

Qalvy Grainzvolt

*Reshaping How We See Ourselves*

Week One: "A Universe of Stories"

October 1, 2018



Hello, my name is Qalvy Grainzvolt. I serve as one of the clergy here at the Shinnyo-en Buddhist Order in our New York sangha. I have the great privilege to speak with you today about a topic that's really dear to my heart.

I wanted to talk about how we can be a working draft, how we have narratives in our everyday lives, and that they're shaped by our thoughts. But our narratives can also be positively sculpted by telling and retelling the stories of those that we emulate in a spiritual or Buddhist sense, the stories of our spiritual teachers or even the Buddha himself.

En route to the center where I spend most of my time I often think about narratives. I walk past the New York Public Library, where there are beautiful brass plaques embedded in the sidewalk that have literary quotes from different poets and authors throughout time. One of the quotes that strikes me the most is the shortest one. I've memorized it as I walk over it. It goes as follows: "The universe is made of stories, not atoms." Again, "The universe is made of stories, not atoms." This is by the poet Muriel Rukeyser. It makes me think about all the narratives, all the moments that we thread into our lives that ultimately become themes and stories that we tell ourselves.

So this topic is about how we are working drafts—it's about the idea that the stories we tell ourselves and the stories we encounter practicing the path of Buddhism as a collective and a sangha have many different threads that come together. Perhaps the stories that we tell and retell ourselves, the stories of our spiritual masters, and the story of the Buddha all have a profound impact on who we become over time and whether we regard ourselves as a success, or a failure, or somewhere in between.

First of all I want to thank you for being here with me. In a sense you're paying to me your most valuable asset: your attention. To use a little bit of financial rhetoric, we say "We *pay* attention." Some people may say you give attention, but I'd like to thank you in advance for that because we now have a story now that we're taking this time to share together.

Buddhism started from storytelling. It began with the oral tradition, before writing existed. It often started with disciples saying, "It was told to me as such" or "It was said as such," as the Buddhist teachings were conveyed over generations. It ultimately became the vehicle by which

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we, here in this day and age, have the Buddhist teachings. Storytelling is deeply embedded in the DNA of our civilization as human beings. If we think about the movies that we watch, the characters that have meaning for us—whether they're fictitious or real—ultimately as human beings we make sense of life by making it into stories, just as Muriel Rukeyser said. The world is not made up of just stories, it's made up of atoms and subatomic particles and so forth. But if we give it a little bit of time and allowance, I'd like to step more into the idea of the world being made up of stories.

When we think about how our own stories come together, we might imagine that part of them are thin threads of narrative. These thin threads are moments that we piece together, the last thought that we had, or the last emotion that really gripped us. These things can really shape and color how we view ourselves. On the other hand, there can be thicker swatches of narrative, almost like fabric that we wear over time. Those thicker threads of narratives may be themes—different experiences that we come to time and time again. Those thin and thick threads weave together into narratives and ultimately, to use a psychological term, they become a schemata. They become an undercurrent of patterns, thought, behavior, and a certain way that we perceive ourselves, for better or worse.

In this talk I'd like to explore how the manner in which we approach moments in our daily life can be significant, but also how we fit into a larger collective and a larger thread of narrative when we practice in a sangha, or even when we ascribe ourselves to a certain thought pattern. When we subscribe to a certain teaching or tradition there is something we can glean from the telling and retelling of the stories about those who have walked the path in various time periods. These stories can have universal lessons for us, here in the time period in which we're listening and exploring our own personal narratives.

Part of what I'd like to touch on is the *Nirvana Sutra* in the Mahayana tradition. It's one of the main scriptures in the Shinnyo-en Buddhist tradition that I'm a part of and it is considered to be the last discourse the Buddha gave before he passed away. In that scripture, there are certain tenants that he expounds upon and certain things that I've found really valuable now that I've heard them also expressed in different time periods, especially by those that I consider my own spiritual teachers: Master Shinjo, Tomoji, Kyodoin, Shindoin, and Her Holiness Shinso Ito Keishu, who is the head of the Shinnyo-en Buddhist Order. You don't have to memorize their

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names, I'm just sharing with you some of where this is going to come from and the angle through which I view it.

In the next segment, I'd like to touch on some of my personal experiences and on the sutra; how it came to me and how we may explore in a broader context to look at our own narratives, as they also coalesce with the narratives of our spiritual teachers.