

The Great Dharma of 'Row Row Row Your Boat'

~Shinzen Young

00:00:00 This was fantastic. I love this.
00:00:07 What's your take on this kitty-ditty?
00:00:12 Row, row, row your boat gently down the stream,
00:00:15 Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream.
00:00:19 I learned it in my earliest school years,
00:00:22 but I can't get it out of my mind.
00:00:24 Do you suppose that my elementary teachers
00:00:27 might have been latent Buddhists?
00:00:31 So what that is, is that's the wisdom function within you.
00:00:37 Seeing in popular literature the deeper dharma meaning.
00:00:43 That's really good.
00:00:46 They once did, I suppose it's actually been done a lot of times,
00:00:58 but I know of one study that was done by a colleague of mine
00:01:03 at Harvard Medical School many years ago,
00:01:06 where they gave Rorschach tests to a bunch of mindfulness meditators.
00:01:17 You know about this study, Dan Brown.
00:01:20 Not the Dan Brown that wrote the Da Vinci Code.
00:01:23 The Buddhist Dan.
00:01:25 It's a different person.
00:01:27 So what they did is, it's like,
00:01:31 okay, let's do psychometrics on monks.
00:01:36 You know, Southeast Asian, I guess it was Southeast Asian monks.
00:01:40 I don't remember the cohort specifically.
00:01:43 And they were graded by years of experience.
00:01:46 And there were a couple of them that were reputedly enlightened.
00:01:53 Okay, that were real senior adepts.
00:01:57 And what they found was that the senior adepts did something with the Rorschach
00:02:03 that had never been recorded in the entire history of Rorschach.
00:02:08 And lots of people have taken these.
00:02:10 It's the inkblot test, right?
00:02:12 You know what it is.
00:02:13 You've probably taken it.
00:02:14 Certainly seen it on TV.
00:02:16 So what they found among the reputed arhats was that
00:02:24 what had never been recorded previously is,

00:02:28 not only did every inkblot appear to contain some Dharma principle,
00:02:37 but the sequence of inkblots, no matter how they presented the sequence,
00:02:45 became a coherent sequence of Dharma talks.
00:02:52 So they concluded that something really major had changed
00:02:57 the way that these people see the world.
00:02:59 Okay, it's like everything is the Dharma.
00:03:03 You know, a Marvel comic book is the Dharma.
00:03:10 So row, row, row your boat, it's absolutely the secret of enlightenment.
00:03:16 It's right in there.
00:03:17 It's obvious.
00:03:20 You're right.
00:03:21 They were crypto Buddhists, every single one of them.
00:03:26 Or maybe we're just seeing it in a certain way.
00:03:30 You can take your choice.
00:03:32 So what is this song about?
00:03:35 What does my Dharma eye see in this song?
00:03:38 Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream,
00:03:40 merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream.
00:03:43 So what's the stream?
00:03:46 Well, that's sort of interesting.
00:03:50 The Buddha said that what we're doing is patisottagamini-madga,
00:04:03 that we are on the path that is against the stream.
00:04:11 That's where the name of the group comes from, against the stream.
00:04:15 Okay?
00:04:16 But patisotta, pati is against, sotta is the stream.
00:04:21 So what does it mean?
00:04:23 It means what we do is against the stream of human culture.
00:04:28 Human culture tends to encourage people to put all of their time and energy
00:04:38 into surface or conditional happiness
00:04:43 and never talks about the skill set associated with total happiness,
00:04:49 which would include, of course, the deeper or unconditional happiness.
00:04:53 So even 2,500 years ago, even in the society of India 2,500 years ago,
00:05:00 as far as the Buddha was concerned,
00:05:02 the society was pushing people in the other direction.
00:05:09 So in that sense, we're going against the stream of human culture
00:05:13 because the human culture, you know, if you learn how to control,
00:05:18 if you learn the skill of controlling some strings on a musical instrument
00:05:23 called a guitar, or you learn the skill of controlling
00:05:32 an elastic inflated sphere called a basketball,
00:05:37 millions and millions of dollars and adulation and celebrity and, you know,
00:05:46 celebrity sex, it all becomes available to you
00:05:51 as the result of cultivating those skills.

00:05:55 So I'll take it in a second.

