

The Path Series #2
Keeping to the Path
Or, How to Steer Clear of Spiritual Bypassing
A Sermon with Zen Tales
Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker
Beacon UU Congregation
February 9, 2020

Tale #1 – Tat Tvam Asi

In the classic wisdom tale , *Tat Tvam Asi*, a seeker went to a great master. Bowing reverentially in the traditional manner he said: “O master, I seek enlightenment, please initiate and teach me so that I may attain That!” The master replied in a kindly manner: “Certainly my son, *tat tvam asi*, which is Sanskrit for You are That.”

The master continues: “The divine Self lives within you. Meditate on that Self, know that Self, merge in that Self, *realize* that Self!” The seeker was disappointed. “O master, I know all that already. Why, that very teaching was featured in this month’s *Yoga Journal*. Please give me the secret teachings, I want the real stuff!”

The master said: That is all I know. That is my entire teaching I have no secrets. There is nothing that I have not given you. However, if you are not satisfied, you can go down the road to the next ashram or monastery and see if he has something more suitable for you.”

The seeker departed and approached the next guru and said: “O master, I seek enlightenment, please give me the initiation and your most secret teaching so that I may attain That!” The guru said: “I do not give my teachings so easily. You must earn them. You must do *sadhana*, spiritual practice. If you are sincere then you can stay here and work for 12 years. Only in this way will you earn my initiation.”

The seeker was delighted: “That’s just what I wanted. That is real spiritual life, real *sadhana*. I’ll begin at once.” The guru assigned him the job of shoveling buffalo dung in the back paddock. The years went by. Each day as he shoveled the dung the seeker dreamt of his future enlightenment. He ticked the passing days and months off his calendar.

Finally 12 years were up; the great day arrived. He approached the Master with hands folded palm to palm. “O my guru, I have served you faithfully for 12 years. I request your teachings and initiation as you have promised. Please bestow your grace upon me.” The guru said: “My son, you have served me well. You truly deserve my teaching.

Here it is: “*Tat tvam asi*. You are That, the divine Self lives within you. Meditate on that Self, know that Self, merge in that Self, realize that Self!”

The seeker became enraged. “What! Is that all? The guru up the road gave me that the first time I met him and I didn’t have to shovel buffalo dung for him for 12 years!” “Well,” said the guru. “That was your decision, but the truth hasn’t changed in 12 years.”

The first time I heard this wisdom tale I was reminded of a New Yorker cartoon I had clipped out years ago and pinned to the bulletin board over my desk. It shows two bald, robed *yogis* sitting lotus-style in an *ashram* (or spiritual retreat) under the watchful eyes of a *Shiva* statue. One is turned to the other, saying: “I’d read so much about it beforehand that I couldn’t help being disappointed when I actually became enlightened!”

Of course, the ironic humor of the cartoon resides in the unlikely notion that anyone who had genuinely achieved enlightenment would remain so earthbound and cerebral as to be *disappointed* about anything!

For the most part, religions *do* hold out some possibility of enlightenment (or more simply put, spiritual growth) and you needn’t don robes, and sit on a cushion in a mountain cave to get a taste of it. To “enlighten” or “to shed spiritual light upon” represents the central purpose of religion in the first place, including our flexible and progressive faith of Unitarian Universalism.

The danger arises when spirituality becomes a self sabotaging ego trap or a way to avoid confronting uncomfortable feelings,

unresolved wounds and fundamental psychological needs, or , the shadow side of ourselves and society.

In the early 1980's, renowned psychologist John Welwood coined a term to describe this phenomenon after observing dysfunctions within his own Buddhist community. He called it "spiritual bypassing." And often those who engage in this behavior veer far from an authentic spiritual path while convincing themselves (or being convinced by false gurus) that they are heading up the mountaintop to enlightenment.

On February 2nd , in my sermon, "Clearing A Path." I preached about living with heartfulness and it was full of positivity and a genuine zeal for the beauty of an open-hearted life through opening the heart chakra. I decided to write this "second part" on the path because it's crucial to acknowledge how a deep dive into spiritual practice can lead to behaviors and beliefs that are far from spiritual.

