

9_16_26 Talk*

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

Rick Hanson: [00:00:00] Somebody made a comment, several people actually, that in this guided practice it was difficult to access some of the experiences I was inviting you into, and maybe especially difficult to rest in them. So I'll make the distinction you may be familiar with in two typical classic types of meditation. One is an open awareness meditation in which we simply remain present with whatever's flowing through consciousness. Without trying to influence it. The other classic kind of meditation, researchers call it focused attention meditation, where essentially we concentrate in and become absorbed in a particular object of attention, very often some particular wholesome quality of being, like compassion or a sense of one's own worth or a chance of kindness and lovingness toward others. Well, it's okay.

[00:01:00] It, in a way, it's challenging to do open awareness because it's easy to get distracted. It can also be challenging to do focused attention practices because, you know, sometimes it's hard to feel certain things, even if a well-intended teacher is, you know, trying to help elicit that kind of experience in you. It's okay. Just do the best you can, the way I look at it, quite pragmatically, both as a psychologist and as someone who has great respect for and has learned a lot from. The early teachings of the Buddha himself, there is a place for working with the mind in an effortful and direct way, and there is place for cultivating various factors such as energy or tranquility or happiness as a factor in Buddhism, or in this case, a sense of growing calm, tranquility, with a sense openness and spaciousness of awareness. And even exploring blends of those. There's a place for that.

[00:02:03] And if you bump into difficulty, it's okay, you're normal. I've had difficulties myself. And very often what happens is you just stick with it and gradually what's blocking you or hindering you from resting in some of these normal states of being. Calm is a normal state of being, sense of strength is normal, openness is normal. Warm-heartedness is normal. It might be difficult to access, but it's a normal range of experience, which means that it's natural to us. And over time, as you work through the obstructions to that and come home to what is natural to you, you will be increasingly successful at it. And as you rest your mind in and as you increasingly stably experience these qualities of being, they become hardwired, literally so. In lasting changes of neural structure and function and become enduring parts of you or qualities of you that you can take with you wherever you go. So I'd like to explore with you here the topic of anxiety.

[00:03:11] And I wanna start with what we could call healthy anxiety, and then we could called problematic anxiety. And I want to approach this from both a Buddhist perspective and from the perspective of modern neuropsychology. So. On the one hand, anxiety is perfectly normal and has an evolved survival function. It provides signals to us about threat. There's what's called signal anxiety in psychology. That's its useful purpose. And it alerts us to the tiger that might be dwelling in the bushes. It might alert us as well to what will happen if, you know, we don't... I don't know. Listen carefully to our partner, you know, or what might happen if we don't go see that doctor about this funny lump in our neck. There's a place for healthy anxiety in the world around us to be anxious about things that feel like they're falling apart in your country or worried on behalf of others. A lot of anxiety is on behalf others.

[00:04:25] My wife and I have two adult kids and you better believe we worry about them. No. We're proud of worrying about them and we intend to keep worrying about them even

if they don't want us to. So there's a place with that kind of anxiety too. It's natural, of course. I'll tell you a little story about myself in rock climbing. When I very first started climbing really seriously in my early 20s, I would go to bed at night, camping out, lying in my sleeping bag near my friend who was my climbing partner. And as I was falling asleep, I would suddenly have an extremely vivid sense. Of tumbling through the air down the face of the thousand or more foot cliff we had been climbing that day, falling down toward the hard boulders at the bottom to smack on them. Whoa! You know, that was a shocker. So I would pull myself up and out of that experience, shake it off. Whoa! And then start falling back into sleep again. And then, boop, there I was, tumbling in space, falling to my death. Know, to smack on the boulders below. And after I think the third time of that, then I thought, well, harumph. And so as I'm falling asleep, then it starts again and I let it happen. I let go all the way to completion where smack right on that gray, I can see it here now, gray granite flat boulder and then in the moment just before, a millisecond just before impact, I realized, oh, what I was experiencing was an upsurge of the fear that I had been suppressing all day long as an inexperienced young climber on the lead, so that if I fell, you know, I might go 20 or 30 or more feet with a little tiny piece of metal holding me. It was a little scary. I just shut it all down and it was now flooding up again. And I learned, oh, there's a middle. Path, there's a middle place, what a surprise, for healthy anxiety, healthy fear, you know, and to allow it, to make room for it and find that middle place where one is not overwhelmed by it and also one is, not trying to, you, know, lie about it or numb to it or push it all the down.