00:05:57 So how—but, you know, is there—are there—there's sports awards,
00:06:02 there's academy awards, but, you know, did you see anybody get the award
00:06:10 for the greatest manifestation of equanimity this year?
00:06:16 Or the longest strong determination set?
00:06:20 That's a subcategory, the longest strong determination set by a non-Asian.
00:06:25 You didn't see those awards, so in a sense we're against the stream, yes.
00:06:32 Did you say that culture teaches us to go downstream?
00:06:37 No, well, I'm actually making a contrast, okay?
00:06:41 I'm saying that—
00:06:42 Okay, you're saying that culture teaches us to go—struggle to go downstream.
00:06:46 Well, we can make different metaphors.
00:06:49 Okay.
00:06:50 I'm going to make one just for the fun of it.
00:06:52 So the Buddha said we go against the stream,
00:06:54 but this song says go with the stream, right?
00:06:57 Merrily, merrily, merrily row your boat, gently down the stream.
00:07:01 So what's—if we want to make this a Dharma song,
00:07:05 then we have to find another stream.
00:07:09 The stream of human culture, according to the Buddha,
00:07:12 we have to go against that stream.
00:07:14 But is there a stream that we go with, that we go down, when we're on this path?
00:07:21 And I would say that is the stream of nature.
00:07:25 That—enlightenment is just waiting to happen.
00:07:30 It's implied, actually, in the Buddha's formulation.
00:07:35 The Buddha said the Eightfold Path is an intervention
00:07:41 that removes a necessary condition for non-perfection,
00:07:47 implying that the perfection is just waiting to happen.
00:07:51 All you got to do is knock out what's getting in the way.
00:07:55 So when I said that, it is possible that the spontaneity aspect
00:08:00 that the masters speak about may be that they're tasting entropy.
00:08:05 Well, entropy is the force behind all spontaneous—
00:08:09 well, maybe not all, but—
00:08:13 I'm not a physical chemist, but it's the force behind spontaneous reactions.
00:08:21 When things just happen, they happen because of entropy.
00:08:26 For example, do you ever wonder why it is if you stretch a rubber band,
00:08:31 all you have to do is let go, and it shrinks?
00:08:35 Well, it's because the rubber is made of a lot of different strands.
00:08:42 It's a polymer.
00:08:44 And when you stretch it, what you do is you impart an order to those strands,

00:08:51 which goes—and as soon as you let go, it goes back to the disordered state.
00:08:58 That actually creates a force.
00:09:00 The spontaneity, the just-happeningness,
00:09:03 when you let go of the rubber band, there is a just-happeningness to its shrinking.
00:09:11 That's the taste of entropy.
00:09:14 It just happens. It goes right down the stream. It falls into existence.
00:09:18 So I think that the stream in this dharma song is the natural—
00:09:26 is the force of nature itself that is constantly calling us to enlightenment.
00:09:31 Now, you could take a Christian perspective,
00:09:34 because they say that God's always calling you, vocation, okay?
00:09:39 Whether you can hear the call or not.
00:09:41 So I think let's take that to be the stream,
00:09:44 and of course, merrily, merrily, means that you—
00:09:46 that's the happy that I claimed is the one word that describes everything.
00:09:51 Life is but a dream.
00:09:53 That means featherlight and paper thin,
00:10:00 which is insight into impermanence and emptiness.
00:10:04 But you know, the interesting thing is it encourages you to row your boat
00:10:09 in addition to just go down the stream.
00:10:12 So when you row the boat, you are exercising control through the oar.
00:10:21 So do you know what the—
00:10:29 why should you know? What a stupid question.
00:10:34 What's the Greek word for someone who rows or control—
00:10:40 who steers the boat?
00:10:43 The Greek word. Well, you will recognize it because it's in English,
00:10:47 but the person that controls the boat is called the kubernetes.
00:10:53 That's what's given us the word cybernetics.
00:10:56 It also has given us the word governor, like in the Watt governor.
00:11:02 Controllers are called governors, like a thermostat.
00:11:07 Okay, it's a controller, it's a governor, engineering-wise.
00:11:11 So the encouragement to row your boat, I would take to mean, yes,
00:11:17 and also in addition to flowing down the stream of enlightenment,
00:11:23 exercise control with regards to how you carry yourself in the world.
00:11:31 So the entire dharma, you're absolutely correct.
00:11:34 And like I say, I am sure that this was intentional,
00:11:39 part of the school teachers in the 1950s, who mostly were Buddhists.
00:11:45 Thank you.