Welwood explains that " when we are spiritually bypassing, we often use the goal of awakening or liberation to rationalize what he calls *premature transcendence*: trying to rise above the raw and messy side of our humanness before we have fully faced and made peace with it.

And then we tend to use an absolute truth we've been fed to disparage or dismiss relative human needs, feelings, psychological problems, relational difficulties, and developmental deficits. "I see this as an "occupational hazard" of the spiritual path," Welwood warns, "in that spirituality does involve a vision of going beyond our current karmic situation. But it can be abused and become distorted." Trying to move beyond our psychological and emotional issues by

sidestepping them is dangerous. It sets up a debilitating split between the sacred and the human within us.

And spiritual bypassing leads to a conceptual, one-sided kind of spirituality where one pole of life is elevated at the expense of its opposite: Absolute truth is favored over relative truth, the impersonal over the personal, emptiness over form, transcendence over embodiment, and detachment over feeling. We see this distortion happening in mainstream congregations, yoga ashrams, Buddhist sanghas, and even evangelical Christian churches.

One might, for example, attempt to practice Buddhist *nonattachment* by dismissing one's need for love, but this only drives the need underground, so that it often becomes unconsciously acted out in covert and possibly harmful ways instead.

But this throws our inner compass, our ajna (third eye) chakra of intuition and wisdom off course. And it wreaks havoc on our relationships with others because it can encourage exaggerated detachment, emotional numbing, an over-emphasis on the positive, anger-phobia, overly tolerant compassion, weak boundaries, and delusions of spiritual specialness.

Welwood points out that even meditation can be used to avoid uncomfortable feelings and unresolved life situations. He explains: "For those in denial about their personal feelings or wounds, meditation practice can reinforce a tendency toward coldness, or interpersonal distance.

They are at a loss when it comes to relating directly to their feelings or to expressing themselves personally in a transparent way. It can be quite threatening when those of us on a spiritual path have to

face our woundedness, or emotional dependency, or primal need for love.”

So, how does this distortion and exploitation happen, even in spiritual communities that appear balanced and healthy? Consider this story about the moon and the pointing finger.

Tale #2 : The Pointer

The Zen teacher’s dog loved his evening romp with his master. The dog would bound ahead to fetch a stick, then run back, wag his tail, and wait for the next game. On this particular evening, the teacher invited one of his brightest students to join him – a boy so intelligent that he became troubled by the contradictions in Buddhist doctrine.

“You must understand,” said the teacher, “that words are only guideposts. Never let the words or symbols get in the way of truth. Here, I’ll show you.”

With that the teacher called his happy dog.

“Fetch me the moon,” he said to his dog and pointed to the full moon.

“Where is my dog looking?” asked the teacher of the bright pupil.

“He’s looking at your finger.”

“Exactly. Don’t be like my dog. Don’t confuse the pointing finger with the thing that is being pointed at. All our Buddhist concepts are only guideposts. Every person finds his way to find his own truth.”

Now, I am not a guru, or a Master, but I am a spiritual guide in my own way. And, maybe you feel impatient or even agitated listening

to this sermon, right now, in this moment, the only reality you actually experiencing.

When is she going to tell us the secret? Maybe you are already wondering if there will be cookies at coffee hour today or if you'll be able to follow the melody in the hymn we'll be singing when I'm finished.

Do *I* know the way to *your* light? I have some ideas and resources to share. Whenever I sense in others a zeal to line up behind me so they can "follow" me on the path, I tell them clearly: I am just another finger pointing at the moon. I am not your light. However, as your minister, I will stand here on the edge of the path and shine a flashlight down upon it, so that you might not trip quite so much along the way."

In a nutshell: If a teacher, a minister, a therapist, *anybody*, tells you they have the secret password to *your* enlightenment, I suggest you strap on your sandals and head to the next village. That is an example of spiritual bypassing.

Charlatans abound in the world of spiritual growth and even renowned teachers, roshis, yogis, ministers, and gurus have lost their way, been seduced by adoration, and fallen from grace believing they are the moon and not the finger pointing at it.

We also need to develop a tremendous tolerance and appreciation for different personal styles of embodying spirituality.

Otherwise, if we settle for a one-size-fits-all dharma, we are doomed to endless holier-than-thou competition and one-upmanship. And what I call the “too-much-ness” of any practice that is meant to help us develop and live a moderate and well-balanced life.

