

5_20_26 Talk*

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Rick Hanson: [00:00:00] What can you, what can I, what we truly count on? What can we really rely on? Including in a larger context, in which politically and economically and otherwise sometimes really feel, things feel like they're coming apart at the seams. Or in your own family system. For example... After both parents pass away, very often, the remaining siblings come apart. Things happen. The body gradually decays. A central metaphor for me, that's very felt and both felt and visual, is eddies swirling patterns of a river, patternings swirling, eddies in a stream. And everything, all phenomena just about, has the characteristics of being made of parts that are connected and changing and thus eddying along, whether it's a passing thought or a passing cloud or an enduring planet or galaxy or cluster of galaxies and so forth, eddies in a stream.

[00:01:18] And while this body is a particular congealed eddy in the streaming of life, that it like all other areas, will eventually disperse. So what can you really count on, right, or at least mainly count on? So I want to explore with you three fundamental pillars of practice in the Buddha Dharma that are offerings to us for what we can increasingly rely upon as these develop in our lives. And I want to use the kind of three traditional offerings from the Buddha, which I'll name in a moment, as a way into a more kind of potentially down to earth or everyday life application that might be useful for you. And since so many of the topics that people would hope I'd explore, really they are served in some ways by finding an increasingly stable footing in a shaky world. So, the first of the traditional three pillars of practice is described with the word in Pali, P-A-L-I, a key language of early Buddhism, of Sila. Sila can be translated as morality or virtue. It can be summarized in terms of precepts, like don't kill. Don't steal, don't lie, et cetera, et cetera.

[00:03:02] And one, so what I'd like to do, though, with you around this topic of sila, of virtue, which is fundamental, is to explore it from the standpoint of your own good intentions. In other words, when you look back in your life, and when you examine your life today, can you recognize the presence of good intentions? Even all the way back to you as a kid, a little kid. If you can do this without it being traumatizing, just imagining or recalling yourself as a young child and being aware of the good intentions you had to explore, to have fun, to play, to learn, to make. To be helpful. What a sweet little kid you once were.

[00:04:20] You know, sometimes it's very powerful to find pictures of yourself as a young child and really see the light in your eyes and who you still really are, you know, behind Thank you. Various veils and masks that we wear. Tuning into the good intent. What were the good intentions? The longings. They may have been expressed sometimes in problematic ways. Behind, underneath, bad behavior is a good intention. So, you you know, someone who's really trying to get the attention of parents. Away from, let's say, a younger sibling or an older sibling for themselves. You know, that's maybe problematic behavior, but the intent is good to feel cherished, to feel seen, to matter to others. These are good intentions.

[00:05:22] And then as you can recognize yourself as an adult, you can, I'm sure, recognize many, many good intentions, virtuous intentions, aims, values, goals. You know, efforts on behalf of good causes. You know we tend to be so hard on ourselves for the ways we fall short. Can we, please, also recognize what is the great majority of what has motivated you in your life, which is good intent? Now alongside good intentions, which, as you may have heard me use the metaphor, the noble ponies, the Noble Ponies taking us

along down the long road of life, well, da-da-da, trotting alongside those noble ponies are some naughty ponies or neurotic ponies. Right?

[00:06:31] The thing that's really important to be aware of is that the mind-brain-body process is very complex. Intentionality occurs at all kinds of levels, including at a cellular, even sub-cellular level, like the directedness, if you will, the functional purposefulness of mitochondria inside individual cells. It's normal to have like a complexity of motivations, many forces pulling and pushing us in many directions. It's just normal to all that and that means that much of the time alongside the noble ponies are trotting some neurotic ones. Well, we sometimes think that our nobility of intent, our goodness of intent is undermined or somehow tainted by the alongside-ness. Other motivations you know, alongside actually contributing and wanting to contribute could be the intent of, you know, being credited by other people or impressing them or getting their approval or setting up a kind of quid pro quo that you give in order to get.

