

6_10_26 Talk*

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

Rick Hanson: [00:00:00] Well, I'm gonna do an experiment with you. And I'm a little nervous about this. I hope it doesn't go too badly. What I'd like to do is to go through and kind of talk through a fairly short sutra or sutta from early Buddhism. As context here, the Buddha lived and taught for many years, probably close to 80 or so. And his teachings were listened to and essentially memorized by the monastics of his time. And then those memorized versions of his teachings, including some commentaries from other people, and we'll be hearing one of those tonight, were then passed down in an oral tradition for hundreds of years until written records survived. That is the basis for the canon, the collection of sutras and teachings that we have today. That we're. Written down originally in several languages, perhaps the one that's best known as Pali, P-A-L-I, which gives us the Pali canon, a collection of teachings from early Buddhism. I think of it as OG Buddhism, original gangster, old guard, original Buddhism.

[00:01:20] And I'm often struck by the degree to which sometimes people in Tibetan or Zen in our modern mindfulness settings. Just are not aware of the root teachings that really began this whole lineage. And I find these original teachings to be very psychological, rarely cosmic, really down to earth and unflinching, unafraid in the directness of the analysis of the mental the processes that create suffering and harm for ourselves and others, and the practices. That we can engage. Everyone is invited to engage these practices that can lead increasingly to freedom and awakening and the highest happiness, which is peace, to quote the Buddha. So I'm gonna go through the Sutta with you. Let's recognize that it's probably an imperfect reconstruction of the exact words that were used. I'm sure there was some editing that slipped into the record here. Maybe some sections were kind of moved around. I'm going to deliberately glide right past some major sections of this sutta to really focus on the parts that I think are most down-to-earth and most relevant for our own practice. Are you ready? I hope you'll go along with me on this ride. We'll see how it turns out.

[00:02:44] Early on in my own encounter with Buddhism, starting in a serious way, starting around 30 years ago, after a while I began to realize that I'd been taught Buddhist light and so much. Was fundamental, penetrating, radical, profound, edgy in early Buddhism was kind of left out. It was all watered down. Yeah, the essence of Buddhist light is be aware and be nice. That's better than the alternative. But I wish there'd been more respect in those teaching traditions that I first encountered for the capacity of regular people to actually grasp and Apple with these. Teachings of the Buddha, which he just offered to everybody in his time. And also I just think, I owe you this. I owe this to just from time to time, yeah, let's get into it. So here we go. And I recognize that the translator, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, sometimes referred to as Ajahn Jeff, who's the abbot of a really significant Buddha center down in San Diego area in Southern California, he's asked, you know, he said there's a little bit of more of an updated. Website. So that's the one I'm going to speak from. And as with everything, see for yourself and see what touches your heart for me.

[00:04:05] As you could tell, you know, I get really touched by these real people. As best we gather today, 2,500 years later, who are grappling with the same questions that we're grappling with in everyday life. What makes me happy? What makes my cranky? What makes them cranky, and how can I train and practice in ways that are helpful to myself and others? This comes from the Manjima Nikaya. Nikāya means collection of teachings. Majjhima means middle length, all right? And this is Majjhimanikāya 44. And the

translator's note is that this is mainly a conversation with the nun, Dhammadinā. And I particularly love that this is an interaction with a very awakened woman, Dhyamadinā, while acknowledging the very patriarchal time in which the Buddha arose, and the very unfortunate. Moving away from the Bhikkhuni tradition in early Buddhism, in which nuns had a serious monastic order, significant one, and a lack of that, and terrible, to me, very un-Buddhist resistance to full ordination of women as monastics, until very recently with people who are really supporting progress in that area. That said, Damodina.

[00:05:32] So we have the Buddha praised Dhammadena, the nun, as the foremost Dhamma teacher among his nun disciples. Dhamm and Dharma are synonymous. In this discourse, she answers questions put to her by a layman, Visakha, who, according to the commentary, was her former husband, a merchant of Rajagaha, and a non-returner. A, I love the fact that she's schooling her former husbands. I as the husband gets routinely schooled by his wife and current wife. And the term non-returner has to do with a frame of reference, which you don't have to believe in, but it's the frame of a reference, cosmologically in which there are rounds of birth and death and rebirth. And Chögyam Trungpa answered the question of, well, if there's no self, what is reborn, he said, your bad habits. I think that's pretty comical, but without getting into all the metaphysics of this, there are kind of four levels of awakening identified in early Buddhism. Someone who is a stream enterer, entering the stream who will have seven more births.

