

8_12_26 Talk*

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

Rick Hanson: [00:00:00] I want to explore with you tonight something that's both very intimate and embodied and also cosmic, inspiring and mind-blowing. And that has to do with our sense of the present moment, the sense of now. And I'm going to do it with your permission, and I hope it's okay, by drawing on some traditional texts in the Buddhist tradition. That have been handed down to us in the Buddha's conversations with people as he was unpacking his own enlightenment and guiding people based on that unpacking in the practical steps, step by step by steps, and the practical recognitions, you know, bit by bit by bit in their own path of awakening.

[00:00:48] Let's start with a little experiment, something a little experiential. We'll just take 10 seconds. Notice what it's like to be you for the next 10 seconds. In particular, notice the motion of your own stream of consciousness. Not just that the next thing is happening, but there's a kind of leaning into the future. A kind of reaching for the next moment. That's the normal biologically based machinery of the that's leaning into becoming. You know, it's not so much that we're like a candle flame, you know, perfectly upright. No, we're more like a candle flame being continually pulled forward, like by a kind of suction, you know always tipping toward what's next. Now the Buddha had a very precise term for that, leaning forward. He called it bhava-tanha, Bava having to do with Becoming, and tanha having to do with the second noble truth of craving. And in the Buddha's very first apparent, as best we gather from the historical record that we can infer, that his first sermon, his first major formal teaching at Sarnath, the Buddha doesn't say per se, or just vaguely, craving causes suffering. He breaks it down, and he breaks craving into three specific currents. Or modes of clinging. There is kama tanha.

[00:02:49] By the way, the root of the word tanha, I like this part, neuropsychologically inclined, is thirst. Thirst is a deficit state. Something is missing, something is wrong. We're driven to solve that problem. And a very ancient part of your brain, the hypothalamus, manages thirst. It also manages things like feeling too hot or too cold. It's very primal. Tanha is primal. So there is tanha for kama, for sense pleasures. Don't worry about the Pali. You know, we want things to feel good, or if they feel bad, we don't want them to stop feeling bad. Okay? That's understandable. Craving for sense pleasures broadly, including the pleasure and impressing other people. Then, third... As first and third. Third, there is the craving for non-becoming. Wanting to end, to erase, to annihilate, to disappear, to not be here anymore. Versions of that show up psychologically in subtleties of dissociation, which then can become fairly habitual. If there's a trauma history, it's that I don't want to be here. The craving for not becoming. Very poignant, very understandable. All right? Then in between the two is craving for becoming. What does that mean? It's a little weird. What do you mean? Not craving for a particular pleasure and not craving for oblivion, but craving to keep on going, to keep coalescing into a future self in the next second, the next minute, the next year, a future-self that's going somewhere, becoming someone, accumulating a story, getting stuff done.

[00:04:36] And it's important to appreciate that craving for becoming might be understood that the Buddha says, Stop changing. No, change is inevitable. We are continually becoming naturally something else, right? It's still fine. Even people very, very far along in the path are becoming. Their body is becoming older, you know. Their mind is becoming maybe more knowledgeable or maybe less cluttered. And there's still a natural process of becoming. That's not the problem. The issue is around the clinging to it. We cling, we

contract, we get pressured about who we will become, including getting pressured about what the world around us will become. Wanting things to happen in the black box of other people that they become, fill in the blank, more affectionate, more respectful, more interested, more well-behaved, more... Politically progressive, whatever it might be, you know, that we want them to become, it's still a kind of becoming, right? The issue is not change and including positive changes, the issue is around the sense of pressure and especially the self-referential aspects of this. Who will I be next? Who am I becoming? When we run our little mental stories, right, as we reflect on the past or fantasize or plan for a future You know there's very much in that story Who was that character becoming in terms of the past and who is that self? That me myself and I that we're becoming in the future There's a distinction between the person, the body-mind process that you are as a particular, you know, kind of identity and continuity over time. That's different from this presumed me inside that is coalescing around a future way of being me inside. That's problematic. And you can just watch how referring in very small, ordinary, everyday ways, and sometimes larger ones, get driven by this machinery of planning, of wanting things to become a certain way, wanting others to become certain way. It's this attachment to becoming that's problematic. All right?

