

## Separating the Wheat from the Chaff

The goal of pursuing your spiritual search within a group or tradition is ultimately to find the essence that exists within and beyond all groups and traditions. While the intention of spiritual groups may be to assist you on your quest, in practice, the outer expressions of religious and spiritual paths, teachers, and communities can sometimes become skewed away from this essential goal and pointed instead toward dogma or greed.

### How dogma is created

Here's a story that illustrates how certain dogmas can muddy the waters of a spiritual path.

Once there was a spiritual teacher whose lectures mesmerized and inspired the many monks and seekers who would gather every evening at his monastery to receive his teachings.

The monastery had a cat that liked to hop around on people's laps during these spiritual gatherings, disturbing the peaceful focus of the space. The teacher told one of the monks that every evening at 6 p.m., the cat should be tied with a rope to a post outside the monastery and released when the gathering ended.

This schedule went on for many years, until the teacher passed on, leaving his foremost disciple to give the lectures, as was the practice in his tradition. More years went by, and eventually the cat also passed away. The monks immediately got another cat for the monastery and continued to tie that cat to the post outside the monastery every evening during the spiritual discourse as part of the daily protocol.

More years and then decades passed. Within 100 years, the doctrine of this path was set down in writing, and one important spiritual practice was that a cat had to be posted outside the lecture hall during all programs. If a monastery didn't have a cat, it would have to get one, because tying a cat to the post was essential to the sanctity of the place. This metaphorical tale shows how dogma, or in this case, catma (sorry), creeps into spiritual teachings, practices, and doctrines.

Sometimes spiritual paths and religions fall into behaviors that are similar to politics. The pure purpose of politics may be to support the quality of life for human beings in this world or in a particular country or state. However, in practice, many politicians bring a club mentality and greediness into their work.

Sometimes politicians in one party will consider attacking a rival party as their most important goal, above improving the greater good of the people whom they were elected to serve. A politician's campaign promises can sometimes be put on a back burner, with other greed-based concerns getting top priority.

In the same way, the purpose of a church, spiritual path, or house of worship is to create an atmosphere for its members to commune with God. Yet, just as with politics, these religions and spiritual paths are headed and run by people, and people can sometimes be thrown off their purest intentions by a few threads of greed, ego, or rivalry.

### **Don't Forget**

Even as you love and respect the teachers and members of your spiritual community, the purpose of any group, temple, church, or spiritual teacher should be to give you the resources needed to attain your own great spiritual wealth. A good spiritual group should help you to find your own individual spiritual path of growth and service, and not try to make you dependent or codependent on outer forms.

### **Don't Forget**

When you approach spiritual teachings and paths, keep both your heart *and* your eyes open! The best tools you have for discerning the nourishing spiritual wheat from the useless chaff are your intuition, intelligence, integrity, and your spiritual practices and studies (see Part II).