[00:06:50] And then we have someone who is a one-time returner, a once returner who will one more birth because they're so far along. Then we have a non-returner, someone who will be reborn in heavenly realms, but not this earthly plane. And then fourth and highest, we have the Arahant, a one who is completely released and all the causes and conditions that lead to rebirth. Have dissipated much like a candle or a fire dissipates when there is no longer any fuel for it. That's the framework here. Okay, so to continue, I have heard, so detail, the person who says I have heard is typically the Buddhist cousin Ananda who memorized all these teachings and at the first sort of major gathering of the key people. After the Buddha died, people recited the teachings so that they could be memorized and passed on from generation to generation to generations. So think about the custodial stewardship here. I mean the seriousness in which people guarded and protected and passed freely. There are no secret teachings in early Buddhism. Passed on freely, these precious teachings, having to do with the liberation and awakening of all beings. Wow, thank you. Thank you, all those who were involved in memorizing, chanting, and teaching these teachings.

[00:08:27] So probably Ananda says, I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One, the Buddha, was staying near Rajagaha in the bamboo forest, the squirrel's sanctuary. I just love kind of the locating of all this. And then Visakha, the lay follower, went to Damodena, the nun, and on arrival, having bowed down to her, sat to one side. Okay, now we're getting in to the heart of the matter here, the teachings. Okay? As he was sitting there, he said to her self-identification, self-identification, it is said, lady, which self-identified is described by the Blessed One.

[00:09:11] So right here, right at the heart the matter. What is... What to be take to be self, and what are the ways in which selfing, taking things personally, wanting to possess, identifying, getting caught up in, you know, grievances, narcissistic injury from others, how does that create suffering? What is the fundamental process of self? Pretty freaking deep, and psychologists today are still banging away at that one. So Damodina responds. She says, there are these five clinging aggregates, friend Visakha, form, feeling, perception,

fabrications in general, I'll explain, and consciousness. The word aggregate is a funny word.

[00:10:14] I'm gonna zero in on the view in early Buddhism that everything boils down to these five things, that reality is actually made of these five elements. Physical reality involves form, bare physical reality, which we now understand involves energy and matter together. Okay, form, and now we're moving into mental processes. The form. A reality also involves just the bare perception, the bare awareness that something is happening, something is here, okay? Then we have feeling, which is not about emotion, it's about what psychologists today call hedonic tone, which we'll be getting into a little later. The sense of things as pleasant or unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. That's the feeling ever good, which was really key. Because the sense of something as pleasant or unpleasant is, you know, tends to drive the craving and clinging that creates a lot of suffering and harm. So creating in our practice more of a kind of shock absorber or buffer or mud room in the mind or space between the hedonic tone of experiences and the drivenness that tends to follow after that, creating more of that space is really central to practice.

[00:11:41] Okay So we have essentially to go on. Then there's perception, which is labeling and memory, categorizing, you know, it's a dog, not a cat. It's a tail, only the tail, for example, perception. Then we have the so-called fabrications. They're just all the other mishegas in the mind. All the thoughts, all the feelings, all the desires, the images, or extreme sorrows, and neogram types. And all the rest of that, and then we have consciousness, which is not taken here, is some kind of infinite cosmic consciousness, but really is sort of like ordinary awareness. The Buddha basically says, you know, who you take yourself to be, boils down to these five elements. Okay?

[00:12:36] So then we continue, saying, Yes, lady. Visakha, the lay follower, delighted and rejoiced in what Damodina the nun had said. Then he asked her a further question. The origination of self-identification, the origination of self identification, it is said, lady, which origination of self identifications is described by the Blessed One, the Buddha. Here we go. The craving that makes for further becoming. Accompanied by passion and delight, relishing now here and now there. In other words, three things, craving for sensual pleasure, craving for becoming, and craving for non-becoming. This, for Anvisakha, is the origination of self-identification described by the Blessed One. So when we get a sense of self... And we look at it closely. The Buddha's not asking us to take anything on faith or belief, but to look directly. When we observe our mind stream. We can observe an ongoingness, and in the ongoingness of the mind stream, we can observe motivational motivations underneath it all that could be sorted into three types. The motivation for kind of immediate pleasure, or the reduction immediately of pain, really direct.

