

7_9_25 Talk*

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[00:00:00] **Speaker 1** I'd like to say a bit about that meditation, and then use that as a way to move into my talk, which is about, in many ways, the most fundamental teachings of the Buddha, as best we know, coming down to us across over 2,500 years. In the meditation, you'll recall that I offered a series of suggestions having to do with... Recognizing when it is true that you are basically all right right now in the present. And sometimes we're not. Sometimes we are running for our life or terribly shocked with bad news or an overwhelming physical or emotional pain. We're not basically all right. But when we are, it is really useful to recognize the truth, to see through the delusion of habitual anxiety. Delusional anxiety, Mother Nature's well-intended effort to keep all her little baby monkeys on their toes, only he's looking around for the next tiger about to jump, which today creates a lot of unnecessary anxiety.

[00:01:18] And it can be quite amazing to try to pay attention to subtleties of apprehensiveness, uneasiness, watchfulness. Guarding, bracing. Habitual ruminating worries, loops of worries. It's very useful to pay attention to these and to explore what it's like out of kindness for yourself and wisdom to truly disengage from those streams. They may still arise for a while due to habit or perhaps ongoing conditions in your life. They may still arise, but we can increasingly disengage from those streams of anxiety and use them. But not let them use us. And part of what's extremely helpful is the insight that you can be strong and alert and effective without feeling scared. Really useful. And if anything, we become more capable of dealing with threats and hazards if we are not flooded with stressful anxiety. You may have seen the 60 Minutes TV show interview with a young Alex Honnold, 10 years probably or so before he climbed El Capitan without a rope. And the interviewer asked him, how do you do this? Don't you feel stressed out? You know, clinging to these tiny holds a thousand feet above the ground. And he looked at her kind of puzzled and he said, if I'm feeling stressed, something has gone terribly wrong. He could be there without stress. He's very aware of the hazard, but he's calm, he's strong, he's coping. And that possibility is really available to us much of the time.

[00:03:18] So I really invite you to explore letting go of any unnecessary habits of anxiety. Some people asked in the chat, well, how do you know what is needless compared to needful anxiety? You decide, does it add value? Now, it may still arise if it's needless. Habits, negative habits run deep. It may still arise, but with insight and with practice, more and more you can disengage from it and gradually even you can turn the volume down, even to the point of. There's no anxiety there, there's no worry. There's determination. There might be a sense of, you know, activation of your energy and your body and a little sense of oh, gotta deal with this, but you're not worried about it. You have confidence in yourself. That space is extremely useful to find. And one way into that is through repeated meditation. And then step two, to be able to truly be okay, with the endless ending of everything. Moment by moment by a moment, which is kind of alarming. To be okay with that, it's pragmatically extremely skillful to stabilize in an authentic sense of the ongoingness of arising, the ongoing-ness of renewal, the reassuring sense of endless arising.

[00:04:50] Otherwise, understandably, people freak out. Whoa, it's all ending, endlessly ending. You know, I can't hold on, ah, it's so unstable, ah. Goes to groundlessness, which they talk about in Zen, ah! And for me, metaphorically, and kind of somatically almost, it's kind of like being on the 100th floor of a tall building, and you're waiting for the elevator,

and the elevator arrives, and ding ding ding, it's here, and it opens up, and you kind of automatically step through, and there's no floor and yet... You're endlessly buoyed by the arisingness of the next moment. That can be kind of scary. And that's why it's very helpful. And that's why I did it this way, to begin with emotionally reassuring practices that are somatically reassuring, that really help the scared, furry little animal of the body. What's Mary Oliver's line? The soft animal of body. To realize it's okay. It's okay, it's Okay.

[00:06:03] **Speaker 1** And then we're much more able to tolerate and gain from the deep, profound, even enlightening insight practices of the Buddha, insight into impermanence. It's actually known in deep meditative practice, certainly in Southeast Asia, that as people become, you know, on a three month retreat or longer, let's say, as the mind becomes very quiet And there's... A lot of awareness of the endingness, the impermanence, radically, continuously. People can fall into a kind of despair as a known possibility and just want to give up. What's the point? It's all ending, what's the plan? People can feel that way. So it's very important, especially by the way, if you're at all prone to a kind of nihilistic, or... Why not get, you know, despair of some kind to really nurture yourself and protect yourself so you are able to engage the insight practices that are very, very helpful as I'll be exploring with you in a moment.