[00:07:50] And I recognize every single one of those naughty ponies inside myself. And I mean naughty and a very friendly, kidding, joking. You know, you know supportive kind of way. So the point being just because there have been other motives you know more self-referenced motives maybe motives maybe more grounded in anger or greed or you know jealousy or envy or narcissistic hunger of one kind or another for social supplies that were lacking when you were young, still the intentions that were good and are good were good and were good meanwhile. All right, so this is one thing you can count on. Can you count on your own good intentions?

[00:08:54] And these days, can you count upon establishing good intentions. It's helpful sometimes to use the elements of the Eightfold Path that have to do with sila, with virtue, with restraint, with morality. Those elements are wise speech, wise livelihood, and wise action. You know, these are guidelines. You might want to review these guidelines or other guidelines for reestablishing your good intentions. These days... As something you can resort to, that can function as refuges, resorts of a sort, for you, that you can rely upon. To a question that came in, my view that I think is supported by science and practice is that underneath bad behavior is some kind of a good intention that we can recognize and understand. I think that's the case for people who are at the most problematic end of the moral spectrum, underneath it all.

[00:10:16] Now, the fact that underneath it all is good intent does not itself excuse bad behavior, particularly if it's sustained over time. You know. The two can be there, and whatever is the case for those people, you know, it's really helpful to look over here. You know, I find for myself that when I've been mistreated by those people and truly mistreated, I don't really get free in relationship to the mistreatment until I can find my own part in the matter, if there is any part at all, and second, I can't get free until I can find some kind of compassion. For those other beings.

[00:10:57] And for me, it's quite self-interested to explore both my part in the matter and compassion for them as a way to come to release and freedom and relationship to it. So yeah, I think there's some, there's a place for recognizing what's underneath it all in that other person. And when we're kind of negotiating with other people in everyday life, it's really useful to find the deep wants underneath the surface. Proxies that we're quarreling about all that said I'm gonna bring it back to you to you What can you rely upon? So you might want to take a fresh look at your Values your aims your intentions going forward in the years to come you know It could well be the case that there is much that you can't

change cannot change in the world around you politically or in, you know, a larger family system, maybe.

[00:12:00] But what can you establish in yourself as your intentions, your values, in relationship to conditions that you cannot change? Sometimes people stare at, you know, an election result or a political policy or a war, a world event. Sometimes a natural disaster and they feel understandably helpless in the face of that. Well, yeah, we are helpless, let's say, to the extent we are in the face of it, and yet we're not helpless in terms of our establishing our relationship to it and our intentions in regard to that.

[00:12:42] And there's a kind of nobility that's available in your good intentions. It's a kind of everyday nobility, you know, it's the nobility of the person who is plodding through their second job, in a day, grounded in their intentions to take care of their family. Doggedness of refusing to be bamboozled by people who are trying to pull the wool over your eyes, let's say. And even if it's not safe to reveal that you see what they're trying to do, deep down inside, you're holding on to your own clarity about what's actually true. You know, there's a nobility in the modesty of all that that you can count on. You can take refuge in, you know, you can rely upon.

[00:13:38] And related to this is a sense of your own goodness, you know, our good intentions come from a fundamental underlying wellspring of goodness, that... In my view, is inherent, deep down. Now, it may be very covered over by people at this end of the moral spectrum, all the way at the end of moral spectrum. But deep down inside, it's there. And it's their when we respond to difficulty, it's they're when we response to loss, and when we have compassion for others.

[00:14:19] And so, Can you be in touch with and push through the taboo against naming it to yourself that you are a fundamentally good person? There. I said it, you know, can you say for yourself, saying it with me, I am a fundamentally good person. What does it feel like to say it? Could you look in a mirror and say this to yourself? I am a fundamentally good person. That's something to to rely upon You know in the middle of conflicts with others and people accusing you of all things. After you kind of work through being initially rattled by it and you know mount some kind of defense or Coping and I relate to all that Can you slow it down to just go you know?