[00:07:08] Now... I also want to just kind of go cosmic here for a moment, because when you really reflect on this in ways that I think are really liberating, there's the fundamental question of what is now? What is the present moment? This is actually a big scientific mystery. And I have one of my favorite books. Yay, back there on the shelf. Now, The Physics of Time from Professor Richard Muller. At UC Berkeley, there's a fair amount of luck involved in who gets the Nobel Prize. You gotta be at a certain level, but after that, there is a certain amount of luck around timing and this or that. He could easily have gotten a Nobel Prize in physics along with other really serious quantum physicists. So, very distinguished person with also a gift for writing. It's a lovely book, now, The Physics of Time. Anyway, Mueller's notion that I shared in my book, Neuro-Dharma, and I've mentioned here before, is that maybe time is actually sort of simple. In this sense. Clearly, there's a Big Bang universe, the Big Banged, around 13.8 billion years ago. And as it banged, it bang into four dimensions, three of space and one of time. And we are living in the expansion of the four-dimensional space-time universe.

[00:08:34] Now, Scientists, astronomers, are now able to measure... Literally the stretching of the tissue of the universe. Wow, they can determine, yes, the universe is actually expanding, but it's on a scale of gazillions of light years, et cetera, that's so big we don't feel it. You don't how your body is literally expanding in some incredibly microscopic way related to the expansion of the Universe. But we can notice the temporal, the time expansion of the four dimensional universe as it expands into the next moment, much as it expand into the next space in a certain sense. It expands into to the next moment. For the universe to expand into to next moment it has to leave the current one behind.

[00:09:27] So there must inevitably be an endless losing-ness of the current moment. Which also tends to drive a lot of attachment and clinging, and a kind of angst. Oh, don't change! Don't go! Right? Then we try to manage in a variety of ways to, you know, not suffer, including with drugs, and so forth. But, you got to let go of the present to grow into the future, which then becomes the past as the universe continues to expand. This means that the present moment involves living in creation continuously. The universe is continually creating new space, but it's so vast we don't notice it. It's also continually creating on Muller's account. It's continually creating a new time. So in every moment we are living in the creation, we are receiving the expansion of the universe, which when you'd kind of rest in that, who would ever want anything more? We're receiving so much in

the arisingness, the giftedness, of the next moment appearing. You know, every moment of impermanence, of losing, is offset by every equal moment of arising. And if we lean increasingly into the arising-ness of the present, then there's less sense of deficit, there's less sense for something missing or wrong, and therefore less driving for craving.

[00:11:03] Now, the brain hates losing. It has a negativity bias. So the brain is continually trying to hold on to what's changing and stabilize it, make it static. It can't. It won't succeed at that, ever. It's impossible. That creates a certain amount of discontent, right? But that discontent is not inherent in living. It's the result of our clinging. We're trying to hold on to the present as it changes. You know, as the sands of time continually sift through our fingers, that's normal. How cool, time. The problem is when we clench our fist and try to hold onto the grains that inevitably pass through, that's when we get frustrated and tip into drivenness and pressure and demandingness and conflicts with others, which create, of course, suffering and harm. So that's kind of, that's contextual here.

[00:12:03] So now, back to the Buddha, right? He, of course, like many wise people, emphasized being in the present. And there's this nice passage from the Samyutta Nikaya. They who are the noble ones, people who are awakening, do not grieve over the past, nor do they yearn for the future. They live only in the present. That is why their faces are so calm. That's nice. So, how can we gain that kind of peacefulness of being here now? Well... We've got a challenge. The brain is a prediction machine. It's continually forming an image or a picture, a prediction of the future, in ways large and small, and then mapping the present against it to update its prediction of next moment.

[00:12:57] So if I were to reach for a cup, my hand is, you know, assessing the weight of the glass in the cup and mobilizing enough motor strength and motor planning to lift the cup. You know, a young child, like a toddler, is trying to learn how to hold a cup. You know they have a lot of learning to do. And you've probably had the experience of predicting that a cup is empty, and yet it's mostly full of water and it doesn't budge. Or predicting that the cup is full of water but it's only a quarter full and you lift it with a lot of force and all kinds of water comes sloshing out. That's predicting. A fair amount of neural real estate including major portions. Of the cerebellum, which has neurons that typically are making, you know, thousands and thousands of connections with other neurons that are in the cerebellum, it's continually generating predictions. It could be things like lifting a cup or in reading. And this is where large language models of AI are starting to get into this too. It's predictive processing, you now, guessing how, you what will be the next part of a sentence or guessing how a conversation will go. You know, predicting how things will turn out, if you have Chinese food instead of Italian tonight, or something like that. That's useful, that's useful. But it keeps us continually out of the present, continually tipping into the future, that biological process. And it's very useful in mindfulness to just watch that happen. All right?

