

Continuum of Practice by Rodney Smith

Does spiritual practice have only one context, one appropriate form and venue? Is sitting more important than walking meditation? Is retreating more profound than job or family? Some practitioners proclaim the ultimate fruits of meditation are discovered within a reclusive lifestyle as a monk or nun or on a silent retreat. Others claim only a fully engaged life is the door to liberation. The more teachers and pundits we hear, the more confused we can become.

Several years ago I attended a retreat with a well-known Theravadan monk. On closing day, several of the participants mourned their lack of dedication saying, if they were really committed spiritually, they would ordain and live a solitary life. To his credit, the monk did not encourage that point but recommended people dedicate their life to liberation regardless of where they find themselves.

I have learned over the years it is not where we are but the full willingness to be where we are that is the crucial link between a spiritually wasted moment and a liberated one. If there is any movement of mind, any flinching, any referencing outside of here and now, we will not meet the moment with the full and embracing energy that is hallmark of a liberating attitude. The end of referencing ourselves away from this moment is liberation, but there is no harder point to communicate to the aspiring meditator than this obvious fact.

We may feel we have lived our life entrapped and contained within the drudgery of daily existence and that nothing of spiritual worth has come of it. Why should this so-called "spiritual moment" be any different than all the other moments we have lived? We may think the heightened aspiration of a spiritual calling requires an equally extraordinary degree of hardship and renunciation. We sense something special arising within us and cannot reconcile that feeling with our ordinary existence. So we may look away toward an ideal of self-isolation. Since the ideal lifestyle is probably unavailable given our responsibilities, we may energetically give up on the deeper aspects of Buddhism and go for the easier, but still worthy aspiration of building a good and wholesome character.

Practice is a continuum. Sometimes we are pulled to be on retreat, sometimes we move toward relationship and family life, and other times we focus on sangha (gathering of like-minded people) and social engagement. No one venue or experience is better or more spiritual than another. What is right for us in one phase of our practice may feel dry and uninspiring in another. We are guided by our inward intention and self-honesty. Forms and experiences will come and go. Our self-honesty will find the right context for understanding to evolve.

Unfortunately seeking complete fulfillment can be envisioned as looking outside this immediate time frame toward a retreat or journey to a foreign land. We get pulled toward events or experiences that seem to harbor a greater truth than this “ordinary moment” contains. When the deep spiritual desire seems to point beyond here and now, we are misinterpreting the source and direction of that longing.

The longing is coming from the common source of all things and if understood, will direct us back to its origin. It is not intended to take us away from ourselves but to pull us back into ourselves and to fully embrace the circumstances that are present. To abide within that source is the dharma journey. Our journey must, by definition, take us fully into the here and now. To look outside of now is to miss the sacred within the ordinary.

To reinterpret the cues of the heart away from the outward pulls of the mind is to find contentment where we stand. We may be directed to take a journey, enter a long retreat, or study scripture, but if they are in accordance with our longing, there will be a profound inward resonance with our choices and a sense of being right where we need to be. Each step taken feels complete in itself as we journey deeper and deeper into the heart.