[00:15:34] In all that You know I've been a fundamentally good person and moving on to the next thing you can rely upon I have some things to learn. I have somethings to learn That takes me to the second great pillar of Buddhist practice which is called in Pali Samadhi and so with regard to that Samadhy is about training including deep meditative training that really trains the mind stream. Really, really develops it for you. I want to use this more loosely, the idea that in this life, are you learning? Can you trust in yourself as a learner? All right.

[00:16:32] Even if there have been some limitations, maybe it's taken a while for you as an old dog to learn some new tricks, eventually, you do have a learning curve. Eventually, you'll learn. And here, I wanna talk about first a quick story that I heard from someone who had been a producer of many, many teachers creating online programs of various people, and I could say that the word Samadhi is spelled S-A-M-A D-H-I, Samadhe. I think it's also a Sanskrit term, and Sila is spelled s-i-l-a, and you could also search on three pillars of Buddhist practice. So very briefly, I was nervous when I created my first online or my first audio programs for sale. This was back in 2006, I think, or seven. And after I was all done, I asked this very grizzled and experienced producer who had seen everybody what he

thought, and he paused and smiled, and he said, well, Rick, you know, I've seen all the teachers, I've see a lot of them, and I've really seen that there are two kinds of teachers, and I think you could apply this to two kinds of people in general. There are knowers and there are learners. And he said, you'll be okay.

[00:18:02] And so for you if you draw upon the term beginner's mind, you know from Suzuki Roshi who talked about how in the beginner's mind are many possibilities and the expert's mind are very few, can you trust in yourself as someone who you know after you kind of settle down, after you work your way out of getting contracted and positional and which I relate to and righteous and, you know, critical. And that settles down a little bit. Is there an openness to learning? Openness. And you may be aware of what's called the big five factors of personality. The idea that there are these five dimensions, kind of a range, like continuum, spectrum, on which people vary, you know, in terms of that dimension and where people are on those dimensions, all five of them kind of summarizes much of their personality. And there's a lot of validity to this approach, which is to say that it probably describes about two-thirds of a person on a good day, if that. So the acronym for this is typically OCEAN, O-C-E-A-N, and it stands for the five dimensions in personality theory of openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. And those are five. Words, single words that are big umbrella terms. You can look it up.

[00:19:35] The dimension I'm focusing on here is the first one, the big O, openness. And people vary in their openness. There's a sweet spot kind of in the middle where we're not totally flooded by external and internal inputs. Or on the other hand, we're really not closed off to external or internal inputs. There's this sweet spot in the middle of all that. And that sweet spot is really foundational for learning. So can you trust yourself, can you rely on your capacity, particularly when the noise settles down a little bit and you can get a little space between you and what's in your face, do you learn? Do you take responsibility for your part? Do you implement correction from now on? And it's really important to realize that there's a distinction between skillful correction and remorseful feelings of inadequacy. In other words, occasionally I think there are moral faults that deserve remorse.

[00:20:40] I've faced a fair amount of remorse in my own life. But that's really different from just skillful correction. A lot of times in this life, we didn't really do a bad thing, and we could be more skillful next time. And you get to decide what's the distinction for yourself. Between moral fault and skillful correction, but it's incredibly useful. And it's really useful when you're with other people because they may want you to admit to a moral fault, but no, deep inside, you're just gonna not do that again because it's skillful for them to not do that again, maybe, or to do something different in the future, and you can commit to that going forward from now on without accepting. The accusation of some kind of moral fault that you ought to feel guilty and ashamed about. You know, you can regret that you did something that impacted people in a harmful way without taking on board remorse or guilt or shame about it, if you so choose.

[00:21:50] Now, it may be that there are things that really are worth taking on boards, some remorse, or guilt, or shame, while also implementing skillful correction from now on. But that distinction is incredibly useful with other people. And also, when you're kind of getting on your high horse, and I know that horse well, with another person, maybe the way to look at it is not so much that there's some kind of moral failure over there. Rather, you're just asking them to be more skillful in some regard going forward, from now on. It's really useful. So learning. And then finishing on the learning point. I'm going to draw on the work of Jean Piaget, a great Swiss scholar, in child psychiatry. I don't know if he was a physician, but anyway, Jean Piage, he talked about two kinds of learning. So you can ask

yourself, how are you doing with these two kinds of learning? One kind is assimilation, where you find out There's new input, and you assimilate it into an existing structure. OK? That's fine.

