

Stories (1 of 5) Source Stories

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Welcome. I'm inspired to have the week be about stories. Each letter of the word "story" will stand for some aspect of stories. The aspect today will be the source – the source story. Later in the week, there will be trapping stories (stories that trap us), opening stories, releasing stories (stories that release us from the trap), and yes stories. You'll have to wait until Friday to understand the "yes" in relation to this theme of stories.

This Buddhist insight vipassana tradition, historically, has put a lot of emphasis on the fourth theme of this week: releasing stories, letting go stories. Learning how not to live in stories as we meditate, not to live in the storytelling, discursive mind that is thinking and talking to itself. This is certainly a very important part of the path of mindfulness practice and something that we learn. But sometimes it gets overdone in such a way that we overlook really understanding deeply the nature of how stories work in our lives, their centrality, and their importance.

Stories are crucial to human society and human beings. It's how we understand ourselves, how we form identities. The stories we tell our children are not just stories. They often pass on values and understandings of self, the cultural self, how we fit into society, how we are. The stories are what convey all kinds of cultural values and identities of how we fit into this world.

As much as we might focus on religion as being a set of doctrines, what is most animating and engaging about religion, for most people, are its stories. We somehow identify with the stories. There is a narrative in stories that people feel they can participate in, enter into, or inspires them for how they live their lives. Life is a narrative. Life, in a sense, could be something we explain through a story of what happened. A friend may ask you, "How did it go today?" and you tell a story of parts of the day. Then they have a better sense of how you are perhaps. It's much clearer.

So stories are quite important. Some of the stories we carry inside of ourselves, which influence us, are somewhat subconscious. We don't always think of them as stories. I call these source stories.

This story might be a bit dramatic to use as an example, but I think it speaks to how the stories of our lives, the narratives, can really shape us. For many years, I've been going to San Quentin State Prison, although I haven't these last couple of years because of the pandemic. I would visit a particular anti-violence program. It is a year-long mindfulness-based program that helps certain incarcerated people deal with their violent past and their difficulties. The program helps them confront themselves in a very deep way.

The group of 30 men, who do the program each year, become each other's challengers and best friends. They support each other to take a deep look at their lives, at the source of the violent lives that they lived. Most of the 30 men in the group have killed someone, so it's pretty bad what they've done.

It is remarkable to be there and discover that each of them had a source story, an original event that became the primary pain they carried with them and from which they acted violently in the world. It was unresolved, festering pain from some events in their life – a story, often having to do with a father who was violent at home, who was violent to them, violent to their mother, or a father who was killed. The trauma that they went through as a young child was very difficult. No one supported them; no one helped them. They were left with their pain and started acting out – to get away from the pain, to somehow try to feel better in a very dysfunctional way.

Without these men taking a deep look at the source story, the source event, and really coming to terms with it, the transformation out of their violent life can't really happen. It's remarkable to go there and see them grapple and struggle with this and come out the other end. Some of these men that I've met are deeply transformed and changed. It's inspiring to see.

Each of us probably has some source story, maybe a series of stories, which has created an attitude, an orientation, a belief about this world that we live in. It is a story that conditioned us and we carry that with us.

An example of a source story is when we go outside and see the world, we might see everyone as dangerous. There's danger everywhere. No matter who we meet, our first instinct is to be afraid of them, to be mistrustful of them. Certainly, it's wise to have some mistrust of some people, to be afraid of some people. But to have that as our policy, our de facto orientation, suggests that something may have happened in our youth, maybe dangerous. Some event conditioned us and led us to have that orientation.

Other people might have a story of hope that they've somehow taken in, a story that's been told over and over again. They have an idea that there is the hope of getting somewhere, of attaining something. Sometimes the hope is unrealistic: becoming rich, becoming famous, becoming a movie star.

So what is a story you've been told? What is the source story of your life? What kind of orientation, story, attitude, or policy do you carry with you about other people? About yourself? Are those stories happy? Are they debilitating stories?

People who investigate the narratives that people live their lives by have sometimes divided them into three types. One is that life has been disrupted and so the story is how do we get back to what we had, how do we get back to our normal life. Another story is that the world is dangerous and chaotic. It's not going to get any better; it's just going to get worse. And so we have to do the best we can to protect ourselves and keep the world and others at bay. The story is all about protecting ourselves.

The third story is that of the quest. Maybe the world is dangerous and chaotic; things change all the time. There is no normal life to go back to, but there is a possibility of engaging in a journey to freedom, to peace, to wisdom. To make the best out of the situation and be personally transformed. To become a better person independent of the situation that we're in.

So the quest is the one that I think is most empowering and the most realistic. The idea of returning to some pristine state is never going to happen when life is always changing. The idea that it's all going downhill from here, that the world is a chaotic and terrible place and we have to do our best to protect ourselves or be afraid or be angry, is also not necessary. It's very debilitating. The idea of "I'm chaotic, I'm a mess, I'm somehow incapable or a terrible person" – is a story, with no hope or possibility in it.

Then there is the quest. With this story, we don't get bogged down by it. It's a story beyond stories. It's a story out of the debilitating stories. It's a story to discover how to be free.

I don't know if the few words that I've said today speak well enough for your particular situation. But you might spend some time thinking about what is your source story. What are the stories, events, narratives, situations in your life, either a particular one or some kind of pervasive, ongoing way about how you were raised? What kind of worldview have they provided you? What kind of philosophy, what kind of story about what this life is about, have you learned? Is there something deeper than maybe you're fully conscious of? It might not be a big story; it might just be an attitude, a belief, an approach to how you are emotionally as you go through the world. Maybe there's a source story that is the origin of so much of how you live your life and understand yourself.

I'm inspired to do this theme of stories partly from the series of talks I gave on emotions, anger, and grief. Perhaps, it is a continuation of this theme of emotions because the chronic emotions of our life are most likely connected to some story. What is that story? And how do you tell that story? And is it the right story? Does the story change over time? What's the source story you tell of your life?

Tomorrow, we'll do trapping stories – how some stories trap us in their grip, in their web. Thank you.