[00:06:50] There's a place in life in general for healthy anxiety. And this goes to a major... Stream of teaching in early Buddhism, direct teachings of the Buddha himself, and in some cases some of his contemporaries, his students, in which he talked about appropriate fear, including fear of, you know, doing things that will cause future suffering, or suffering in the present for yourself or for other people. He talked about, you know for example, the five reflections that I've talked about previously. Recognizing that each one of us is involved in processes of, you know, of aging and we're inevitably exposed to illness. Eventually the body will die. Eventually we will be separated from all that we love and eventually we will, and along the way, we will inherit the results of our actions. This is not a gloomy prospect. This is a recognition of what's simply true. So healthy anxiety, you Caution! Healthy vigilance, prudence, thoughtfulness, is really, really wise. As a psychologist with a lot of interest in neuropsychology, there's a wonderful term, I think wonderful, called allostatic load. Trying to recall the person who coined it, I can't on the moment. Anyway, it's the notion that in the body-mind, there is the accumulating wear and tear of stress, particularly stress. That's invasive and overwhelming. There is a place for stressful experiences. There is place for fairly mild experiences of being stressed that are well-managed.

[00:08:41] The problem is... Arguably, most of the stressful experiences of most people are not the kind that are just sort of gonna make you stronger and stronger, but they actually wear you down. That's allostatic load. That's a gradual accumulating burden of stressful experiences and negative emotions that invade us our stressful experiences. Invasive irritability, resentment, Helpless Outrage politically is full of allostatic load, carrying grudges, allostatic load, ruminating about worries, allostatic load. So it's appropriate to be anxious in a sense, to be aware of the threats and the risks and the costs of certain things. I wish I had been more anxious about saving a little bit of money. In my 20s and 30s, which would have helped me later on in life, and rather than just totally resisting the advice of my parents. There's a place. So you might pause here, you might pause here and ask yourself, huh, would it help me to be a little more worried about some things? Just a little. And for example, one of the things that I think many couples would do well to worry more about is a gradual chilling in their relationship. The forces of entropy are continuously

at work. Rust never sleeps. Disorder occurs. And if we're not continually re-knitting the fabric of a relationship, you know, thread by thread and often in very little and easy ways. And just life itself tends to push people apart and create more distance in the relationship, which may be fine for a while, but then something may come along. Particularly maybe one person is particularly challenged with some health issues or some appealing alternative emerges and you know you suddenly realize that wow the threads that really held us strongly together. For so long are being quite frayed, and now we're really vulnerable to major disruption.

[00:11:16] Another thing to, I think, pay attention to is the impact in relationships of irritability and pushiness. I'm calling myself out on that one. People roll with our behavior for a while, but at a certain point, they just kinda maybe get quietly fed up and start to vote with their feet. The door. So that would be a thing. Also as we age, I don't know about you but I'm aging. Sure. And you know, we inherit in our 80s what we did in our 60s or 40s. So it's never too late to stop going down the wrong road, right? And it might be worth just being a little reflective about being concerned, being motivated, being vigilant about... You know. The impact over time of not setting aside a little time in your week to be active, to move, to exercise, to build muscle mass. So there's a place for that.