[00:23:07] So maybe your existing structure with another person, is that mostly, you know, they do their best but occasionally they're kind of flaky. And, you deal with it. So yet again, they've been late to lunch. You assimilate this new event, this new piece of information, into your existing view of that person. Then sometimes though, we need to accommodate. We need to change our structure. To absorb new information. We have to make a shift.

[00:23:46] And sometimes, for example, with this other person, maybe you've just had a lot of hopes for something in the relationship, and there are, you know, things they've done, you kind of have assimilated that into we're good, we're fine, it's just a little rocky. And then sometimes what happens is the light bulb goes off and you look at that other person and you go, Wow, you really have no intentio to changing in this regard. Or, wow, you're really not very interested in me. You're really interested in me as an audience for what you're really interesting in, which is yourself. Oh, accommodation.

[00:24:28] So sometimes we need to learn in ways that accommodate. A version of this is maybe your view has been that you are flawed and are tainted. You are spoiled. You are damaged goods, fundamentally broken. Maybe you have that view of yourself as a basically bad person. And you assimilate. You have assimilated events and compliments and accomplishments into that underlying frame of reference that, you know, really inferior. But then, eventually... You listen to me or somebody else, or you just, the light bulb goes off, and you realize, dang, I've been viewing myself in a fundamentally mistaken way.

[00:25:28] And finally, I'm going to accommodate, I'm gonna shift my self-concept, and deeper than concept, my self sense, my sense of who I am. That's a kind of learning. So here we have the second pillar. Buddhist practice, Samadhi, which describes a process of training, and I'm applying it in everyday life to you as a learner. Can you trust yourself? Can you count on yourself as a Learner, including going forward in life? One of the things that helps us be learners is to remain open and to be willing to accommodate, not just to simulate, but accommodate and to shift and to budge.

[00:26:16] And related to that to make ourselves available to new inputs, reading new things, listening to new people, checking stuff out on YouTube, going to Dharma Talks, you know, just having a mind that's open, that's exploring, trying new things. A couple weeks ago, we had David Sloan Wilson in here. An extremely esteemed and historic figure in biology in terms of particularly, you know, updating Darwinian evolutionary models to think about selection at multiple levels, the individual, the group, the culture, and so forth, and then applying that more broadly. And he emphasized the point that across all systems, evolution proceeds through these three aspects. Evolution proceeds through variation, having multiple individuals in a species who have different characteristics, and then selection that operates biologically and it can operate personally, and retention of whatever it is you selected so increasingly you are that way going forward.

[00:27:32] Well, one of the foundational elements for learning, therefore, is exposing yourself to a variety of influences. You know and not so that you become like a will-o-the-wisp twisting in the wind, but that You know new things are coming your way Can you trust yourself to be someone who learns? Okay, and Then we have the third pillar of Buddhist practice panya P-a-n-n a panya standing for wisdom I should say before I go further that two of the eight elements in the Eightfold Path are specifically related to,

actually three of the Eight Elements are specifically related to learning or samadhi or training, which is to say right mindfulness, right concentration and right effort in the mind.

[00:28:33] So if you're interested in that, I'll just name that along the way here. Okay, all right, so then we have the third element, wisdom, and here's where I want to raise for you... Can you rely on what you know to be true? Right? To go back to learning for a moment, I love this quotation apparently from Maynard Keynes who founded Keynesian Economics. It's kind of this august British intellectual. And this comment is gendered, which kind of for me adds to the way it was said as I've understood the quotation. So Keynes said, probably at some posh dinner party in Mayfair in London or something, He said, when the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir? I love that sir dropped in at the very end. When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir? Okay. So that goes to learning and accommodation, changing your mind. Okay.

