

6_17_26 Talk*

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

Rick Hanson: [00:00:00] I'm gonna pick up the thread from my experiment last week. You may recall that last week I was so taken with a particular, it's called a sutta or sutra, a piece of teaching in the large and extensive written record of what the Buddha and his contemporaries taught and taught. And I said, what the heck, let's do some sutta study. Let's get into it here. This is from Majjhima Nikaya. Number 44, majjhima just simply means middle length and nikāya means collection. So these are the middle length discourses. With no logic whatsoever, the discourses are gathered in the nikāyas in terms of their actual length.

[00:00:48] So we have the shorter length, you know, discourses, the middle-length and the longer length. The majjhima nikāyā is the middle link. And in particular, the sutta that I'm just sided with. It's called the Kula Vagala Sutta. So I'm going to give a brief introduction and then pick up the thread in the second half of it. As we go along, I'm gonna slow down periodically and really invite you into the spirit, imagining that we are listening to these teachings being offered. We are gathering sincerely because we care and we're interested and we are applying them to ourselves. Things we don't understand, we try to understand, and things we do understand, we let in and we have a sense of being in community with others, you know, gathering on the path. That's kind of the original meaning of the word Sangha, a gathering of beings on a path. And here we are.

[00:01:47] And some of the language in the translation is pretty ancient. It tends to be kind of gendered, even though wonderfully, and one thing I really love about this particular sutta, is, as you will see in the very introduction to it, which I'll now read to you, we are being taught here by the nun, Damodena. The Buddha, with some arm twisting, he did establish an order of bhikkhunis, like the male bhikkhus, and Damodina is a bhikkuni, a nun, and she is answering the questions of a lay follower who happens to be her former husband. So there are any twists and turns in this that particularly amuse me and make me happy.

[00:02:32] So let's just take a look at the very start of this. So here we have this particular sutta. We have Damodena the nun, praised by the Buddha as the foremost dharma or dharma teacher among his nun disciples. And in this discourse, she answers questions put to her by a layman, Visakha. According to the commentary, was her former husband, a merchant of Rajagaha and a non-returner. So part of what's going to be happening here as we dive into this material, it's this is original Buddhism. This is OG Buddhism, the original as best we can gather what they were up to. And so we're in the frame of that. And in their metaphysical frame, there was a matter of fact presumption of rebirth. Now, Chögyam Trungpa, you may know, was once asked, so what is it that reincarnates if there's no permanent self? He said, your bad habits. Now, also it takes birth in the next life in this way of looking at things which you don't have to believe. You don't to accept if you don't want to. I have basically an open mind about this while being of the view that is, you know, I have no idea how this kind of works, But thank you. Really might be true. That's my own personal take, but I'm not trying to push that on anyone.

[00:03:58] In any case, in this framework, there are sort of four levels of enlightenment in early Buddhism. And the first level is a stream enterer who has really seen through the construction of the self moment to moment, but still has some tendencies of various kinds, does have deep conviction. About the value of the teacher, the teaching and the

community of the taught, but is set up to return seven more times. Why seven? I don't know. Then we have a once returner. This is someone who will come back for one more human life. That's the second level.

[00:04:38] Then we the third level, which is a non-returner, someone who we'll be reborn in heaven realms of some kind. You go with it. And then there's the Arahant, for whom all causes and conditions that lead to the repeated transmigration, you know, of aspects of, you know, individual consciousness, all those causes and conditions have been fully quenched. It's interesting that the word nirvana or nivana is rooted in the meaning of quenching, as in quenching the fire, Putting out a light. Cooling. The withdrawal of fuel for the fire of rebirth has been completely withdrawn, completely ended, and the Arahant disperses fully at the end of their physical life. That's the framework. Quite profound. So here we have her husband, a lay practitioner, a merchant, who is so far along that in the next life he will be supposedly born in some kind of mystical Brahma realm. And he's asking her, Damodina, his former wife, for wisdom and for help. Kind of the context here.

