

7_15_26 Talk*

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

Rick Hanson: [00:00:00] Before getting into my formal talk about vows and vows, I'd like to say a word about meditation in particular and practice in general. In my view, I think practice involves two things, being with and working with, conditions, both external and internal. And those two aspects, being with and working are like the wings of a bird. It needs two wings to fly. In terms of working well... It's appropriate to rest attention on what draws the heart, what is healthy, wholesome, skillful, wise, resting attention there, and through neuroplasticity and other processes that are physical, increasingly establishing those qualities within ourselves so that they dwell increasingly within us and we take them with us wherever we go. It's completely appropriate to do that.

[00:00:57] And, meanwhile... Being with all that is, is the foundational practice. It's where we start, it's what we need to do to be able to work with anything skillfully. And as the fruits of working with your own mind and external conditions to some extent, you know, accumulate in your own life, in the upper reaches of practice, more and more we're simply being with what's arising as it passes away. So being with is foundational. That said, there is a place. For training attention to be able to stay with something. So we train it often by resting it on the breath. And as we train our attention to be able stay with things, we can identify and increasingly rest in beautiful qualities of being such as compassion, or tenderness, or lovingness, or contentment.

[00:01:51] And as we lean into that, which is beneficial, Of course, some of the times what comes up are blocks to that. Like, we're scared of leaning into it because then we might want it and get disappointed if we don't have it. Or maybe we've been told it's not ours to lean into or it's bad or, you know, that's sinful or that's for other people, not for you. Whatever might come up. You know, leaning into what's good surfaces blocks to it, which are very useful to practice with. There might also be a spiritual belief which I've discerned in many quarters. That I think is deeply mistaken, in terms of the teachings of the Buddha, as well as the practical necessities of the developmental path of healing, growing, and awakening, which involves changing physical systems, especially in the brain, that don't just change on their own. They need a little working with, skillfully, over time, or a lot of it, at least in my case.

[00:02:50] So, you know, it's really okay to rest in something like contentment. Even if also around the edges, are things like disappointment and frustration and drivenness. Okay, that too. I'll get to this more, but okay, I can bow to frustration, I can about a disappointment, I can go to discontent. And meanwhile, I'm also bowing to contentment and increasingly dwelling in it. That's okay. That's a good part of practice. It's good in meditation and it's good life in general. And interestingly, as I said briefly, Positive emotions are factors of steadiness of mind.

[00:03:29] Technically, one of the ways this happens in your brain is that we sustain attention to what gives us a steady stream of dopamine reward. But if what we're attending to gets less rewarding, well, then we look for other rewards. Or if we suddenly become aware of something that's even more rewarding over there, we start shifting attention to that, other little shiny object. And the brain is kind of continuously tossing up one thing after another to pay attention to. Look at me, oh, look at me. Oh, over here, right? And a lot of steadying the mind is about becoming increasingly mindful in real time of those calls for attention and increasingly being able to be a choice, to being free.

[00:04:18] So I said at the very beginning, in terms of what we choose to engage with and what we just. Disengage from and so as we practice, you know, if you're able to sustain attention to something that feels positive You get steady dopamine coming so you're staying with it And if what you're paying attention to is pretty juicy Pretty appealing even something subtle like contentment or tranquility, but yeah yummy Well, then it's so rewarding that nothing else can compete with it for attention you know, in some Darwinian sense in the theater of the mind. That's one reason why happiness is skillful means and one reason neurobiologically why in traditional Buddhist contemplative practice, happiness and even bliss are considered worthy of development, including as factors of deep concentration and non-ordinary states of awareness.