[00:14:33] A good portion of our minds are camped out in the future, which doesn't exist yet, yet we're continually, constantly rehearsing, revising, and getting attached to various outcomes out here. And that process of predicting is very related to the construction of a self, again. You know, literally the neural circuitry that's involved in higher-level human predicting of things is very connected to the neural substrates of selfing, which are multiple in the brain, but a major strip is in the midline here. The front portions of it are more task-oriented predictions of things, including how it will be for you. The rearward, more default-mode network, is more involved in kind of... Daydreamy, or diffuse, or ruminating, including negative ruminations, predictions that have to do also with a very strong sense of self. Every prediction implies a predictor. All right? Every what will happen next implies a what

will happened next to me. You know, me, the important one here. Moi, right? What will happen to me?

[00:15:52] So the anticipating mind... And the becoming mind are not separate, you know, they are very involved. You want to say anticipating, anticipating for me, my stakes in this. We have stakes in what we are becoming, what is becoming, and those stakes, much of them really have to do with the construction of a separate self, which is problematic in a variety of ways. I won't get into a lot of that tonight, bit. You know, there's a useful fiction in, you know, some kind of core of choosing and responding. I think it was, I believe, Jack Engel, a great therapist who said, or wrote, essentially, you have to be somebody before you can become nobody. I mean, there is a place for the useful fiction of a self. It's when we get caught up in it, you now, and we get possessive, my precious. When we get identified with my positions, my case, I'm right, you're wrong. You know, our... When we start opening up to taking things personally, and we start experiencing hurt and narcissistic injury, oh, then we start to suffer, and often then create suffering for other people as well.

[00:17:14] So, one of the cautions about attachment to becoming is the way that it reinforces and reifies a sense of me, I, who are becoming, or me or I who are not becoming right, not becoming in good ways, not becoming as good as them, not becoming even better than them. Lots of suffering in all that. All right? So let's take a look now at the neurological machinery of the present moment. Which has to do with the machinery of attention. This is super cool and practical stuff. First of all, we just start with basic wakefulness. You're, let's say, a mammal 200 million years ago, or a hominid with a brain a third your size who could still make stone tools two million years ago, or an early human 100,000 years ago or today, walking down the hall somewhere. You're awake you're alert you're moving and then something happens that is processed in the first 20th, 10th, quarter of a second in your brain as engaging the alerting systems of attention. Something has happened. And then on the heels of alerting, which doesn't know what it is or where it is, or what to do about, or if it's even relevant, on the heels of alerting comes the second kind of movement in the streaming of attention. Called orienting. We start to locate it in space, and we start to begin to categorize it, okay?

[00:19:07] Suppose that you're walking down the trail, and you register, huh, that's alerting, and then you orient, there's this wiggly thing. Oh, snake. And then as you orient, you begin to realize, oh, that's a vine on the trail, not a snake, which then leads to the third step in the sequence of attention, which can happen in less than a second, maybe a second or two, is, you could call it, evaluating and responding, you know, based on what it is. Oh, okay, it's just a vine. I can keep walking, I can step over it and kind of chuckle at my own reactions. Do you see the sequence? Alerting. Typically the first, you know, quarter second or so in the processing stream, maybe the first second, then orienting, where is it, what is it? And then what's relevant about it, moving into, okay, what do I need to pay attention to to respond appropriately? This is all happening at the front edge of the windshield of now, right? As time streams through us, or as we... Stream outward, you know, the expansion of the universe into time, those initial moments of attending and orienting are what it really, really means to be in the present.

