



## Take the Fork

The dictionary defines paradox as a “seemingly absurd or self-contradictory statement or proposition that when investigated or explained may prove to be well-founded or true.” In traditional Zen we hear about the gateless gate, the light within darkness, the stillness within movement, the silence within sound, the equivalency of enlightenment and delusion—and the famous distinction between but ultimate non-separation of the dual and the nondual. And in daily life we have common seeming contradictions like love-hate or attraction-repulsion, ice-burn, or even the printed text that absurdly but accurately claims “this page left intentionally blank.”

Yogi Berra’s coyly-innocent statement points to something important in our practice. Normally, we’d see a “fork in the road” as a choice point, as a moment of having to decide between two possibilities that present themselves. Do I go left or do I go right? Yogi subverts that normal sense into a paradox which reveals a deeper truth, albeit one disguised with humor. Our practice asks us to see what we call the choice points of our lives not so much as opportunities to make the *correct* choice but as opportunities to *experience* the existential reality of the very situation before us. Yes, of course, typically we’ll make a choice and go along our way—unless we “freeze” and just camp out at the fork for a while. But a deeper truth is available: we can “take the fork” in its entirety, which means we can accept the gift that life is presenting right here and now as the “fork in the road” that we’ve come to—even if sometimes the “gift” shows up disguised as a problem or challenge.

Maybe an example would help here. Many years ago, when I was just starting out with practice, actually when I was shopping around for a particular practice, I had tried out a variety of meditative approaches. I had even been on a few intensive retreats. My experience with a Vipassana retreat had been quite wonderful, what with the long 45- to 60-minute sitting meditations, the long, slow walks, the intense focus on the coming and going of the breath. It didn’t hurt, either, that the retreat was high up in the mountains in a beautiful, quiet setting. In contrast to that, I had my first long Zen sesshin in Los Angeles, in the middle of an urban neighborhood, where on Saturday night we actually heard more than a few gunshots. There were a lot of folks in black robes, and we chanted a fair number of verses in Japanese that I had to read off a handout. (The experienced Zen meditators, of course, had committed them to memory.) It was all exotic and somehow very attractive to me at that point in my life. I even took pride in “asking for the



### April Sesshin

Applications are still being accepted for the five-day April Sesshin (4/11–4/16.) If you can’t come to the full five days you can apply for the first three or last three days.

### Announcements

#### Sesshin Application

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*“When you  
come to a fork  
in the road,  
take it.”*

—Yogi Berra

stick” during a hot and dozy afternoon in the meditation hall. The sharp sting on the flesh of the shoulders lovingly applied by the sitting hall monitor did, indeed, bring me back to just this moment—and it was a painful one!

So it seemed that I had a choice to make between the two paths of Vipassana and Zen. And at that point it seemed to me like a genuinely tough decision. I remember going back and forth in my mind, seemingly endlessly, with what I thought were the pros and cons of each path, e.g., which Asian teacher was easier or harder to understand, which teaching center was closer to where I lived, what were the kind and number of formalities each required—and, of course, most importantly, how well did all or any of that suit me.

In the end, a funny thing happened. I realized that no matter which of the two paths I embarked on, I would still be the “traveler,” so to speak. Wherever I went, I would be the one going. Clearly, it was more about me embracing and committing to whichever path, than trying to decide that one was actually better than the other. At that point, I found myself not so much choosing the “path of Zen” as finding myself on it. Nor did I ever reject the “path of Vipassana,” as what I had learned from it was still there in various aspects of my meditation practice. The point is the “decision” somehow took care of itself when I was able to detach from all the mental back and forth, from all the obsessing with needing to make the correct choice.

Another way of talking about paradox and choosing might be to see every moment of our lives as a fork, a choice point, an existential moment, an opportunity to experience the intersection of time and timelessness *in* and *as* this moment. A life of focusing only on a rational way of making choices, which for most of us means simply making the “right choices for me,” is a life devoted to propping up our egos, keeping in place all our comfortable prejudices and self-serving views—while not even being aware we’re doing so. Typically, we think there is a right choice to be made, that we can come to it rationally, and that it will serve us the best having made it. But Yogi Berra and Zen practice suggest another possibility: *being the very moment* of the fork in the road, and that might include the felt tug of one option over another, the memory of other choice points and their existential angst, the desperate feeling to “get it right” and not make another mistake—“mistakes,” of course, being our little minds’ judgments and second-guessing about what we’ve done, or failed to do. The more we are able to be fully present, the more we simply experience “choiceless” action and living. And we have practice to help us to get to that.

Practice offers us a number of questions to ask when we find ourselves confused by a choice we feel we must make but seem unable to—either because both possibilities are equally attractive, or equally unattractive, or because we’re just not ready. Elizabeth’s WIPITS comes immediately to mind—What Is Practice In This Situation? Notice, not “what is the right choice in this situation,” which can often get us into an endless round of rationalizations and internal pro and con arguments. Once we’re caught there, it may be very hard to get off the gerbil wheel. Even more to the bone is the simple question “What is this?” asked in the very moment of coming awake to our mental

spinning, or resistance, or in indulging negative emotions because even though we say we don't like them, they serve to feed an identity we've unconsciously bought into and somehow connected to our own perceived sense of survival.

Zen practice calls us to engage with the juicy stuff of our lives, and once we do—always and only in the here and now—we come to earth out of our mental spinning machines, and paradoxes and difficult choices are resolved in the actual living of life—in just “taking the fork” we have come to.

*Al Zolynas*

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