[00:07:16] So that's why I did the meditation in the way I did. It's kind of a two-for-one. You get the value of releasing habitual anxiety and recognizing the beautiful truth that much of the time we're really okay in the present. And then second benefit, establishing that as a foundation, as a core from which we can witness the changingness of everything. And then finishing, at the last part of the meditation, I talked about the possibility, if it's there for you, of realizing that because everything is changing so rapidly, you can't hold anything there can be a kind of giving up that can feel joyful. Blissful even even I used the word ecstatic where you just realize Holy moly, you know, I can't succeed at holding on I may as well give up and then live in the midst of the endless ending and arising. That's something that really flagged the point of the recognition of impermanence for the Buddha, who is pragmatic. He wasn't trying to propound a new philosophy or theory of everything. He was pragmatic, you know, as a to paraphrase, he said, essentially, I teach essentially one thing suffering in its end. You know, that was his focus. The point is that these insights in new impermanence, which might seem... Terribly conceptual, boring, philosophical, lead into the kind of release I'm describing, the kind giving up of clinging, which then opens into such a joyful sense of peaceful abiding.

[00:09:16] And that's what's available to us, guided by these insights into changing. Into impermanence, which are then in turn enabled by stabilizing a reassuring sense of being okay in the midst of all this, so that you can be aware of it. See how the pieces fit together? Basically, the three statements here, you see for yourself that this is true, all compounded things. Compounded means made of parts and arising dependently, which is to say most everything. There are some interesting exceptions to impermanence that I will get to in a moment, but most everything is impermanent. It's not. Subject to arising and that which is subject to arising is subject to passing away.

[00:10:16] So, you may ask, okay, Rick, what's not impermanent? The past is permanently the past. Whatever happened in the past, you dropped the vase on the ground on Monday, today is Tuesday. It will always be true that the vase fell on the floor on Monday. So the past is the past and the good news about that is that all the good you have ever thought were said or done in the past. Will always have been the case. Good on you. Second, you could say that the principle of impermanence is permanently true. And I think in the physical universe, that there are certain facts, like the area of a circle on a flat plane is

always pi r squared. You know, there's certain things that are true, right? Mathematically true, they're permanently true. Um, also quite seemingly permanently true that in this big bang universe, the speed of light is a constant, uh, plonks constant, a few other key numbers of the case, you know, all right, but you can understand how I've really got to go out to some serious edge cases. To find exceptions to the general rule of impermanence. Certainly, our experiences, our experiencing, our streaming of consciousness is endlessly changing.

[00:12:07] One of the wonderful ways of asking the question, why do things change? Why does there seem to be a process in time in which the present moment passes and something new replaces it? Why does that happening in a deep way? Well, nobody knows for sure. And yet my favorite explanation. Is given in this book, now, the physics of time, now. I wrote about this in neurodharma in the chapter on now-ness, being here now, right? So this fellow, Richard Muller was a physicist. There's a certain randomness at the highest level and who actually gets a Nobel Prize. A lot of people roughly equally qualified. Some are picked and some aren't. He was one of the folks that just wasn't named, but certainly at that level. Anyway, you may have heard me talk about this. I'll be brief. His theory is that the Big Bang universe, which seems to be permanently the case, at least for us, right, has four dimensions. Three of space, right? Length. Time, time. Scientists have found evidence that the fabric, the spatial, the spatial three dimensional fabric of our universe is actually gradually expanding. It's stretching out from that initial explosion when everything bubbled into being. BLOOP.

[00:13:56] **Speaker 1** Now, 13.8 or so billion years later, space is stretching. We don't notice it. You're actually getting a little bigger. So am I, but everything else is getting bigger at the same time, you know, we don't notice it because it's so subtle and across such vast distances. All right, the Muller says, what about time? That fourth dimension in the expanding space-time universe. Well, the expansion of time, necessarily means that we must leave the present behind endlessly for the next instant, instant by instant by instant in the temporal expansion of the universe.

[00:14:39] So we are therefore living on the edge of creation endlessly as we are expanded into the next moment, which necessarily entails the endingness, the leavingness of... Um what has been what is now past and is behind us that's a really beautiful way i think and a hopeful one and a kind of a joyful one a very grateful one in a lot of ways to appreciate that we are endlessly receiving you know there's a lot to focus especially in early buddhism on the kind of grim recognition of everything ending well that's only half the story The other half of the story. Is everything endlessly arriving? It's actually an interesting practice meditatively, particularly if you have abandonment issues in a sense. They're leaving, I'm being left, I am leaving, right?