[00:14:21] And you can see that fundamental motivation in animals with an increasingly primitive or simple nervous system. The immediacy of approaching that which is pleasurable in a crab or a frog or a mouse, and then the withdrawal from what is unpleasant, what is painful, frog, crab, or mouse. Then second. And this is really useful, especially for people like me who are pretty goal-directed. There is the craving for becoming, for achieving certain goals, for constructing a future self who is fill in the blank, richer, better looking, happier, more loved, more famous. Craving for becoming. And if you watch closely, you can see that there's a lot of subtle and not so subtle contraction, pressure, stress, suffering, harms to self and others, from that... Powerful, powerful movement toward becoming. Now, to preview a really important point, the Buddha does not say that desire per se is bad.

[00:15:54] In fact, he calls out wholesome desire. And technically, the word in Pali for problematic craving is tanna. The word for wholesome desires, such as the desire that others prosper and flourish and be happy, is chanda. So there's a place for wholesome desire. But the Buddha keeps calling us to, very pragmatically, what are the results? When you pursue your purposes, are they wholesome purposes? And you decide if your purposes your aims, your goals, your values are good ones. I know for myself that, and I joke about one road, two ponies, you know the noble pony and the naughty pony? And we can be aware of two kinds of motives at the same time. We're in conversation with another person and there are maybe some noble motives in that conversation that involve kindness and standing up for ourselves in appropriate ways.

[00:17:04] And then on the other hand, there could be naughty or neurotic pony purposes running alongside it about proving your superiority or driving home your point or enacting a certain aggrieved... Ill will, that wants to punish that other person, you know, for not agreeing with you from the start, both of those can be present. And over time, we can sort out for ourselves what are wise intentions, wise purposes, wholesome purposes from the ones that are not so much. First question.

[00:17:38] Second, can we pursue our wholesome, wise, purposes in wholesome and wise ways? And here too. See for ourselves. I think back on my wholesome purposes of helping our kids succeed in school and be appropriately, you know, make appropriate efforts there. But I can see that some of the time, and they never let me forget this one, when I was probably a forest who wrote some kind of book report and said, well, what do you think, Dad? He was probably sixth grade or so. And I went, oh, OK, and I just... Line edited it like people line edited me, you know, marked it up and my wholesome intent there, you know to help him become a better writer was pursued in a really dumb way. You know, he never let me talk to him about his schoolwork again for at least a while. Anyway, so that's the second question. You know if you have your wise and wholesome values, okay, are you pursuing them in wise and awesome ways?

[00:18:43] And then the third question is Even with wise and wholesome purposes pursued in wise and whole some ways, can you be at peace fundamentally with whatever happens? That underlying peacefulness may include understandable disappointment, might include understandable moral outrage at the actions of others, but underneath it all, underneath it, all in the core of your own being. Can you find a stillness and a vastness and a contentment there and an ongoingness of lovingness, no matter what happens? This is aspirational. This is the work we do, to find those wholesome-wise purposes, pursued and wholesome wise means, with a fundamental, increasingly unconditional inner peace regarding whatever happens. These teachings call us to that, in our relationship to what's going through our mind. All right, so how do we do it? So Visakha continues, the cessation of self-identification, the cessation, of self identification, it is said, lady, which cessation of self identifications is described by the Blessed One? Check out these words, the remainderless. Fading and cessation, renunciation, relinquishment, release, and letting go of that very craving. Craving for pleasure, craving for becoming, craving from non-becoming. Non-becoming is sort of a wish that can arise if people are suicidal to just not be here anymore. So craving though, especially craving for becoming, the remainderless fading away of that. This, friends Vizagha, is the cessation of self-identification described by the Blessed One.

[00:20:49] So we're talking here about a remainderless... Fading in cessation. We're talking about a renunciation of this engine of craving that causes so much suffering and

harm. Just feel the weight of those words. Remainderless, fading away of this craving. What do you feel when you imagine the remainderless, fading away of craving in the way it is meant here, in your case. What comes up for me is a sense of like, wow, that would be big, you know, and also a sense of peacefulness when I kind of tune into what that would feel like. So continuing, which way of practice leading to the cessation of self-identification is described by the Buddha? And the answer from Damodina is precisely this noble eightfold path consisting of right view, right resolve or intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This, Franvi Sarka, is the way of practice leading to the cessation of the mind. Of self-identification described by the Blessed One.

[00:22:27] So the Buddha is not just describing our problem. He is offering a path of practice with eight elements in it that lead to the cessation of that craving. So then you might ask yourself, Okay, eight suggestions from Coach Buddha, Dr. Buddha, Right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. Which of these for you is pretty strong these days? And, you know, which of these call to you as maybe worthy of some greater effort or focus on your part? That's a good question. All right, so I'm going to do a little more and then open it up again.