[00:06:04] Okay, so now I'm going to move ahead to the section on the Noble Eightfold Path. And if you're interested in the previous section, you can go back and take a look at it on your own. The reason I'm really going into the Sutta is that it's a great summary of hardcore fundamental teachings that are freely offered. They're offered to the merchant, Visakha. Who was very far along in his own practice, they're offered freely. There's no sacred teachings in early Buddhism, and they're very, very fundamental. So let's pick up the story here with the Noble Eightfold Path. So I'll just read it. Now again, lady, what is the Noble eightfold path? And to be really clear, what does that word noble mean? Let's slow this down. It does not mean some kind of, you know... Dukes and counts and kings and queens sort of nobility. It is a path for the noble ones and ones who are noble by virtue of their practice. The Buddha was very socially, politically radical in that way. He blew up the caste structure of his time basically in terms of who had access to his teachings and who was welcomed to go forth into homelessness and become a bhikkhu or a bhikkhuni. Of the monastics.

[00:07:34] So the nobility here is the nobility of the heart. This is an eight-fold path that ennobles those who walk it, and that which is noble within you draws you to this practice. It's a very beautiful and fundamental way to understand this. There's a lot about any kind of path, whether it's psychoanalysis or the Enneagram or Buddhism, that in its sometimes technical language can feel off-putting. And it's really important to keep allowing your heart and your body mind to be drawn in to this and open to it. So, Tomadina replies, This is the Noble Eightfold Path, friend Visakha. Right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

[00:08:36] Now, as you probably know, the Eightfold path is the fourth of the four ennobling truths. In other words, there is the truth of challenges, There is the truth that craving makes our challenges worse and creates new ones. There is a truth, the third one, that there is an ending to that craving and thus that add on suffering. And the fourth truth for the noble ones is that there's a path that both embodies the gradual reducing of that craving and suffering and leads eventually to its complete end, the path. So the Buddha has a practical path for us. This is what the Eightfold Path is about. This is his treatment plan for healing what he has diagnosed humanity with. Now there's a keyword here as well, right. Right view or wise view. Now, some people, including me sometimes, tilt a little bit toward wise because right could sound, in an off-putting way, has some kind of ring. Commandment from on high.

[00:09:49] And if you've had it up to here with commandments from on high, for many sources, including religious sources, people could kind of balk at that. That's why sometimes, you know, if it works for you, settle into wise or useful. That said, the root of the word that's routinely translated as right, sometimes as wise, does have to do with connotations like accurate. Correct. True like the one, like the right answer to a question. So if somebody points out that the right answer two plus two is four, not seven, it's not that they're commanding something from on high, they're just simply pointing to that which is right. We also might think of right as having to do with a kind of a path or a practice that we want to be conscientious about. We want to really enter into it and take it seriously. I myself, as a fairly rebellious kind of person, I actually like the edge, if you will, the nudge from an encouraging, heartfelt, and still firm teacher that, Rick, this is the right way. This is the way to speak. This is right way to engage your livelihood and so forth, okay? And so see for yourself.

[00:11:13] Then there is some language here. About is the Noble Eightfold Path fabricated or unfabricated? Key point. Anything that arises based on a cause or condition is fabricated in the language of early Buddhism. Unfabricated means that which mysteriously does not arise or pass away. It is not born, it does not die, it's not constructed. What is all that? Then that opens the whole door that in early Buddhism, I think it was very clearly explored, you know, that which is the realm of causes and conditions that arise and pass away and therefore are not a reliable basis for the most profound and lasting happiness, contentment, and inner peace. The distinction between those that which are arising and passing away and those fabricated and that which is un- conditioned, unborn, undying, unfabricated. We're in the realm here of that which is considered to be distinct from the clockwork, dominoes falling, deterministic unfolding of the Big Bang universe. Some might point to that which is timeless and transcendental with language which like spirit, God, the divine, the ground. Since those terms are pretty freighted with associations for many people, associations that are negative, I like the ways in which the Buddha pointed to that which is not conditioned. He described it through negation, that which was not fabricated, that which is unconditioned, that, which is timeless, without time.

