakening. That's a flattening of hierarchy.

[00:29:24] And then, as he approached his own death, despite pleas to create a priest class, the Buddha refused to create a priest's class and he said essentially, everyone needs to take responsibility for their own awakening. And the Dharma is freely offered to all. There's no secret teachings in early Buddhism. That's a flattening of hierarchy there. And then, and a decentering of power in authority. In the collective, which then would have reasonable, efficient forms of having abbots and senior teachers and, you know, who earned the respect that they received. But it was in that larger context. That's a wonderful, I think, opportunity and guide for us today.

[00:30:15] I think it's really helpful to be aware of what makes you vulnerable to appeals to grievance and, you know. Appeals to authoritarianism. A lot of research shows that if a person feels unsafe, they're very vulnerable to authoritarian appeals. If a person feels really wronged by some group, they're vulnerable to authoritarian appeals, if a person feels that their world is chaotic, unstable, they are very vulnerable to authoritarian appeals. And this speaks obviously. To doing what we can to help people feel safer, to help not be mistreated and wronged by others, and to help feel that they live in a reasonably orderly society. We want to obviously do that as a matter of public policy and ordinary common sense, including in small groups that we're part of.

[00:31:23] Related to that, it's very helpful for people to wake up from the delusion and have the scales fall from their eyes and recognize the ways in which wannabe authoritarians throughout history have deliberately fostered a sense of low safety in people, deliberately foster a sense of having been mistreated and deeply wronged by others and fostered the sense of chaos. And, uh... Yeah, chaos, in order to ride on that big tall horse into the halls of power. And waking up and realizing, yeah, they're doing that deliberately to build their own base is very, very eye-opening.

[00:32:12] All this is especially true, to bring it home, if you grew up in what's called an authoritarian household in which there was probably significant corporal punishment, spanking, different kinds, in which often there was a dogmatism about what is pure and

what is impure, and households in which there was kind of a backstory about how there were people out there out to get you, do you dirt, or maybe people who, you know, had been wronging you, or you know, wronging the previous generation, and you're still suffering the results.

[00:32:53] So if that's been true in your own background, that's something to really kind of be aware of. So, okay. And if you do have power, like I have power here. I think it's always good to not get complacent about it. The way it shows up for me is always feeling a little off balance and liking that, so you don't just drop into your authority or your power in ways that become trance-like.

[00:33:29] So I've been in, show of hands, I don't know, I've in the Dharma world in a serious way, I'd say for about 30 years. And before that I was pretty familiar for watching. With the Buddha Dharma, a little bit through as kind of a Zen background through some reading and stuff, but not whole hog. Anyway, it's interesting how often there's certain topics that I've never heard any of my teachers talk about, right? And this is sort of one of them. How do we deal with power coming at us? And how do we use our own power responsibly? And I'm sure some people talk about it, but I think it's one of those topics that deserves more attention. And I think the ways in which we are affected by really powerful political forces that can be very invasive and consequential is worth paying attention to. And if we want to relieve suffering, it's really important to address the upstream systemic sources of suffering, many of which are being controlled by unjust power. What do we do about that? You know, paying attention to that. Seems appropriate, if we are to be compassionate toward others and compassionate toward ourselves.

[00:34:50] And also you might think about how power was used and expressed growing up and how you feel about that. I myself am pretty nervous about the power of the mob because I grew up and I saw the classic kind of primate social structure in which there'd be a bully, you know, in my middle school, let's say, or high school. And that bully would gather around themselves, Alpha minuses who would suck up to the bully and praise it and agree with its power, and often pick on some kind of outcast individual or group of individuals to build up the sense of the group, the in group, and also serve as a kind of threat to others. See what I do to that outcast, that pariah over there? I can do it to you if you don't tell the line here. All right. You just really see it in adolescent social groups often. And you can then see that phenomenon writ larger and at the scale of millions of people, in large political ways.

[00:36:06] I read this passage or this thing that just stuck with me. I read it numerous years ago. This fellow grew up in Haiti during the time of truly a tyrant. I think this was Baby Doc, the son of Duvalier, I guess, in Haiti. Terrible history in Haiti, sad history. I have a lot of fondness for Haiti and its people and have spent a little time there. Anyway, this young man, whose friends were being killed by the secret police, escaped Haiti, he knew French. And he made his way to Canada, French speaking part of Canada as a refugee, washed dishes and gradually started writing. And his writing earned him the only apparent, at least as of the time, French literary honor, the highest honor conferred on someone who is not from France due to his writing. So really a deep-souled person. And he made a comment that really struck with me. He said, when you live, under the thumb of a dictator, a tyrant, or someone who wants to be, you know, the dictator. They wanna get into your head. They want you to be talking about them and thinking about them. They wanna capture your attention. And in a way, they don't even care if you're mad at them, as long as you're talking about him, as long you are bound to them as a stimulus. Whose gravitational field you keep orbiting. They're fine if you're mad at them as long as you're in orbit around

them. So one of the most fundamental acts is to get them out of your head. And to reclaim, as the Buddha teaches, foundationally, the most fundamental property of all, your own attention.

[00:38:03] You know, we may be trapped in certain settings. You know we may need to superficially acquiesce because we're outnumbered, we're outgunned. We may need to do that sometimes, but deep down in that innermost, super duper secret temple of your own being, we don't need to grant them authority. We don't, to keep trying to figure out why do they do what they do? They do what they do because they want to and it works for them. That's why they do it they do. We don't need to do that. And so I just kind of want to offer that. You know, one of the things that is a fateful choice for many children when they're very young is to decide, are they wrong-headed or am I? Is there something wrong with them or is something wrong with me? And understandably, most children decide that there's something wrong with themselves because that enables them to preserve kind of the fantasy, the hope of a just world or truly loving wise parents or siblings or priests or teachers. But even though it's often a necessary choice, it's an unfortunate choice. Some children I don't know why, are able to look out at them and think to themselves, something's wrong with them, not me. I gotta put up with them. I gotta act like I agree with them maybe to survive high school, but no, I'm okay. They're the problem, not me. And if you weren't able to make that choice when you were young, at least we have the opportunity to make it today. That doesn't mean hating the bullies and freeloaders, but it means seeing them clearly and knowing that it really is them. And not you.

[00:40:20] In the Buddha's last words, as he undermined all the attempts to create some kind of new class of priests, he said, things fall apart. Tread your own path with care. And that's our opportunity today. In the context of whatever kind of power is coming at us that we have to deal with. So tread your path with care and hopefully with a loving and peaceful heart in community with others. That's our great opportunity and that's where we can be a cause. And history is full of many, many examples, including in our, just the last months in the world, in which people came together in sufficient numbers, at a sufficient scale, peacefully, to, boom. Reset, not completely, but somewhat, unjust structures of power. And even if we don't accomplish that, at least in our hearts, we will know that we have done what we could with care. All right.

[00:41:48] Well, I had no idea how this would go when I launched, and hopefully there was something in it for you. And I think really paying attention to power, which often tries to act in sneaky ways, covertly, is a really good thing. And making sure that you yourself as best you can, you know, walk a path that is, when you do have power and the like.