[00:15:42] To actually pay attention to the givingness to everyone, to you included, of the next moment appearing. There are some people here who are familiar with the Pali versions of these, poly. In a language of early Buddhism. Okay, so we have all compounded things are impermanent and all compound things are subject to dukkha. This is a very important point. Dukkha includes physical and emotional pain, it includes the fact that pleasant experiences end, and it includes that fact that we can't hold on to any single thing. So no single thing can be a permanent basis for happiness. But dukkha is not a problem unless we cling to it. All things are subject to dukkha if we cling to them. It's a very important point. They're not inherently dukkhas. They are subject dukkas if we cling to it. That has a lot of implications. Life is not necessarily suffering. It has to do with our attaching. Okay?

[00:17:01] So setting that aside and then we have the teaching that all compounded things are made of parts that are connected and changing, and therefore they are without, they are empty of essence or self. These are these three fundamental statements that are at the heart of early Buddhism. They seem philosophical, perhaps. They are observations about reality. And the Buddha, there are other things he could have observed about reality, all of these observations about reality break us free of our habits of clinging and attaching and identifying and possessing and insisting. Creates so much unnecessary suffering for ourselves and others. So I'm gonna focus now on the first teaching here and relate it as well to the valuable sense of healthy not knowing. Healthy, maybe so. Healthy, don't know. Not so sure.

[00:18:15] To avoid dukkha then being different. Thank you, Ole. So take a look at what Ole, what a troublemaker you are, asking me about electrons earlier. To avoid dukkha, then be indifferent. Great point, classic, okay. No, we can live with passion. We can live joy. We cannot avoid values, right? I am not indifferent to injustice. Or people who give me, you know, a hard time unnecessarily. I notice it, I have values about it. I do something about it, I'm not indifferent to, gosh, what's the name of it, Mr. Dewey. Oh my gosh, Mr Deweys, cashew based ice cream. Oh my goodness, that stuff is so good. Chocolate orange chip. I'm not indifferent. And that was the great teaching of the, one of the great teachings of the Buddha, is a phrase I probably use too often, but where he basically turned away from the ascetic practices of the Jains of his time that were killing him. And he realized that it was okay to take a little food. You know, the story of the milkmaid who gave him a little rice with milk when he was dying of hunger or his own recollections which have come down to us in the Buddhist suttas. Of being a boy at some kind of a festival or event when he was young sitting under a tree and just sort of dropping into a blissful state of being and recognizing this is fine, it's okay. There's a distinction between tanha which is problematic. Chanda, which is healthy desire. I have healthy desire for you, Ole. I wish you well. I wish a long and beautiful life and that you ripple outward and onward to help all kinds of other people and that your favorite sports teams win frequently, whatever, right? That's Chanda. So this is very important, okay?

[00:20:30] So I'm gonna keep moving, but this is really key. So the question is, can we live in the distinction? Can we live the difference? Between tanha, contracted, pressured, insistent, wanting, and wholesome, valuing, and leaning into that which is good for us and others. Okay. So now, I started to read a fantastic book, hardcore, Buddha Dhamma. Extremely clear. I was turned onto this book by a couple of young monastic friends and had their full endorsement. All the cool kids are reading this book. Now, they did not say cool kids. They said, we are all reading this books. But anyway, it comes with high praise. I find it really clear, you know, I skipped through the scholarly stuff in the beginning, but then I really burrow into the parts that really speak to me. So the teachings here, if you care, if it matters to you, are as fundamental as it gets in the original teachings of the Buddha.

[00:21:36] There are other equally fundamental teachings, various kinds, but this certainly is right at the core. So I could rattle on and say the obvious in different ways, but I don't think I want to do that. The obvious being that everything is changing. Certainly our experiences are changing. The mind is continually changing. The question is, so what? Thank you, Captain Obvious. Thank you Dr. Buddha, pointing this out. Everything changes, so, what? How could this be useful for me? So I want to offer, I want nominate a few things and I'm taking into account Malena's comment at nine past the hour. Along the lines of the teachings are extraordinary about the Buddha, but the environment forces us to deal with situations every day. Molina writes, I have to work with government

environments in Mexico and I don't know how to find the middle path and not get lost along the way.

[00:22:59] So I want to offer some practical suggestions. In part related to Melina's comment and also to any of the rest of us who are dealing with challenging situations. I'm certainly dealing with challenging situations probably on a smaller scale, but still very real. I have family members who I love, who are dealing with difficulties, health problems, other issues. I'm involved in a complicated international nonprofit that is going through a lot of changes. You know, living in America, as I said early on, there's a lot of turbulence right now and in my personal value system, I think much of it is terrible. Dealing with things. The more that things are changing around you, especially in bad ways, as you consider it bad, the more that that's happening, the more important it is to find refuges. In which you are relatively stable. Find your footing. First and foremost, stabilize. Secure your base of operations. That's a rule of warfare or something. And I think this is very important. So finding, you know, a sense of stability in the present. That's available, stability in the ongoing mindfulness of breathing and going on being, a stability in knowing what you see, what you know is true, just trusting what you now, taking refuge in that. The stability also of your values. What are your values? And the stability of knowing what your basic plans are, what are the steps you're taking as best you can. Amidst all the other things that are out of your control. Really? What's the takeaway from impermanence?