[00:13:05] And so you see for yourself, but we're, This is the framework here. And my own entry to Buddhism, as I said in the last week, I felt like a lot of it was Buddhist light and it swerved away from numerous really important themes that were right up front when you actually look at the actual teachings of the Buddha and Dhammadena and other contemporaries. So I think, gosh, it's kind of patronizing to think that we'd have to water this down, that people can't take it. So I hope you can take it, that I'm just. Matter-of-factly, including the unfabricated here. So, Damodena is saying the noble eight-fold path was fabricated, it was made up by the Buddha. Okay, fine. Then we move on. So now we have the three aggregates, I'll get to that word in a second, of virtue, concentration, and discernment. Discernment's often translated as wisdom. If you've heard these kind of teachings before, you might be familiar with the Pali, P-A-L-I. Language of early Buddhism, terms for these three in order, sila, samadhi, and panya. Sila, typically translated as virtue or sometimes morality or restraint. Then we have samadhe as concentration, as a process, and also as broadly non-ordinary states of consciousness. And then we have discernment or wisdom, okay?

[00:14:34] So right here we have the three fundamental pillars of Buddhist practice. Interestingly, a friend of mine, Professor Andy Dreitzer has pointed out that you'll find similar structure of three with slightly different terminology in Christian contemplative practice. And I don't know, but I have a hunch that we find these three in other settings as

well, including in secular settings, because there's nothing inherently religious. About virtue, mental training, and wisdom. Okay?

[00:15:10] So... Now, Damodara is pointing out that right speech, right action, and right livelihood come under the aggregate or pillar of virtue, right? So you see, we have a clustering of the Eightfold Path. Maybe you knew this already. It took me many years of wandering around in American Buddhism before someone pointed out, oh yeah, the Eightfold path forms three clusters that correspond to. Virtue, concentration, and wisdom. So we have the virtue element, right speech, right action, and right livelihood. I'm not gonna get into the detail of these. The description of them is short and I think sweet. In Buddhism, you can find them described, you know, ask Claude or ChatGVT or your favorite local AI or look it up in Wikipedia. It's very practical. The fundamental essence of these three is non-harming. And it's very important to appreciate that the pillar, the aggregate of virtue and non-harming applies to yourself as well. We are not to harm ourselves. And in many ways, the practices of right action, right livelihood, and right speech involve forms and results of not harming yourself, in addition to not harping others.

[00:16:37] A friend of mine, Leslie Booker, goes by Booker. I think she's co-guiding teacher of New York Insight. I heard her give just a marvelous talk in exploration in a retreat we were leading together in which she talked about the five precepts in Buddhism expressed through negation, typically don't kill, don't steal, don't lie, don't get intoxicated, and don't harm through sexuality. And she said, we often just sort of go, eh. Wow, interesting, I heard that sort of thing before. Actually, the practice of Sila can be very, very powerful and profound. Frankly, in my ripe old age, including a certain maturity of practice, the phrase surrender to Sila, surrender to alignment with what has the least friction of harming in this moment for others and for myself, has been very powerful. Surrender to Sila. Whatever that means to you. And typically what that means is to eventually drop down below the mind's integrity system to the being's integrity. You know, we've internalized many shoulds, do this, don't do that, etc. Some of them are useful, okay fine.

[00:17:57] But underneath it all, there's an inner nobility and inner knowing in you that has a feeling for, okay. What would be the wisest, best, most noble, most virtuous thing to do here? And very often we know, and then can we surrender to that? Instead of scratching or clawing our way up the mountain of virtue, can we surrendered to the warm river of Sila whose currents are carrying us along? So you might want to consider that. You might explore that, okay? And then we have the next element. We have Right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration are under the aggregate of concentration. That makes sense. Mental training. So we're making efforts. This is where we are working with the mind. With mindfulness, we are mainly being with the minds. That's the fundamental practice. Beautiful. With right effort, we're working with the mind in its two fundamental aspects. Reducing, preventing, or releasing that which is harmful or painful or both for others and or ourselves. Okay, releasing.