[00:20:37] What's interesting also is that alerting and orienting themselves are not suffering. Alerting and orienting themselves our primary neurological process. There's no suffering yet. There's not clinging, there's no craving, there's just alerting, something happened, and oh, that's where it is and what it is, moving into the beginnings of what to do, its relevance to you personally. Now, this relates, ready, to these five aspects of who you are psychologically and physically that the Buddha called out, form, feeling, I'll

translate, perception. The other formations, and awareness broadly, being conscious. So form is all of the physical universe and the barest sense of it, kind of close to alerting. Feeling and perception have to do with first the hedonic tone, so I'm going to flip the order. I'm gonna do perception first, which is categorizing and orienting. Then comes the hedonic tone, pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant or unpleasant, let's say neutral, which is starting to move toward its personal relevance. Okay?

[00:22:09] Then come all our various thoughts in the so-called volitional formations. Our thoughts, our neogram style, our attachment classification, you know, our personal history with walking in a trail, do we like snakes, have we ever been scared of snakes, all in a field of awareness. Where does suffering begin? Suffering begins in the formations. There might be unpleasantness in the hedonic tone, sometimes called the feeling tone, it's pain, but we're not really suffering. There's no mental anguish around it. And also, where does selfing begin? Selfing begins in the formations. There's not inherent selfing in the barest perception, the barest apprehension of form. Barest sensation, barest sound, sight, taste, touch, smell. Just there, right? There's no self in that. The hedonic tone, pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, no self-in-that. The labeling, the categorizing, sometimes drawing on memory of what something is and what its relevance is. Again, not much self- in-that, if any. Where selfing arises and craving and suffering and conflicts with others are in the formation, so-called, everything else. This means, to the extent we live, in the front end, the processing stream. There is less craving, there is less selfing, and there is less suffering. And thus, our complexions are serene. Wow Whoa, I don't know about you when that all kind of came together for me Reading the dormant and stuff and thinking about how the brain, you know Constructs the present moment in this processing stream that starts with simply alerting Wow I thought of course that's why the great teachers. Why do they tell us to be in the present? Like why It's a lot of work sometimes to stay in the present.

[00:24:23] Well, because the closer you move to the front end of the processing stream, the less suffering there is. And a couple things really help us to move close to the front end to the processing string. Not knowing. So you're already starting to disrupt perception, the categorizing of things. Don't know. All right? Also going wide, getting a sense of the whole field rather than collapsing attention around one part. You know, being aware of your own mind as a whole, being aware of your relationships and your projects as a whole, not collapsing on a single part. That also helps you stay very close to the front end. Ah. Wonder the work of Dacher Keltner and others. I'm blanking on the name of a Friendly acquaintance of mine who also wrote a great book about all anyway lives in Northern, California.

[00:25:13] Anyway, the sense of wonder I don't know how wonderful You know that sense that I'm drawing you in and I'm highlighting that realizing we are receiving moment by moment by movement the extraordinary gift of the ongoing expansion of this singular universe Whoa! You know, ah, also moves you toward the front of the processing stream. Feeling like the moment is enough and being, you know, aware of what is enough already helps you stay in the front end of the process stream. Now to be really clear... Many people do not have the privilege of the life conditions that enable them to even a minute a day of deliberate contemplative practice rest in the front end of the processing stream. They're running for their lives, they're being chased by one force or another, they don't have enough food, they are gripped with physical pain, they worry about their loved ones. Yeah. It's understandable that we kind of pull out of the present in the kind of very radical way I'm describing, and we solve problems. Okay, sometimes you have to do that.

[00:26:30] But to the extent that we can disrupt the habit of becoming, the habit mental time travel, and the habit ruminating, or what the Buddha called proliferating, to the extent we can disrupt that through training. And through deliberate practice and intent, and come again and again to the front edge of now, receiving the front end of now as it flows through you, to the extent that we can do that, you will suffer less. You will become happier. You will cause less trouble with other people. You will be more rested and your complexion will improve. So how do we actually do this, right, increasingly? So it's very helpful to become more and more aware of the expectation machinery, you know, expectations. I recall a teacher, I think it was Stephen Gaskin, in his Monday night class, back in the hippie days, he said, if you don't want to get disappointed, don't get appointed to a particular future. Not that that was both clever and correct. And you know, I myself, you can figure out my one of nine enneagram points probably from me saying this, I myself tend to really enjoy imagining different futures and planning to live in them in various ways. And also under pressure, I definitely shift into a mode in which I'm trying to achieve standards, trying to meet a standard or achieve a goal. You know like Accomplish something at an excellent level and all that's kind of normal and normal etc And it's so easy for that to become a habit that just hijacks you and so you're then increasingly Kind of fixed on how things are supposed to become and when they don't become that way But you get disappointed because you got appointed to a particular form of becoming what things will become So being aware of expectations.

