

Stories (2 of 5) Trapping Stories

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This is the second talk of the series on stories. Yesterday was source stories. Today will be trapping stories, the stories that keep us trapped. Some of the source stories, the fundamental, baseline stories that we live by, which we've learned and inherited can be debilitating. We get trapped in them. We get caught in the labyrinth, the maze, of the story, thinking the way out is to think more. Somehow, the foundation or frame of reference for the story is there is no way out, there is nothing that we can do. It is just spinning, spinning, and spinning ourselves.

Some stories that trap us are about rumination. Rumination is said to be one of the leading causes of depression. We tell ourselves a story about ourselves over and over again, and it can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is a trap because we are telling ourselves how terrible we are. These self-critical, undermining thoughts produce depressing feelings of sadness, anger, despair, and discouragement. These feelings are proof that the story is true. Then we tell the story again, and the same despairing feelings prove *that* story is true.

We might tell ourselves a story that the world is a frightening place. Because we see the world through the lens of our fear, we see things that are frightening. We are projecting our fear onto things. Sometimes there are real things in the world to be afraid of, but that's all we see. And because we see fear, it reinforces a belief, a story: "Everyone's out to get me, everything's terrible, everything's gonna fall apart. There's no hope here."

Some stories that trap us are self-fulfilling. They predispose us to have that experience. I've seen people who have a lot of anger and are ready to be angry at people. They say that people are disrespectful and unkind. But because they show up angry, people step back or hesitate to be with them. Maybe they are not so friendly to them. These people don't see how the very anger that they're living by reinforces or confirms their story. So it's a vicious cycle that goes on.

There are stories we have about ourselves that we have to be successful. Maybe we've learned that from our family. Some people are conventionally successful but that isn't enough. There's always someone to compare ourselves to or some fear, "What if this situation happens and this situation happens?" So this fear builds up that there can never be enough.

"Never enough" kind of people are called hungry ghosts in Buddhism. A hungry ghost is a mythological creature that has a very big belly and a very thin, long neck, thinner than a straw. A hungry ghost cannot eat enough food to satiate its big belly so it's always hungry, always wanting and searching for more.

I was a little like that when I was in my very early 20s. I had almost no money. I was traveling around and spent a lot of time being hungry. When I finally did eat, I gorged myself. There was that feeling of being a hungry ghost: "There's never enough. I have to have more." It took a while for me to overcome that strong, unhealthy urge to gorge myself.

Some stories we tell about ourselves have to do with conceit – proving that we're important or undesirable, unworthy. The source or heart of these stories of self is fiction – it doesn't really exist. This identity, this strong sense of "*this* is who I am" – actually, no one is "*this* is who I am." As soon as we get locked into that kind of idea, it becomes a story built on a lack, an emptiness. The basis for the story is fragile, and something in our psyche knows that, so it becomes an idea that we reinforce. No matter how much the self is built up, there is always going to be a sense of lack and fragility in the middle of it that is going to be searching, reaching, wanting more, proving more, and getting more.

So we live in these stories, ideas, and beliefs that can be traps. I think of them as gordian knots – huge, powerful knots. A gordian knot was a puzzle in the ancient world. Whoever could release the knot would win a prize. The legend goes that when Alexander the Great came upon this big knot, he took out his sword. Rather than figuring out how to untie the knot, he sliced it in half.

Rather than getting caught in a knot, trying to figure everything out, Buddhist practice also steps away and brings a very different approach. Sometimes it's called the sword of wisdom, which can be as simple as lovingly, kindly putting down the story. We put down the stories, interpretations, and reactions we have to things and experience ourselves without focusing and centering on the thoughts that tell us a story about what's happening.

This is not easy to do. It doesn't necessarily mean we have to stop thinking, but we stop trusting or participating in those thoughts. Instead, we are present for our experience, here and now, as it actually is. If there's a feeling of lack or hunger (wanting more), then the task is to just sit with that, breathe with that. To learn the art – it's not an easy art – of just sitting with whatever it is, breathing with it, feeling it, free of story. Free of the projections of ideas, judgments, criticisms, and self. Free from the story that it needs to be different. This is the sword that cuts through the gordian knot, the knot of our entangled stories that we get trapped in, caught in, and lost in.

In this practice, we start becoming sensitized to the stories, projections, and ideas that the mind lives by. The quieter we can become in meditation or mindfulness, the more our stories stand out in highlight. Seeing those stories doesn't mean we have wisdom about them. Seeing them doesn't necessarily mean that we can put them aside or not be under their influence, but it is the beginning of finding the way out. It's the beginning of putting a question mark at the end of the story, "Is this really true?" Maybe not, maybe there is another way. Maybe there's another story. Maybe the story we have been telling ourselves is debilitating. Maybe the story we have been telling ourselves and live by never has any conclusion.

Is there a better story? This will be the topic for tomorrow. There are good stories. There are stories that lead to the end of stories. There are stories that open us to our lives.

Today, I invite you to consider: What stories are you trapped by? What stories do you get caught in over and over again that you live by? Maybe you've been living with them for decades. It might be related to a source story, the lesson of a real event that you still live by (e.g., "This is how the world is, this is how people are"), and you're trapped in that view. Can you see how the trap is? Can you see the way that it has no way out? Or that it's self-reinforcing and self-confirming?

Take time to look. I don't think what I'm saying here today has much value unless you can see how it works for you. Maybe talk to a friend about it. Exploring the stories that trap you may help reveal them more.

Tomorrow we'll talk about the stories that open. Thank you