

Class Three: Life *is* Experience  
January Intensive  
Green Gulch Farm  
January 12, 2007

We don't actually experience life. Life *is* experience. But we talk that way. There is immediate experience, immediate life every moment and with this comes the capacity to cognitively construct something upon this direct experience-- theories, images, and so on. One of the results of this mental construction is worlds, karmically created worlds. Then the karmically created worlds mix in with the situation in which direct experience arises. Then again from that, by interacting with those worlds, we have more direct experience, more mental construction, and more worlds created by mental construction.

Even our original direct experience is not the entire world. It's the world and the working of the world, the interaction of our body and the world, as it's manifested. It's not the whole universe, but it's the whole universe manifesting as this life. To some extent, then, it's limited and it's somewhat enclosing. One of the consequences of the thought constructions which are built on this somewhat limited function of the universe is that it can become habitual and that creates even more enclosure. It's a containment due to our karmic habit. The consequence is that the cycle continues, resulting in the creation of new worlds which don't seem new to us and are entrapping.

Someone might say every little thing in the world is a result of karma and every phenomenon we know is a result of karma, but I think you can distinguish between personal karma and collective karma. My understanding is that physical phenomena that we are responding to are a result of collective karma, all contributing to what is called in Sanskrit [...] a container world. Then there is the world of beings, and that is also created by karma, but there, I think, our personal lineage is more relevant. But I don't think that we or our karma is all that makes us either. I think that we, living beings, are made from our body interacting with the world. The body doesn't make the body, but the body interacting with the physical world creates a life experience; then there is a basis for karmic activity. The consequence of that is more worlds, more beings that interact to create more consciousness and more karma. But the individual doesn't make this go by him- or herself. Each individual person, although they don't make themselves, can observe to some extent their own creation... Not how they create things but how they are created. They can observe the cause and effect of their own selfhood, and see that that self is not self-made.

And also I thought I would mention at this point that our body is in some sense both a gross and a subtle material event. The gross material events are the sensible data. The subtle material events are the sensitive organs. So our body is a sensible body, a sensitive body, a sensual body. It's five organs, but it's also a tangible thing. It can be olfactory data. It can be an object that can give off sound [snaps fingers] [we need to verify that that's what he did] Light can use our body to be seen. We don't actually see light. We see light as it reflects off somebody's body.

So our bodies can be part of gross materiality and subtle materiality. Both the gross material and the subtle material are the result of karma, but my body is not the result of my karma alone. My body is the result of everybody's karma. You are all responsible for my body according to that understanding, I would say, and also I am responsible for all of your bodies. You can take care of your body-- and you do, one

way or another. But you also can take care of other people's bodies--and you do, one way or another. We both contribute to each other's physical existence and are responsible for each other's physical existence. You are not responsible as if you had an assignment, but in fact you do take care of everybody's body. You do respond to everybody's body. You do a relatively wholesome or unwholesome job of it. I can't help but respond to your bodies. I am responsible for your bodies and you are responsible for mine. You can't avoid it. You can't avoid making me. You can't avoid being made by me. And you can't avoid being responsible to me once I exist for a moment; then everything changes and you are responsible to the next body that I am.

Once again, the definition of karma is how we project our stories. Karma is mental construction to establish relationships with the world. I don't know of course, but to me it makes sense that I can't grasp my relationship with you. I can't grasp how you contribute to my life and I contribute to yours. But I can cognitively construct a picture of that relationship. This is a way to cope with the ungraspable flux of our relationship with each other.

We like to grasp because we desire, and we desire because we feel alienated and lacking. We feel alienated because we have distanced ourselves from this intense dance which is our experience, this dance between ourselves and the world. We feel alienated from it because we're afraid of it. And we feel a lack all the time because we've created a sense of self to cope with our life, but we don't have this thing that we've created. So we both yearn and fear for this flux. And we're separated from it because we've constructed something which doesn't exist in hopes that it will give us some peace.

This is part of the cause and effect of our desires, our fears, and our longings. The Buddha teaches cause and effect to help us rectify our misapprehension, our misconceptions about our experiences. By rectifying our vision, we actually let go of these habits. In the advent of a body interacting with phenomena and consciousness arising, there is a self. So it isn't that we say there isn't a self, it is just a question of understanding it properly. Understanding it properly has to do with understanding the causes and conditions of misunderstanding, and also causes and conditions as they actually are.

