

The Hazards and Benefits of Organized Religion

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Some of us come hesitantly to Buddhism, or refuse to enter at all, because it smacks of “organized religion.” It is true that religions, particularly in the West, do not have a very good track record of maintaining the ideals and principles of their founders. I often encounter people who seem to want to have spirituality—“the goods”—without accepting responsibility for taking care of them—the organization. “Organizations” are looked upon with suspicion and distrust, and it is often assumed that organizations are only concerned with self-interest and self-perpetuation. There is an unwillingness to make a commitment for fear that one might be hurt or taken advantage of, plundered spiritually or financially—and these are genuine abuses of trust! Or one might be asked to let go of a cherished ideal or opinion, to bow to the leadership of spiritual seniors, to work with people one is not so fond of, or to compromise in order to allow and promote the spiritual growth and flourishing of the community—common requests in any group effort. Given all these hazards and risks, why in the world would one join an “organized” group when one could just study and practice spirituality on one’s own?

What follows is how I personally trained with this dilemma. I offer it here for any whom it might help. Like many of my generation, I came to Buddhism amidst the intellectual and spiritual climate of the 1960s, yet chose to commit to, and stick with, an organized group, our particular Order. How was I able to put aside the fears and worries mentioned above, as well as past personal disappointments? How could I in good conscience know that I was not “selling out to the establishment”?

Well, upon reflection, it seems I had enough good karma (merit) to come in contact with this Buddhist lineage (just as each of you have) and then enough faith to entrust myself to it and the teachings. First I encountered very good people associated with the Order, which also shows just how much of an impact each of us can have; then I discovered our remarkable founder’s Dharma and eventually made it to Rev. Master Jiyu’s monastery at Shasta Abbey where I met her in person. At each step something in me sensed that this was “the real thing.” I saw in Rev. Master Jiyu not only the deep genuine spiritual teachings of the Buddha but also that thread of Truth that runs through all religions. I heard in my heart her unequivocal stating that the purpose of religion and spirituality was to find and realize the Unborn and the corollary that everything else must be grounded in, flow from, and support that purpose. As I trained with this group of people, I particularly observed her untiring efforts, often in the face of unpopular opinion and criticism, to organize our temples and the Order in accord with this purpose. Inherent in that purpose were the spiritual values of the religion—compassion and wisdom born of meditation—and the actual teachings of the historical Buddha and His successors down the centuries. For me this was just incredible—to have the opportunity to practice with someone who was brave and strong enough to practice the Buddha’s Original Way and was a warm, loving, and genuine human being as well! It was indeed as if the Buddha was once again alive here on earth and I had the chance, first as a lay trainee and then as a monk, to follow Him and be His disciple. This genuine practice of spirituality was what I had longed for all through childhood and adolescence and had wandered far and wide in subsequent years to find. And to discover a like-minded group of individuals committed wholeheartedly to doing the same thing—along with a reliable guide to help us—was truly the treasure of treasures!

But what about all those hazards? Well, those possibilities do exist. However, Zen Buddhism as an “organized” religion has a number of preventive measures which when utilized properly can guard

against “illness” in the institution. First, it places vital importance on the master-disciple relationship as a vessel for maintaining the essential truths and integrity of the tradition—which is why masters are so often strict, inconvenient, and even demanding at times! Second, because we are human, fallible, and will make mistakes, we have the practice of *sange*, described in the second section of Great Master Dogen’s *Shushogi*. “Contrition and conversion” is the continual looking within, seeing and acknowledging one’s capacity for causing suffering, and training to convert that potential into something good. It’s a wonderful antidote to self-delusion; it’s a “self-correcting mechanism” if ever there was one. *Sange* also figures prominently in a formal way in our Soto Zen/Serene Reflection tradition: it’s a key element in both lay and monastic ordination, monastic Transmission, and the twice-monthly Renewal of Vows (Bodhisattva Precepts) Ceremony.

Third, we have the interconnections in the sangha—bumping elbows and sometimes heads(!) with our fellow practitioners—which also provide invaluable prevention of going astray. Training and learning with and from others—the master or teacher, and fellow sangha members—help us make the best use of our limited time to develop an enlightened life free from suffering. We don’t have to reinvent the wheel—or Wheel of the Dharma! For me, this is the true compassion and glory of the Buddha—that He was willing to share His understanding with others, and to practice with them. He didn’t expound the Dharma and then go off by Himself. He lived day and night with others, continually teaching and helping. My own master did the same, and that ideal is held up for her successors to follow.

So yes, we have the possibility of all the pitfalls and hazards of organized religion. But there is also a positive aspect to organization. There are benefits. This is indeed the purpose and the treasure of the Sangha. For instance, there is strength in numbers, both in how the sangha can help the individual (observe how easy it is to break a single stick of wood and how much more difficult it is to break an entire bundle) and also in the ability of a group of people to do more than one person can do alone (as any great project, secular or religious, attests to). Through being organized we simultaneously help each other and enable the Buddha’s truth to spread ever further and wider. If one reflects on the life of the Buddha, it’s clear: He never intended to set up an organization when He left home to search for an answer to suffering. Organization—and those darn inconvenient rules and guidelines—developed naturally after His enlightenment as a means to enable His followers to awaken, too. This organization made it possible for them to train together harmoniously, to learn and teach the Dharma, and to live at peace with the surrounding society and natural world. These collected guidelines and instructions—Precepts and Vinaya—together with the rest of the scriptures, anecdotes, and the personal experience of those who have lived with an enlightened master down the centuries, are the treasure of the Dharma.

Lastly we have the spirit of honest inquiry which the Buddha Himself used and recommended to His disciples, monastic and lay. He examined everything carefully in meditation in His search for truth, and He told His followers to do likewise—to prove the teachings true for themselves. It certainly helps to have enough trust in the master to consider that what she or he is teaching you just might be true, an approach Rev. Master Jiyu called “the backburner method.” This inquiry is an aspect of pure meditation itself, the Buddha Treasure. By sincerely looking within, reflecting on one’s True Heart, and asking what is good to do, we will discover the enlightened way. Perhaps not immediately, but eventually and in good time. And together, through our combined efforts and wisdom, we can share the Buddha’s liberating teachings with each other—and all beings—and pass them on to future generations.