[00:05:17] So I encourage you to lean into all that and to let yourself have the good stuff, okay? Well, that goes to what are we bowing toward and what are bowing or declaring ourselves about? So we routinely see people bowing to this, bowing that. It's easy to do it in kind of a perfunctory way as a simple show of respect. Okay, that's fine. And I wanted to explore with you more deeply what are you bowing towards in two regards? First, as an expression of thankfulness or respect, pardon me, appreciation. You know, do you appreciate a friend? Can you bow in that direction? Can you appreciate the efforts that you've made already in your life? And can you therefore bow gratefully to previous versions of yourself? That is a very powerful kind of bow. As you go through your day thinking about great teachers, you talk about gratitude. Can you bow in the direction, you know, the flowers, the little flower that is blooming up through a crack in the sidewalk? You know, can you bow with gratitude to people who are taking care of the world? So many people maintaining streets, you know building infrastructure, teaching children, and doing the little things that keep the world going. Can you bow in those directions? So I wondered right now if you would care to ask yourself, kind of experientially, what do you bow toward? What are you thankful for? And how might it serve you in your practice to be more mindful and deliberate about to name what you bow to, to bow in the direction of what you're thankful for? What are some of the things that you bow toward? And how do you do that? I'll give you two personal examples.

[00:07:36] One is that quite often at a meal, I will take a few moments and look at the lettuce on the plate or the tomato or something else there. And I'll consider how did that tomato get there? Wow, tomato. Thank you, tomato, right? And I think, well, let's see, we got it at a store, down the street from where I live. We didn't grow it in our backyard, okay. How did that tomato get there? Well, people brought it there. It got set out on a shelf, many hands touched it, you know, it grew in a field somewhere. Someone took care of that tomato plant so that the causes and conditions were cultivated to develop a tomato. And then... Nerd that I am, I think back on the domestication of plants. 30,000 years ago, there weren't really ripe, luscious, modern tomatoes. Those have been gradually domesticated over thousands of years. Oh, thank you all those people who did all those things to bring that tomato to my plate. Think of the systems. Maybe those systems are fraught and complicated like transportation systems. That use fossil fuels to bring tomatoes from the field to one's plate in our modern lives, okay. And thank you all that it took to put that tomato on my plate. And then, nerd also that I am, I reflect on the sunlight that was required for that tomato plant. And the ways in which sitting there on my place, all red and juicy, is congealed sunlight. Thank you, sun. Thank you universe. Thank you the ways in which smashing together hydrogen atoms deep in the heart of the sun to form squishing helium, merm releases a bunch of energy that eventually gets congealed into the bright red globe sitting on my plate, waiting for my fork and knife. Thank you tomato. It's kind of wild. To just appreciate what we eat and to feel that what's coming into you is literally all

the goodness of all the causes and conditions that led to that tomato on your plate. Wow You know, that's practice. Many people do something quite like that when they eat. To think about even the elements in the tomato. You know that which is earth, wood, wind, fire, air, different ways of thinking about elements. And right there, coming into you, making you a tomato. If you're meditating, do you bow before or after? Or in any way, do have anything in your life that's kind of significant for you. That you have a bowing practice in relationship to.

[00:10:56] Many people, for example, bow to their ancestors. Including those who walked the land, that we might so casually pave over today. I've been reflecting recently on the amazing fact that everyone here had a mother. I could also say father, but I'll keep it simple. And your mother had a Mother who had a father who had A mother Who? Must have had a mother. Who also must have had a mother, in an unbroken line, stretching back 300,000 years to the first humans. Who had a Mother? Who had A Mother? Stretching all the way back, da da da da da, to the origins of life on earth. Wow. Thank you. Recently, I've been going through our garage and processing a whole bunch of stuff from our history. And one thing that's really startling to realize is how much work it is to raise children. So I could see that in the early photographs and pictures of our own little family. And I can see that as well in the history of my own family. All the work that my mom and my dad did to keep it all going. And then their mother and father. And sure, we can acknowledge the not so good parts sometimes in that lineage upstream. And I'm not trying to sugarcoat anything here. I'm just naming a traditional reflection, which is to bow to your ancestors or pick some ancestors that could be worthy for you to be thankful for. Thank you. People also bow to the natural world, to life. Wow, life, thank you.

[00:12:50] You know, those little robotic rovers on Mars are searching, searching. They've been searching for many years now for signs of life there, on a planet that had liquid water on its surface, you know, recently, you know like two billion years ago, and yet not yet found any signs of life. I mean, either. Earth has the only life in our galaxy, or even universe, or it doesn't, or there's life elsewhere. Either option is pretty remarkable, all right? And meanwhile, we can sure appreciate the life on our planet, and the web of life, and that's a traditional bow of gratitude or thankfulness as well. You can also make bows that are more abstract. And I'll share kind of personally a three that have been quite central for me or including currently.

