

LIFE'S JOURNEY ZUYA

Oral Teachings from Rosebud

ALBERT
WHITE HAT SR.

COMPILED AND EDITED BY *John Cunningham*



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chapter three

OUR ORIGIN STORY

OTOŪKAHE WIŪOOYAŪE

In the beginning was Inyan, and Inyan was in total darkness. Inyan was soft. Inyan was Wakan. Inyan began creation by draining its' blood and from this blood created a huge disk around itself. Inyan called this disk Maka, the earth. Half of the disk was land, and half was water. Inyan called the water Mni. The color of Inyan's blood was blue, and Maka, Mni, and Inyan got together and separated out this color. They threw it up into the air, and it became Mahpiya To, the sky. Then Maka said, "It's dark and I'm cold," and Inyan created AnpeŪ Wi, the sun and daytime, to give light and warmth. Then Maka said, "It's too bright and too hot," and Inyan created Hanhepi Wi, the moon and nighttime, to balance light and darkness.

Then Inyan created Tate to give breath to life. Today we call the wind Tate. Maka said, "I need a covering. I'm naked and I need a covering." So Inyan got together with the others and talked, and then said to Maka, "If we give you a covering, you must promise to give it life and nourishment." Maka promised to do so, and life began on earth.

1. I use "it" for Inyan because I've never heard anyone address Inyan as male or female.

This life began in the form of grass, plants, flowers, bushes, and trees, and as each new form came in, another need arose. All of creation came together to address each new need and to decide on the next one to come in. As each new being came in, Inyaŋ created the other one, just like it, in the universe. For every blade of grass, there is the other in the universe. For every tree, the other one is in the universe. For every being that came in, Inyaŋ created the other in the universe.

Draining its blood for each new creation, Inyaŋ became weaker and weaker. The last to be created was the Human nation. Inyaŋ created Wiŋyaŋ, woman, to be like the earth, to give life and nourishment to all of her children. Inyaŋ created Wićaša, man, to be like the universe, to provide nourishment and protection. The universe and earth create life together; man and woman create life together.

When creation was complete, Inyaŋ was dry and brittle and broke apart and scattered all over the world.

Our origin story was recorded for the first time by Dr. James Walker, a physician working on the Pine Ridge Reservation in the 1880s.² The medicine men in that area took him under their wings, so to speak, and taught him many of our rituals and healing practices. Eventually, they adopted him as a healer. Throughout this time Dr. Walker kept extensive records of the stories he heard and the rituals he participated in, and then he sent them to the Nebraska Historical Society. The historical society felt that because Walker was not a trained anthropologist, his notes should be edited by someone who was, and that's what happened. Whoever worked on Walker's notes changed much of the content to conform to western European philosophy. This has happened to us repeatedly and is another reason I don't use books for my resources. Lakota philosophy is usually changed in the written record to conform to Western beliefs and understanding.

2. Walker's version of this story can be found in *Lakota Myth*, published by the University of Nebraska Press.

The medicine men told Walker about our relationship with all of creation, and then, in his published work, we have a God, a celestial hierarchy, the basic Christian setup. So if you don't know our oral history, which tells a very different story from Walker's published version, our philosophy is seen as something very similar to Western philosophy. This isn't the case at all. Our traditional philosophy is nothing like western European. As you read these stories, please keep that in mind.

Our origin story begins in darkness. It says, "In the beginning was Inyaŋ. And Inyaŋ was in total darkness. And Inyaŋ was soft. And Inyaŋ was Wakaŋ."³ Today the word *Wakaŋ* is translated as "sacred" or "holy," sometimes as "great mystery." In Lakota understanding, however, Inyaŋ has the power to give life or to take life. Inyaŋ has the power to build or destroy. Inyaŋ possesses both good and evil; both have power within Inyaŋ. In traditional Lakota understanding, *Wakaŋ* means "power," the power I've just described. Think about this: *Wakaŋ* is a common word today, and the generally accepted contemporary meaning is more in line with Christian thought than Lakota.

Inyaŋ began creation by creating a huge disk around itself and calling it Maċa. Half of this disk was land, and half was water. Inyaŋ's first creations were land and water, Maċa and Mni. Inyaŋ's blood was blue, and at first all of creation was blue, but then Maċa, Mni, and Inyaŋ got together and separated out this color, and it became Maĥpiya Ťo, the blue sky. The original term to describe this is *Miye Maĥkeċa*, or "I am different." Today we say *Maĥpiya Ťo*, blue sky.

