

Route Finding

By Rev. Master Seikai

Every day, all of us navigate from point A to point B, and have to decide how to go about it. Usually, if it is driving to work, the supermarket, a friend's house, or a walk through the neighborhood, we don't give finding the most direct or appropriate route a second thought. But then every once in a while we have to give finding the best way to get somewhere serious consideration.

I just returned from a backpacking trip in the Sierra Nevada, a nine day trip covering about 46 miles. I was in a group of eight people, a trip organized by the Sierra Club. We were in Sequoia National Park, which is about a three hour drive from the temple, and started from a spot well into the park known as Mineral King. The two group leaders had scouted out the route we were taking in advance, so I didn't need to think about that aspect of the trip, but I did purchase a map so I could see where we were going.

A map you say? In the high tech era, more and more people are relying solely on mobile devices which use satellite data to navigate from one place to another, and maps must seem almost obsolete to them. As someone who grew up poring over maps (and still do), and collecting them, I find this kind of hard to fathom, but more about that later.

When I was young and adventurous, I would sometimes set out into unknown territories, relying on a map and compass to find my way through wilderness areas. I bought a book entitled *Be Expert With Map & Compass, by Bjorn Kjellstrom*. Originally published in 1967, this book has been updated and reprinted since then and is still available. With the advent of Global Positioning Satellite—GPS—I imagine that relatively few people nowadays would make use of such a book. But at the time it was all there was for finding ones way in such remote places, and it worked. I can only remember one time when I felt well and truly lost in the wilderness. This was in Yellowstone National Park, and although it was summer, at higher altitudes the ground was still covered with snow. On an overnight backpacking trip I found myself walking in circles in the snow, given that, if there was a trail, I couldn't see it. But there was one way out, my map told

me, and that was to follow a creek drainage down to where it flowed into another stream, which ran alongside a highway. It was rough going, but that's what I did, and I made it out OK.

One interesting aspect of my recent trip is that there were a number of occasions in which we all stopped while the group leaders assessed exactly where we would go next. There are always moments when there is some question about where to camp, or if the trail becomes very faint or nonexistent, where to go so as to reconnect with it. Sounds a lot like life in general, which brings me to one of the important points regarding route finding: the need for a guide. When venturing into unknown territory, especially of a spiritual nature, it is best to have a guide to show you the way.

Again, when I was young and adventurous, I shifted my journey from the mountains to the monastery. Something in me desperately needed to undergo a transformation, to traverse the rugged landscape of a spiritual journey. And something in me also knew that, if I was going to be smart about it, I needed to trust myself to a spiritual guide. So, without really looking or searching for a teacher, the universe delivered me to the gate of Shasta Abbey in Northern California.

Looking back, it seems that at least initially, it was the monastic environment that was my guide, as opposed to one human being. Rev. Master Jiyu had already ordained many, many monks and there was a collective knowledge of how to meditate and get started on the spiritual path of Buddhism and Zen. I entrusted myself to that knowledge and practice and threw myself into it completely.

Later, when the going was trickier, and I was confronting some of my own deeper spiritual difficulties, my teacher definitely acted as a personal guide for me. She pointed the way for me to move forward on a spiritual level, and to do so required a simple trust that she knew what she was doing. It also required putting down what I might have wanted to do at the time. This is what many people find to be so very difficult in spiritual practice: trusting yourself to another

human being. Not only that, but just finding a trustworthy human being under whom to practice in the first place.

Regarding the latter issue, my only advice is that one must learn to listen to one's own heart, and trust that, if the right person to train and study with is found, it will tell you so. And then, regarding the former issue, once you have found a trustworthy individual, the willingness to give up whatever it is that you hold on to for dear life and follow good advice is essential. In a world which is so full of fakes, charlatans and egomaniacs, it is understandable that many people are reluctant to take this important step, and yet, if we are to truly navigate the choppy seas of life or traverse dangerous terrain, how else are we going to get there?

