

Stories (5 of 5) Yes to Stories

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This week, we've talked about source stories, trapping stories, opening stories, and releasing stories. Today's topic will be the "Y" of the word "story": yes to story.

I want to say a few words about stories. We each have a story of our life. It's fascinating to tell or write your story around certain themes and then see the different perspectives those themes have. For example, one theme could be growing up and maturing. What is that story, your maturing story? What is the life story of your sexuality? What is your life story around money? What is your life story around religion and spirituality? What is your life story from the point of view of your education? What is your story of friendships?

By choosing different themes, we can get different perspectives. Some people don't reflect much on their lives. But to choose a theme to reflect on – this area and then this area – we see our lives in a new way. It's fascinating sometimes to do these stories repeatedly over months or periodically and see how they change. We see how many different stories we've been living and how many different influences come to bear on who we are today.

By telling our story, several things can happen. One is that we can know ourselves better. We can know our influences. We can know the richness of who we are, the background history that went into making us, which can be more alive in a very healthy way.

Once we tell our story, there is a chance to let go of it. This gives us a chance for the next chapter to be written. We can move on from that story. Sometimes when we stay stuck in a story, never tell the story, or keep it very private, it doesn't grow. One kind of story that doesn't grow and can fester is the story of what you keep secret, hidden things you would never tell anyone.

If you have such a story, I would encourage you to find someone you trust, someone you can have a confidential conversation with, and tell that story. It might free you. It might allow you to write the next chapter. It might allow you to move on.

Telling our story can also, hopefully, allow for greater self-acceptance. Verbalizing a story and hearing it, or writing down a story and reading it, there's a whole different way we can relate to our story – our history, what happened to us, who we are. Maybe that allows us to be more accepting of our vulnerabilities, shortcomings, challenges, sorrows, and difficulties. That kind of acceptance is a huge part of a maturing life.

To live an idea of perfectionism – that we're supposed to be perfect Buddha's practitioners, perfect spouses, perfect parents, or whatever we're trying to do – we sometimes shut parts of ourselves down. No one is perfect. So tell the story of your imperfection – that is another theme. Tell the story of your shortcomings. And see what comes out of that. Maybe there's a greater acceptance, growth, and space for something to happen next.

The advantage of stories – your own story or listening to or reading the stories of others – is that they are narratives over time. Stories represent something that happens over time, whether it's a very short time or a long time. And Dharma practice has to do with time: changing, moving, growing, and developing. Our life is a journey. To explain that journey is a story. Everyone has a story, and there are many ways of telling it.

As we get familiar with that process, rather than rejecting our stories, we can outgrow them at some point. We can leave our stories behind. With mindfulness practice, with Buddhist practice, there comes a time and a place where the practice is of the nature that we leave all stories behind. For a short while during the practice, they have no relevance anymore, and there's much greater freedom. We experience ourselves independent, free of all the stories that we've carried.

When we come back from that kind of freedom, that kind of putting down all the stories, we can have a different relationship to the stories of our life – the stories of ourselves, the stories that we are in the process of making every day. We can hold them more lightly. We start seeing them more like clothes we put on than who we essentially are. Our stories are important; they have a place. But we don't have to define ourselves by our story, even the stories about "me." Even though I tell the story about me, that is not who I really am.

If anything, who I am is freedom. There's a lightness and openness. And with that can come a wonderful "yes." A yes that doesn't approve of everything but is ready to be present for everything. This too is life. This too is this rich, fascinating world that is filled with stories. Who knows why what is happening right now is happening? What's the story behind it? Why are people treating me this way? There must be a story behind that person's life. What is that story? Why is this happening now? What's the story? Not that you understand the story, but that you realize there's a rich, multifaceted universe. Nowadays, we say multiverse, which we're all living all the time in a sense, and we can say, "Wow, yes." Then afterward, maybe we say no to some things: "This is not appropriate." But the sense of wonder, the sense of yes.

The "Y" in the word "story" stands for yes to stories, all the stories – the good, the bad, the ugly, the difficult, the painful, the embarrassing, the wondrous. This ability to enter life ready to say yes to all of it, including all our own stories. In fact, saying yes to yourself, to all the difficulties and shortcomings, all the beauty and wonder, all the stories. To really be able to say yes and hold it lightly, hold it fully. And not hide, not resist, not have shame, not have pride or conceit at least. This yes is what allows us to have a healthy yes to others and the world around us.

So, to understand our source story, which shaped us in some powerful way, so that we're not stuck there. To understand how we are stuck in trapping stories and to learn how to unstuck and untrap ourselves. To have opening stories – to search for, understand, and create the stories that help us to open and go forward in an open way. You can tell yourself the stories on that theme: What are the opening stories of your life? You might have to stretch, but what are the stories of your life that open you to new possibilities?

There are the releasing stories that freed you of something. And then there is this broad, open-minded equanimous, and generous way of being open to all your stories, even the stories that you know are not true. Not to believe them or justify them, but rather, to say, "Yes, this too." This too you hold lightly. This too you open to and be with. And then you let your wisdom decide how to act and what to do.

But before the wisdom, there can be a yes – an acceptance, a tolerance, a willingness, an openness. Before any no and before any approval, just this wonderful lake full of mindful awareness, bodyfulness, which is present and overflowing with "Here I am, yes, with this."

Stories are part of the richness of this Vipassana tradition. The Zen tradition I practiced in has a history of discounting stories and storytelling. There is wisdom to that, so we don't get stuck in the stories and depend on them. So we don't assert our stories or hang on to the stories, all kinds of things. But there's also a time and place for stories. Stories are part of the richness of human life.

I'm sure all of you have a richness of stories to tell. Some of you may have to mine them. But may your stories be stories that free you, take you beyond stories, and take you to love all beings.

I was going to stop here, but I have one more thing to say. Many years ago, I knew a man who would come to me repeatedly over the years and talk about how he realized how stuck he had been in different stories over his lifetime. He was an old man. He had all these stories and identities that he had lived in and thought were the truth – putting one story down, he just picked up another one. He became a Buddhist practitioner. Eventually, he said: "Now I don't have any stories anymore. What do I do now? How do I live now without a story." And I said to him, "Now listen to other people's stories." What was behind that was the idea of listening with compassion, listening with care, listening in such a way that others are not stuck in their stories, but can grow and go further and be respected.

Thank you all very much.