

Dharma Teachings by

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WHY I CHOSE BUDDHISM

Different people have taken the time to tell me how challenged or stressed they feel because from their perception our Center has moved from generic metaphysics to Buddhism. They take the change as a personal challenge, thinking that because we have chosen a different path we have left them. There is a vast difference between leaving someone and differing from what they think or feel. Having a difference of opinion simply means that there is diversity.

Other people feel challenged because we have adopted a formal religion, from their point of view. And having adopted a formal religion, they feel we have become rigid or that we have lost our freedom. And because of that, they somehow feel that it has taken away their freedom as well.

I never cease being surprised when someone is personally challenged by my path, especially since I never try to convert them. I don't understand why it should bother one person what religion another person practices. Or how one person can take it as a personal threat when someone else doesn't believe in their god. I cannot for the life of me see where unity argues with diversity. In fact, I think that a lot of the world's problems, at least from the relative point of view, arise because people have no tolerance for one another.

Since I have listened to many people describe to me their heartfelt feelings about what it was like for them when I chose Buddhism, I would now like to tell you how it was for me when I chose Buddhism. I think turnabout is fair play.

First of all, from my perception, there was never any conversion process. There was never a time when I converted from something else to Buddhism. The reason why is that since the time of my adulthood, I have never formally identified with any religion. There was never a time that I felt that I was going to an external god; and yet I have a very spiritual and religious sense of there being a goal, a path and a reality that is absolute or true. And I knew that that reality had no describable nature, that that reality was essentially free of all conceptualization, that that reality wasn't a reality in a sense, because reality implies thingness. I knew that there was something that was beyond; and that beyondness was free of any ideas of here or there, or high or low, or self or other. It was free of any contrivance

I didn't use the word emptiness at first because I didn't know the word, but I used to think of it as being vibrationally zero. That is to say, there was no artificial construction within it, no contrivance, no conceptualization. I knew that any conceptualization or idea that one had was delusion. And I knew that there was an awakened state in which one realized one's nature, and that nature was essentially free of all limitation. That nature is not separate, it is not other; it is not something that one must go to or even progress toward. That nature is the true nature, and one needs to awaken to it, and that awakening occurs naturally.

In order to describe that philosophy, at first I had to use general metaphysical terms. There were no other terms for me. I never had anything to do with Buddhism. I had never even read a book about Buddhism. When I met His Holiness Penor Rinpoche and I began to hear about the Buddha's teachings, my sense was not of changing at all. Nothing of the Buddha's teaching seemed strange to me. From the deepest part of my heart, I felt that I had come home. My sense was, "At last, here's the vocabulary I've been looking for. Here are the words that I've needed all this time to describe what I've been trying to teach." And so gradually I began to absorb and introduce the vocabulary into my teaching, because I already had students at that time.

Now Penor Rinpoche says that I'm an incarnation of somebody that used to be Tibetan 400 years ago. I don't really know if that's true or not. If Penor Rinpoche says what he says, then that is due to his wisdom and his kindness, and I can't take any credit for that; and I have nothing to do with it, other that that I rely on it. I feel like I am just an ordinary person and I'm doing my best. I believe in the Buddha's teaching. I believe that compassion will save the world. I believe that enlightenment is the end of suffering. That's what I know.

So I'm not going to pull an ego trip and say, "Oh, when I heard the Buddha's teaching, I recognized it, I knew it, I remembered it," in some hokey way. I'm not going to say to you, "Oh, immediately upon hearing the Buddha's teaching I came into my own, and therefore I knew all these amazing things." It wasn't like that at all. It was something like the joy you might feel if you recognized music that had been in your heart for a long time being played on the radio. There was a part of me that could recognize this truth as being truth. It wasn't really a change. It was more like finding the right suit of clothing for my size. So if any of you are uncomfortable with the fact that I've changed, please don't be; I'm certainly not. I've always been a Buddhist. I just didn't have the words.