[00:29:53] Now. Along the way, right, you've learned things, you've realized some things, and doubt is very pernicious, because anything can be doubted. You know, again and again, we know things, we learn things, but we somehow doubt them. You know? We learn that, gosh, exercise is good for us. We learn that... We have to be extremely careful about alcohol. We learn that there's no cheese down the tunnel of certain kinds of arguments with our partner or our adult kids. We just learn that or we learn that every day is better if it begins with a minute or more meditation.

[00:30:51] You know, can you rely on what you've learned, what you know to be true, you know, on your wisdom, in other words? Wisdom sometimes comes in the form of recognizing what other people say as to be True, right? So earlier today, I had a little back and forth with someone I respect a lot, and this person made the comment that in their personal practice, for various reasons that I personally can relate to a lot that surrender is an important element of practice for them.

[00:31:40] And... Confess a little bit here, and this goes to some traditional Buddhist themes that I might be exploring with you down the road, the recognition of empty, of not-self, the recognition that everything is connected and changing, everything is an eddy in the stream, takes one out often into a sense of the empty nature of everything and thus kind of vastness. So I'm sort of prone in that direction. I love nature. I love the sense of the vastness. I love imagining the universe, as you know. Right? Go where no one has ever gone before, that's kind of natural to me.

[00:32:31] This person was saying for themselves that they've been practicing a lot with surrender, which involves a release of intentionality. And intentionality is very strong in me. And so it just kind of hit me like do do do-do-do do-doodoo I've got something to learn here. There's some wisdom in what my friend was talking about that I could recognize over there. I could recognize, aha, that's something to pay more attention to, to appreciate as something I know to be true.

[00:33:11] You know, I think it might have been Oprah who would ask people, so what's one thing you know for sure is true? Those are things we rely on. And these elements of wisdom, of pañña, in the Eightfold Path, are approached through wise intention and wise view. Wise view is summarized. Obviously, the whole of the Buddha dharma is wise view, and in particular, the Four Noble Truths are highlighted, in which they're, the way I'll say it, is this. In which there's a recognition of the challenging aspects of life, and second, a recognition that when we bring craving to that which is challenging, or bring craving in general, that creates suffering.

[00:34:05] Third, there's the recognition that we can gradually train so that there's less and less craving, and thus less and less suffering, and fourth, we appreciate that there's an actual specific path. That can guide us in our training, into the release of craving, the lessening of craving and ultimate freedom from craving altogether and thus suffering altogether.

[00:34:31] So that's the summary of wise view in early Buddhism. I'm just pointing you in that direction, but in particular, I'm inviting you to consider for yourself, what for you are those things you know to be true? Some of them are probably good news, you know, that you can know are true, and others are things that you're trying to help stabilize in yourself to rest in and rely upon. For example, do you know if it's true that you are liked? That there is at least one being. It might be your dog who likes you. Who's fond of you? It's not a perfect relationship, maybe there are ups and downs, but you're actually liked. What is it like to feel liked? Can you know that you are liked? Or even further, you know, like your cat. I'm seeing your cat there, Janet. I'm very fond of cats, you know. And to feel cared about. Do you know that you are cared about? Can you let the felt knowing, hi Ani, that's great, sink in too, right? That a thing for you to know.

[00:36:06] For me it was really a breakthrough a few years ago to actually say to myself repeatedly and to feel it that I am liked enough. I would still like to be liked even more, but it arises that pony is still trotting down the road, in which the noble pony really does feel a sufficiency of liked-ness. I am liked enough. So whatever, now it may be true, I want to be clear. This is not about bypassing a genuine lack of being loved or liked or cared about in other ways. We're not trying to deny it. I'm just trying to say if there is some good news. That you can afford to recognize as true. Can you help yourself recognize that? So I kind of want to sum up here with a quick review and a twist, and then respond to some of the questions and comments that have come through here.

[00:37:10] So we've been exploring the broad question for you of, what can you count on these days? As the Buddha pointed out, there's much that we cannot count on. His final words could be translated by Stephen Batchelor as, Things fall apart. Tread the path with care. So in that larger context, in the Buddha's long journey, as I talked about with regard to the unconditioned before our formal beginning, he was very interested in the ultimate reaches of reality altogether and to find a ground, an underlying absolute ground that he took his fundamental stand in. A ground that was not subject to change, not subject arising and passing away, as an ultimate kind of something he could count on, and it's not a something.

