

Qalvy Grainzvolt

*Reshaping How We See Ourselves*

Week Two: "Finding Your Place in the Story"

October 8, 2018



Part of my own narrative is that I was born and raised in New York City. Some might claim that New York is not only the Big Apple, but the center of the world. I'm not going to say that. But it is a place of incredible ambition and drive, and that's something that I've grown up with. I've noticed it in myself and in others. Having met my Buddhist practice in New York City, of all places, my practice is also framed in the context of that ambition, drive, and busy-ness.

There's a passage from the chapter *Bodhisattva Lion's Roar*, from the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, and it goes as follows: "Candle reduces itself to give light to others. Those who pursue the way should become like the candle." I think it's a beautiful phrase. I wish that New Yorkers could be more like that candle that gives light. I think there are also many instances of that happening. At the same time, I've certainly noticed that not everyone has that altruistic bent all the time. I have had my share of moments where I've been self-centered and selfish on the streets of New York City.

What I've noticed particularly in myself but in others as well, whether they subscribe to Buddhists or not, is that sometimes we take the idea of giving light to others to an extreme and place [unreasonable] expectations on ourselves. From my own experience, I've reinterpreted that phrase, that those who walk the path should indeed be like the candle, but that burning the candle from both ends, although theoretically giving more light faster, actually diminishes the light much more quickly.

Why then do we put ourselves under pressure, stress, and expectations for people that we really can't compare ourselves to in an 'apples to apples' way? There is a uniqueness in each of us, there's no one else like us, so we can't expect to exactly match someone else. If we put that in the context of our spiritual teachers, our Buddhist masters, we're not aiming to be exactly like them. We may feel like we need to be, but the *Nirvana Sutra* and the teachings of my spiritual masters remind us to focus on the uniqueness of each individual person, that there's something that

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cannot be found elsewhere, that everyone has a place on this earth in their own specific way.

I happen to come to my Buddhist path through my mother. She's the one that introduced me to the teachings. I'm half Japanese, if you can divide in such a way, and half European from my father's side. I grew up with a great tapestry of spiritual traditions in my background. But having that parent to child connection is something that I've thought about because the Buddha himself never met his mother. Queen Maya passed away shortly after he was born, and his aunt raised him. I thought about that in particular when I read a passage from *The Path of Oneness*, which is one of the works written by Master Shinjo Ito, in my tradition. He talks about a story that he's never forgotten as it was conveyed to him by his mother, and I'd like to read that now.

"When I was a young man, I left home with lofty ambitions. My mother saw me off at the gate and said, 'A person only lives 50 years or so. It's not hard to do something that anyone else can do. Try to do what others can't. There you'll find a way to go forward, a path to success in life. It's the same for the path of faith.' My mother was a follower of the Tenrikyo religion. It has been over 40 years since she gave those words to me. I don't think I will ever forget what she said."

He goes on to share, "I was once in the military. When they said, 'Mark time,' we had to stop and march in place for an hour or two until they ordered us to stop. This was more tiring than marching forward. If you keep saying to yourself, 'Practice, practice. I must practice,' all you're doing to yourself is wearing yourself out. Mistaking mental effort for real practice you may wonder in dismay, 'Why am I not elevating? I'm trying so hard.' If you give something your all, you will be free from self-centeredness and will not wonder why you couldn't make it despite the effort. Only the joy of practicing can propel you forward. Joy gives birth to greater joy and ultimately, a state of great joy will indeed develop."

When I think about that passage, I think about Shinjo's mother's expectations. She gave that advice to him 40 years before he wrote that in the mid-1900s and he carried that expectation

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through his whole life. That expectation became a part of his narrative, his military service became part of his narrative, and all those experiences and moments became nourishment and lessons for his narrative. Obviously, we do the same. We make sense of momentary experiences and they become points of reference for us when we decide how to go about each and every day. Then over time, they become thicker threads of narrative. They become themes in our lives and ways that we fall back on when we don't think about what to do, like an autopilot mode.

The passage that we just heard harkens back to this concept of expectations and the fact that Master Shinjo carried his mother's expectation throughout all his years. Master Shinjo heard that advice 40 years before he wrote that passage in the mid-1900s, but even now in 2018 there's still something timeless about finding that uniqueness, about being able to hold on to expectations but to also carve out space to find a sense of joy and what it is that we can do that others can't.

I think it's also something quite remarkable and special to look at how Buddhist masters and teachers processed those moments. Not necessarily the exact steps that they took, but how did they figure out a way to go forward? I think that's where we can find something timeless when we visit and revisit, tell and retell the stories of those that we emulate in the Buddhist tradition, or whatever spiritual tradition that resonates with us.

The Buddha Shakyamuni never met his mother Queen Maya, and I wonder what his mother would have said to him. We've all been encouraged and touched by people who've inspired us, whether they're our parents, or just people who have mentored us over the years. There is something to be found when we take a step back outside of ourselves to make space, to let go of some of the pressure of expectations, to find what makes us unique.

So there's something we can take from the chapter on *Bodhisattva Lion's Roar* that we heard about earlier, about a candle reducing itself to give light to others. We can find an altruistic thread when we go through our everyday experiences by stepping outside of ourselves to do for

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the sake of others, to put the teachings of Buddha into practice in the here and now. We can be inspired by looking at how Buddhist masters and spiritual teachers process their experience, while knowing that we're not going to walk their exact footsteps and the exact moment and time periods of their lives. We're going to do it in our own contexts, and that can be a really valuable lesson that we get from telling and retelling their stories.

As we go on to our next segments, I'd like to go a little bit more deeply into the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, some tenants that we can focus on, and how they relate to our own narratives.