[00:12:20] And in the Buddhist tradition, there's a definite encouragement from the Buddha to realize that in this precious human birth, we have limited opportunities. Very few of us will know when we've crossed the line, when we will have, as Steven Levine put it, one year to live. We don't know. And I live with the knowing that the lights could go out. The lights could out for me at any point. I had friends as a couple who said that when they parted in the morning to go off to their different jobs, when they said goodbye, they took a moment to realize that they might not see the other person ever again, not morbidly, but tenderly and appreciatively. And as it turned out, one of them went into the hospital for a... For a fairly ordinary operation and did not come out. I hope I didn't shock you there. You know, just the realness of it all. Okay.

[00:13:30] Then on the other hand, there's problematic anxiety. And what can we do about that? So I wanna talk about two kinds of approaches. One kind of approach is given in the fact that understandably, often due to some kind of underlying physical condition, the body will generate chronic anxiety. Just general. And one of the major symptoms of an underlying health condition is an internal sense of alarm. Even before you identify what that internal condition might be, you know, the early warning systems in the body-mind process are bubbling up alarm into your consciousness. So if you're dealing with a chronic health problem, for example, or you're in the middle of a, you know, difficult situation, you lost your job or you may be, you know, someone in a country who is being targeted for mistreatment of various kinds. Well, it's understandable that you feel scared. It's understandable. You know, your heart is pounding or your body is tense. It's really understandable if you're desperately worried about somebody else. It's really understandable.

[00:14:53] And this is where the Buddhist teachings about how to bear and how to live with, and how in some senses shift our relationship to ongoing painful experiences is really useful. His teachings are really useful here. These are teachings around mindfulness, so there can be a witnessing of the anxiety. Not being identified with it and hijacked by it, we're not trying to reduce it, we're just simply stepping back from that. If anything, it's helpful to the extent you can to open to it. That's why I did the practice with you in the beginning in the meditation around establishing a base, a refuge of calm strength, as best you can, because that base... And there are other aspects of things that can help you

establish that, such as a warmheartedness, flowing out and flowing in. It's a major factor of being centered in the body mind. Establishing that base then enables us to be more open to the anxiety, to feel it, to let it flow, to open to and deconstruct, disentangle the body sensations aspects. Emotional aspects, the subtle differences between, let's say, apprehensiveness and, you know, fear, you know uneasiness, worry to disentangle and identify the thought track in the experience, what are the cognitions, what are the beliefs, particularly beliefs about the future, this kind of unpacking. If you haven't done this before, try it. It's really helpful to your being with the experience while tracking its different aspects.

[00:16:57] And in the tracking of its different aspect, it becomes easier to bear because you start recognizing a kind of airiness, a space between the different aspects and ways in which they feel less personal. They're there They're unpleasant, they hurt, and they're not so invasive. They're not personal. There's more space in them and around them. It's like airing out the threads that previously had formed a tight-fisted knot. Highly recommended in the Buddha Dharma, fundamental process. Also, there is the aspect of recognizing that this experience has arisen due to various causes. It's there, dependently. And as those causes change, well, the experience of anxiety can change as well. You know, the Buddha talks about his own childhood. Or not childhood, his own youth as a practitioner, as a meditator, in which there's a kind of a sutta. This is Majjhima Nikaya, number four. Titled Fear and Dread, that's the title, in which the Buddha talks about feeling really scared. It's arising, you know, he would go into the forest full of lethal threats, frankly, and close his eyes and sit and hear all the sounds and the smells and even with imagination and in the worldview of the time, there would be spirits of various kinds, not always so friendly. And he just stayed in place, stayed in a place. You know, to not be so overwhelmed by all this. So that's good practice too.

[00:18:52] I want to say also that in terms of practicing with we could say inescapable anxiety, first dart, first arrow anxiety, I have found as a therapist and as a friend to others, two things in particular and I use them myself. So in addition to What I've said so far, which is essentially mindfulness of anxiety with compassion for yourself is unpleasant. Additionally, I find that turning toward realistic reassurance is quite helpful. If there is reassurance, if there is the possibility of helpful treatment, if it might be getting better, anything that might be reassuring. And I think often for people they're aware of what might be reassuring, they're also aware of what might be worrisome, what might be getting worse. And then the question is, what's the last thing your attention rests on? If both are worth being aware of, maybe finish with reassurance, just to help yourself feel less anxious. You're still going to keep your eyes on dangers, you're still gonna take prudent action, but you're opening to reassurance. That's helpful.