[00:38:12] And in any case, my point being there, that he was searching for what he could truly count on. Here, we're talking about things we can count on a lot, and I use the three pillars of Buddhist practice, virtue, training, and wisdom. I'm translating the traditional terms, *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*, in those ways, virtue, training and wisdom. And what could we count on in each of those? And I talked about recognizing your own good intentions in terms of virtue, recognizing your own learning, and yourself as a learner, and strengthening that too, with regard to training, and recognizing what you really know in your bones. Belly and bones is actually true, the good news that is actually true, that you can trust and rely upon.

[00:39:08] And then if you, as my little twist here, look back on your life, as you look back on your live, I'm going to state three questions. You can adapt the questions as you like, and you can use these questions as a way of reviewing your life factually. No praise, no

blame, factually, and you could use these three questions as a ways to guide each day. All right, so the first question is, did I bring my heart to it? Did I bring my heart to it? In other words, was there warm-heartedness? Was there courage? Did you put skin in the game? Were you wholehearted? Were you sincere in the ways that you were? Did I bring my heart to it? And it's really important to appreciate. That I think there are extremely rare beings who are just born, completely cooked, Ananda Mayama, perhaps, a few others, but most of us, me included, are works in progress.

[00:40:49] So it's okay if you look back and you cannot answer the question, yes, completely. Okay. But in the ways that you did, And quite likely, on the whole, did I bring my heart to it. Second question, did I make efforts? Not perfectly, not all the time, but did you try? Sometimes, yeah, we kind of phone it in, but on the whole, did you make efforts? Did you try, did you stick with stuff, did you endure, did you persevere? You know? Did you put in a fair day's work? You don't have to be heroic to make efforts. Did I make efforts?

[00:41:51] And third question, did I learn along the way? If you can look back on your life, and many of us here are past the midpoint of the lifespan, can you look back and credit yourself for the ways in which you can answer yes to those three questions? And maybe there's a bit of a wince when you look. About this or that, maybe there's an exception to the general trend that you wince when you look at. Okay, can you learn from that? And apply that wince as you go forward from here. Yeah These are the things, these are among the things that we can truly count on. You know, we can count on virtue and good intent. You know we can on count on training.

[00:43:20] We can count on the accumulation of wisdom and count on those things and you can count on those qualities in yourself as currents that are living through you and which are increasingly strengthened and we are increasingly given over to in our practice with each other. Okay. And you might find, as I finish here, that if you're troubled by what's happening around you, you know. It's interesting, on a retreat I was on recently, I just became aware of the number of times or a number of time in my life in which I had been attacked. Occasionally physically, mainly not physically, but definitely attacked. And I've had a very privileged existence, right? And there are many, many people who have been attacked much more than I have. And we become aware, as well, sometimes that we're being let down by someone. They're just kind of falling short of a reasonable standard and they're going to continue to fall short and whatever, we're in the middle of something or maybe we look at it in our political climate and we just shake our head in despair. It can be very helpful to be with that part of reality and to be kind of that phase in sort of events unfolding and then at some point. And sometimes kind of quickly to look inside to what you can truly count on in yourself.

[00:45:09] And what you can truly count on in reality all together. You know, alongside these other things that are falling apart or have clearly, you know, malentent, alongside those aspects, there are so many other things that are still going okay. Typically without much fanfare. So there's that moment where there's a turning. There's a turn away from how we're being let down or mistreated or things are falling apart and in consequential ways. Sometimes it's the body. We age, eventually we acquire certain conditions that are gonna be the ones that we're gonna ride all the way out until the lights go out. The more things fall apart, the more important it is to turn toward what you can truly count on, including the things that we've explored here, and to know where that moment is, that turn toward, what you could truly count, on being real for you, including in relationships with other people, and it's good.

