

January Intensive Dharma Talk  
Green Gulch Farm  
January 7, 2007

I offer you a story, or many stories, about how stories are not, really, what they are about. I'm going to tell you a story about you and me. The purpose of this story is to help you become free of the stories that we have of ourselves and our relationship with the world. So I'm telling you this story about our life process, or our life cycle, a story about what we call samsara. Samsara means going round and round, birth and death, birth and death. It's about going around in a locked-in way.

I like this way of telling this story very much. It goes something like:

“Originally—” (In the Buddhadharmā we don't say, “In the beginning,” because this process, this life process, is beginningless and endless. So it may be better to say, “Originally,” or “At the source.”) At the source there is the unborn. And it's like a river.\* The river became a road and the road branched out and covered the whole world. But because the road was originally, or is originally, a river, the road is always hungry.”

Last night I was reading a story to a young man, a young male; he just turned seven. His grandmother and I were reading him a story called *Briar Rose* or *Thorn Rose*. It's also sometimes called *Sleeping Beauty*. It's a story about consciousness. It's about something very precious, something wonderful, a living river. If we don't invite all the fairies to the birthday party, one of them will put us to sleep for a hundred years, and will actually try to kill us. But after a hundred years we can wake up, and live happily ever after. That's the story we told the little boy last night, and this morning I would like to tell you a similar story, about going to sleep in the river and how we can wake up.

Originally, or beginninglessly, at the origin, there is unconstructedness in stillness. There is immediate realization. Then the unconstructedness is covered by mental constructions which we can grasp on to. But because these mental constructions are originally a river, they're always hungry, always desiring.

The source of our life is always here, right now, like a river. There's actually no way to get hold of the river, even though we're completely supported by it. We support it, it supports us, this is our life, but we're afraid of this world of change. And we know what to do about that: build a road, cover it with thought constructions. We've assuaged our fears because now we can hold on and maybe we'll survive. But we want to go back to the river, back to the actual world of living, pulsing change.

Living in the river we want to maintain ourselves. We want permanence. We want to stop the flow and the change. So we project a story upon it with our mind. But then again, we want to change. We desire transformation. We desire improvement. We desire to be other than we are. That's because we are other than we are. We're not really a road. We're not really our thought constructions, or the stories we use to cope with change. If we start to get what we desire, we get scared and project upon it to try to get hold of it again. Because what we are is actually completely ungraspable. Nobody can get hold of us. We can't get hold of anybody else. And we love that. But we're afraid of it. So we forget this wonderful thing, we put it in a box and then we're not so afraid. But we want what's in the box, that changing, pulsing life. So

round and round we go, first trying to keep things from changing and being somewhat successful for a little while, then yearning for life, desiring to go back to the river.

We're always hungry when we're living in the world of thought constructions. I should say we're always hungry when living in the world of thought constructions, we hold on to them as being what they are covering. If we just see them as thought constructions, and don't forget that that's what they are, then we don't have so much desire.

Whether we are conscious of it or not, there's a deep desire to return to experience which is this flow. The source cannot be grasped and we want to go and be with what cannot be grasped. In his poem, "A Letter From Li Po," Conrad Aiken wrote, "Each morning we devour the unknown. Each day / we find, and take, and spill, or spend, or lose / a sunflower splendor of which none knows the source."

We have a practice here of getting up early in the morning. Really early, in the dark, somehow flowing out of bed. Then we sit in meditation in the hope of meeting the sunflower before we devour it, before we eat the unknown and lose it. There's a little while there in the morning when you can maybe catch the river before the road gets replaced.

In our unenlightened state we are sometimes called sentient beings. That means we are sensing, sensuous beings. We are sensuous bodies. And we live in a world that touches us and wants us to touch it. It does touch us and we do sense it. And when we sense it, the world and "us" live together. That interplay between our sensual bodies and the world is our experience. Sometimes we say our experience is born of the interplay between our sensuous body and the sensible world. Another way to say it is our experience is the interplay itself.