Then Maċa said, "It's dark and I'm cold," and in response Inyaŋ created Aŋpe Wi, which is a shortening of *aŋpeŋu wi*. *Aŋpeŋu* is daytime and *wi* is the sun, so *aŋpeŋu wi* is a description of the sun. It's interesting to me that right from the beginning, we, as creation, complain. We're not satisfied. Then Maċa said, "It's too bright and too hot," so Inyaŋ created Haŋwe wi (*Haŋhepi Wi*), the night and the

3. Inyaŋ was Wakaŋ, and Inyaŋ created everything by draining its blood. Every creation comes from the blood of Inyaŋ and so has the qualities of Wakaŋ, the ability to give life or to take life. Every creation is Wakaŋ.

moon, to bring balance. Next Inyan created Taŕe, to give breath to creation. Today we call the wind Taŕe.

Maka said, “I need a covering. I’m naked and I need a covering.” Inyan got together with all of creation on that point, and they decided to give her a cover. First, however, Inyan told Maka, “If we give you a covering, you must promise to give it life and nourishment.” Maka promised to do so, and life began on earth, first in the form of grass and plants and trees. As each creation came into being, another need arose, and with each need, all of creation would get together and decide how to fill that need.

Also, with each creation that came into being, Inyan got weaker and weaker. Inyan was draining its blood to make each creation and getting weaker as this went on. Throughout this entire process as each new creation came onto earth, Inyan created another identical one in the universe. For every blade of grass on earth, there is another in the universe; for every tree, there is another in the universe. The day you were born, the other you was born in the universe. For every being on earth, there is an identical other in the universe.

The last to be created were Winyan, woman, and Wicaŕa, man. Winyan was created first, to be like the earth, to give nourishment to life, and Wicaŕa was created to be like the universe, to carry the power and energy of the universe that, together with the earth, create life. Man and woman work together just like the universe and the earth. After creating man, Inyan was dry and brittle and broke apart, scattering all over the world.

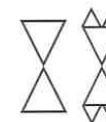
Everything on earth became known as Wamakaŕkan Oyaŕe, the living beings of the earth. Remember, *Maka* means “earth.” *Wa* refers to the beings of the earth, and *ŕkan* means “that move,” “that have life or spirit.” *Oyaŕe* simply means “a nation.” In the universe there is *Wicaŕhpi Oyaŕe*, and one interpretation of this term that I’ve heard is *Wicaŕa ceŕhpi* (man’s flesh). So in this particular meaning, *Wicaŕhpi*

Oyaŕe addresses the Star nation. We don’t have a word for star; we call them *Wicaŕhpi Oyaŕe*. These two, *Wamakaŕkan Oyaŕe* and *Wicaŕhpi Oyaŕe*, represent the beings of the earth and the beings of the universe. On the day you were born, the other you was born in the universe.⁴ Whatever you are doing on earth, the other you is doing that in the universe. Occasionally, that other one will send some energy down to you, and whatever you are doing at the time will get a little boost.

When creation was complete, the phrase *Mitaŕkuye Oyas’in* came into being. *Mitaŕkuye* means “a relative”; in the first-person usage it means “my relative.” *Oyas’in* means “everything.” So, *Mitaŕkuye Oyas’in* means “all my relatives” or “we are all related.” This is the most fundamental belief in our Lakota philosophy, that we are related to everything on earth and in the universe. We were all formed from the blood of Inyan: humans, animals, trees, water, air, stones.⁵ Everything in the universe, we are all related.

If I have a need or want to give thanks for something good in my life, I will face west and call all the relatives in that direction. I will call them and express my thanks or tell them my need. I’ll turn north, east, and south and do the same. Then I will look up and tell the star people and down to tell the earth, our grandmother. If I am asking for help, I will first tell them my problem and then what I am going to do to address it. I will ask them, as relatives, to help me. It’s important to tell them what you are going to do to address your need, to take responsibility as you ask for help. I never ask creation to answer my needs or solve my problems; that’s for me to do. I simply ask them to help me as I make the effort. If I have a need that can be addressed by another person, that’s probably where the help will come from. If it’s a medicinal need, help might come from the Plant nation. If I ask a medicine man to help me, a spirit in a ceremony might give it. Help can come from anywhere, but it is important to remember that all beings possess both good and evil, exactly

4. We have an image in our culture, two triangles, one over the other, the top one pointing down, and the two meeting at their apex, like an hourglass. This represents creation into two, one creator into two, male and female. Also, it represents that whatever is on earth, the same thing is in the universe. We use this image all the time in our artwork and our designs. It’s a fundamental symbol of our beliefs. The smaller triangles on the top and bottom of the second image are simply an elaboration on the basic hourglass shape. There can be many variations on this, but whatever is on the top will always be on the bottom as well.



5. Our word for stone is *Inyan*. A stone tells me about Inyan, and that spirit of Inyan is in that stone. That spirit or energy in that stone is Inyan. That’s my belief. In English when we talk about a rock, pebble, or stone, it describes a lifeless object, so that’s what it becomes. It becomes just an object. But to us it’s a living relative.

like Inyaŋ, and we must be careful how we ask for help and what we ask for.

