

4_8_26 Talk*

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Rick Hanson: [00:00:00] So I had planned tonight to talk with you about one of the eight elements in the Fourth Noble Truth in Buddhism, the Eightfold Path, that both embodies and leads onward to a growing liberation from the causes of suffering. Renunciation framed not in its conventional sense as, oh, I've got to give up all the things I like, but rather framed as I'm giving up that which makes me suffer and that which harms me and other people. That's the fundamental framing and approach to wise intention or wise or right intention in the Eightfold Path, which includes the intention for renunciation. And the intention for non-harming and the intention for releasing ill will.

[00:00:57] So we have a path that's aimed at individual transformation, which includes a recognition that as we pursue this path, one of the purposes and one of fruits less harming of others. It's an individual path. Buddhism is not framed as a political approach to life in general. Although it certainly has many implications in that regard and implications that I've been very engaged with myself as you may know. The question is for me, whether it's actually in keeping with this moment in the world and this moment for many people for me to give a talk about the wisdom of renunciation, framed as releasing craving and finding greater sense of contentment in the present as it is, while also recognizing that there is completely a place for healthy desire, for oneself and for other people. But I'm not so sure I should do this tonight.

[00:02:14] And I am basically contemplating, whoop, taking my notes and saving them for another day. Because I think a lot of people, me included, have been thoroughly rattled by world defense and by the behavior of the American president in the last hours, the last days, the last years, thoroughly rattled by it. And with a heart. That's heavy, if not even broken by the terrible and so often unnecessary suffering of so many people around the world. So I want to open it up for us as a group, if you like, to explore this ourselves in a frame of personal practice. I really request that as we enter this very hot territory, that we stay away from political pronouncements and attempts to persuade or criticize other people and focus strictly as much as you can on what's in your own heart and what is relevant for your own practice and what you are actually experiencing. That's a frame that creates greater safety for others. And as we create greater safety for others, if you were here for the little example of my friend taking better care of the ants, crawling around the edge of the pit toilet where he was practicing as a Buddhist monk in Thailand some years ago, as we take care of our impact on others, often it's the case that we feel actually safer ourselves in their company. Including here right now.

[00:04:06] So I wanted to share with you some reflections in this territory. I was basically exploring quotations that have to do with the Buddhist wisdom about releasing craving. Craving as seen as an understood, not as healthy wanting. Healthy goals, healthy values, but rather fundamentally, very biologically embedded drive state based on the sense of something missing, something wrong, typically with qualities of contraction and pressure and a lot of me, me, me embedded in it. And the Buddha's suggestion is that, hey, take a look, see for yourself what the correlation is for you between, you know, suffering, more suffering and more craving or less craving and less suffering. And also in your relationships with others and your relationship with the wider world, how heavily do you land on others as craving increases or decreases? Result of a gradual falling away and a kind of shifting of the center of gravity of your being from being driven by forms of you know something's missing something's wrong I gotta have it me me mine right you shift

away from that to a more kind of balanced open-hearted present grounded sense of fullness already sense of personal strength and you know presence as you gradually shift in that direction. Know what is that like for you? And is attention to gratitude and thankfulness and contentment for what you have already a skillful means to that end? And, is a growing sense of enoughness already in your own life contentment already? Is it one of the fruits? Is one of the results of that kind of personal practice? So that was the frame in which I talked about contentment.

[00:06:12] And then I read... I'm just so appreciative of someone identified as iPhone at 40 minutes past the hour. Can you please explain? Believe I, how can I be content when my country is being bombed, destroying all the infrastructure, killing people and children without remorse. On top of that we were called savages and inhuman and public. And. I think in keeping with what I was talking about in the very beginning about letting people land in your heart. Really wanted to let that land and I could see it landing in the hearts of many other people.

[00:07:03] And in addition to what has been happening and is happening in Iran and to its people and a great and ancient civilization with many many amazing and beautiful modern expressions, you know, in addition, to what's happening there, we could certainly extend this. Please explain, how can I be content when... My country, a different country. Think about occupied territories in the Middle East. Lebanon today are being bombed. People are dying. Children are hungry. Think about South Sudan. Think about people, nearly one in five children in America lives below the poverty line. Over a million children a year in America, the wealthiest country in the world, go unhoused every year. Terrible. And think about other things as well. This is not liberal, conservative, right, left. This is facts or lies. You know, how can we be content? How can we even engage in personal practice when so much terribleness is going down all around us in the world? These are really fundamental matters, aren't they? And moral choices on our own part. How dare you, how dare I, put attention on, in my case, my own well-being, my inner life. When so much horribleness is going on around us. It's a weighty matter, and there is no glib arithmetic around it that says, oh, here's the formula. It's an ongoing inquiry.

