

LOVING, KNOWING, AND GROWING

Growing with Rick Hanson: Part 1 Talk

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Hi, I'm Rick Hanson, a clinical psychologist and meditation teacher, and I'm really happy to be talking with you about this element of the program Loving, Knowing, and Growing. My aspect of it has to do with growing, and I'll say more what that means.

It's an honor for me to be part of this with such wonderful teachers as Tara Brach and Joseph Goldstein and to have all this sort of brought together with Tami Simon of Sounds True.

My own view, that I expressed in the interview that we did with all four of us together, is that practice, in other words, the active, deliberate relationship to our own mind, and then active engagement with it is really, really important. In some ways, I think it's more important these days than ever as people feel pushed around by external forces of various kinds. It becomes more and more important to feel that, well, at least inside your own mind - inside the inner temple of your own being - there are things you can do with your reactions, with the conditions around you, with the legacy of your own childhood that is still with you today. There are things you can do, and that's what I mean by practice.

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So as I've said, I think practice has three fundamental elements. First, we need to bring a warm-heartedness to our own selves and to those of others. That's compassion, kindness, the pillar of Loving that Tara has spoken to. We also need to be mindful. We need to sustain present-moment awareness. We need to be aware. And we need to acquire self-knowledge over time as we become mindful of ourselves. That's what Joseph has been speaking with. And also, it's very important to keep in mind learning along the way. Healing and growing and developing along the way.

As I was preparing to do this, I was thinking back on a really important turning point in my own life. I was a teenager, probably about fifteen, and very unhappy, socially awkward, painfully self-conscious, neurotically caught up in my own mind tremendously, very irritated with my parents, and afraid of the kids around me. It all just seemed hopeless, and I was stuck. The past was miserable. The present wasn't any fun. What could I do?

But then a kind of white light moment came to me of sorts, in which I realized that no matter

how bad the past had been, no matter how crummy the present was, I could always grow a little bit from here. I could learn a little bit from here. I could become a little less nervous around other kids. I could become a little more comfortable talking with girls. I could be a little less reactive to my parents. I could be a little less preoccupied with the weird chatter inside my own mind. In other words, I could develop. I could become more competent. I could become more skillful. I could become wiser. I could become stronger. I could become happier every day, a little bit, every day.

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Wow. That was wonderful and hopeful to appreciate. And to appreciate that inside my own mind, inside my own inner temple, no one could stop me. No one could stop me from learning something every day. Maybe I was stuck in various conditions: my high school, the kids sitting next to me in the room, the kids standing next to me in the bathroom. You know, I was stuck with that. But inside my mind, I had some power and some freedom, as we all do. No one can defeat you in learning something every day, and no one can do it for you. That's why I think that the path of growing, the pillar if you will, of the three-legged stool, I think of it as practice. The one of growing is both full of hope and possibility and also a kind of tough-minded responsibility. It's up to us to help ourselves learn and grow a little bit every day.

So in that context, I want to say first that one thing we can do is just in the flow of everyday life, take in the good during little, authentic, beneficial experiences as you move through your day. For example, as you accomplish a task, you can slow down to internalize the feeling of being a little successful or a little capable. As you get in touch with the feeling, let's say, of grit, or resilience, or determination inside you, you can slow down and let the sense of that really sink in so you progressively move from states from various experiences to growing these as traits along the way.

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In this presentation, I'll talk about how to do this. I'll explain what's happening in your brain, plausibly, as you do this. But right now, I just want to set the table and explain that one of the benefits of focusing on growing, in addition to the sense that there's something you can do, is it's not hopeless, a sense of possibility and hopefulness.

In addition to that benefit, you can deliberately move through your day helping yourself grow from lots of little experiences during the day. You can also focus on key psychological resources that you want to develop in yourself. Let's say you actually want to become more mindful as a trait. So while being mindful, you can use some of the methods that I'll be presenting here to you to help the attitude of mindfulness and the skillfulness of mindfulness to really sink in, so that

it gets gradually hardwired into your brain. And as research shows, you gradually change your brain to develop what is in fact a more mindful brain. And then mindfulness becomes more stable for you. It becomes more established for you.