In the spiritual realm, I believe it is the trust itself which is paramount, even moreso than the specific qualities of any given teacher—not that those qualities are not important. They are, but it is just that there are no perfect human beings and no perfect teachers; every teacher makes mistakes and, ultimately, it is the faith and willingness of the disciple to look beyond the failings of the teacher, not firing the person for being a mere human being, which makes it possible to enter into the deeper and subtler realms of the spiritual journey. This is not an easy thing to do but I think it is essential.

If it turns out that the spiritual guide you have chosen is not worthy of that role, once again it is necessary to trust in one's own heart that it will tell you so. I'm sure this happens all the time. The Buddha himself studied with two eminent teachers of his time in that part of India, and when it became apparent to him that neither of them, in their turn, could lead him any further, it was only then that he set out on his own to find the answers to his spiritual search for the causes of suffering in the human realm. And then, even with all the merit of being a future Buddha going for him, it was still not easy, and the ascetic Gautama, the future Shakyamuni Buddha, almost killed himself in the process.

The long and the short of it is that there are no certain guarantees in life that we will meet up with the "perfect" spiritual guide. Personally, I do not believe in the concept of perfection, unless everything and everyone are already,

by their very nature, perfect. Where this leaves us is to face the uncertainties of life, how to find our route from point A to point B, in the muddle that is human existence. We make decisions by our best lights, and sometimes they work out great and sometimes they fall flat. Either way, however, it is still possible to learn from every experience, and in that regard there is compassion and teaching embedded in every experience. It is only our judgments about the outcome of our experiences which get in the way of our learning from them.

If you look at the inside of the back page of this newsletter, there is a map accompanied by really clear instructions for finding our temple. Any person who can read a map and follow directions ought to be able to get here without any difficulty; all the same information is to be found on our website, which is where most people will initially gather the necessary information for coming out to visit our remote temple and spending time here. And yet, there are those who nevertheless get well and truly lost trying to drive to the temple. I am always a little bit chagrined when this happens.

What happens is that, as I mentioned before, there are those who rely solely on high tech gadgetry to find their way *anywhere*. I have to both marvel at this level of naïve trust in technology and feel that such total trust is misplaced. Perhaps it is a little bit ironic that in my life I have been willing to place complete trust in another human being, or a map, but am quite reluctant to place it in high technology, whereas someone a generation or more younger than me would have precisely the opposite orientation. Human beings cannot be fully trusted, but technology can.

Not long ago a person who had signed up to come to the temple for a weekend, and left early enough from home to get here in plenty of time, ended up lost and had to call the temple to say he'd be somewhat late. He'd put the address into his GPS and then assumed it would get him there. Something went wrong somewhere. Was it human error or was it the technology which failed in this case? We'll never know, nor does it really matter. But the point I'm making is that we seem to have developed a sort of slavish dependence on high technology in our society, and I wonder how well founded that is.

Lest this essay devolve into a rant against high technology, I should say that not long ago I was given a ride from the temple to the airport in Los Angeles by someone who relied on an I-phone “app” which told her, as we were driving, what route to take so as to avoid traffic snarls. The route we were directed to take was not the shortest in driving distance, nor was it a route I would ever have taken by relying solely on a map. But the device, which incorporates user data which is constantly being fed into the system, can divert the driver around back-ups. It was amazing. We got to the airport without being tied up in traffic, and I made my flight in plenty of time, hassle-free. So, isn’t that a really good testimonial to the virtues of using high tech stuff for route finding? It is.

Similarly, while I was backpacking in the Sierras, some of the participants had gadgets which would tell them surprisingly detailed information such as the current altitude, how far we had climbed in elevation that day, or how far we had walked based on the number of steps taken by the carrier of the device. All pretty impressive. But does it take some of the “romance” out of good old fashioned walking and route finding? It all depends on your perspective, and whether you are a person who embraces new technology or one who likes things done in the old way and don’t want to be bothered by newfangled stuff. I can see it from both sides of the divide.