We are born of the interplay. We are the interplay. We are not just our sense organs. I am not just my sense organs, which include eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. My eye organ or ear organ is not the physical eye or ear and so on, but the eye function, the ear function. My sense organs do not exist unless they're functioning. And they don't function unless they're touched. What I am is actually not my body and my mind. I am the dance between my body and the world. And so are you. That's a story about you. And a story about me. According to this story, because this experience that you are right now is born of the interplay between you and the world, you are always changing. When the world changes you change. When you're born the world is born. And when you die, it dies. Our experience is the same as our knowing. Our knowing, our cognizing, our perceiving is the interplay between our bodies and the world. Our knowing, our perceiving, our life are synonymous. And all of these are constantly changing.

Again, once we have an experience, we have abilities to misinterpret and misconceive the process, and to project upon this process of interplay a grasper and a grasped, something that can grasp and something that is grasped. We can imagine that in this flowing relationship there is a constant grasper. Then that idea spreads to what is grasped. We start to set up again the belief that this construction is substantial. Now we've got the road, because we interpret this interplay of grasper and grasped, knower and known, as having two parts. Our life doesn't have two parts really, it is the two parts. It is the dance of the two parts. This extremely dynamic dance is the life, the knowing. Two people may be dancing, but the dance isn't the two people. You can't get hold of the dance. If you get hold of the dance, the dance is dead, the dance becomes the road. And then we yearn for the dance. Sometimes when we're really dancing we say, Hey, I

can actually tolerate a few seconds of not getting hold of the dance and just enjoy it. That's why we like to dance.

It is possible to wake up and enjoy the river—fearlessly, peacefully. I tell this story in the hope that telling it will promote freedom from believing this story and all other stories. I tell the story of samsara in the hope of realizing what we call freedom and peace and the ability to act from the river.

So again: there's the river, then there's fear, then there's road-building, then there's desire to go back to the river, then there's fear, then there's road-building, then there's desire, and so on. This is the cycle of samsara. Studying this cycle leads to understanding it, and understanding it leads to freedom from it, even while going through it.

Because of conscious or unconscious fear of change we grasp. Feeling successful at grasping, we desire change. Getting what we desire, we become afraid and try to grasp. This is going round and round.

Grasping is birth. Seeking change is death. [check]

We need to train ourselves to realize and accept this radical change [restate—what radical change exactly? – transformation of our understanding e.g.?)

In the last few days I was talking to four male homo sapiens. One of them was me. I talk to myself quite a bit. One of them was a person who's close to eighty. Another was a person who's kind of in the middle between zero and eighty. And one of them, when I was talking to him, it was the last day in his life of being six years old. We were walking in the dark of his last evening as a six-year-old, and I said to him, "This is your last night of being six, how do you feel?" He said, "I feel sad; I liked being six and now I'm going to lose it." He could sense the river a little bit. Then I heard from a man who was very sad also. He was crying because he misses being in the place where he was born. Now he's here; he was not born here. In the place where he was born they have very nice things. One thing they have is very nice croissant shops. He was just having some delicious pastries there a few days ago. And he was missing that. He was sad. He was crying. Then I talked to a person who was getting to being eighty years old. He was sad about losing just about everything.

I'm losing quite a bit too. I'm losing my ability to speak. You may or may not notice it. My mouth doesn't work the way it used to. My speech is becoming slurred. The tongue doesn't quite come up to the task anymore. The lips are kind of limp and unresponsive.

Change. Loss of today. We're going to lose it pretty soon. Loss of each moment. Loss of our whole life up till now.

Sadness is an offering of our wisdom body to help us go back to the river. It's a lubricant to help dive into the present moment of change. At the fullness of opening to our sadness we can open to change as it manifests as a moment of freshness, so fresh we have not yet tried to get hold of this ungraspable, extremely dynamic interplay between our body and the world which is our life, which is our knowing, which is our experience.

So sadness is a help. It comes when we're holding on to what is no longer around. Sadness is coming along and saying, "Would you please come and live now. Take this, feel this and come back to the present

of the river.” If we would open to it then we get to deal with the present. And that’s where we train. We train to realize our life and become free of our stories. It’s where we find the current story, where we’re not distracted by holding on to old stories which we don’t have anymore. We can just deal with the present story, the present mental activity.

Right now each of us has an active mind. We are knowing, we are experiencing, we are living. We know, we sense the presence of each other, right now. We do. And that sense of being together, of living together, that’s our life. We don’t have a life in addition to being aware of living together. And we have the ability to actively imagine a story about this.