Now, I would like to tell you a little bit about what I felt in my heart when I found the Buddha's teaching. I felt humbled to have the opportunity to practice a path that has been around for more that two and a half millennia and that has brought people to enlightenment again and again and again. Ordinary sentient beings, through the intensity of their devotion and their practice, have achieved not theoretical, but exacting, reportable and repeatable physical and psychic signs that indicate

enlightenment, such as bodies producing relics at the time of death and other miraculous signs. This has happened again and again and again to guys like you and me.

Sometimes I stop and I think, "What can I have possibly done to have this opportunity? What good fortune has befallen me? What circumstances have come together over ages and ages of time to give me this chance to practice a path that really works and has worked again and again and again?"

I am awestruck that I don't have to follow someone's advice who is not enlightened, because I am following the Buddha's teaching. The Buddha knows what he's talking about because it brought him to the state of supreme realization, and it has produced enlightenment in so many beings.

Sometimes I am afraid for others, because they are following a spiritual path that is very new — perhaps 10, 20 or maybe even 100 years old — a spiritual path that was simply developed by a great thinker, great philosopher or great psychologist. Although these paths mean well, and they do produce some good — in that people who are tied up in knots get untied a little bit — I'm not sure they actually produce enlightenment, because the source is not enlightened. Even if the founders of these paths were to describe themselves as being enlightened, I would want to see if the paths actually produced enlightenment in someone following them, because there are many people who are practicing paths that have not yet produced enlightenment in one single person.

So I adopt a wait-and-see attitude. I'm really hard-nosed about that. I want something that will awaken me to my nature. I want something that will produce enlightenment. I won't give you a dime for back rubs and affirmations and good feelings because those things have not proved to me that they will produce enlightenment. I want what works.

I'm not saying there's only one path, and that's the Buddha's path. I'm not saying that another path could not be revealed. I'm not saying that no one else has the answer. I am saying that if I'm going to travel across the ocean of suffering, I'm going to do it in a boat with no holes. I know that I want to practice a path that has as its source the mind of enlightenment, and I also want to practice a path that has produced enlightenment in many other sentient beings. That, to me, is a boat with no holes. You're not going to catch me — I'm a very, very practical person — leaving shore in a boat with holes. That's not going to happen; I'm too much of a coward.

And in my having the special joy that I feel, the most happy part is that somehow I seem to have the karma of being in the position to help propagate this path. Now believe me, I have no idea how that happened. I'm just happy that it is so. If I have the opportunity to do anyone some good, if I have the opportunity to afford someone a place to be comfortable and to be trained and to feel at home so that they can practice

such a path, then I'm really happy about my life.

So, when someone says to me, "I don't know how to deal with your change," I can only say, "Don't even bother, because you have enough to deal with already. You have to deal with cyclic existence. You're a busy person. What you need to think about is not what I'm doing. You need to think about how you are going to achieve enlightenment. How are you going to liberate your mind from the very conceptualizations that you are expressing to me right now? How are you going to free yourself from the rigidity and the restriction, the confines of your own feelings, that run you around the block the way they do and never produce enlightenment? That's your problem, and it's not my job to worry about it."

My job is to do what I am doing now. I hope to do it better and better. But this path isn't all about me; it's about awakening. And so I really don't waste a lot of time thinking about how I feel or how you feel or what feelings are all about. I mostly try to rest my mind in something that is like calm abiding, because the Buddha didn't teach me to worry. He didn't teach me to have preconceived ideas, he didn't teach me to be rigid, and he didn't teach me to have lots of ideas about things. He taught me to realize the nature. And at the core of every experience, including my feelings or yours, is that nature. And it is my intention to spend the rest of my life accomplishing the full awakening to that nature and dispelling attachment to everything else.

So, you see, I am not a convert to the Buddha's teaching. I am simply one who wishes to cross the ocean of suffering and to take everyone with me. I simply want to experience the end of suffering, and I want everyone else to have that experience too. If that makes me a Buddhist, then I am a Buddhist.

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