

# Living with a Rule, support vs. suppression

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For fifty years I have been living with the Rule of Benedict, first as a Benedictine Oblate, then as a professed religious. Thinking I was really familiar with this fifteen hundred year old Rule, I was startled when a Buddhist gave me a radically new perspective. In a book originating from a dialogue between Christian and Buddhist monastics, *Benedict's Dharma*<sup>1</sup>, four Buddhists reflect on the Rule of Benedict. The first chapter bears the title, "The Trellis" and begins:

"The root meaning of the Latin and Greek words translated as "rule" is *trellis*. Saint Benedict was not promulgating rules for living; he was establishing a framework on which a life can grow. While a branch of a plant climbing a trellis cannot go in any direction it wants, you cannot know in advance just which way it will go. The plant is finding its own path, within a structure. The space in which it moves is open, though not without boundaries."

This trellis image resonates with the Buddhist Dharma, usually translated as "teaching" but also carrying the meaning of "support." Both the Rule of Benedict and the Dharma of the Buddha offer us "general guidelines for the inner journey."

Like most Westerners, I generally understand "rule" as referring to some regulation, some "Thou shalt;" or "Thou shalt not;" a command or a prohibition. Lent, for many of us, conjures up images of renunciation, or rules we make for ourselves. These may become burdens, and we can scarcely wait until Lent is over, to be released from them.

A *rule of life* is very different from a collection of detailed regulations. Most of the concrete regulations set forth in the Rule of Benedict have been adapted or significantly changed over the centuries, and it is precisely because this Rule is flexible enough to adapt to cultural changes, that it has endured this long. Living a spiritual life of any depth usually calls for commitment to following certain practices. We are free to choose an established rule of life that has survived through centuries of practice, or we can draw up

our own rule of life. Whatever rule we choose to follow, the rule is always *a means, a beginning*, and never a goal in itself.

In a society that places a high premium on personal autonomy and celebrates individualism, the choice to follow a rule of life is counter-cultural. Decades ago many students memorized the poem, "Invictus, which Timothy McVeigh chose as his parting words. The last lines of this poem by William Henley are: "I am the Master of my fate/ I am the Captain of my soul." The idea that commitment to a rule of life can actually *enhance* our freedom may meet with incredulity. Some may point to cults that impose rigid rules on their followers, and in fact violate their freedom. The kind of unquestioning obedience demanded by cult leaders has nothing in common with voluntary commitment to a rule of life that, like a trellis, provides the direction and support needed to encourage growth in goodness.

On both the political and religious scene today we find many people caught in rigid patterns of belief and behavior. They are not comfortable with ambiguity, with any *gray* areas, but want everything in absolute categories: right or wrong, black or white, friend or enemy. This is fundamentalism and it lurks at the root of all terrorism. The conviction that *I* am absolutely right, that only *my* religion is true, that only *my* country is right, leads inevitably to the dangerous conclusion that anyone who believes differently is to be converted, suppressed, eliminated, or at least ignored. History is bloodied with examples of conversion by conquest.

Making laws or rules to govern other people's behavior is never simple. Good law grows from serious reflection on our own life experience, and how often do we take time for that kind of reflection? As we mature, our life experience changes, and we outgrow some rules we needed earlier. Laws and rules need to change to reflect changed life experience, but changing them takes time, and law will always lag behind experience. On the other hand, a good rule of life, like the trellis, provides direction and sets some boundaries but leaves room for growth.

While all of us live under a variety of rules and laws that we had no part in making, we do have the freedom to choose our own rule of life, remembering that the rule is meant to be a trellis, not a straitjacket. We build character through making commitments and living up to them. Without commitments we lose focus and tend to drift aimlessly.

The discipline required to live up to any serious commitment may at times be painful, but it builds character, liberating us from following every interior impulse or external pressure. We form our commitments, and then our commitments form us.

There is an element of mystery in every significant commitment. We never know fully what we are committing ourselves to, and it takes faith as well as discipline to persevere while we follow the path we have chosen. Sometimes the journey is lonely but at other times we draw strength from the companionship of those who travel along the same road, and we move on with greater joy and confidence. When the going is rough, the commitment we have made defines the boundaries of the road and keeps us from losing our way.

We may design our own trellis, our own rule of life, but we might do well to study trellises that others have designed, and that have been shown to encourage growth. Benedict's Rule has survived these 1500 years because it is so balanced. Firm but gentle, it calls for courage yet compassionately responds to weakness. Benedict describes the "*way which is bound to seem narrow to start with. But as we progress in this monastic way of life and in faith, our hearts will warm to its vision and with eager love and delight that defies expression we shall go forward on the way of God's commandments!*"

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<sup>1</sup> *Benedict's Dharma: Buddhists Reflect on the Rule of Saint Benedict*

<sup>2</sup> *Prologue of the Rule of Benedict*, translation by Patrick Barry, OSB, edited by Patrick Henry, 2001, Riverhead Books, New York, NY.

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