In much the same way, you could say, you know, "I want to really develop what Tara was talking about. I want to develop greater trait compassion, trait kindness. I want to stabilize more in a strong and courageous heart. I want to be able to recover to that home homebase faster going forward. OK. I want to develop myself in those ways."

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And you can cultivate other things. You can cultivate a growing sense of self-worth, which might be very important, if you like I, have had lots of feelings of inadequacy rooted in childhood. You can develop more commitment to various things, such as exercise, or sobriety, or standing up for others in terms of social justice. You can cultivate wisdom. You can help conviction land more and more deeply in you about whatever teachings are meaningful for you. You can even cultivate very subtle but very important insights, such as the ongoing recognition of the transience of all experiences, their impermanence.

In other words, you can use the methods that I'll be sharing with you to develop particular inner strengths that would be so useful to have more present in your mind today, to deal with both external challenges as well as whatever internal issues that you, like I still am, are still grappling with.

Last thing to say about all this is that I have a bit of an opinion, see for yourself what you think is true, that the element of deliberate cultivation -that's what I mean by growing - the deliberate helping of oneself to stabilize wiser, happier, more wholesome, more effective ways of being inside yourself to develop in other words, in my view, the deliberate process of cultivation is routinely left out. Teachers routinely do not speak to it. We kind of assume that if we help people have experiences as therapists, or coaches, or self-compassion teachers, mindfulness teachers, kind of assume there will be what's called incidental learning. Maybe there is. Especially for people who are naturally and intuitively on their own using some of the methods I'll be presenting to you for changing our brains for the better over time.

But many, many people actually don't particularly change for the better. Maybe they're having a nice experience during that therapy session, or conversation with a friend, or while reading a book, or doing their meditation, or yoga each day. But an hour later, a day later, they're just the same. There's no lasting change for the better, which is the fundamental definition of any kind of learning, including emotional, social, somatic, motivational, etc, etc., including spiritual kinds of learning.

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So we tend to leave out a deliberate focus on learning. And then as individuals, we tend to zoom along. I relate to that. We tend to zoom along from one experience to another, in effect changing the current experience continuously in short term memory buffers in the brain, moving from one experience to another before the current experience has had enough time to sift down into, in effect, memory stores leading to lasting physical changes of neural structure and function, which is the essence of any kind of learning.

So watch your own mind, you know, as you go ahead in the days to come in and observe the habit of moving on to the next thing before the current one has really had enough time to land in the body and leave lasting residues behind.

So in that context, then, I thought I could give you a bit of a taste of what I'm talking about here. And then I'll explain more what's happening in your brain and the process of positive brain change. Then I'll talk about, in a more developed and detailed way, you know, how to do this in everyday life and what are some of the specific applications. And along the way, we'll do some more experience or practices too.

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As with anything, take care of yourself. My focus will be on beneficial experiences, which usually, not always, are enjoyable or meaningful. Occasionally a beneficial experience is uncomfortable, like healthy remorse, or recognition with some disenchantment that something you had hoped for, realistically, is just not going to happen. There's a place for those experiences too. But most of the experiences that are the basis for developing whatever we want to grow in ourselves are actually positive experiences, which is really interesting. They're usually enjoyable, or meaningful, or both.

And so I'm going to be focusing mainly on those kind of experiences. But if anything comes up for you that's uncomfortable, feel free to pause this program. Feel free to distract yourself. Feel free to touch it and say "Maybe I'll come back to you later." Really take good care of yourself here. And also know that at my website, rickhanson.net, S-O-N, RickHanson.net, I have oodles, tons of freely offered resources of all kinds. Short little guided meditations, longer talks, slide sets from workshops I've given, detailed applications of these methods with different issues and different populations, including, let's say, children, or how to use this material with trauma. So there's plenty of backup for this, including its scientific basis. And you can find more of that at my website, rickhanson.net. And knowing that, I'll make this presentation streamlined and as experiential as possible.