In the *Samdhinirmocana Sutra*, there are three characteristics discussed for all phenomena: the other-dependent character, the imputational character, and the thoroughly established character. The thoroughly established character is the way things actually come to be, the way they always are. The other-dependent character is how they depend on other things to exist. The imputational character is an imaginary version of events. So in the study we've been doing so far, really we were talking just about the first two. When you see the thoroughly established character, you will be free of conception. The thoroughly established character is how it is. The imputational character is actually not present in the other-dependent character. Our imputations on things are actually absent. To see their absence is to see the thoroughly established character. The absence of these projections is how they actually are.

The other-dependent character is free of, or lives in an absence of, imputation. By understanding that, your vision opens to see what the other-dependent is. The further revelation is to see how things happen when you find that the stories about how they happen are not actually present in the happening. So first you clear your vision by not believing your stories about how things happen, then you can see how things happen. But even before that, you are already liberated from the problems that come from adhering to the

stories you tell about things. In other words, you can be liberated before you understand the full range of all the subtleties of causation. Any stories you have about how things come to be are absent in the way they come to be. When you see that all the stories that you have about the way things come to be cannot be found, when you verify that, then you can start to see how things come to be without any stories.

Are you ready to ask questions?...Some people are. Are the people who aren't ready for the people who are?

FS: So at the moment of the experience of the thoroughly established, is there perception?

Reb: Do you mean can you have a perception of the thoroughly established?

FS: Yes.

Reb: Yes, uh huh.

FS: What is the object of perception?

Reb: It's seeing that the imputational cannot be found, seeing that the story cannot be found in the phenomena... seeing through that.

FS: So the story has to stay there for a while, it has to still be in the picture?

Reb: You're looking for this story, this mental construction. Ok? And you have a perception that it can't be found. You can also have a valid understanding conceptually, in a way that you've never had before, that you can't find this. When you hear that teaching, that our stories about things cannot be found in them, maybe you think about that and meditate on that in your daily life for quite a long time. Then, one day, suddenly you see it the way you never saw before. You see it for the first time, that that's so, conceptually. That's a big transformation. You can also have a direct perception of that:: the absence of your karma in the world. --Or not so much in the world, but in your life, which is the relationship between your life and the world. Because you see the absence of your story that you're separate from the world, the absence of the separation between the grasper and the grasped. You can perceive that because it's a phenomenon. So phenomena have characteristics, and the characteristics are phenomena. Does that make sense? You can't directly see the other-dependent character because we do the thought construction on top of everything very fast. So you're experiencing the world, but then you're really experiencing the world through your karma. You have a cognitive version of the world, and then you superimpose your relationship with the world over this color. That's the imputed picture on top of the phenomenon, the color. So you need to study your karma to know that what you're going to be able to find out is not actually in any of these phenomena. Neither I nor you can make a story about our story which is found in the story.

Student: In one of the sutras we chant in the morning it says when dharma fills your whole body and mind, then something is missing. Is that what we sense that is missing, the stories and the karma that our body and mind are filled by?

Reb: That's another version of it: you would sense that your story is missing in the ocean. You go out in the ocean and you have this story about it, that it's a circle. You look at the circle, but you realize something's missing; this doesn't really characterize the ocean. You realize this is only 5% of what's going on. Another way to look at it would be, this circle is actually not in the ocean, but because of the way we see things, there seems to be a circle in the ocean. But there isn't actually a circle out in the ocean, and the ocean isn't actually circular. And there aren't those pictures up in the sky, but in order to make sense of the sky we make these stories about the sky.

When you realize how limited you are and you accept that limitation, you understand that the entire ocean is creating this limited version of itself. If you really accept that, then you realize this circle of water is the total manifestation, the whole works, of the ocean. It's not the whole ocean, it's the whole works. The whole ocean works through circles, through these little circles, and you can experience the manifestation of the whole works in a part. But if you refuse to accept the limitation, then you're just confused and you don't see the manifestation of the whole works.

Student: It sounds to me like you have to understand that the something that is missing is actually very freeing.

Reb: Very freeing, yes, and it's a result of letting the dharma fill your body and mind. Then you can understand something is missing, and then you can be liberated by understanding that your limited situation is actually the whole universe working this way.

Student: How does this apply to our practicing Zen?... – Yesterday, for example, we cooked kale. We make some good food, food to feed everyone in here. Now I'd like to know the teaching applies to that.

Reb: The basic teaching here is be aware of what your story is while you're cooking. Moment by moment. Be aware of, "Now I have this story or intention to cut this vegetable, now I have the intention to bring these ingredients together, to add this condiment, this is my intention, I see myself in the kitchen, I see myself in relationship to these people, this is my position here, this is my job. Now I see that I have a different job. I see that. Because of my different job, I want to do this. So it goes each moment, noticing these intentions.