[00:25:10] Maybe the first takeaway is stabilize where you can in healthy ways, not by imposing rigidities, but in ways that for you are healthy. Find that stability, including the stability of recognizing your good intentions and feeling your good heart and making good connections with others. A second takeaway is to hold your views lightly. On the one hand, in the Eightfold Path, we establish right view, wise view, which includes these three profound statements that I put above that all compounded things are impermanent. Well, meanwhile, realizing that as conditions change, we need to change our views, especially if you are someone like me who's rewarded for being right. You know, if your role is to be the knower, to be right, to be a teacher, you especially need to pay attention to whether you are clinging to your views rather than holding them lightly. And I recall this quotation from Maynard Keynes. Keynes, the great British economist who was a upper-class, I guess, kind of high-level academic there. And you can imagine him in various... Posh dinner parties in the 1930s, maybe. And apparently, in one of those occasions, he looked at someone, and I'm gonna gender it the way he said it, which locates it at a certain time and place. You can just imagine the... The oomph factor in what he said. He apparently looked at somebody and said, when the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir? Isn't that great? When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do? I'm lightening up about attaching to view about other people and about yourself, which then goes to my third suggestion that's practical I think, from how takeaways from impermanence, which are to let yourself change. And to realize both that you have been changing. And to let that change happen.

[00:27:53] So letting that change happened includes budging inside by when you've taken the good, including the good of realizing that you need to look at something newly, in new ways. Can you let yourself change? You know, what would happen in the next 24 hours or, you know, before you go to sleep tonight, wherever you are. If you just said, you know, I'm gonna let myself be changed. Whatever good things might change me. It also is a way of recognizing that the person you are today would not do some of the bad things that younger versions of you did. I'm using the word bad just bluntly and simply. Um, knowing what I know today, there's an, there are so many things that I feel embarrassed about and sometimes ashamed of and remorseful about. I do. And it's not a cop out. It actually opens

you up to accept appropriate responsibility and regret, remorse, guilt and even shame to realize that the person you are today would not do that. That you learned from that, or you've made amends, you're walking a higher road these days, to credit yourself for that change opens you up for truly facing and then releasing around previous mistakes in your life. That's a real benefit here. Change impermanence. Another practical takeaway, we give other people room to breathe when we recognize that they are changing too. We recognize that some of the stuff they say or do is a momentary phenomenon. Yeah, it had the real impacts it did, but it's, it's a certain amount of flotsam and jetsam, you know, in the river that they are just moving along. And we can lighten up sometimes about what they did when we realized, you And you know, dealing with things that have made them do what they're doing in the moment.

[00:30:36] In other words, they said that stupid thing. I have a list of people in my life who shall be nameless. I have list for each one. I have the list of the people and each one of those people I have to list for. All the stuff they keep doing that I don't like. All right. But usually that stuff they do is the result of forces impinging on them, right? They are that current with, and whatever's happening in it is interrelated and interdependent. With other things. So that's another thing that's quite helpful. You know, they do their thing, you look at it, you're irked by it, but then you look around and you realize, wow, it's not here anymore. The only place that what they did is here is inside my own mind as I ruminate about it. It usually takes, you know, it depends with practice. Realizing this can change how you feel within, you know, a few minutes, I would say is pretty reasonable, possible, sometimes longer, but to realize it's not here, except when you're thinking about it and for them, it's gone. Now, maybe you need to talk with them about it. You need to clear it. You need a process, you sure. You need to make sure they don't do it again, okay. You need just pick up for yourself, maybe okay. But it's still really helpful to realize, huh, it's not here anymore, unless I focus on it, unless I recall it. That's really useful.