[00:13:45] So when I meditate, often, I'll bow three times before I start and three times when I'm finished. And the three that I bow to is first, I bowed to the mysterious absolute. The infinite, timeless, unconditioned, potentially conscious and loving ground of all. Some people might call that God or spirit. Some people may not choose to bow in that direction. It's fine. I'm just sharing. When I bow to, you might also, interestingly, if there are people you can ask this question of that are close to you, or perhaps other teachers, what do you bow to? Right? Because what we bow toward, what we're thankful for, is where, increasingly, we hope to dwell.

[00:14:38] A second bow for me is to the teachings, particularly Buddhist teachings, and really grateful for the Dharma and the account of the mind, the practical tools, the analysis, all the hard work and the know-how, the best practices in our lineage. And then third, I bow in the direction of my future self, my future person process going forward. You know, good luck, future you. And good wishes, you know. Hang in there, kid. You're getting older every day. And you might add something from your heart as you bow. Like, again, I'll be honest with you. When I make that first bow, what arises in my mind is love you. Love you. We become one with what we love, love you. And that second bow for the teachings is thank

you, thank you. And the words that come up for that third bow in the direction of my future person process is bless you, you know, with kind of this quality of encouraging and guiding. Bless you. As you go forward, facing difficulties in this life.

[00:16:05] So You might consider that in some version of that for yourself. So we have bows of gratitude, bows of thankfulness, and we can, if we choose, adopt formal practices of bowing. Another common category is bowing toward refuge or refuges. We all need refuges, refueling stations, pit stops, oases, places of safe harbor. As we go through this life. And, you know, there are many different refuges we can bow in the direction of. You probably know that in Buddhism the three classic refuges, sometimes referred to as the three jewels, are named as the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Buddha is both the historical teacher, in whom we can have some confidence, and Buddha as that capacity within every being to know what is true. In ways that are liberating. Dharma is both that which is true and accounts of what is true, that we can take refuge in, a thoughtful, credible account of how the mind works in many regards and what we can do about it. And we can a refuge in the sangha, both the vertical dimension of a kind of hierarchy of respect and appreciation of depth of practice and moral fiber. And we can also appreciate Sangha in its horizontal dimension as others, peers that we gather with on the path. That might be bows for you. What might you bow, you know, to in that direction? Over the years, I've taken refuge in different things.

[00:17:55] And one way to frame this is not just I take refuge or to go for refuge. But I abide as. I abide AS Buddha. I abide as Dharma. I bide as Sangha. So that there's an embodied immediacy of it that's non-dual, in which, you know... You are one with what you are bowing toward or bowing as. These are nice points of skill in how we deal with all that. Over the years, I've bowed to different things that have been important for me. You might consider for yourself bowing to practice. You know, nuts and bolts, grounded practice. You know I respect practice. I respect effort, bowing effort. I really appreciate science. Wow, thank you. All those people who've developed a credible body of knowledge, credible because it is continually under, you know, pressure and refinement. So that which remains, you can count on until it gets revised further.

[00:19:07] Anyway, so for you, where do you take refuge? Where do you bow? What are you thankful for? Yes. Then there's the second aspect of bowing that. Can be more challenging in which we bow to reality as it is, including aspects that are challenging. Grieving and mourning, you know, I and many others are quite in touch with aspects of grieving and mourning in their life, and I saw a distinction recently that I thought That really helped me at least, the grief. Is intense and immediate and sometimes just completely compelling, takes you, it occupies you understandably, there it is, grief. Mourning is kind of, grieving can gently sometimes become increasingly mourning, in which there is the loss, there is the grief, there's the mourning, and there is more and more around it. Not taking away from what is still there. That loss, that hurt, that regret, maybe that remorse, and there is more and more around it. So grieving, mourning, so forth. Well, we can bow to that. We can bow to having a heart that is big enough to be able to grieve. We can, you know, bow to the reality of, you know the hurricane. We can bow to the reality of cruelty, or oppression, or despotism, tyranny. It doesn't mean we like it or agree with it. It means that we accept its reality. It doesn't mean that we acquiesce to it. Doesn't mean that countenance it. It means this, too, as Tara Brach puts it. This too belongs. This too is part of the whole. I bow to that part of whole. Bowing as facing, not turning away, or releasing of aversion. It may still be very unpleasant, it may still shock our conscience, it might stir up moral outrage appropriately, and this too is real. That too is true. That too arose due to

causes and conditions. We bow to it. We accept it. Sometimes what we bow to is not so much, you know, a challenge or a problem, but it's a simple inherent aspect of reality.

