

Choosing a Path

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Lately a number of people have been asking me about choosing a spiritual path. How does one do it, are there any guidelines, must one commit oneself to a path, what are the risks of putting “all of one’s eggs in one basket,” why make such a limiting choice? What is the value—and risks—of commitment?

First I want to allay two concerns that often crop up. One is that we—or any group—claim to have a monopoly on the Truth, or just plain truth, if you are uncomfortable with certainty. Rev. Master Jiyu often said, “All paths lead to the goal, walk which one is best for you.”ⁱ Another fear is that we are trying to “get” people into our organization in the manner of a cult. As far as I know, monks in our Order usually encourage newcomers to have done, or do, some “shopping in the spiritual supermarket” so they know what’s out there, have sampled the goods (different approaches to training), and have found the path that seems best for them. Sometimes that is only an intuitive affinity, and that is fine. Then, and perhaps sooner than one might wish, we encourage people to make the commitment to one path. Why?

First, narrowing our choices to one thing and being content with that is good practice for we Americans and possibly all human beings, given the universality of greed. In this country we are used to and even encouraged by our society to want it all and to have it all, and usually right now! We also have the very ingrained value (delusion) of “rugged individualism”—“I’m going to do it myself”! Limiting oneself to one practice can be a useful exercise in contentment and trust in others. In my own experience, I found that when I relinquished the desire to know about other Buddhist traditions (“What about my liking of Pure Land practice?”, or even just “But isn’t Tibetan Buddhism interesting?”), when I rested content with the faith that Rev. Master Jiyu and the teachings of our lineage would bring me to full enlightenment and be all that I would ever need, I was then ready—a fit container—to inherit the Transmission of our Ancestral line. And that contentment, faith, and subsequent inheritance have not disappointed me.

Second, as we are taught when we accept meditation instruction, “If you meditate, you run the risk of being grabbed by the Cosmic Buddha [the Unborn].”ⁱⁱ Something—with a capital “S”—takes us seriously. And the more serious we get, the more serious It gets: the karmic consequences of our past misdeeds begin to ripen and we have the opportunity to accept, convert, and transform our karmic inclinations. Without a commitment to one path, it is so much easier and convenient to sidestep this process by “falling out” with one group and seeking a connection with a new one. However, as the Buddha taught, our karma follows us like a shadow and there is no place on heaven or earth where it will not catch up with us. Karma is usually created in the context of human relationships—what we did to others or how we responded to what was done to us—and karmic consequence likewise usually ripens in the very same context. “As you sow the seed so shall you reap the fruit.”ⁱⁱⁱ Simply changing groups, once a commitment is made, only delays the eventual ripening of karma and the training which we have promised to do—which is the only thing which something in us knows will lead to true and lasting peace.

Third, there is a simple practical difficulty in trying to walk more than one path at a time: you can not do it. We can take—it is only possible to take—one step at a time, and that step has to be placed somewhere. It can’t be in two, much less three or four, places at once. Now you can take a step this way and one that way or walk for a while one way and then switch, but you won’t make much progress in either direction. And this limitation leads

us to another important reason for concentrating on one path: there is an incredible urgency to training, and once you see that, you won't want to waste any more time meandering through the countryside, no matter how beautiful or interesting. It is imperative that you get going, and quickly, toward your destination. It is as if you are in India and need to get to China, urgently. Your life, or say, the life of someone you love dearly, depends on your transporting medicine to them quickly. Which way will you go, via the ocean around Southeast Asia or via land around the Himalayas through Central Asia? Given the urgency of your mission, this is probably not the time for a leisurely cruise to ancient Buddhist sites in the South China Sea or for trekking in Nepal, although both would certainly be enjoyable and "educational" for you as a 21st century Buddhist! Your life, or the life of those you love, depends on traveling quickly—a choice becomes imperative. And in contemplative Buddhist practice as we come to see the suffering of the whole world and that its liberation depends on our training (we express and develop this insight through the Bodhisattva vow), do you really want to delay this journey?

And this leads to another reason for committing to one path. Each path has its own route, obstacles, guides, directions, and skills necessary to reach your destination. Each one will get you there, provided you have a good teacher. However, skills and directions—and teachers—for one won't always be able to help you with another. For example, reading a map is useful, but land maps and ocean charts are different, and getting the two mixed up could lead to disaster. Demons and monsters (wild animals, say) live in both the ocean and the mountains, but how you avoid or deal with them will differ. And the languages of the people you encounter for buying supplies and hiring help along the way will be different too, and so on. Given the urgency of your trip, you won't want to waste time learning unessential information which could also possibly confuse you in a difficult and life-threatening situation.

"But, but, but," you may say, "this means taking an awful large risk. This goes against the proverbial wisdom of 'Don't put all your eggs in one basket.'" Well, you're right, and it points to the necessity of finding a very good "basket" to put your eggs in. If your trip was not so urgent, dangerous, and difficult, you could perhaps spread your eggs out in several baskets. However, extra baskets could slow you down with more weight and superfluous clutter. You might not get to market on time. Your life and those you love depend on selling those eggs. You have to weigh the risks and take your chances. Your most important choice may be: find a basket maker—a teacher—you can trust. See if others who used that person's "baskets" got to market safely, even under adverse circumstances. Your life is at stake: how many baskets will you insist upon?

A few final thoughts: (1) The Eternal is not narrow-minded. It will not judge us because of a particular path we choose. IT is only concerned with us getting There. (2) The Eternal will never force us. Every choice has to be our own, made freely of our own will, and we take the consequences of those choices. (3) We also don't have to force ourselves. Often choices arise naturally and are seemingly small. Be aware and mindful of the small choices one is making. (4) This journey we've been talking about is a limited analogy. Life and training are not linear. Don't stew over past choices or lost time. Somehow nothing is wasted. Just "get weaving!" as Rev. Master Jiyu once said to me personally. (5) When trying to choose or commit to or stay on a path, the one thing I am certain of is: there is nothing that does not resolve itself through continued meditation, faith, and training. Lastly, (6) in Buddhism we have Three Refuges, which provide an incredible amount of safety when all three are consulted honestly, sincerely, and with faith and trust.

ⁱ*Roar of the Tigress: The Oral Teachings of Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett: Western Woman and Zen Master, Volume 1 :An Introduction to Zen :Religious Practice for Everyday Life*, ed. Rev. Daizui MacPhillamy (Mount Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey Press, 2000), p. 48.

ⁱⁱA favorite expression of Koho Zenji, Great Master Keido Chisan, Rev. Master Jiyu's Transmission master in Japan. See *ibid.*, pp. 8 and 28.

ⁱⁱⁱShakyamuni Buddha in the *Samyutta Nikaya*, quoted in Narada Maha Thera, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, 3rd edition (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Buddhist Missionary Society, 1977), p. 381. See also pp. 353-354.

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