Tale #3: Moderation

An aged monk, who had lived a long and active life, was assigned a chaplain’s role at an academy for girls. In discussion groups he often found that the subject of love became a central topic. This comprised his warning to the young women:

“Understand the danger of anything-too-much in your lives. Too much anger in combat can lead to recklessness and death. Too much ardor in religious beliefs can lead to close-mindedness and persecution.

Too much passion in love creates dream images of the beloved – images that ultimately prove false and generate anger. To love too much is to lick honey from the point of a knife.”

“But as a celibate monk,” asked one young woman, “how can you know of love between a man and a woman?”

“Sometime, dear children,” replied the old teacher, “I will tell you why I became a monk.”

Too much passion, too much love, too much anger; “understand the danger of anything too much” instructs the monk....very simple, very wise advice for us as we set off on our own individual journeys and attempt to keep to the path.

And be cautious about the aspect of spiritual bypassing that labels actions and beliefs as spiritual that are anything but. Jordan Bates on the website Higher Existence gives us a good summary - a list of “10 spiritual things people do that are total BS. (or “buffalo dung” as our first tale would call it).

1. Use spirituality to feel superior by engaging in the latest or coolest spiritual practices because you want to fit in. “I hang out now with the spiritual people.”
2. Sabotaging their ability to succeed by associating ambition or material wealth with spiritual impurity and general malevolence.
3. Use spirituality as a justification for failing to take responsibility for one’s actions. “Oh, did I hurt you? It doesn’t matter, reality is an illusion anyway.” Or, “I am just honoring my truth.”
4. Judging others for expressing anger or other strong emotions, even when it is necessary do so. “If only you were more enlightened, you would avoid these negative feelings.”
5. Use spirituality as a justification for excessive drug use (and using these drugs, including psychedelics without proper guidance or safeguards)
6. Overemphasize positivity in order to avoid looking at the problems in their lives or the world. “Just be positive, just open your heart, just focus on the lovely white light.” Of course, optimism is wonderful, as long as its grounded.

7. Repress unpleasant emotions that don't fit their spiritual self narrative. "No way ..I can't be depressed or sacred or anxious. I meditate every day at the coolest sangha in town."
8. Find themselves in bad situations due to excessive tolerance and a refusal to distinguish between people. Should we affirm and activate our first UU principle about the worth and dignity of others? Yes, but there are people who do not deserve our trust and prey on our good will. It's not "unspiritual" to be savvy in making common sense distinctions.
9. Want so badly for various spiritual practices to be correct that they disregard science entirely. Science and spiritual do not cancel one another out.
And finally -
10. Feel deep aversion or self loathing when confronted with their shadow side. "I feel guilty for being imperfect." Guess what? The Dalai Lama, Jesus, Thich Nhat Han, even Buddha made a very big point of their imperfection and modeled compassion of self. They understood the need to be flexible in responding to real life and that the path might be muddy, messy, and inconvenient.

Our final Zen tale makes that point quite well -

Tale# 4 Muddy Road

Tanzan and Ekido were once travelling together down a muddy road. A heavy rain was still falling. Coming around the bend they met a lovely girl in a silk kimono and sash, unable to cross the intersection.

“Come on, girl,” said Tanzan at once. Lifting her onto his back, he carried her over the mud.

Ekido did not speak again until that night when they reached a lodging temple. Then he could no longer restrain himself. “We monks do not go near or touch females,” he scolded Tanzan. “Especially, not young and lovely ones. It is forbidden. Why did you do that?”

Tanzan looked at Ekido calmly and replied, “I put the girl down hours ago. Why are you still carrying her?”

Do you know the way to light? Keep to the path from unknown to unknown. In your quest, do not bypass the pain or the joy. Maintain humility and what Einstein called “a holy curiosity.”

The truth has not changed for 12 years or 1200 years “*Tat tvam asi*. You are That, the Divine Self lives within you. Meditate on that Self, know that Self, merge in that Self, realize that Self!”

You are That. Inquire Within.

Jai Bhagwan (*the divine in me recognizes and honors the divine in you.*)

© 2020 Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker. May be quoted with proper attribution to author and sources.