[00:08:57] And I think it particularly behooves people like myself who were born into situations of advantage, even though I was born into a fairly modest economic situation as an American still, through advantages of being male-bodied, straight, tall, white. You know, born into an educated, relatively educated family. You know, I have lots of advantages that occur and accrue and compound over time through disadvantaging others. And then in addition to that, there's the fortune, good and bad. And then there's virtuous effort, all of which in the mix, leading to whatever privilege one ends up having. Those of us who do have privilege, particularly I think, need to not be glib. And to not evade appropriate squirming.

[00:09:53] As we explore the answer to this question, how dare you, how do you attend to your own wellbeing when there's so much terribleness around you? You know, I invite us all to be anguished by this question. People find their own answers to this question. And I think it's really important to be careful about our judgments, about the answers that other people are finding at particular times and points in their lives. I think there's a place. I've done this myself, for frankly... Encouraging, inspiring, whatever, exhorting others to do what they can to make a better world and to expand their circle of moral concern, their circle empathic concern beyond, you know, their immediate family and neighbors and those who are like them. You know, I've talked about that recently in terms of an expanded view of compassion that is so needed these days, compassion that has a wider circle of

empathic concern. Expressed passionately and attends to the upstream sources of suffering that are systemic and structural rather than simply doing what we can in, you know, in addition to doing what we can, in the immediacy of the suffering that presents itself in front of us, including that and other people. You know, certainly I think there's a place for that.

[00:11:53] On the other hand, quoting the poet Miller-Williams, we do not know. What secret wars are going on down there where the spirit meets the bone in other people. We just don't know. We don't what they're carrying. We don't know what they are dealing with. We don't know what burdens are consuming their time and attention and energy and we don't know what fires they need to put out before they can even think about. Signing a petition for a fire department, you know, as worthy as that is. And I'm very supportive of those kind of efforts. So we just don't know.

[00:12:37] So in that context, I hope you'll... Be perhaps forgiving of me as I kind of offer a few things that seem in keeping with the Buddhist tradition and including aspects of it today that are about what's called engaged Buddhism, that are really aimed beyond personal development. Now certainly we have in the Buddhist tradition the deep teachings around the importance of loving-kindness and compassion. And happiness at the welfare of others in early Buddhism. And then we have a real flowering of compassion and great benevolence toward others, including to the point of the Bodhisattva vow that postpones and defers one's own personal awakening until all beings are fully awakened. And we have the flowering of that increasingly in the Mahayana tradition and including in Chan and Zen and onward. So we have all that clearly present. So other people are clearly taken into account in the Buddhist teachings, that's certainly present.

[00:13:46] But the fundamental question remains, you know, how dare we, or how do we, take one iota of attention and effort and time and money for our own wellbeing in the face of the needs of others? How do we do that? And in a context in which people have different answers here... There's a range of possibilities that I want to observe. And I'm in this range myself. There are people. I respect immensely who give it all up in the service of others. It's just so clear for them. They really kind of don't care about their own wellbeing. Most minimal level so that they can be of service to others. So they can keep on going, keep breathing, keep living, and being of service others. And we know people like that. And we people in the world, they typically are most known in religious settings of one kind or another, not always, but they're just crystal clear about all that. Some of them practice or function in lay settings, you know, as school teachers. People in healthcare, people in helping professions, people who are completely involved in service of one kind or another, agencies, non-profits, in all kinds of ways around the world. They are just given over to the welfare of others, 1,000%. And the only attention they have for themselves, and it's typically a real afterthought, is sort of like, what's the minimum I need to continue to wait and to continue to wake up tomorrow? To be of help for others. That's a very real option. I have not yet chosen that option. Most, the great majority of people have not yet chosen that option. And what do we do if, I suspect, like the great majority of people here, you have not yet chosen that option? You may choose it in this life, perhaps if there's any continuity at all of tendencies from life to life, it may be a choice in a future life. How do we live not having chosen that options? How do we be? What do we do?