[00:19:14] And then we have the element of creating, preserving, or even growing that which is enjoyable and beneficial and or beneficial to others and, or ourselves, the positive aspect. You may have heard me use the metaphor that the mind is like a garden. There are three fundamental modes of practice. We can be with, we can witness a garden, we can pull weeds, and we can plant flowers. In other words, three great modes of practices that blend together often and support each other, we can let be, we let go, and let in. So we have here the being with, whatever's happening, including our own stream of consciousness, that is really the essence of mindfulness. And we have the working with that in its two aspects, that is wise effort. The great bird of practice needs two wings to fly.

And then we have a right concentration, which we'll be getting into a little bit more. And then, we have right view and right resolve or right intention comes under the aggregate of wisdom. All right?

[00:20:23] Liz Wiener asks, what is the unconditioned? Yeah, that's what we were pointing to, that it's defined through negation. I invite you, Liz, and everyone, much as the Buddha did, to move out of theorizing about it because then we're generating conditioned speech about which is by definition beyond language. What... Could be timeless. What could be timelessly the case always just before the arising moment? What could be eternal? What? Perhaps could be an underlying ground of consciousness and even love that's woven into the fabric of reality, inherently so. And that's an invitation for exploration. The garden metaphor for me has been super useful. In any moment, there's the mind and we're rolling along, fine, and then something happens. You know, we get irritated by something. I got irritated by a little earlier today. Involving an email exchange with somebody. And what do you do then? Right? Okay. Game on, what's your practice? How do you practice with that? And the foundation practice is to be with what's there initially. And very often simply being with it, letting it be, observing it, investigating it, not trying to change it, simply being with it bearing it if it's painful, tolerating it, getting a little spaciousness around it, witnessing it, maybe noting it very succinctly to yourself to describe it. Sometimes that alone. Will lead what's painful or harmful to dissipate, to ease, to become something else. But very often it doesn't. You know, the nervous system is designed to hold onto its experiences, especially the negative ones, quote unquote. And they rarely completely release through bare witnessing alone. They just don't. And that's why the Buddha taught many practices that had to do with aspects of wise effort, you know, letting go and then letting in.

[00:22:40] And as you may know, I in particular am very interested in the process of cultivation letting in because the brain is kind of biased against the positive cultivation. And how can we help what we're growing into to really stabilize inside? That's the planting flowers in the garden aspect of practice. Bhavana in Pali and I think Sanskrit as well. Okay? So I'm going to keep going, bear with me, because we're really getting down to some juicy stuff. Let's see. Now, what is concentration, lady? Now, what is Concentration, right? What qualities are its themes? What qualities or its requisites, its requirements? And what is its development? So right here, I invite you to consider that third pillar of Buddhist practice, that in my experience, is the weakest for a typical lay practitioner in the West, maybe the East as well, which is to say concentration. There've been some major turning points and growth spurts in my own practice.

[00:23:50] One of them was, I think, over 20 years ago when Christina Feldman, a teacher, a wonderful teacher, in kind of a small group I was in, looked at people and said, well, what about concentration? And we all stared at her blankly because we were in Buddhist light. And no one had really explained to us the eighth element of the eight-fold path. It's not a seven-fold-path right concentration. And so the development of greater concentration, including in practices that start leading onward, naturally, into non-ordinary states of consciousness that are very convincing, you're not in Kansas any longer, and they're very purifying, And... Impactful. That's a very important aspect of your practice.