[00:20:12] And then, the other thing I think is really, really helpful is to make a plan and to have Make a plan you have confidence in, that it's the best plan you've got. And you're going to take steps, and then those steps will lead to an even better plan. Know your plan, and take refuge in your plan. A lot of people, they freeze, understandably, in the face of threat. But once you get through the freeze, and help yourself to get through the freeze, plan and take action. Anjula Sarayan, to paraphrase her, talks about how action binds anxiety. And then, I'm sorry, I am going to say it. Surrender to us beyond your control. Your plan is about what you can influence. Surrender is about you can't. And see if you can find your way into being at peace with the most dreaded outcome. I'm not saying you like it, I'm not talking about sugarcoating it. I am talking about a sort of ultimate acceptance. In a larger context of the universe as a whole. You know, people, I don't mean, and if you can't get there, you can get there. And some people sometimes say they're there, but they're not really there. I'm talking about with your belly, your heart, and

your bones, surrendering to what might happen that's beyond your control. Not acquiescing to it or ... Not knuckling under to it, not succumbing to it. Surrendering is different from succumbing. Doing all that you can while... Surrendering to it. There are these two lovely lines from Dylan Thomas, the Welsh poet. They're actually inscribed on the top of his tombstone in, I think, Westminster Cathedral or Westminster Abbey. I, whatever. Anyway, I was there. I saw them. They're great. They're from the end of the poem Fern Hill, in which he talks about his childhood. And these last two lines I love. Ready? Here we go. Time held me green and dying. Though I sang in my chains like the sea. Time held me, green and dying, though I sang in my chains like this sea. Both hand, surrender to the dying, right? And the chains while singing like the sea. Okay.

[00:23:18] And then the Buddha put a fair amount of attention on the anxieties that we create ourselves. The anxieties that are not so beneficial and that are very worthy targets of practice. So I want to name two from Plastic Early Buddhism. The first of these is the anxiety that has produced through clinging, which seems counterintuitive, right? I'm a rock climber. I want to cling to those holes. There's healthy clinging sure. But then there's the clinging for example, to sense pleasures, which inevitably fade. And we get anxious about their fading. We get anxious, about will we get them? We get, anxious about will I get the last cookie? Right? We get anxious about the sense pleasure of approval. From other people and responses to us of various kinds. You know, we cling to them. Or the Buddha pointed out, we cling to views. Ways we think we're right. We get anxious about, don't other people see it the way I do? Why not? What's wrong with them? Or, oh, I got to defend my view. Oh, it's under attack. We get anxiety about that. The root of which, the root of that anxiety is the clinging to the view. We also cling to the sense of self. Whoa, you know? Me. And so anything that seems like it undermines me, you know, like others are not so impressed with me, oh, that would make us anxious. We get caught up in what's called affective forecasting in which we project a future self into situations involving, let's say, sense pleasures or communicating our viewpoint or a sense of appreciating us as a self and then, oh, we get anxious about that.

[00:25:20] So here we have the great, you know, the fundamental teaching of the second noble truth, the ways in which craving and follow on clinging is a major factor of suffering. And as we cling less, we suffer less. So the Buddha pointed to that and yeah, easier said than done. And there certainly is a place for enjoying pleasures in life and There is a place for knowing what you think, and as need be, asserting what your viewpoint is. And there's a place for appreciating healthy narcissistic supplies. We're very social primates. We need to feel cherished. We need feel prized. We need the feel seen. We need you feel included and liked. There's a plays for that. And there is a plays where we go too far. And often we recognize where that plays is. By how it feels. It starts feeling contracted, it starts feeling insistent, it starts feeling like we're taking things really, really personally. That's the kind of clinging that leads to an anxiety that's not so good for us. And through insight and through practice over time, we're able to hold our pleasures, our views, and our sense of self more and more lightly. You know, than open hand rather than a clinging clenched fist. Yeah And then there's a second kind or source of problematic anxiety that's given among the five so-called hindrances. This is a really useful area of teaching. I know I've taught about it sometime in the distant past, probably back in the Bronze Age. So I think I'm gonna dust these five off.