[00:16:32] And a few things. Stand forth for me, and I offer this. From my heart. One is to. Take into account, along with the needs of others. The opportunities for others that could be kind of beyond needs even, could be served and furthered. What are the needs and the opportunities that could be furthered in the one being among 8 billion others who has your

name tag? Alongside whatever duties of care you experience or take on or whatever moral commitments, whatever loving kindness, whatever compassion, whatever delight in the welfare of others you hold, one of all that is there for you. What are your rights? What are your needs? What are in a very good sense claims on this life that are appropriate? What are... How are you for you? Is there a place to be for you, alongside being for others? I'm not saying you should be for you, alongside others. I'm saying that I. Incredibly honor people who really, pretty much totally set aside themselves for others and are joyfully lived by that. And for those of us who have not yet made that choice. What is there? What is wise? What Is True? If you haven't made that choice, and I have not yet made that choice, what is the place of being for you alongside being for others? How do we balance that? Morally, ethically, it's a general principle that our greatest duties are to those over whom we have the greatest power. So parents have great duties to their children. I'm a licensed psychologist. There's a fair amount of asymmetry of power. If you're in my office with me, I have a lot of duty to you. The one being we have the most power over is our future self. What kind of duty do we have?

[00:19:25] We're moved in a vast world. We cannot heal and prevent the suffering of all humans, let alone billions of other sentient creatures. How do we choose to allocate our very finite and limited time in this life, you know, 168 hours in a week? How do allocate that? Across all beings. And one basis for allocating that is, whose suffering do we feel most keenly? Whose needs do we feel most keen? Whose opportunities for flourishing and fulfillment and true happiness are most available to us, most accessible to us? Well, both from the standpoint of the beings upon whom we have the most impact and the beings whose needs and suffering and opportunities we feel most keenly. The being who wears your name tag is there.

[00:20:32] So, in a context in which we are both hands. We are not living mainly entirely for others at one end, nor are we living mainly or entirely for ourselves. We reject that. You know, fueled by wisdom and fueled by compassion, we reject that and we stand against those. Stand against those who exploit their power, exploit their privilege, delight in the harming of others, we reject them. And so in the both hand, how do we be? Day to day, how do we eat? What do we eat, how we spend our attention, our time, our money? How do we do that, what's helpfulness here? What's wisdom about that? Where's our heart called? Your heart, like mine, I suspect, is called both to protect yourself and to support yourself whose suffering you feel keenly and who you have a lot of power over. And meanwhile, also, so many others. How do we, what do we do? How do, how do we both end? So what are, what's some guidance about that, perhaps? In a frame of knowing that There's imperfection here in the guidance. We don't know, and we're a work in progress. We're a hot mess, we're evolving. Knowing that things change. Sometimes we shift more into, you know, serving and living for them.

[00:22:21] Other times we shift for a while and then serving and then living more for ourselves. There's a dynamism around all that. How do we do? Couple things, a few things here. Is to realize that if we are to sustain our care for others, it's helpful to care for ourselves along the way, pragmatically. I've learned from people who've made activism, basically their work in this world, and there's a recognition that you need to slow down. You need to find a sustainable pace. You need take care of your own needs. You have rights as well. That seems. To be true. Alongside that, I think it's really important to keep helping ourselves wake up from the trance of comfort. And to realize that it's really important, and I'm saying this to myself, to keep lifting our gaze to the horizon beyond our own immediate circle of comfort that's so easy to kind of incubate in and to be big enough and brave enough to keep in mind, oh my gosh, so much other suffering. You know, see if

you can rest in the discomfort. I'm uncomfortable. Can you rest in the discomfort of your own anguish, of wanting to do so much and only being able to do? While wanting to help yourself have a good life along the way. Discomfort.

[00:24:19] I've said, in terms of guidance, I think there is a place for taking care of oneself, you know, to make sure you have enough to eat, that you're protected in your own immediacy, your own rights and needs. The Buddha said it was okay and in fact a worthy thing to enjoy the wholesome fruits of one's life and efforts, a place where that. While second is to really, really, keep waking up from that trance of comfort. To look over the fence, to imagine there but for the grace of everything go I. To allow yourself to be shocked. If you can bear it, shocked frequently by just the enormity of the suffering in the world. Earlier today, I was just reflecting on the quantity worldwide. Well, sentient creatures who have the neurological basis for suffering the quantity. Millions a day, or maybe billions a day. Worldwide, to be Eden. Usually not out of necessity by other people, and occasionally me. So, you know, pierced, pierce me out of my own trance of my comfortable notes.