We have entered into a new era. The amount of information available to anyone able to afford the purchase of a high tech gadget, and the knowledge of how to use it, is astonishing. It is almost as if all the digitized information in the world can be reached in a few moments by twiddling with a hand held computer, which is communicating with a satellite 22,000 miles out in space above the equator. To me this is awesome, wonderful, and scary all at the same time. What does it mean for human beings who still have to muddle through the uncertainties of their lives, make mistakes and then find some way to learn from them? What does it mean for the future of religion, or the future of Buddhism?

I can’t really begin to answer these questions. But what is readily apparent is that route finding is not an open and shut case by any stretch of the imagination. And a larger question, perhaps, is the following: in a world which

has effectively been shrunken down by the availability of instant communication, how is humankind going to find its route and move into an uncertain future? At the moment it seems unlikely that we will, or that as a species we will be able to agree on anything, and that all the forces which we have set in motion in the past couple of centuries, are energies which will simply play out over the course of time, and to which we all will have to submit. This should be a humbling thought.

For that matter, I think humility is one of the key ingredients, if not the key ingredient to finding our way in life. It's a little too easy to sign away your spiritual independence to another human being, giving total, blind faith to that person to guide you. This is the other side of the equation from being unwilling to trust another human being sufficiently or at all. There is a balancing point between these two extremes, one which is easy to fall off of, like any point of balance. To trust in something greater than yourself requires putting down the voice of ego which says it knows better than everyone else what is right, and that act requires humility. Meanwhile, to have the integrity to trust in the validity of your own inner certainty about something—in this case a voice which comes from a deeper place than an egocentric insistence on being right—requires a measure of trust in one's true self. At root, this is also an act of humility.

As a whole, humankind will continue to stumble along—this is a certainty. We are in the process of mucking up our planet royally, and it will take centuries to bring what is out of harmony back into balance. But on an individual level, we can all learn to make wise choices in the here and now. To do so requires the willingness to listen to wise voices, either to those of people who are truly wise, or to the native wisdom that exists within all of us if we can quiet down enough inside our own minds to be able to hear it.

As I mentioned before, I love maps and I pore over them, often purely as a form of relaxation. I can't imagine driving from here to a distant place without reliance on the accuracy of a road map. And it seems to me that, in the larger context of route finding in life as a whole, Buddhism provides us with some pretty accurate maps for living: the Four Noble Truths, for instance, and the Eightfold Path, which is the fourth of the Noble Truths. The Precepts which we take to

heart when we embrace the Buddhist path show us where not to go—down the road of lying, cheating, stealing, speaking ill of others, jealousy, pride, anger, meanness of spirit—while the Eightfold Path shows us where to go. To cultivate good intentions, pleasant speech, harmonious conduct, constant effort, a mind which seeks the silence of meditation, and the eventual fruit of these things, which is wisdom and insight, is the map for finding true peace of mind and heart.

Finally, there is a tool for route finding, like a map and compass, which I have found extremely valuable and use on a regular basis. In a word, that tool is prayer. In other religions people pray to God for guidance, which is to trust in the existence of a force and wisdom greater than oneself, an act of humility. And for that matter, even in Buddhism there are many who beseech Quan Yin Bodhisattva, or some other visual manifestation of that power of “otherness,” which we turn to when we are lost. Just as “to err is human,” it is human to get lost, and we get lost repeatedly. In and of itself, getting lost is a good thing, as it is part of a greater undertaking of getting from point A to point B spiritually. So if to err is human and to forgive divine, then I think it follows that to get lost is human and to consult the divine to find one's way is essential.

What I do is stand in front of my altar and completely lay out the problem as I perceive it. For a start, this unburdens the mind from whatever difficulty it is playing or struggling with. Then to place it on the altar, an act of humility and offering, opens the door to a solution. It is important to keep coming back to this place, the place of asking what we set off to look for in the first place. And having come however far we have come, and life having gotten however complicated it has become, we can touch home base, or press reset, and start over in that moment. All it takes is a little bit of humility and willingness to be open. Asking for help, like asking for directions, isn't hard to do—it is only to the extent that we suffer from pride, guilt or embarrassment that we prevent ourselves from doing it. And even those seeming obstacles will dissolve if we have the presence of mind to simply offer them on the altar of acceptance and loving kindness for ourselves.