[00:21:55] You know, in Buddhism, the Buddha noted three fundamental aspects of existence. And one of them really needs to be carefully understood. So these are in Pali, a language of early Buddhism, Anicca, Anatta, and Dukkha. Anicca is impermanence, transience. Can we bow in the direction of impermanence? Can I accept it even as my hair turns gray and my teeth hurt or my back is pain or, you know, I lose loved ones and friends who, I'm saying this for you too, can we bow to impermanent? I accept impermanents, I face impermanency. I bow to a impermancy. Aniccia means interdependence. So that nothing has self-creating absolute existence, that all that which arises due to causes and conditions will change and pass away due to causes and conditions. That's a Nietzsche, one of whose key implications is that the presumed single entity of me is actually a kind of illusion. It's a useful fiction, but actually the apparent self. Is continually made of many parts that are changing.

[00:23:17] Then there's dukkha, the fact that sometimes it hurts in life, the fact all pleasant experiences end one way or another, and the fact because of anicca and anatta, we cannot hold on to anything. Experiences are continuously moving through our fingers. If we accept that, we're okay. There's no escape from that fact. There's no escape from the three aspects of dukkha that I've named so far, even as a Buddha. But if we can relate to dukkhā without craving, then there's no suffering. There may be pain, but there's not suffering. Anicca, Anāta and dukkah. We can bow to dukkha, we can bow Anāta, we bow to Aniccā. So, what are your bows? And what might serve you in adopting even formally certain bowels. Maybe not enacted physically, although in many traditions these are enacted physically. You know, I have monastic friends who, one of whom does 49 prostrations daily. Some people do 108. I've had friends who accumulated over time 100,000 prostrations. This is full body. On the floor, fully stretched out, and then stand up and do it again. I read an article many years ago, I think in Tricycle magazine, about a monk... Who was walking the Pacific Coast Highway and doing prostrations the whole way. So step, prostration, get up, step, prostration get up. Can you imagine, you know, as a form of practice? So you might take on something like that if your back will allow it, or you might simply bow in your mind, you know in the direction of this or that, both as an expression of thankfulness. And, when it's appropriate, as an expression of recognition and acceptance of the reality, even as you oppose that reality, but facing the reality of various things. Okay? Vows. And this leads naturally onward to vows.

[00:25:40] And... The word vow is quite traditional, and it might stir things up in people like, er, somehow it reminds me of the Pledge of Allegiance in America and complexities there, or the Boy Scouts, I was a Boy Scout for a while, and in effect promises, commitments, vows. And yet on the other hand, there's something very fundamental. If you're making your vows for yourself. We have, of course, very formal practices in which, for example, in Buddhism, people vow to undertake the five training precepts. Basically summarized as, I vow to undertake the training precept of abstaining from killing, abstaining from taking that which is not really offered, abstaining from sexual misconduct, abstaining from intoxicants and abstaining from speaking falsely. Now, the way that these five are language and sequenced can vary somewhat, to be sure. But those are vows, in effect. Very straightforward, foundational moral conduct in Buddhist practice, related to one of the three great pillars of practice of sila, samadhi, and panya, the first one being virtue. You know, what do you stand for? You know, one of the very first things we do when we enter in practice is we kind of clean up our act. I remember way back when, with the EST training, in 1975, I believe, by early 1976, I believed, I was in what was called the Guest

Seminar Leaders Program as a young puppy. I mean, I was probably 22 at the time. And one of very first thing you do when you enter that program is you just clean up all kinds of stuff. Put your financial house in order, you list your undelivered communications, and deliver the ones that are appropriate to deliver. You clean your closet, you know, you get rid of clothes you don't wear anymore. I mean, you just clean it up.