[00:25:49] Third, do what you can. Do what I can. That's sustainable. I think Many of us can do more. And then the question is what to do. I've sat around and here's where I'm gonna be a little irritated. I've been in many settings in which people I know well have really good hearts and really care about the world and are anguished by the state of the world and understand the systemic causes. We'll just sit around and bemoan it and develop their articulate critiques and then won't really do much at all. There's a lot we can do. Find organizations that you like, support them. If you have a little extra money, give it. Do you have \$1 a day, you know? Do you a penny a day? Little bit of time, little bit of support. So, support online. Do what we can. Often we can a lot. Speaking of online, in our hunter-gatherer bands, freeloaders and bullies were recognized and there were consequences for freeloading and bullying which is why. The human species essentially squeezed that out of the life inside the band while often aggressing on others.

[00:27:05] But in social media these days, there are no consequences for bullying and freeloading. Dumping costs on others is a form of freeload, externalizing costs like dumping your crud, your garbage in the river for others to deal with downstream. So we can do little things in all kinds of ways. We can be informed. We can bear witness with people who, in America, a third of the adults are not registered to vote. If for some reason you think that there's no difference, you know, at the highest level, I think observe the facts of the last 20 years and beyond that, there's always a difference locally. Do what we can, and find what there is to do, and know that you've done what you can. I think that's really important. And know that what you've can for yourself too, in addition to doing what you can for others. And then I'll just offer a fourth reflection.

[00:28:05] And again, I'm not trying to tell you what to do. These are real for me. If we are overwhelmed by grief and outrage, understandably, we are swept away by that river of suffering. Unable to help others. If we're just so invaded and helpless outrage is toxic, it impairs action. That's why the tyrants, the demagogues, the wannabe authoritarians, and they're, you know... Allies, try to make people dispirited. They try to make people overwhelmed. They tried to make people feel helpless. If we're shocked and frozen, we can't help ourselves, let alone others. We can't help the most immediate circle around us, let alone wider circles. So, you know, myself, I'm minded by the Buddhist description of his own process of awakening, not yet fully enlightened in which he said essentially I'm gonna paraphrase, all kinds of things. You know, I was racked, I was experiencing painful racking feelings, but they did not invade my mind and remain. If we allow, if, yes, there's a place

for understandably being shocked for a time, outraged for a, time just like frozen and immobilized by the enormity of it all, you know, a little of that goes a long way. I mean, just living in that is not. Good for you or helpful for others, in my opinion. And there's a place for titrating the overwhelm.

[00:29:57] So we preserve our capacity to act and be resourceful. I invite your own reflections. You know, as you could tell, I just freestyled this one, quick little summary. There's a range. At one end of a range is people who live, mainly if not entirely for the sake of others. At the other end of the range are people who lived only for themselves. Most of us are in the middle, and personally, I reject and stand against. Those who live only for themselves. That said, how do we live in the middle? In the both-and. How do we take into account our own privilege if we have it, as I do? What's the both and? And I just kind of was reflecting on four things that I think are in keeping with the Buddha Dharma and have been real for me.

[00:31:03] One is to establish for yourself what for you is a principled and also kind of stance towards yourself. The being among others who wears your name tag, taking into account your duties to those you have great power over and taking into an empathic response to one whose suffering and opportunities you feel most keenly. You know, clarify for yourself. What is that for you, realistically? And also, I will note in passing that as you clarify that, you're gonna have more inside and around you that you can offer to others.

[00:31:43] Second, routinely as best you can, wake up from the trance of comfort if you have access to that. And be open to and minded to, as Guilfranco put it, and I've quoted him recently, to stop for suffering. You know, when When you see the horror show on the news, take a moment before you change the channel and allow yourself to imagine what is it like to be a shrimp or raised in a factory farm or a chicken, you know, or a cow? What's it like to be human living, you now, in places that are torn by war and oppression and tyranny, you to open to that? I think that's important To the extent that's not you know, disabling for you.