[00:28:50] Second, try as best you can, you know, in an interaction with someone to let go of any expectations. It's kind of hard, where you just don't expect anything good or bad from them and what they'll say next in that interaction. You just play with, Don't know. Literally, you don't know if they will explode into a cloud of pink gas. You don't if they won't bonk you. You don't know if, I don't know, they will hug you. Don't know. And just like disrupt the expectation machinery. That's a very cool thing to do. That tends to really bring you into the present. Also, I think a simple sense of wonder. Is increasingly understood to be good for physical health, good for long-term health, good for long-term mental health, a simple sense of wonder. What do you feel, oh, a sense of wondering about? What blows your mind? Or where are you gobsmacked with gratitude? Me, stuff like an awareness of stars and space and the extraordinary history of the universe that enables us to have the privilege and the opportunity of a human brain and capabilities, having the technology in modern times to be able to be with others here, I just think, wow, how fortunate, how blessed.

[00:30:29] So for you, you know, what makes you gobsmacked with gratitude and draws you into the present? And with practice, and meditation is really, really good in this regard, you will find yourself more and more naturally in the present. You'll be letting go. Letting go and letting in, continuously. I had a teacher who talked about this as the prayer of changes, in a way. Receiving and releasing, receiving and releasing. Over and over again. In tune potentially with the breath. So I wanna say one last thing, two points. One, this awareness of change can for some people be very unsettling. That's why I think it's really important to pay attention to arising, not just passing away. It can be helpful to train in the awareness of passing away, which is a common and formal meditative practice, as an aid to releasing grasping and to become... Disenchanted, because you realize that everything you're trying to accumulate will turn to dust, etc. Etc. Okay, there's a place for that. But it can start to feel like, oh my gosh, everything's endlessly ending, there's nothing here, and it can be kind of freaky.

[00:31:56] A way to deal with that in part is to take refuge in that which is reliable for you, the love of your cat or dog, you know, the taste of chocolate, your friends, and a sense of

the endless arisingness. That can offset that terror at groundlessness. Also, it's important to appreciate as well that there are very wholesome desires that sometimes get caught up in becoming. You know, I'm involved right now in the Global Compassion Coalition. I have generally, not craving, but chanda, distinct from tanha, which is wholesome desire. I desire for you to gain from these weekly gatherings here. I wish you well. These are wholesome desires. You want to make something better, you want to a nice meal, you want learn how to make even better spaghetti sauce. Great. As I definitely need to keep remembering for myself, because I'm good at chanda, I'm at wholesome desire. Be careful about the ways in which wholesome desire can become a kind of spiritual bypass that actually constructs and reinforces that sense of self. The I who has wholesome aspirations, You know, the me, the future me who will gain from others. Appreciating what a good guy you are, or gal, or whatever good guy I am. You see? So be careful. You know, there is a place, certainly in the Buddhist tradition, for wholesome desire. Desire is not the problem. It's contracted craving and clinging. That's the problem, and even if we're engaged in wholesome desire, it's like a yellow flag, sort of maybe. Just be careful about the ways in which that might feed a sense of self that you are then becoming.

[00:33:53] A kind of a metaphor for me, that I used in my book, Buddha's Brain, is this idea that in this life, living is like living at the edge of a waterfall in which the river of time is streaming by. And the monkey mind keeps trying to grab the water as it goes by. We have to let it go. We have let it to go. And one thing that really enables us to appreciate that is that we live, as it were, at the apex of a standing wave. All right? Future is coming and the past is leaving and we're rested in the immediacy of the now. We really do exist there. Just because that existing is made of parts that are connected and changing and empty of absolute solidity and self-causing does not mean it's not existing. It's just existing emptily at the apex of a standing wave. And as we live there, because that is where we live, that is the nature of the instantaneously brief moment of now, continuously. Since that is actually the nature of things, let's get with the program and enjoy it there. You know? And in getting with the program, we suffer less and cause less contraction for other people, and enjoying it there, it's worth doing in its own right. And as we enjoy living there, in that radical present, we feel filled already. We feel enough already, and content already. Even as we make appropriate plans for, you know, wholesome things we're trying to bring into being, but it doesn't have the contraction and crave. It feels gifted, it feels life is moving through you. To at the apex of the tippity-tip-top of that standing wave, I'm minded of this teaching from Dogen that hit me like a two by four, right between the eyes when I was on retreat a few years ago. To paraphrase from memory, he said, carrying the self toward all things is delusion. All things coming through the self and carrying out practice and action is awakening. Do you follow the distinction?

