

Stories (4 of 5) Releasing Stories

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This is the fourth talk on stories. Using the word “story” as an acronym, we began the week with source stories, the originating stories from which come our views, attitudes, and approach to life. These are the fundamental stories our life might be built on. We talked next about trapping stories – how we get caught in stories. These stories are sometimes self-reinforcing labyrinths. We get stuck in debilitating ways of being in the world or with ourselves. We also talked about opening stories that give us a bigger vista full of open possibilities. They help us see beyond the limited possibilities of the old stories we have. They free us in a certain kind of way.

Today, the “R” is for release – releasing stories. Releasing stories differ from opening stories. Opening stories are about opening perspectives. Releasing frees us. Releasing helps something let go – be released.

For many reasons, “release” is my preferred translation of the word “nirvana” or *nibbāna*. One reason is that release is a kind of action, something that happens. It is not a state, but rather, it’s the movement of letting go deeply.

Releasing is not the same as letting go in that letting go can be something that we do. The release is something that we don’t have control over. It is not something we do ourselves. We set the conditions for it. We might let go deeply so there can be release.

This idea of release is more than just being open to possibilities, but also releasing the idea of control. In ordinary life, it’s fine, and important actually, to have some degree of control and agency. But in the spiritual realm, as we get deeper and deeper into practice, it becomes clear that letting go is what is needed. To let go in a deep, deep way, or let go and allow. The idea of allowing something that’s not our agency to operate is part of the movement of Buddhist spirituality. I think all forms of spirituality have this emphasis.

Stories can help with releasing and letting go. There are a few stories that come to mind. One kind of releasing story is where we tell the truth. Sometimes we only become released from the burden of our guilt, our resentments, and our regrets if we tell the truth to someone: “This is what happened. This is what’s true.”

Sometimes it’s telling our own story to someone, even a stranger. By telling our story, we are no longer keeping it bottled up and festering inside. There is a kind of confession or confessional attitude we have. We have to confess. We have to admit. We have to explain. We have to not carry secrets. We have to not hold things privately, where we don’t really see them. Things are kind of in the background, and we know they’re there, but they are not released.

These are not made-up stories, but rather, true stories or true enough. They are the things we have to say to get off our chest. They are the things we have to say to come clean. They are the things we have to say so we no longer identify with our behavior.

One of the great truth-telling places is in recovery. People tell their stories there all the time. Alcoholics Anonymous is considered one of the very important practices for recovery.

So these are releasing stories – telling the truth. Because this truth-telling, this releasing has to do with not our agency, but something deeper in our minds or hearts, the imagination can have a big role. A story can sometimes speak in a different way than prose or explanation can. A story can speak to the subconscious mind in very important ways because we might identify with it and connect to it emotionally and symbolically. A story opens and releases things that are not easy to do by ourselves.

Some teachers are brilliant at telling stories in such a way that people release what they're holding. With some Dharma teachers I know, it's not uncommon for people to cry during their Dharma talks because of a story they told that somehow released something.

I want to give you an example of a releasing story or poem. Not to have you cry, but maybe you can get a flavor of how a story can bring up a possibility and then allow for some kind of release. This is a poem by Guillaume Apollinaire, a French poet of the early 20th century. [Some sources attribute the poem to the English poet Christopher Logue.]

It's a very short poem. It goes something like this.

*He said, "Come to the edge."
We said, "No, we'll fall."
He said, "Come to the edge."
We said, "No, we will fall."
He said, "Come to the edge."
So we did.
And he pushed us.
And we flew.*

What is the edge we get pushed from, where we finally really let go, and rather than falling, we become free – we fly? Some of you might know this poem and so already knew the punch line. But some of you may not have been expecting that ending. Maybe hearing “we flew” evoked something in you. Maybe “we flew” pointed to a possibility, rather than if you had just heard: “You know, it's a good idea to let go. Let go deeply. Don't be afraid, just like go.” This shows how a story or poem can bring us along, where we identify with or live the story.

So, the stories that release us, the stories that inspire and move us enough that we get released. These two kinds of stories are closely related: the stories of telling the truth, and the stories that pull us into the possibility of deeply letting go of something. Both are releasing stories. Both are about letting go.

A letting go we want to do is let go of our stories. Some of you, I'm sure, are more than ready to let go of some of the stories that you've been living with for a long time. Maybe you can let go by telling it to someone or telling it to yourself by writing it down. Maybe you can let go of some of the stories by designing a little ritual of putting the stories down. I have a tremendous appreciation of the power of ritual. The wonderful thing about rituals, they work even if you don't believe in them. So it's okay to do them. The shift, the change, might not be dramatic or known right away. But there's something about a ritual of honesty, of truth, which helps the heart let go.

You might want to consider what stories have you lived in long enough that you'd like to release. And that becomes a releasing story for you, a story of how you released your stories.

Tomorrow will be the letter “Y” and that will be for yes stories. I'll explain tomorrow what that means in relation to stories. Thank you.