[00:32:32] Third reflection was to do what you can for yourself and to do what you for the world and to stand against those who would want to make you feel despairing and disempowered and defeated even before you get out of bed. Fuck that. Claim the power you do have where you are in the time that you have. I say that to myself as well. And then last, be careful about not letting things invade your mind and remain and overwhelm you. You know, sometimes, maybe you're particularly sensitive or you've been traumatized yourself already by so many things. You know it's okay to let yourself be aware of what's challenging in small doses, just enough. It's okay. You know being immobilized or just overwhelmed by shock. Is understandable for a time, but midterm and longterm, it's not good.

[00:33:39] By the way, if you didn't know already, I have a request that as much as I enjoy them, you kind of save the floating emojis to the very end here because they can be sometimes distracting for people. Okay, so that's my riff. Being real. Theo writes, every time I start teaching meditation, the need for political action comes up. I have hard time doing both. I decided to alternate this here. Three months teaching, then three months volunteering. Rhythm for that. Writes, well, how does one not get dull in the midst of negative news on the media? I stopped watching TV since more than 15 years and daily unfollowed news channels on social media. How not to get dull? I think that's a very deep question actually. And even we could bring it down to the immediacy of the people we live

with. We habituate. The brain habituates. We get used to things. We kind of dull. We dull to it.

[00:34:38] Forgive me for quoting, I believe, Joseph Stalin here, who said, You know, the death of one person is a tragedy. The death of a million is a statistic. You know? He was a terrible, terrible despot. In any case, the point being, it's easy to become dull to the numbers. That's why I think it's helpful to bring it down to a real person. Imagine a real person. Imagine you. You know. You're. In any one of you Peckham. A hundred different really horrible situations in the world. You pick them. What would it be like to be that child, that person, that older person, that grieving person? You see a picture in the news, what's it like to that person? You know, we can open up to individuals and not be dulled by it. I also think it's really important to, you know, think globally, act locally. In other words, be aware of, you now, global stuff. It's real. What can I do in my own circle, right? What can do with the people I talk with every day? What can I do with my money, my time, my attention in the concrete immediacy? Brings it down to earth, helps it be more real.

[00:35:59] I want to offer, if I could, a fifth suggestion to what I've said so far, the four I've said so far, and very much in keeping with the Buddhist teachings, especially as they've evolved in the Tibetan and Zen traditions. It's to recognize the emptiness of phenomena. What that means is that. The person who lacks water, water is real, and the experience of thirst is real. And if we look closely, we see that the experience of thirst as made of parts that are connected and changing. We look closely. We see that conditions that led that person to lack water are made of part that are connect and changing and complex and dynamic and vast and extending in time. We don't do this as a spiritual bypass. No, no, no. We do it. Because as we do it, it allows our heart to widen and expand enough to hold the sorrows of the world. It's through this deepening insight. Vipassana means insight. Through this deepened insight that starts kind of conceptually like, yeah, that's actually true, made of parts that are connected and changing, thus empty of solidity. Empty of absolute existence. Yes, that's actually true. Both thoughts and things, mind and matter, have these three attributes, parts that are connected and changing.

[00:37:55] As we do that, we actually are increasingly able to stand alongside great suffering. We're able to be with it. We're extending and expanding our capacity to remain present with it. We're able to rest in being with it through the deepening and increasingly visceral and known in your body, in your belly and bones as true. Recognition of the truth of things as existing, empty, empty in a kind of technical sense that has a certain emotional resonance to it as well. That's a... That's a fifth suggestion. In keeping certainly with the Buddha Dharma. Things are real, things are real. The pain, the death, the needlessness, the disgusting. Greed and selfishness and exaltation of hatred and deliberate cruelty, that stuff's real. And it's empty. It exists emptily. And still, to quote, you know, the poet and Zen practitioner Leonard Cohen, who I quoted earlier on, paraphrasing here, he said it better, I know your load as heavy as you carry it through the night. People say it's empty. That doesn't make it light. Recognize emptiness while being heartbroken. And that's the intersection classically in Buddhism of great compassion and great equanimity. The great compassion is opening out with a broken heart and equanimity is the capacity to open out that sustains a broken-heart. That can act accordingly and skillfully. In sustainable ways in our world. I invite you into your own reflections, your own truth-telling for yourself about all this as it is for you. And I really appreciate you creating the occasion for us to be here together. Really, thank you.