[00:27:09] Essentially, it's the idea that in our practice, which could have a beneficial forward quality, we are hindered by certain things. Interestingly, I've learned from Gil Fronstel that a way of translating the Pali word, P-A-L-I, in early Buddhism, that's translated routinely as hindrances, is as coverings. Coverings, isn't that interesting? These

are coverings over the beautiful true nature that is inherent in all of us but is covered over by various things. So what are the five hindrances? We have the hindrance of attachment to sense pleasure, we have the Hindrance of Doubt, we have The Hindrance Of Ill Will. We have the hindrance of sloth and lethargy, and we have the hinderance of restlessness and worry, sometimes translated as restlessness, and remorse. This is rumination, this is mental preoccupation. Worrying that is not productive hinders your progress on the path, and hinders relationships, hinders productivity at work. It's Saps Energy. It. Pulls us away from the present as it is, and gets us caught up in mental time travel about the future or, you know, being preoccupied about, you now, the past. So worry gets in the way. It's a hindrance, it's a hinderance. And it can make people feel kind of restless. Sometimes we worry also intertwining with remorse. We worry about what we've done. We worry if we'll ever be able to repair something. You know, we worry about people who are estranged from us and what will happen, right? So it's really understandable. It's really understandable. And what can we do about it? I have a fair amount of material on rumination and you can burrow into it on my website. I did a workshop in rumination. It's available online. And if, you know, if it's... If you're blocked financially from doing it, you can just ask for a scholarship and do it for free. A lot of material about ruminating. You can find it elsewhere in my world. I'll be kind of quick here.

[00:29:33] With regard to worry, what's really useful is to ask yourself what's productive here? What's useful? Welcome to worry. Thank you worry. What do you have to say? And At the point that you've gotten the phone call Hang up the phone at the point. You've gotten a message. You can hang up the fun. I got it. I understand I Understand there are certain things that are uncertain. I Understand that there are things that aren't beyond my control. I Understand that some bad things might happen. I don't know and meanwhile, I'm gonna do what I can. Thank You but I don't need to add worry to my discerning and my planning and my acting. I can disrupt ruminating, which is like a cow chewing its cud. I can interrupt laps around the rumination tract. I can glean the value, I can harvest the value. I can squeeze the juice out of that orange of worrying and then release the rind, release the part. That's not so helpful. Very useful. I want to say a word about the worries of others because As someone who, myself, two things.

[00:30:57] Number one, privilege plays a role. Many people don't have to worry about certain things, you know, as a man, cisgender man, I don't worry particularly about walking down dark alleys. I'm not worried about being sexually assaulted. I don't have to be worried about that. I don't have to, or in other situations, I don't have to be worried as a white person, let's say, about what are people thinking about me necessarily, personally. So, it's important to appreciate... That what we worry about or what we're anxious about is the result of being part of a larger network, systems and society, family systems, neighborhood systems, economic systems, access to healthcare. Some people don't have good access to health care so they worry, of course, a lot about their child having the sniffles. What is this gonna lead to? Can we afford the expense? One of the major sources of bankruptcy in America is medical debt. So it's understandable that You know, it's privilege plays a role in worry. And second, in interacting with others, I don't know about you. If I'm worried about something, to have some well-intended person tell me, ah, don't worry about that. I want to smack them. They should worry about my reaction to them telling me to not worry, right? And so don't be that person. Don't be Rick, because I've been that way sometimes. So it's just really important. When other people are worried about something, make room for that, you know? Can you give them room to breathe? It's easy to get kind of, frankly, arrogant. And maybe you have the privilege of a lot of practice. Maybe you have a lot years of therapy and Buddhist practice and some good enlightenment experiences under your belt. Okay, great, that's you. But to come from that