[00:27:56] Well, one nice thing about that is it cleans up your mind to clean, to organize those desk drawers. Anyway, so there's a foundation of, you know ordinary practice. People vow in that regard. Quite prosaically, you could say. Although there's a world of contemplative practice and wisdom in not getting intoxicated anymore. Whoa. Or, you know, there's world of practice as you really start looking at not killing. You know, if you're eating, you now, meat of any kind, death was involved in that. But these days, pretty much to live. Inevitably we're involved in processes that... In the lives of many, many creatures. Small insects, large insects, all kinds of other things. You know, how do you think about that? How do you practice with that? How do do as little harm as possible? You know something as simple as not killing can really open up a lot of things. You know? How do feel about tax dollars that you have to pay or you go to jail being used for military purposes? All right. How do you feel about friends who deliberately hunt or fish in order to kill, unless they're doing catch and release fishing, living creatures that maybe they take home and eat, but on that particular day, that deer did not need to die because you went hunting. And I don't say any of this critically. My dad grew up on a ranch and I have relatives who are avid hunters and it's complicated. So something as simple as not killing. Can open up a lot of deep practice, not taking what is freely offered. It's interesting, walking down a street, reflecting on the so-called male gaze. Hmm, is it experienced oppressively by people who did not particularly offer that for view? Whoa. That's something to reflect on. You know, you move through an area and you see someone's notebook open or something like that. Do you take a look, even though they didn't really offer it?

[00:30:14] So these simple precepts have a lot of moral depth to them, a lot a practice to them. Additionally, as you may know in the history of Buddhism, in the development several hundred years after the Buddha himself died. In the Mahayana tradition, so there's the emergence of the notion of the Bodhisattva. Someone who chooses to defer their complete liberation from the wheel of life and death in that cosmology, which rebirth is just simply presumed. They defer complete release from that wheel until everyone is released from it. Wow. And particularly in Zen... There are various formal vows that are really quite elaborate and powerful and profound. You know, so there's different aspects of vowing certainly in Buddhism. For you, what are you committed to? What have you already vowed? And if you're interested in a little writing practice, a little exercise, that's a good one. You know, what have I already vow to you, that you've kept? And by the way, we can undertake this interesting thing. In Buddhism, vows are not framed as commandments from on high. They're framed as aids to practice and aspirational moral commitments. To harming as little as possible, all the way to not at all. So they're framed in that way, they're aspirational. So it's understood that you can make a vow knowing that you won't keep it perfectly. A long time ago, I vowed to not speak or act from anger with our children. And I was startled by how much leakage there was in the very first days, you know, as I undertook that commitment. You know, it's okay just just because it won't be perfect you can aspire and you can launch and you can head in that direction. So you might want to acknowledge ways in which you've been pretty steadfast in your life. For example, as we age, I think it's quite helpful to look back on your life and ask three questions. Did I bring my heart to it? Did I make efforts? And did I learn along the way? Now if you face that

question, those questions, there could be some squirming. Not in eighth grade. I did a really mean thing there. I didn't bring my heart to it. Okay.

Rick Hanson: [00:32:51] Or, wow, I was a serious slacker after I got out of college or whatever and did a lot of drugs and I sure was not making efforts then. Okay. Acknowledge that. And still, on the whole, I'll bet it's true, that pretty much on the hole, you kept faith with yourself. You did keep bringing your heart to your life, even often when it was scary and it took courage. You did keep making efforts. And you learned and grew and healed and developed along the way. You can credit yourself for the keeping of those vows in effect. And as well, I'm sure many more practical vows, like to your children, your family, your work, even to your future self, that you would go through serious periods of training and difficulty to enable your future-self to do the work that you really long to be able to do.

[00:33:45] Or simply to be able to, you know, make a good living and put bread on the table. You know, you kept faith with your future self. You fulfilled your promises. Vows are a kind of promise. At this point going forward, I really invite you to consider what might serve you and kind of raise your game, particularly framed as a purpose you give yourself over to. Not framed as some kind of big flashing red light should, should, should, you know, from the top down, you know, oppressing you. No, not so. No. Framed really as something you give yourself over to. I vow to be sober today. I vow to see the good in others. I vow to pause before speaking or acting from anger. I vow to let go. What might serve you? So, I'm going to pause for a moment here. As you reflect, wow, held in this aspirational way, and also held, though, with a kind of sacredness and seriousness, like, what comes forward for you? I vowed to disengage from quarrels with my in-laws. I vow to remember that I get to decide. Who I spend time with.

