

Qalvy Grainzvolt

*Reshaping How We See Ourselves*

Week Three: “Transcending Binary Thinking”

October 15, 2018



In this segment I'd like to return to a discussion of one of the tenets in the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* that Master Shinjo often talked about. The tenet is that all beings possess buddhanature, the inherent goodness in each and every being. A recent experience really brought that back to me. Again, I'm not dwelling on too many stories from the Buddha's time, because I don't think that ancient wisdom is the only place that we can glean insight from. I think it's how we integrate both modern and ancient wisdom into a growing and evolving world that resides within us but that we're also a part of, and in that nexus we continue to find our steps forward.

When I'm not doing my priestly duties, I spend time serving in a psychiatric hospital. I offer group therapies, individual therapies, and so forth. I was in a group therapy session recently where we were doing exactly this—we were exploring narrative themes and discussing how changing narratives and negative thoughts can be a really profound way to mitigate the effects of having mental illness, as well weather the up and downs and obstacles of everyday life. Master Shinjo had once written a short poem that goes as follows, "It's through the ups and downs of everyday life that we can attain enlightenment." I'm paraphrasing a little bit here. But it is, in fact, through the ups and downs that we can find nourishment in each and every moment, that we can find something valuable that helps us to grow.

One of the patients in this group therapy session was a computer programmer and coder, and he was talking about the idea of coding his life. We went into that a little bit more deeply and he shared how there are Xs and Os—it's a binary in some ways. But in discussing it as a group, we realized that X means “closed,” and O or zero is “open,” and that maybe life is actually not like that. It's not just black and white, either/or. The word “and” can be a really operational word. When I think back to the teachings of not just my own Buddhist masters but others that I've heard, there's always room for "and." Very rarely is it just black or white, this or that. Certainly there are instances where “or” has a place in the dialogue. As we talked about it more, we thought “Well, what about this whole middle ground?” We need to be constantly reminded that there is buddhanature in every being. We need to be told and retold, to tell and retell ourselves

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that we all have inherent goodness and buddhanature. Even when we're in the gray zone and we feel not great, not so bad, or teetering somewhere in that spectrum, we can always come back to that undercurrent of truth from the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*. Master Shinjo has been reminding me over the years in various ways that this is something that we can return to. It has been of real value and merit to me personally to tell and retell the stories of Buddhist masters.

As we go a little bit deeper there's another tenet in the *Nirvana Sutra* that talks about how even *icchantikas* [a deluded person who can never find liberation or nirvana] can find liberation, and I'm paraphrasing a little bit. This means people who are considered to have cut all wholesome roots, individuals that we would almost consider as not even having buddhanature—“bad people” might be another way of putting it—that even they can find liberation. In a world where we do label ourselves and others instinctively, automatically, and sometimes very quickly, taking time to step back to have space for “and” rather than “or,” or black-and-white thinking, is how we can move toward more adaptive rather than maladaptive thoughts in our everyday living.

One of the major forms of treatment for personality disorders, particularly borderline personality disorder, is something called dialectical behavior therapy. I'm not a clinical psychologist, but this technique has borrowed a lot from the Buddhist tradition. Mindfulness is a key element of this form of therapy. The fact that there can be a dialectic means we can hold two things at once. It could be both happy and sad, or angry and aspiring not to be angry at the same time. There's something really beautiful in how something ancient has informed something modern, that this growth continues to weave itself into how people are trying to find healing and well-being in this day and age.

In considering that there aren't necessarily just two reference points but a whole spectrum that we can look at, we come back to the sense that who we are is not just the last thought that we had or the last emotion that strongly gripped us. It is rather a whole string and thread of narrative over the years. What we choose to focus on, minimize, or amplify also becomes an area where we can

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glean inspiration from Buddhist masters. What beacons of light have kept them going when they felt overwhelmed or defeated? Even Buddha himself had those moments.

Hopefully you're not tired of hearing these stories yet, but this is one that has really stuck with me. Several years ago, Shinnyo-en was hosting a interfaith retreat in one of our locations in Japan. At that time, I met a religious studies professor from the U.K. We talked about spirituality, religion, and the people who subscribe to that path, in this case, in a Buddhist and an Islamic context, as these were the two paths that we came from. We started talking about how the word “religion” has gotten a certain connotation over the years, while “spirituality” has another. He shared something with me that I thought harkens back to this notion of a dialectic, holding two things. He explained that the very word “religion” comes back to a root in Latin that means “to re-ligament,” to reconnect what was once whole. What we consider to be the whole may be different for each and every person, but it comes back to the notion that every person has an inherent goodness, and that we can reconnect to that goodness somehow. That has been inspiring to me.

In the hospital where I work there's a spirituality group where I brought up this point. The theme for that day was “Connecting something small to something bigger.” If we can extend that into the other moments in our lives and to the perspectives that we bring into each moment, connecting something small to something bigger can be an inherently positive thing. It reminds us that there is something whole within that we can reconnect to, even when we feel so far removed from it.

Ultimately what I want to share with you, and what has been forefront in my mind for some time, is how the narratives that we tell ourselves are so nuanced—so sensitive to what people say, to what we think, and to what we interpret from others. We can have our own space and our own time, but ultimately we live in a world that is truly interconnected. We're going to come across people and create labels for them and for ourselves whether we know it or not.

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The message that I keep coming back to is the inspiration from poet Muriel Rukeyser, that the universe is made of stories and not atoms, and we're going to connect with those atoms in the form of people, places, and experiences. We can hold onto that fundamental core inherent goodness in ourselves and even see it in others when we're stepping outside of ourselves to be helped by someone, or to be altruistic and help someone else. The lives and stories of Buddhist masters bring us back to that awareness time and time again. Even those who we don't see as good may have something that we can work with when we have that solution-oriented, growth-oriented mindset, to look for something where we can connect, where we can harmonize. We should look for it within ourselves as well, considering that maybe we are not always as great as we would hope to be. But underneath there is an inherent goodness that we can come back to time and time again.

Another point I would like to raise is about our own uniqueness. Let's return to Master Shinjo's story about his mother saying, "Maybe you can do something that only you can do. Anyone can do something that anyone else can do. What is it unique that you can do?" We recognize that we not only have buddhanature, but there's something unique about it and that when we share that light, while we're reducing the candle so to speak, we can actually light many other candles along the way. This is a lesson that Her Holiness Shinso Ito, daughter of Shinjo and the current head of Shinnyo-en, has shared time and time again. It never goes out of style, never goes out of fashion. It is timeless and universal.

In considering ourselves as a working draft, we don't have to see ourselves in terms of a binary. This is something I've seen, and if it's something you've encountered then it may be a helpful way of looking at it: do we ask whether we are successes *or* failures, or are we both successes *and* failures, depending on the time and place in the moment?

I've spoken a lot about my own tradition because this is where my experience comes from, but the very symbol of the Shinnyo-en path and teachings is a lotus flower superimposed over a

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dharmas wheel with its distinct eight points. These are universal symbols in Buddhism. It is a reminder that the lotus flower has its roots in muddy water—much like the money-oriented world that we live in—but that it grows through dirt and finds nourishment. What comes out above the surface is a pristine beautiful flower that represents a sense of enlightenment and awakening.

Surely each one of us has our own way, our own uniqueness, and our own inherent goodness. We must allow time to create space in ourselves to have that “and”, not just the binary “or”. We can keep that option in our mind, heart, and consciousness as we go through the ups and downs of everyday life. So with that I'd like to move on to the next segment where we can try embodying this in a meditative practice.