Student – I know-- this means if I do something, just do it. Anything that arises from karma, just arises.

Reb – Right.

Student: The other day you said that the river breaks through the road,\* and I'm trying to understand it in light of Dogen. I know yesterday we made the distinction between earlier Dogen and the focus of a later Dogen and reliance on karma, but when I see that, it looks to me that there's a road that breaks through, and the road builds the river.

Reb: -- and a road can build a river? Yes, it's a cyclical process. You can tell that story too. But that is a thought construction, right?

Student: But it makes a difference, it's a subtle difference in practice.

Reb: What's the difference in practice?

Student: It's that I don't hold a river as a solid independent dharma.

Reb: Ok, do you hold anything as a solid independent dharma?

Student: Sometimes.

Reb: Hmm. And what do you do when you notice that?

Student: I notice that ...in meditation, or not.

Reb: --or not, right. (laughter) and you notice whether you do it or not.

Student: Sometimes.

Reb: Right, but do you have the intention to notice whether you do or not?

Student: Sometimes

Reb: Do you have it now?

Student: Yes.

Reb: Yes?

Student: I was hoping we could go back for a moment to what you said about each person observing their own selfhood and observing that we're not self made...And I'm wondering where sensory perception begins, if we can know a bit about sensory organs.

Reb: First, once you see your mind has constructed a story, once there's a mental construction of self in the world, then you look and see: Is it me over here talking to you over there? Is that the way I see it? And if I do see it that way, then I know I have what is called delusion. And by studying this pattern of delusion, I will see that the way I come to be at this particular moment, is through the experience of seeing you and talking to you. Those phenomena arise, and then I'm created by that. That is the accurate way of seeing how I come to be.

In the realm of karma we represent the sensory world through a cognitive construction of that world. Then, in that presentation, we see ourselves as separate, but in the actual arising of our sensations we are not something separate. It's not like "I" have an experience of color. There's really the experience of color. There's not a separate self having that experience. The self is the experience of color. The way I'm experiencing color is really who I am. I'm nothing but the experience of color at that moment. We tend to

think that there's a self that has the experience or the self that knows, rather than the just knowing. But there's not somebody that has knowing of the known. But we think there is. We think "I" know "you." Rather than (breaks into song), "Getting to know you, getting to know all about you." That's all. That's the case where the river breaks through the road.

Student: In song.

Reb: In song, yeah.

Student: So road construction is necessary to live in daily life?

Reb: Yes, definitely in daily life, but even in any old way. When there's life, there's knowing. When there's knowing, there's life. And when there's knowing, there's mental activity, there's road construction. And the consequence of road construction is roads.

Student: So if we choose to live functionally in the world, we always have to feel that alienating sense of lack?

Reb: Well, yes, but even if you don't choose to live in the world, what is the alternative? Is there an alternative to that?

Student: Death.

Reb: Would you choose death? Anyway, if you have an alternative to living in the world, tell me about it, but I think we're living in the world, and we really don't have an alternative to mental construction. Mental construction comes with every experience. It's my experience that everybody's thinking all the time. Everybody's active. I don't know any inactive people.

Sometimes people say to me, "What should I do?" I say, well, you're doing something right now. You're asking me, what should I do. That's a big, active thing you're doing. But you don't notice it. Asking the question, "What should I do?" is road building. It creates worlds. If you say, "What shouldn't I do?"-- that's also an action, a mental construction. That's a story. It's a short one, but it's a story. If you don't say, "What should I do?" and you keep quiet, that's what you're doing. You're doing, "I'm not going to say anything." That's a big part of Zen. Zen is, we're not going to talk about the following topics today (laughter).

So we have no choice but to be road builders. We're going to be active all the time. Sometimes we seem to be able to pay attention to our road building, and, most of the time, not pay attention to it. Not paying attention to it is a great disaster. Paying attention to it is an aster. (laughter) That's English etymology: aster means star. Disaster means wrecking the stars. If we pay attention to the stars, things go well. Our vision will improve. The stars will get healthier. If we don't pay attention to the stars, it will be a disaster. There'll be pain and misery, and desire and longing and lack and pain.

Student: Even if we pay attention, we will still feel lack and pain, a little bit?