[00:35:48] So I'm going to be quiet for a moment. You might even like to write down as an exercise, What are your vows going forward? And as you contemplate on this, it's very helpful to get a sense of the enactment of the vow. You know, what it feels like, or what it would be like to enact the vow and focusing on what is rewarding, what is meaningful or enjoyable, or both, in the enacting of the Vow. You know feeling into that and centering into it, getting in touch with that will really serve you. In turning the vow into a habit. Vows and vows. Isn't that pretty cool? And obviously, you know, what we bow to in forms are vows, how we declare ourselves, what we're committed to. Sometimes vows are really supported when they're declared publicly. Other people know, like, a real moment of truth. It's embarrassing, but I'll tell you. Let's see. I have a still a very good friend, Bob, and we would often have adventures. He was my first rock climbing partner, and we'd do stuff like sail together and things. And he lived across the country. Well, soon after our son was born, Bob came to visit. And I remember sitting with Jan with infant forest, you know, I have no idea, maybe three weeks old, sitting in her lap. And I said. You know, much as I would have said before he came along, and it would have been fine before he come along, I said to her, oh honey, Bob and I are gonna go sailing and we'll get back and we can bring in some takeout for dinner, okay? She looked at me Not with daggers, but more like stunned disbelief which had more impact actually than daggers Who was like what and I suddenly realized Wow, I had to take her into account in a whole new kind of way in which neither of us had to Take the other and into account previously in terms of how we spent a Saturday with a friend or not You know, we'd connect later. No worries, but now Wow I had to take her into account, and our son, in a completely different way. And the vow to do that just landed. My life changed irrevocably right there, and it still changed on the other side of that change.

[00:38:42] So sometimes a vow will come in that sort of a way. It's just there. It's kind of maybe private. It's not like you're making some kind of fancy declaration. You just know, oh, OK. I'm never gonna go there again. Sometimes you have an interaction with another person and you walk away from that and you go, never again, fill in the blank, never again am I gonna yell like that, or never again am I going to put up with that. You just know. One of your vows. There's a kind of vow I want to name. One of the things that I've been really struck by is a great writer and and teacher and being, Ta-Nehisi Coates, who I believe just said that privilege is not having to take something into account. Now there are many sources of privilege, including advantage through disadvantaging others, there's also good luck and effort, you work hard, you put yourself in a position in which you have more privilege, okay. You don't have to take into account certain things. And I think it's really important to take into account what others have to take into a count that you don't have to taken into account. And if nothing else, taking it into account which then is the first step toward potentially becoming more of an ally and a resource with the benefits of your privileges to those who don't have those privileges and they have to take certain things into account.

[00:40:19] So for me, one of the very useful things in this era that tends to drive people into small silos, including with just overwhelming streams of complicated and often Deceptive information seeming purported information. There's a real tendency to bunker up, you know I think it's really important to keep raising our gaze To everyone and expanding the frame in which we're taking into account what they have to take into account that we don't have to. Take into account whoever they might happen to be and that's another potential bell you might consider that you're the kind of person who is open to learning what other people have to, take into, account that you don't, have to into account. You're open to learning about that, you know. Very often it's a matter of grief rather than shame. It's not your fault that things are as they are, unless it is to some extent, and we can feel the grief that they are the way they are and let that grief open and soften our heart. So that's a kind of vow as well, to be that sort of a person, which I think is crucially important in the world today because, you know, as we stand together and only as we stand together. Can we be big enough to be strong enough to truly change the world and make the world grounded in justice and compassion that we long for? How about we just kind of be quiet for half a minute, and you might rest in your reflections about what we've explored here, and what you bow toward, and what you are bowing. And I like the fact that bowing and vowing are active, active conditions. Bowing and bowing along our way, I'm just imagining very comically, many people passing alongside each other, bowing and bowling as we do, as we go through this life. So thank you.