

## **How to Follow the Path**

We all have the karma to meet one spiritual path or another, and I would encourage you, from the bottom of my heart, to follow with complete sincerity the path that inspires you most.

Read the great spiritual books of all the traditions, come to some understanding of what the masters might mean by liberation and enlightenment, and find out which approach to absolute reality really attracts and suits you most.

Exercise in your search as much discernment as you can; the spiritual path demands more intelligence, more sober understanding, more subtle powers of discrimination than any other discipline, because the highest truth is at stake. Use your common sense at every moment.

Come to the path as humorously aware as possible of the baggage you will be bringing with you: your lacks, fantasies, failings, and projections. Blend, with a soaring awareness of what your true nature might be, a down-to-earth and level-headed humility, and a clear appreciation of where you are on your spiritual journey and what still remains to be understood and accomplished.

The most important thing is not to get trapped in what I see everywhere in the West, a "shopping mentality": shopping around from master to master, teaching to teaching, without any continuity or real, sustained dedication to any one discipline.

Nearly all the great spiritual masters of all traditions agree that the essential thing is to master one way, one path to the truth, by following one tradition with all your heart and mind to the end of the spiritual journey, while remaining open and respectful toward the insights of all others. In Tibet we used to say, "Knowing one, you accomplish all." . . . When you go on searching all the time, the searching itself becomes an obsession and takes you over. You become a spiritual tourist, bustling about and never getting anywhere. . . . Following one teaching is not a way of confining you or jealously monopolizing you. It's a compassionate and skillful way of keeping you centered and always on the path, despite all the obstacles that you and the world will inevitably present.

So when you have explored the mystical traditions, choose one master and follow him or her. It's one thing to set out on the spiritual journey; its quite another to find the patience and endurance, the wisdom, courage, and humility to follow it to the end.

You may have the karma to find a teacher, but you must then create the karma to follow your teacher. For very few of us know how truly to follow a master, which is an art in itself. So however great the teaching or master may be, what is essential is that you find in yourself the insight and skill to learn how to love and follow the master and the teaching.

This is not easy. Things will never be perfect. How could they be? We are still in *samsara*. Even when you have chosen your master and are following the teachings as sincerely as you can, you will often meet difficulties and frustrations, contradictions and imperfections. Don't succumb to obstacles and tiny difficulties. These are often only ego's childish emotions. Don't let them blind you to the essential and enduring value of what you have chosen. Don't let your impatience drag you away from your commitment to the truth. I have been saddened, again and again, to see how many people take up a teaching or master with enthusiasm and promise, only to lose heart when the smallest, unavoidable obstacles arise, then tumble back into *samsara* and old habits and waste years or perhaps a lifetime.

As the Buddha said in his first teaching, the root of all our suffering in *samsara* is ignorance. Ignorance, until we free ourselves from it, can seem endless, and even when we have embarked on the spiritual path our search is fogged by it. However, if you remember this and keep the teachings in your heart, you will gradually develop the discernment to recognize the innumerable confusions of ignorance for what they are, and so never jeopardize your commitment or lose your perspective.

Life, as the Buddha told us, is as brief as a lightning flash; yet as Wordsworth said, "The world is too much with us: getting and spending, we lay waste our powers." It is that laying waste of our powers, that betrayal of our essence, that abandonment of the miraculous chance that this life, the natural bardo, gives us of knowing and embodying our enlightened nature, that is perhaps the most heartbreaking thing about human life.

What the masters are essentially telling us is to stop fooling ourselves: What will we have learned, if at the moment of death we do not know who we really are? As the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* says:

With mind far off, not thinking of death's coming,  
Performing these meaningless activities,  
Returning empty-handed now would be complete confusion;  
The need is recognition, the spiritual teachings,  
So why not practice the path of wisdom at this very moment?  
From the mouths of the saints come these words:  
If you do not keep your master's teaching in your heart  
Will you not become your own deceiver?

Source: Rinpoche, Sogyal (2002). *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. New York: HarperCollins. (Page 135-137.)