[00:23:32] So I'm gonna move ahead to the question, but lady, how does self-identification view come about? There is the case, friend Visakha, where an uninstructed, run-of-the-mill person who has no regard for noble ones, is not well versed or disciplined in their Dharma, or Dhamma, who has not regard for people of integrity, is NOT well versed or disciplined in their Dhamm, assumes that form, in other words the body, is the Self, or the self as possessing the body. Or the body as in the self, or the self as in body. These actually are very cool four distinct ways to investigate your own experience. In other words, do you assume that your body is the self? Do you assume alternately that yourself possesses your body. Or do you presume that your body is in the self or that yourself is in the body?

[00:24:51] And then similarly, we have these four ways of talking about this with regard to the hedonic tones of experience, the feeling tones as pleasant, unpleasant, or neither. We have the same structure with regard perception, labeling, memory, categorizing. We have same construction, the same opportunity for investigation with regard all the other thoughts and feelings and memories, hopes and illusions, you know, in the mind. And we had the same kind of investigation with consciousness. Do we assume that consciousness is the Self, or do we assume that the Self possesses consciousness, or do we think that consciousness is in the Self or the Self is in consciousness? See the strategy here, it's very characteristic of early Buddhism, which... Drives some people crazy because it's kind of analytical and might seem really heady, but it's really about directly observing what it's like to be you. And in that observing and then investigating, becoming increasingly free.

[00:26:04] And so then Damodina continues that this release of self-identification, this fading away, this relinquishment of self identification is supported. By not assuming that the body and the self are equivalent, or not identifying with hedonic tones as self, not identifying perceptions as self. Not identifying with thoughts, feelings, and other activities as self and not identifying consciousness as self There is an ongoingness of personing. Crucial point. And... There is a body mind process with a sense of self associated with it. And if we look closely though, we actually, when we deconstruct, we can never find the basis for the presumed, you know, unified and during an independent entity that we take to be I or me. It's important, as we appreciate this, that, as the teacher put it in writing, love yourself, just don't love yourself. In other words, you're here, you in the broadest sense, you as a person are here. You exist as a Person, a body-mind process with continuity over

time. Arising based on causes and conditions, and fading away eventually. All eddies disperse in the stream of reality. Eventually, that is occurring.

[00:27:51] And as we look closely with insight, with Vipassana, into what it's actually like to be ourselves, we start realizing, oh, there's this ongoing streaming of mental activity, and when it is related to in a lighter way with less contraction, more awareness of the bigger picture, more of a sense of openness and vastness and emptying out than we explored in meditation, oh, I suffer less, I'm more peaceful and I get into fewer wrangles with others. That's the very down-to-earth result. Of this kind of increasing insight into your own stream of consciousness. I find that this text is really worth some time. There's some technical stuff in it about really advanced meditative states leading to cessation of ordinary consciousness and then return that you could maybe glide past or slow down and really absorb in the footnotes. I wanted to respect you enough. To dive into this more fundamental material and to invite you, as the Buddha invited everyone, to dive in to it yourself and to see for yourself what, you know, speaks to you here. Is there a danger in these teachings of depersonalization? Yeah.

[00:29:26] In other words, I think it's important, especially if a person is already sort of fragmented or fractured, sometimes as a result of trauma, to be careful with this material. On the other hand, interestingly, as we lighten up about our self, There's more of a basis you'll find for caring for yourself broadly as a person. You know, when we interact with others, if we conventionally presume that there's some kind of entity in there behind their eyes who is just making us mad, then we're often gonna get caught up in cycles of reactivity with that other person.

[00:30:18] On the other hand, if we can recognize that over there, a lot of stuff is happening, a lot sub-personalities are in the mix, there are multiple selves over there in that other and they're the result of complex history, causes and conditions swirling through that person right now. You know, if we can look at them in more that way, we become more skillful about dealing with the, you know, the specific forces moving through them and we give them more breathing room. There's more of a buffer. There is more spaciousness between us and them. And also I should add that as we really feed ourselves. With appropriate social supplies that help us to feel valued and included and loved. And as we address so-called narcissistic injuries that many of us, including me, suffer in childhood and even adulthood, where we feel dismissed or put down by or rejected or attacked by others, as we deliberately internalize healthy experiences of being seen and valued. Even cherished by other beings, as we actually take those in, we feed the person who longs for those experiences and needs those experiences, and as we feed that inner being, the person we are, the sense of self relaxes, and people become less self-preoccupied. They become less selfish over time. It's a really important point, and I think there are a lot of virtual circles. That push away and somehow put, you know, look down on the important needs that people have to feel recognized and wanted and valued because they think that'll just feed the ego. Well, yeah, it could just feed ego, but most people actually, especially with a little, you know instruction or encouragement, take in the caring and the valuing coming to them from other people to gradually fill that hole in their heart.