And I will imagine, I will. I have a mind. You have a mind. And the mind has this amazing function: it can make a story, very quickly, upon every moment of experience. Sometimes it takes a little bit of time. “Is this a friend or enemy? Let me check a little more data here. I’m not sure. He’s not smiling, he’s not frowning, not winking. I’m not sure if he likes what I’m saying. This is somebody to watch out for, because I don’t know if he’s a friend or not.” That’s my story. I make up these stories about everybody and everything I meet. And I desire to go back to the river rather than deal with my stories about everybody. But when I get back to the river I say, “No, thank you,” and go back to doing stories again.

Story is our basic action of life. It’s the basic form of what we call karma. Karma is basically mental. It’s cognitive action. Karma is a cognitive representation of your relationship with the world. I have a story right now that you do have a relationship with the world. You have a body, your body interacts with the world, you become a knowing, experiencing being. Once you have this experience you have the ability to make a story about that relationship. That story is a cognitive representation of the relationship which you actually do have with the world. You can’t grasp the actual relationship. And that’s quite frightening, so you make a cognitive version of it which encloses the relationship in a nice little package. This is the same as a cognitive representation of your life because your life is your relationship with the world. We do not have a life separate from the world. We construct upon this relationship, this unconstructed relationship. We impose, we project, we overlay it with karma. This activity has consequence. And believing it heavily reinforces and weighs the consequence.

A big part of the training in becoming free of fear and desire, and all the unskillful behaviors that arise in the cycle of fear and desire. The path to freedom from this entrapment is to study the process, to notice what is the current story that we have. What is the story? What is the story? Every moment there’s a story. You never don’t have a story, you never don’t have a picture, a history, a herstory of what your relationship with the world is. And every story has a consequence. Your mind does this thing called imagining your relationship with everybody, each person and every person and all subgroups and all whatever. You do this with incredible, wondrous creativity. We all do. And if we’re not studying this process, if we’re not noticing these things, if we don’t notice what we’re doing, then one of the things that happens is what’s called hindrance, karmic hindrance. An obstruction arises from our actions, from our imagination of our relationship which we don’t attend to but which we believe. Without looking at it, we just believe it.

This is my karma. Watching it has the consequence of illuminating it. Not watching it has the consequence of darkening it and creating obstructions to becoming free, obstructions to understanding,

obstructions to experiencing our life directly. And when we experience directly with understanding, we are not afraid of the river.

We can still imagine that the river's a road, but we don't do it out of fear. We do it out of going to talk to the other people who are on roads and telling them how to study the road-building so that they can have access to the river with fearlessness. We do it out of wanting to tell them how they can build roads and work with roads without desiring to go back to the river—because they never left the river.

If we study our karma, if we study our mental activity, which infuses our verbal and our physical postures, we can become free of the fear of the river and free of attaching to the road-building, which we still have to do in order to talk to people. And we do want to talk to people who are afraid of the river. Once you're even starting to get a little bit free of the fear of the river, you want to talk to people who are. You want to give them the gift of fearlessness and invite them to come home to the waters of change. You want to show them that you can be there with them and not be afraid. We actually do live there all the time, quite nicely. But we exile ourselves from it because we're afraid, because we think we must be able to hold on to our self, which is not true. It's just our habit. There are reasons for having the habit, but there is a possibility of becoming free of it. That's the claim.

And I propose that there are three ways to validate this claim. One is by scripture, either oral scripture, oral transmission, or reading the scriptures of the tradition. Not just the Buddhist tradition—you can also read it in neurophysiology, neuropsychology, evolutionary psychology literature. You can read it in many places. Another way to validate this claim is by reasoning. And the third is by direct experience.

How we are today is important. But what's really important is what we're doing right now. And we are doing something, right now. And not only that is important. What is more important than what we're doing is to be aware of it. What we're doing right now is the most important thing to be paying attention to. If you pay attention to it, if I pay attention to it, we will become free. Free of what? Free of believing that what we're doing is what's happening. Free of believing that our stories are really our relationships. Being free of believing our stories are really our relationships will free us from fear and craving. And that will make us free to help other people enter the process of freedom and peace.

Transcribed by Joey Ryan

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\*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.