[00:24:38] So in that context then, how does Damodina answer the question? She says, well, singleness of mind is concentration. And here there's a nice metaphor that says essentially that we find ourselves in a forest of suffering. And in the distance is a mountain of awakening and happiness and love inner peace. How do we get from here to there? We're in the forest, what do we do? Well, we could get a razor blade and, you know, trying to work our way through the thickets and brambles of the forest but that would not move us

very rapidly. Or we could a stick, nice hefty stick, whack, whack, wack and whack the brambles and thorns and thickets but that will not get us through very well either. Or we can combine the two together. We could combine... The sharpness of mindful insight, Vipassana, penetrating insight, the razor blade sharpness or penetrating inside with the heft of the singleness of mind that is concentration, the two together.

[00:25:50] So in concentration, there's a sense of just sort of landing, you're present, you're not divided, you are single, your mind is not darting in multiple directions because that would not be single. Whoof You are settled Okay Now what are the themes of this concentration? What do we use it for? All right Well, we use it for the four establishing, or sometimes called foundations of mindfulness. We use it, we apply this concentration to mindful insight into the body, mindful insight into the moment-to-moment feeling tones or hedonic tones of experience, as pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

[00:26:44] Third, we can apply this hefty powerful insight into states of mind in general kind of are we are we content or are we discontent are we scattered or are we kind of settled and gathered together you know what's the overall global state of being we're in and we can apply penetrating insight powered by concentration to the various elements in the fourth foundation our fourth Establishing of Mindfulness, including... The four noble truths, the seven factors of awakening, et cetera, et cetera. That's what that part's about. So that's where we apply, in our deep practice, the growing singleness of mind that we're developing over time.

[00:27:32] So what are the four right exertions? These are the aspects of right effort, right? We are basically both creating and preserving that which is beneficial. And we are reducing and ending that which is harmful. Those are essentially the four right exertions. And then to complete here, we see that any cultivation, development, and pursuit of these qualities will help develop your concentration. In... Ordinary terms, and I'm gonna do a teaching sequence about concentration, including leading into, or leading towards, certainly, the so-called Jhanas, which are what constitutes the right concentration element of the Eightfold Path. I'll do that later on. For here, I'll just say that in ordinary practice, one thing that's very helpful is to pick a single object of attention, like the sensations of breathing. Around the upper lip or if you want more generally in your chest and torso the sensations of air flowing in and flowing out or you could pick something else like a phrase such as letting go or a mantra of some kind or an image whatever it is pick one thing and then for a fixed period of time, like... 10 seconds, 30 seconds, one minute, five minutes, 20 minutes. Give yourself over to that object of attention. That's a fundamental form of training, and in the process of doing that, you will both strengthen your attentional capacities and you will become aware of all kinds of stuff that pulls you in other directions. That's really a primary thing.

[00:29:25] There are certain factors that support concentration. Calming the body, tranquilizing as it were the body is very good. A sense of seclusion, where for the duration of your practice, You just step out of the ordinary worries and plannings and preoccupations of householder life. You open the heart, heart opening. Sometimes people will start with heart opening practices before they settle into concentration practices. And also interestingly, positive emotion, gladness, gratitude, even joy, quiet happiness, perhaps with other feelings in the mix, but still happiness is an identified factor of concentration. So I encourage you. Explore in this territory and I'll be talking about it and teaching about it more. And there's some wonderful guides to these practices from teachers like Shaila Catherine, Tina Rasmussen, Stephen Snyder, Lee Brasington and others. Okay? All right.

[00:30:33] So now I want to continue here, having really encouraged you to deepen in your practices of concentration. And if you are, like many people, more toward the spirited, even ADHD, so-called end of the temperamental spectrum, either by birth or by history, including sometimes a trauma history, sometimes it helps to walk maybe slowly or even quickly while you're concentrating to... Paradoxically help yourself settle down. In other words, it's really okay. Maybe do some yoga or some slow movement of another kind in which you're really staying in touch with the physicality. Maybe that will help you achieve or develop increasingly this singleness of mind. It's okay to adapt traditional practices to your own neurology and whatever works best for you. All right. And then in our remaining time, I really want to get to the end of this, because I think the end this is so cool, okay? I'm just going to bounce toward the very end to the section. And there's all kinds of great material here for you to take a look at. I'm starting here. What lies on the other side of ignorance? Okay, and I invite you to feel into the inspiring magnitude of what these people were up to and what you can be up to as well, right?

