Stories (3 of 5) Opening Stories

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Continuing with the theme of stories that we live by, today's focus is stories that open. Using the acronym for "story," we had source stories and trapping stories, and now, we have opening stories.

I've seen over the years that I've been a Buddhist practitioner, especially here in the West, all kinds of attitudes towards stories and thinking and words that are dismissive of them – that treat stories as traps or problems, that mindfulness practice is about completely breaking out of stories. That all stories somehow obscure reality or are not quite right. Or even that having any words for things is somehow a barrier towards wordless, direct, non-dualistic contact with reality – something like that.

Certainly, stories and words can interfere with our lives, as I covered in yesterday's talk on trapping stories. There can be words that trap us – keep us restricted, narrow, tight, constricted. But some words and stories are opening. They open us to possibilities – possibilities that free us from the traps of stories.

An enigmatic example of this, which I loved when I first read it, is the autobiography of Helen Keller. She was born blind and couldn't hear or speak. She was raised without any words at all. Her teacher put one of Helen's hands underneath a running faucet of water and spelled with her fingers the word "water" into Helen's other hand. In her autobiography, Helen wrote that a light went on for her. The world opened up for her. Once she understood that there were words for objects in the world, she could communicate, understand, and organize her experience of life and her whole world started to make sense.

So this idea that words and stories interfere is not always the case. Some stories open us. They open us from the traps. They free us from the traps of stories that we live in. And so I'd like to read you a story from my book, *A Monastery Within*.

In the monastery, after the new monastics had been there for close to a year, they were starting to get restless and began to wonder why they were there. They had settled in enough to start seeing that the monastery

had problems and a lot of interpersonal issues. People who have the greatest need for spiritual practice often went to monasteries, and they brought their challenges with them. So monastic life could be difficult with all the challenging, fellow monastics there.

It was a custom for the abbess of the monastery to take the new monastics on a pilgrimage to the holy sites of Buddhism. When they heard this, the new monastics were quite excited. They had read about the holy sites in India – where the Buddha was born, first taught, became enlightened, and died. And so they packed their bags and got on the bus.

First, the abbess took them to an old age home. There the monastics saw people who were quite old and amazingly frail in wheelchairs – blind and toothless. They were surprised. They had never seen such a collection of very old people.

The abbess then took them to the local hospital where they saw people in all stages of dramatic illnesses like Alzheimer's and with major injuries. The monastics were stunned to see the collection of illnesses, injuries, and physical challenges that people lived under.

Then the abbess took them to a hospice. The monastics saw people dying. They saw dead people laid out on mortuary slabs to be prepared for whatever was next.

They'd never seen so much death and dying all in one place. It was quite stunning.

Then they went back to the monastery, and they went to the infirmary where there was a very old monk, who was maybe 99 years old and had lived a long monastic life. He was also dying. They went to see him in his room, and there was a peace there, a serenity. When they sat with him, he didn't really talk, but he was certainly very cognizant and aware that they were there. He had a delightful sparkle and warmth with which he received the visiting new monks. They'd never seen someone at the brink of death, who had such warmth, peace, and love.

Then the abbess took them back to the meditation hall to give them a teaching. She said, "You have now seen the holy sites of Buddhism. Now it's for you to practice." And the holy sites were sickness, old age, death, and the dying monastic who had discovered peace.

This story is a story of reframing, of opening up. Now the monastics had a whole different attitude to their lives in the monastery that they didn't have before. Rainer Maria Rilke wrote that everything terrifying, in its deepest being, is something helpless that wants our love. This is not a story, but rather, a reframing statement that everything terrifying needs our love. It's a terrifying idea because there are frightening things, and now we're supposed to love them.

We have stories that reframe and open up our world. If you have enough of this, you begin to appreciate that maybe the trapping stories shouldn't have the last word. Maybe they're not absolute or ultimately true, like "This is how it is." Maybe there are other perspectives to bring. And good stories bring that. Good stories are opening. They offer new possibilities and perspectives that are freeing rather than limiting.

So, I'd like to end with a story, which I'm also fond of and have told many times. I've often told it in children's programs. I'm sure many of you have heard it before. Maybe as you listen, you do not dismiss it because you've heard it before, but rather, apply it because you know it – how is this relevant for you in your life? How is this a story which is opening?

This is a story from China of a farmer who was getting old and weak. He had a young son who helped with the farm work. They had an old horse for plowing the fields and taking care of things. At some point, the horse died or ran off into the mountains. The villagers said: "Oh, disaster has struck poor you. How are you going to manage this terrible thing? What's going to happen to you now without your horse?" And so the old farmer said, "We shall see."

The young son went up into the mountains to look for the old horse that ran away. He came back with a young, wild horse and the villagers said, “Oh, now everything will be okay for you.” And the farmer said, “We shall see.”

Then as the son was training the horse, he fell off and broke his leg. And the villagers said: “Oh, this is terrible for you. Your son does all the work, and now he can’t work. This is a disaster.” And the farmer said, “Oh, we shall see.”

Then the king of the country decided to go to war with a neighboring country. He recruited all the able-bodied young men. But of course, the young man had broken his leg, so he couldn’t be drafted. The villagers came and said: “Oh, you’re so lucky that your son wasn’t drafted. He’s here. He’ll heal well enough. This is great.” And of course, the farmer said, “We shall see.”

There’s no end to the story. A good story is supposed to have an ending, but this story goes on and on and on. We shall see. Maybe, maybe not. We’ll see.

So this is an opening story. What are your opening stories? In what ways can you reframe the trapping stories that you live by? What are the stories that you live by that do not serve you? Is there, in fact, a better

story to tell? Not to make something up, but the trapping stories are already made up. They're just perspectives.

A story that tells of possibilities, a story that tells of love – to love everything, to care for everything – is neither a true thing nor a false thing. It's a possible thing. And so stories can let us live in the possibilities that are inspiring and meaningful and help this world. Stories can teach us to love everything.

We'll continue tomorrow with a different twist on opening stories – the stories that release us. And maybe they release us from stories. So thank you