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One time in the mid-1970s the medicine men here were talking with members of the Jesuit community. They met twice a month for nearly two years to talk about philosophy and spirituality. Often I would attend these meetings to listen and learn, and in one session a priest who had served on Rosebud and Pine Ridge for more than fifty years stood up and said, "For quite some time you've been telling us you can see and hear spirits. If that's so, tell me then, what does Satan look like?" A medicine man sitting near me nudged his brother-in-law who was sitting next to him and said quietly, in Lakota, "Why don't you tell him? I know he's one of your brothers." Then the medicine men had a discussion among themselves about the priest's question until one of them stood and said, "You really disappoint us with that question. We were hoping you could answer that for us, since you brought him here with you." He continued, "Since I was a child you've taught me about Satan, how evil he is, and you've also taught me about good. Take a look at yourself and at everyone else in this room. In our philosophy everyone has that spirit of good and that spirit of evil in them, and each one of us decides which one we want to develop. It's our decision. It's up to each one of us. There is good and evil in each creation, in the wind, the water, the sky, each one. Look at the water; if we abuse it, it will kill us. Same with the air. Every creation has both good and evil, and if we work with it as a relative, with respect and honor, we get the same back. That's a relative. You know what that's like from working with your friends; you have a wonderful relationship with them. Well, that's what we practice with all creation." That was the explanation our medicine men gave to the Jesuits. Later in that same

meeting, one of them said, "We address our needs to our relatives, but we have to keep good and evil in mind all the time. We can ask for an evil thing and receive that too. It's always there. We have to be careful when we make an appeal."

They said that life was wonderful in the beginning. All of the relatives worked together. As time went on, however, they began to abuse each other. They began to kill each other. They began to abuse the earth. The earth sent out warnings that they should stop this behavior, but no one listened. So the earth cleansed herself by shaking violently, and when she was finished, islands had been created. The land of earth had broken up into islands, separating many of the relatives from each other. The children were given another chance, but as time passed the abusive behavior began again. The same things happened. Again the earth sent out warnings to stop this behavior, and again the warnings were ignored. This time the earth called those closest to her inside. She said, "Come inside," and when they did so she said, "This is the last time." She held them safe inside her and began to shake again—the land opened up and swallowed and closed over, opened up and swallowed and closed over. This went on for a time, this cleansing, and when it was over our people, who were inside, were afraid to come out onto the surface.

In our culture we have a trickster figure called Iktōmi. After the cleansing Iktōmi took the people to the opening that led onto the surface. Three times the people made it to the opening, and each time they were met by a huge buffalo. Three times they got frightened and went back below. Somehow Iktōmi got them to go back a fourth time, and this time the buffalo spoke, saying, "Come out. I want to show you something." The people emerged onto the surface, and that buffalo said, "Look to my right. That nation will feed you, give you shelter, and the tools you need." They looked and saw a herd of brown buffalo. Then the buffalo said, "Look to my left. That nation over there will be your spiritual guides." They looked and saw

6. One of my brothers had some in-laws among the Shoshoni people in Wyoming. One summer he went to visit them and said that one evening he went to visit a neighbor. He said it was a nice evening, and he saw some Shoshoni women were sitting in the shade talking. There was a magpie sitting above them making a lot of noise, and finally one of the women got up and chased the magpie away. My brother asked his friend why she did that, and he said, "That magpie was sitting there calling them names." So the magpie must speak Shoshoni. The meadow-lark is the one that speaks Lakota. Different birds can speak different languages.

a herd of white buffalo. Today the spot where our people emerged onto the surface after the second cleansing is one of the biggest tourist attractions in the Black Hills. It's called Wind Cave. We call it Waśu niye, "the hole that breathes." It's a national monument.

Other nations had been protected by Maġa during the cleansing. When all who were left were back out on the surface, there was a need to set life in motion once again. The relatives decided on a race to determine how this would be done. Essentially, the race was twice around the Black Hills, a total distance of about a thousand miles. When the race began the magpie flew up and landed on the back of the buffalo, which it knew to be a strong runner.⁶ Interestingly, even so soon after the cleansing some of the racers cheated, tried to cut across the course, and were disqualified, but the others stayed the course and, with the buffalo in the lead, just before the finish line the magpie flew ahead and crossed first, declaring the race for the *hu nuġa*, the two-legged. The two-legged the magpie declared for, though, was not the human but the bear, because the bear has wisdom. To this day we receive instructions and guidance from the bear in our ceremonies.

If you think about our concept of Miġakuye Oyas'inġ, which means "we are all related," it begins to make sense that an animal or bird or plant, as a relative, could help you. That is what we try to practice in our daily lives and in our rituals. Miġakuye Oyas'inġ—we are relearning this philosophy today, and an essential part of understanding it is that there is no mystery in our philosophy. There is no mystery, and there are no miracles. Everything we do is reality based. We understand what we are doing, and we understand who we are working with every moment. We are working with our relatives. We all go back to Inġanġ.