[00:32:30] So they feel increasingly filled up from the inside out and less needy about getting self-referential, self-oriented supplies from other people over time. Really important point. Why is it so difficult to let go of the desire to be happy? I don't think the Buddha is counseling us or Dhamma and Dina to let go of that desire to be happening. There's a lot of teaching in early Buddhism about the Buddha's rejection. The asceticism of the

traditions of his time where there was denial of the ordinary desire to be happy and the Buddha actually talks about the importance of the happiness visible in this present life. It's okay and much as out of you know for example among the four so-called heavenly abodes or immeasurables of compassion, kindness, equanimity. Happiness for the happiness of others. There's an appreciation of the desire for others to be happy. That's a wholesome desire. Well, you know, in the desire for all beings to be safe and happy and healthy and to live with ease, all beings include yourself. So that's really okay.

[00:33:49] And that's where I think the metaphor of the noble pony and the naughty pony or the neurotic pony is quite useful because There can be that desire for our own happiness that has a quality of compassion in it and a quality justice in it. Fairness and decency, sticking up for our rights, much as we recognize the rights of others. You know, that I would call the noble pony in terms of the desire to be happy yourself. The desire to actualize and to fulfill your talents, your abilities, to allow them to come into being. To realize that your own personal happiness is the foundation for spiritual practice. You know, when you're really unhappy, it's hard to awaken. Personal happiness, including the quality of not just sukka, which is basic happiness, but blissfulness, piti in Pali, these are factors of awakening, right? We can value and appreciate those forms of happiness, and we can distinguish between those noble motivations for happiness from the more problematic ones that want to be happy at the expense of others or want to have short-term happiness through various things, intoxications included, that yeah, bring momentary relief and pleasure, but carry a long-term price. I love the proverb embedded in the Dhammapada, which says that one is not wise because one can recite the scriptures. One is truly wise. Who can choose a greater happiness over a lesser one. And it is that choosing of a greater happiness for ourselves, entwined of course and interdependent with others, that is the really wholesome and wise desire for happiness. Really important.

[00:35:42] There is a particular teaching in a footnote, I think it's footnote three, that landed for me personally. So I wanna kind of call it out. And the framing of it is in reference to deep, deep meditative practice, which has to do with sort of the return from the cessation of ordinary consciousness. I have never experienced that. I know multiple people who have and have been really supported by it and that meditative attainment or event is highly valued, especially in early Buddhism. That said, the footnoted point is to appreciate that there are sort of three major characteristics of existing. Notably, impermanence, interdependence, and the inevitability of pain or disappointment. Eh, dukkha, okay? Some people are very engaged with an awareness of impermanence. And they are, I'm gonna check the footnote. Footnote number two. Okay.

[00:37:07] If you're particularly drawn to an awareness of impermanence, you might, especially when you're really in touch with impermanence, have a sense that in reality there are no signs, there is nothing stable. And finding comfort with this deepens in part as we shore up our sense of ourselves being okay as a person. You may relate to what I'm saying, you may not relate to it. Either one is okay. Okay, those who are focused on the theme of dukkha which Tony Sarubiku translates as stress. Those who have a particular awareness of, you know, stress or that which is unsatisfactory, you know the inevitability of that which we like will change, the inevitability of pain. Those who are particularly aware of that aspect of existing. Can be particularly drawn to a sense of being undirected and might gain particular value from tuning into a sense of being un-directed. This has been very useful recently for me.

[00:38:40] And then third, in footnote two, those who have been focusing on the theme of interdependence, interbeing, are not so You know, been really releasing the sense of self,

the sense taking things personally, might increasingly have a sense of what could be called emptiness, or, you know, vastness that is sort of absolute and impersonal. I'm just tossing this out there. You may not relate to it. It's really okay. For myself, I've practiced a lot with relaxing the sense itself. While caring for and tending to the person process ongoing. And it's been really... So I have a pretty full growing but pretty full sense of emptiness. And... Given my goal-directed accomplishing nature, hoy, really facing dukkha and exploring the value of being undirected in the flow of everyday life in a healthy way, kind of lived by everything, all things coming through, living through us rather than the self top-down being goal- directed, hoy, that's been really useful for me personally. So I just want to offer these out there. It might be, you know, kind of real abstract or you don't relate to it, or you could go, whoa, one of those, you now, comments here really speaks to you.