[00:32:24] Someone wrote me privately that I'm gonna speak to here. This person writes, I do have abandonment issues. And even though I know everything is temporary and passing, but to be with people who don't want to commit to partnership is also unfair to my relational needs of safety. Is this need false? I just don't know how to reconcile this truth of impermanence with holding relationship standards when people don't wanna commit. Beautiful, beautiful, important question. I get irritated with people who use teachings and sometimes sort of new age sayings as a way to avoid responsibility for their impact on others or as a way to minimize or discount the needs of others. We are social mammals, social primates. We have deep needs to attach to others and to feel safe in those attachments. Now people vary. Some people have high needs for stability in relationships and high needs for closeness and a sense of security. Other people, maybe they're more introverted, they have less needs for relationships, they actually prefer to keep things distant. That's them. So it could be that you're someone who has for you a normal need for safety, especially if you're going to be emotionally vulnerable. Or physically vulnerable through sexuality. You don't wanna do that with people that, you know, have a very casual, uncommitted, surface kind of feeling for you. It's just not right for you, you don't want to do it. It's interesting, if you think about two people considering going into business, you think consider going into business with someone like watch the show, The Bear. Open a restaurant or run a restaurant with someone, you want to know they're committed. It's interesting, isn't it, that in simple, ordinary, small business, we want the people we work with to be appropriately committed and reliable in their commitments, trustworthy. And we want them to be loyal to the enterprise. You know, there's a saying in Western movies and Western culture, my dad was a... Grew up on a ranch in North Dakota. You ride for the brand, the brand being, sorry, those creatures that are branded, but the idea is you're on

the team. You're loyal to the team, and if you don't like the brand find another horse. Isn't it interesting that we have these normal range standards? We expect this for people on a sports team. And in high school, we expect this to people to show up for practice, to keep their word. We expect this of our neighbors if we loan them a tool.

[00:35:27] And yet in romantic relationships, there's a whole subculture of people who try to resist these normal expectations. If you are going to invest yourself and invest your body in an intimate relationship, of course, it's normal. Of course it's... True rather than false. That said... The reality is, if it's a restaurant, there are many people who are just not prepared to make the level of commitment that is necessary to hire them as a cook. It's true that in relationships, many people are not prepared to make that level of commitments that many others need to feel truly safe with them. That's a fact. So then the question becomes, can you, on your side, live with a very limited vulnerability in the relationship or do you want to be alone until you can find another person who might be hard to find for a while, but still that's what you're trying to do, who can actually meet your needs and not reenact patterns that could probably go all the way back to insecure attachment or an early childhood.

[00:37:00] All right, and this goes to my point related to impermanence that. In this endlessly changing and largely unreliable world of wonders, we need to find refuges of relative stability and reliability and trustworthiness and security. We need to fight that. And I'm all for that. And that's healthy. That is healthy attachment. That's healthy desire. That healthy making of something that lasts. You know, the Buddha has one of my favorite proverbs. I'll try to do it from memory. Train yourself in doing good that lasts and brings happiness. Live a life of peace and cultivate a mind of boundless love. All right, train yourself in doing good that lasts. This is from a great teacher of impermanence. Last thing. As we recognize, whoo, it's all changing. We realize, wow, it is impossible to know everything. Things are changing, I can kind of sort of predict, but I can live in the not knowing, a certain amount of not knowing amidst continual change, continual flux. And I want to nominate to your, for your consideration, the experience. Of combining for yourself a kind of a blend of these two beautiful teachings. You can combine all three. Well, I'll leave it at this. The teachings of impermanence, along with the value of, you know, healthy, not knowing. Right? The two together, it's all changing and I don't know everything and that's okay. It's okay that it's always changing. It's OK that I don't always know. It's ok. That feels really peaceful, and as you rest in that, it brings you to a lot of peace. And as Liz points out, there are many other things that are stable. Your wholesome intentions, your moral adoption of various rules or precepts or standards or aspirations. Questions. My love for my wife is reliable. It's not gonna change.

[00:39:52] And as somebody else, I'll finish on this, pointed in the chat, given that all compounded things are subject to, are impermanent, they're subject to arising and passing away, the Buddhist quest in his own journey was to find that which is not subject to arising in passing away. And in his meditative explorations, EEEEEEEEEEEEE I, you know, people interpret this differently sometimes, but basically he talked about the unconditioned, all-conditioned phenomena are subject to change. Is he eventually found through the third noble truth, Nirodha, cessation, the cessation certainly of the experience of change in, I believe, and many other people would say the same thing, in an awareness of an underlying ground of all that is absolute, that is unconditioned, And therefore not. Subject to passing away, timeless and eternal. So interestingly, a deep recognition of impermanence leads us into valuing relatively stable refuges in our real life, which I've named a number of, including, as Liz points out, good intentions of various kinds. Interesting. Also, a recognition of in permanence leads us to non-clinging, to that which is

endlessly changing. Beautiful. And third, a deep recognition of impermanence can lead us as it led the Buddha into finding that which is eternal and timeless and absolute by whatever name we call it. All of this leading onward from that fundamental teaching of impermanence.