[00:36:33] As someone who's really good at carrying myself out toward various goals and tasks and plans and standards and commitments and duties and the rest of it, wow, to just flip it and imagine what does it feel like at the tip, at the tippity-tip top of that standing wave up now. Wow. And can we delight in the, you know, surging through us continuously of all the ten thousand things that are making this moment a reality? Beautiful. Okay, now this all can sound a little vague, I don't know, physics, now... We know what it's like. You know what is like to feel lived by everything in the present gratefully. Including, there could well be pain. There could be loss. It's all there. And that pain and that loss is much more peacefully and happily experienced while practicing in the way that the Buddha has taught. And I've described in some ways here. We know what it feels like to rest in the present, receiving what's coming next, letting go. Receiving, releasing, receiving, releasing. We can enjoy that feeling. We can know what its like, and we can know what it's like when we're

not there. And we can know what it's like to return again and again to the tippity-tip top of the standing wave of now.

[00:38:42] Gina writes, I'm challenged with the grateful part in the present moment. I do not like how I feel too much at the time. At 75 I'm tired, although I'm still here with you all. I'll have to re-listen to this one a few times. I want to be really clear. In the present. The body can feel really tired, in pain. You know, we have people here who've written about really severe chronic pain. The question is, what's our relationship to those experiences? Can we recognize their changing nature? Can we recognize the tendency to construct a self around them? And can we recognize that when we appreciate their changingness, they don't seem so piercing and hijacking? Can we recognize that when we, like, kind of let go of taking them personally, when we can see them more as, you know, all things coming through painfully, some of them? How does that... What happens then? We can recognize that it starts feeling better, typically. And we can recognize about so much else that is true, including in your own mind the sensations that are not in pain, the sensations that are actually pleasant. The thoughts that are not pain, thoughts that beautiful, emotions. I happen to know, Gina, that you have a really loving and huge heart, that's coming through as well, right? Yeah.

[00:40:26] Thing to do that I started doing a little bit with this brain function stuff, alerting, orienting, evaluating, responding, that kind of sequence. And the idea of resting increasingly in the front edge of now, as it were, and also the very first three aggregates of form, hedonic tone, and perception. Then I am likened that to being in a airplane that's moving through the sound barrier. So... You know, before you get to the sound barrier, blah, blah, right? But when you get crashed through or move through the sound barrier, and you're just at the front end of the windshield of now, you know what I'm saying? All that stuff in the formations is way back. It's way back there. You can't hear it anymore. It's a way back here, because you're in the front with the immediacy of things as they are. That's pretty cool. That imagery of the plane, the windshield, the front edge of now, the arisingness, the immediacy, the sense of just... I find that when people really open to a sense of that front edge and now, it's almost ecstatic. Even if part of the ecstasy is your back is killing you because there's so much. You know, normally the brain is doing a lot of filtering perceptually and otherwise, so we're not overwhelmed. You start moving more toward the front edge of now. And you're not trying to categorize things, you're not trying make sense of them, you are not trying to label them or understand them or plan about them. You're just like, whoa, so much is happening. The filters start dropping. And as those filters drop... A sense of wonder. It's like being like three months old. Right? And you can do that. Okay. All right.

[00:42:21] But remember to tie your camel. So let's just kind of sit with this for a minute. See what it's like as much as you can to rest in that front edge of now. As soon as you label, oh, I'm in the front edge now, you're not in the front edge. So you're moving out of verbal processes and you're just here. Okay, here we go. One minute. A lot of allowing. When you do this, there's much less following after, and you can see the wisdom of the meditation instruction to let things arise and pass away without following after them. I talk about don't feed them or follow them, and that's exactly right. Little thought bubbles will arise. The question is, do we hop on board the thought train and get carried away from the present on down that track?