[00:32:13] So Visakha asks Damodina, what lies on the other side of ignorance? Okay, in other words, what is the alternative? Clear knowing lies on other side ignorance. In other words after you move through ignorance, there is clear knowing, all right. What lies on another side of clear knowing? This is the run up to awakening. Release lies on the other side of clear knowing. You can kind of feel it. Release. What lies on the other side of release? Unbinding lies on the other of release. We have unfabricated, unconditioned, unbound. The Buddha here is pointing to the Third Noble Truth, which at its heights, *Nirodha*, is translated typically as cessation, which is a state of being that I have not experienced, that the Buddha pointed to again and again, and some of my teachers, and I've known others as well, who have experienced it, where ordinary consciousness ceases. Cessation and there is an unbinding of the ordinary machinery of consciousness. This occurs for some length of time because time continues in ordinary reality even though the individual in cessation has kind of in some senses stepped out of that process as far as their own stream of consciousness is concerned and then at a certain time there's a gradual return. The people I know who have gone through cessation are very functional, they have mortgages, I've been on retreat with them, and they can cook, you know, and set the table. They're able to function, but it's, when you come back, as they have described this, the furniture inside your psyche is rearranged. And sometimes it could take a while to really appreciate the extent of the rearrangement. But there's a kind of deepening of awakening thereafter. So unbind. Unbinding lies on the other side of release.

[00:34:43] And then the question is, what lies on other side on unbind? Heh. And we know people like Visakha, right? They just keep asking questions. But okay, Tomadina says, you've gone too far, friend Visakhan. You can't keep holding on up to the limit of questions. She's pointing out that his questioning is a holding. It's not a releasing. For the holy life, the life we're practicing here, gains a footing in unbinding. It culminates in unbinding, and it has unbindings as its final end. If you wish, go to the Blessed One, the Buddha, and ask him the meaning of these things. Whatever he says, that's how you should remember it. So I appreciate as well the skillfulness of Damodina here. She's not chastising Visakha. She is not arguing with him. She's just simply saying, well, see for yourself. So, Visakka the lay follower, delighting and rejoicing in what Damodinath the nun had said, bowed down to her, and keeping her to his right, went to the Blessed One. On arrival, having bowed to the blessed one, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he told the Blessed One the full extent of the conversation he had had with Damodena the Nun. When this was said, the Blessed one said to him, Damodina the Nun is wise, Visakha, a woman of great discernment. If you had asked me those things, I would have answered you in the

same way she did. That is the meaning of those things. That is how you should remember it. That is what the Blessed said, gratified. Visaka, the lay follower, delighted in the Blessed One's words.

[00:36:45] So the text here on the page, in my own voice, is merely the messenger of these teachings. And they are freely offered to people as a mode of practice. And the way that this material is typically taught is that it is offered to be good in the beginning, the middle, and the end. We have here two people who are close to the end talking with each other in a very pithy way. And... Much as, sometimes I'll watch tennis TV, you know, what's his name, the guy who does, he won the US Open, the podcast is called Served, it'll come to me. Anyway, there's technical stuff these world-class players are talking about, it's over my head. But I can appreciate that they're into it and they get it, and, you know, I can kind of move in that direction. In much the same way, maybe there's some aspects here that just seem like, what? You know, that's science fiction to me. That's very, very okay. But are there parts that are useful to you along the way, such as the elements I've really underlined tonight around valuing concentration and appreciating the three great modes of practice, letting be, letting go, and letting in, appreciating as well that if you have an intuition, as many people do, that which is not subject to arising and passing away. And if you are able to increasingly feel in contact with that which is timeless, even as time proceeds, wonderful. And you can deepen in your felt knowing of that. And if ever have known what is true, even later when you're not in touch with what's true, you still know what's truth. And a fair amount of practice. Is returning to that which we know is true and resting in and coming home to that which you know is really true.