place of Frankly, superiority and just be like, well, you're still worrying about that. Not so good, not so good. I think that's an important point here to quote the poet Miller Williams, you know, with his line or his poem about compassion. Have compassion for everyone you meet. It's not conceit something something for you do not know what secret wars are going on down there where the spirit meets the bone. We don't know, very often we really don't know the circumstances of other people's lives that they are understandably freaking out about. We don't know.

[00:33:37] So it's respectful to have an attitude of gentleness and inquiry and softness and receptivity around that. I think also, I'm on a poet role here. Quoting Leonard Cohen, Zen practitioner, bless his memory. I think this is close to what he says. I know your burden's heavy as you carry it through the night. The guru says it's empty, but that doesn't make it light. Right? The Guru says it's empty. That doesn't make it light. And that's true for your own situation as well, some kindness for yourself about all this. So I wanted to say a word about that, about how we treat the worries of others. You want to hear my quick fix for worrying about public speaking? There's some kind of list of things people worry about and down in the middle are things like terminal illness. The top is public speaking for many, on average, it's the one that got the highest ratings. What I learned to do was to look around the room, either before I went out on stage or just when I was on stage, maybe being introduced, to just look around a room and take a moment to register the faces of some people and a sense of them. And frankly, to recognize in a broad sense, the suffering, the common humanity, the weariness, the fatigue, the concern about others, the longings for the good. And when I would register that, it would draw me out of myself into being over there and shifted me into what could be a value or a service for them. And then that helped me be a lot calmer, you know, as a presenter.

[00:35:36] So you might play with that a little bit. And it shows up in other places, you're going out on a blind date or whatever, you're meeting the in-laws for the first time or whatever or you're going into a kind of a... Tough situation at work, and just putting a little bit of attention on tracking, not in a patronizing way at all, but in a respectful and open way. Oh, how life is landing on that other person, too. And taking a beat to register it in your body, not just knowing it conceptually quickly, but taking a few extra seconds to register in your own body. Oh. Might really help you to feel better and do better in that situation. Okay. So let's see if there's anything else that's coming up here. Anxiety. I think it's okay to not want to feel anxious. I think anxiety is unpleasant. Would you want someone else to feel more anxiety than they really need to feel? Need based on, you know, inherent causes and conditions. You probably wouldn't. In the same way, I think that's really okay. To find this middle place in which you're not fighting the anxiety, and you're pushing it down, and you are not ignoring it, and you, in a way, are welcoming it. Thank you, anxiety, for trying to help me. It's trying to HELP you, on the one hand.

[00:37:03] And on the other hand, appreciating that, you know, I don't want to feel more anxious than I need to. I love this proverb from the Dhammapada, that one is truly wise, not because they can quote the teachings. One is truly wise, who is peaceable, friendly, and fearless. Not like an aggressive jerk, but, you know... Their cause is just, like a kind of, they're looking clear-eyed, you know? They're not carrying unnecessary anxiety along the way. So you might, you might... I think a lot of people just... They feel like they're stuck with their anxieties. And in this presentation, I hope, drawing on the wisdom of the Buddha, and a few good psychologists as well, plus some poets, you know, I hopefully you have found some skillful means in this talk to relieve yourself of the burdens of... Extra unnecessary anxiety while learning ways or being reminded of ways, perhaps, to practice with inescapable and informative anxiety. Okay. So how about we just take a moment, a few

breaths, you know, a handful of breaths here at the end, to... Let whatever is useful for you settle in. The line is, people will forget what you said, they will not forget how you made them feel. How we feel, our state of being, is the real prize. Sinking into the state of being that you value here, you appreciate. You know, what's a blessing in your heart for others?