Reb: Maybe a lot, maybe a lot. But the feeling of alienation and lack is part of the education about causes and conditions of storytelling. I'm telling you about the story telling. I'm telling you, you're telling stories. I'm telling you, you're thinking. I'm telling you, you have intentions. Buddhist psychology is saying you always have intentions every moment. You are always actively constructing worlds in your mind. And that construction comes because we're feeling alienated and lacking and afraid. Seeing the reasons why you're doing the thought construction should help. Part of the causes and conditions of the storytelling is fear of direct experience, longing for direct experience, the creation of a self to defend against direct experience, a sense of lack because of the creation of the sense of self, and so on. If we study the causes and conditions of this karma, our vision will become correct. We will see the way things actually happen and then there will be no fear, no longing, no lack, and no alienation. But it requires clear vision for these things to be dropped.

So karma makes problems, is a problem, and comes from problems. Originally, we have an unenlightened state, and to cope with it, we create this karma. Then the karma creates more problems. Studying the cause and effect of karma and how it chokes us and suffocates us and how we struggle with it, seeing the reason for constructing something that's bad for us helps our vision become clear, and when our vision becomes clear, the problem is resolved. The cognitive processes which create this entrapment are appeased or dropped. There's a transformation of the process of cognition, the mental construction.

When you have clear vision you are very functional. You are a great compassionate being. Which is the point of all this.

Student: I had this story coming here that I was tired, and that I didn't think I could take on any more. As I was sitting here, I realized my intention was actually not to listen. When I saw this, I also saw there was a greater intention to listen, but I couldn't. I was tired, and there was already too much. When you see this intention, what then?

Reb: OK, you saw that intention, so that's a kind of mental construction. There is a direct experience in which you were listening. It wasn't your intention, but you were. You actually were listening, and you were saying that you weren't going to.

Student: I noticed I was having trouble listening. Like I said, there was another intention that I actually did want to listen.

Reb: So you could also say, I'm having trouble listening, and that is a thought construction. Right? Somebody else could say you listen really well. That's their thought construction. Then you make a story that you're doing pretty well. Ok?

Student: --But I believed it, because I really felt I wasn't listening.

Reb: Then you're also noticing that you believe your thought constructions. You believe, "I'm having fun studying Zen today." Or, "I'm not having fun studying Zen today." "I'm having trouble listening." "This is a good class." "This is a bad class."

Student: All these are stories.

Reb: They're all stories, yeah. They're all karma. Those are intentions. It may not be clear that there's an intention there, but intention is in some sense an implication of the way you see things.

Student: I may not be clear about the story, but later I see what the intention is in that story.

Reb: It is definitely the case that we often can't see what our intention is. The mind can create an intention which is very foggy and ambivalent. Dogen recommends, for himself and others, to pay close attention to these patterns of consciousness which are happening every moment. You were doing that. And you reported your research.

At the beginning of the *Abhidharmakosa*, Vasubandhu says, "What is Abhidharma?" Abhidharma means literally, "highest dharma." Abhi means "highest" or "approach to." "Approach to the highest dharma": that's the etymology of it. And so, what is Abhidharma? It is wisdom. And what is wisdom? It is discernment of dharmas. "Dharma" in this case means discernment of phenomena. All phenomena occur within cognition; all cognitions come with a pattern of relationship among everything that is happening at that moment which is called intention, volition, thinking, or the story of what's happening at that moment. So by investigating this field of phenomena we come to discern phenomena, and we come to have wisdom, clear vision. And the lessons are being supplied every moment. We don't have any moments when we don't have a field of phenomena to be aware of. Every moment is a chance, so you can take a big break now for a long time because after you come back there will be plenty left to do. But you could also not take a break and just enjoy all the moments from now on... And have gazillions of opportunities to carry out the exact transmission of a verified Buddha. Remember what the exact transmission of a verified Buddha is? It is to quietly explore the causes and conditions of the situation that is described here, to investigate the field of mental phenomena. You can also not do this, but then you are missing the practice of the verified Buddhas. This is what they do for a living. Even the Buddhas have mental activity up until the time of their complete enlightenment, and then afterwards they have a different kind of mental activity, which is totally unhindered by mental activity.

Our problem is karma, that's our problem. And the recommendation is, give close attention to the problem. The problem is what you're thinking, how you're thinking. And sometimes our thinking is really difficult to look at, just as our karma is really difficult to look at. But the place where you are is not so important as the fact that you find your place there. Sometimes the place where we are is really tough. I'm not saying this is really a good place, it's just a good place to find yourself because then the practice occurs, and when the practice occurs, wisdom will arise.

Is that enough for today?

Transcribed by Lise Loubert

Edited by Roberta Werdinger

Edit Update 9/22



\*Note: Tenshin Roshi quotes and references the opening to *The Famished Road* by Ben Okri in the sections of the talk that speaks of the river and the road.