

Going It Alone

Making It Work as
an Unaffiliated Buddhist

Featuring **Norman Fischer, Judy Lief,
Barry Magid, Gaylon Ferguson,
Sylvia Boorstein, and Lewis Richmond**

Plus comments from
unaffiliated Buddhists

GONZALO QUINTEROS





Buddhism's New Pioneers

by Norman Fischer

It's possible that most Western Buddhists are "unaffiliated." That is, they practice alone or in small informal groups not listed in the phone book or on the web. There is therefore no record, no official trace, of their activity. They practice off the books.

If you're unaffiliated, maybe you became interested in Buddhism through reading, or in school, or maybe you met a Buddhist practitioner whose approach to life intrigued you. Perhaps you traveled in Asia. Chances are you are unaffiliated because you can't find a Buddhist center nearby. But I suspect that many unaffiliated practitioners do live near Buddhist centers but don't want to go to them because they don't like "organized religion." This may be due to a bad experience in the past, perhaps in childhood, or because of a strongly held opinion that organized religion is always bad, on principle.

According to this essentially romantic view (that many affiliated Buddhists share), "organized religion," meaning all identifiable religion, is—or should be—an oxymoron. That's because real religion, according to this view, is essentially personal and dynamic, and is killed off by all attempts to organize it into doctrine and institution. Religion as we know it kills religion. So it is better to rebel against religion, for the sake of religion.

Notice that on both counts—whether one is unable or unwilling to "join"—the assumption is the same: that Buddhism is confined to Buddhist centers. But suppose this isn't true, or at least not entirely true. What if Buddhism—Buddhism that is as Buddhist as any Buddhism—can also be found outside conventional Buddhist institutions?



ZOKETSU NORMAN FISCHER is a former abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center and the founder and spiritual director of the Everyday Zen Foundation, an organization dedicated to adapting Zen Buddhist teachings to Western culture.

Lately I have been fascinated with the idea of the evolution of religion. When Nietzsche pronounced God dead in the nineteenth century, he was not alone. Freud quickly followed, as did others. Religion was dying because humans were growing out of it. Religion had been a necessary, if somewhat juvenile, phase of human development. There was a time when we needed comfort and fanciful explanations for things we couldn't understand. But now that we were grown up and scientifically minded, religion would naturally fade away and be relegated to nostalgia, history, and myth.

It turns out this wasn't true. Human beings seem to need religion, just as we need language, food, and air, and this is why religion has always existed in human societies, from earliest times to the present, and why it will probably continue to exist. Some activity, some thought, some feeling that helps us extract meaning and significance from our lives is necessary, because we human beings are creatures uniquely capable of living meaningless lives, and we desperately need to avoid this. Without meaning and significance we literally get sick or go crazy. Religion is our coping mechanism, our natural healing activity. Efforts to transpose religious practice and feeling into politics during the twentieth century (communism) failed spectacularly. Art has been significant as a substitute, but it isn't enough. Neither is psychology. So religion is almost certainly here to stay.

Everything in human society changes over time, and religion does too. Neolithic religion was quite different from the

so-called Axial religions (Buddhism, Judeo-Christianity, Confucianism, Brahmanism, etc.), and these religions in their formative centuries were quite different from their this-worldly manifestations (Protestantism, Shin Buddhism, etc.), which allowed modernism to flourish.

We are now in the twenty-first century, but we still have a nineteenth-century view of religion. We see religion as a set of coherent doctrines, rituals, and hierarchies that take shape within real-estate-based institutions. We might be affiliated with such institutions or not. We may prize their doctrines without being affiliated, or we may be hostile to all of it. But whatever the case, what we affiliate with or prize or reject is a centuries-old view of religion.

Intellectual life of the last fifty or more years has been mostly about the breakdown of hierarchies, the relativism of doctrines, and the doubtfulness of real-estate-based institutions in an increasingly network-based world. Religion needs to absorb these developments. Probably it is in the process of doing so. But our thinking has not yet caught up with it.

All of this might provide context for understanding with new appreciation the position of the "unaffiliated Buddhist." It may also help us to appreciate the distinction people these days so frequently insist on making: "I'm not religious at all! I'm spiritual." It seems to me that some of the liveliest religion going these days is not in Buddhist centers, churches, synagogues, or other official religious

institutions. It's taking place in the solitude of the private home, in living rooms and community centers, in book groups, twelve-step meetings, women's and men's groups, private meditation prayer or study gatherings, corporate leadership classes, human potential workshops, yoga and improv classes, stress-reduction clinics, coaching seminars. And, perhaps, in the practice of unaffiliated Buddhists.

Everywhere I look, what I would call "religious questions," questions of ultimate meaning and ultimate connection, are spilling out of the official religious institutions and entering the society in various way. Some of these ways, to be sure, are superficial or exploitive, but it's natural in times of social change that the faulty comes along with the sincere. Religion is evolving under our noses, but we are not noticing it because we are stuck on old forms and old terminologies. It may be that among Buddhists, the "unaffiliated" are our leaders without knowing they are, rather than the poor souls who either by choice or by circumstances have been left out in the cold. As they fumble to find their way, perhaps they are finding the way for us all.

This is not to say that these unaffiliated individuals and small informal Buddhist pick-up groups are the good guys, while the conventional Buddhists are the bad guys, old-fashioned and moribund. If we have learned anything over the last decades, as technologies and social forms have morphed and multiplied, it is that nothing disappears; it just changes its function.

I think of the great world religions

Comments

from unaffiliated Buddhists

as self-contained high-rise buildings. Christianity is a massive Cathedral-like structure. Islam is a giant multi-tiered and -storied mosque. And Buddhism is a huge tower, like the great stupa at Bodhgaya but many times bigger. Completely enclosed within each of these separate uniquely designed yet essentially similar structures a coherent conversation has been going on for millennia among intelligent and highly committed interlocutors who share an intellectual system, a history, and a set of rituals and practices that inform them. Because the conversation is so thorough and so old, and because its theme involves what is most mysterious and most fundamental about human life, it is essential that we not lose track of it. These various conversations are human treasures, and we need them now probably more than ever.

In the past if you wanted to participate in these conversations you had to move into the building, because the rule then was that only people who permanently resided in the building could speak and listen to the conversation. At that time it was possible for people to do this, because they could be more or less content living entirely inside one of those buildings.

But times have changed drastically. In a global world where all the buildings have windows and TV screens, and where citizens are so psychologically open and aware that our various identities and impulses can no longer be sublimated or suppressed, very few people can be satisfied with moving into one of those buildings and simply remaining

there. Many of us can visit one or more buildings briefly, or we can stay in one but only during the daytime, because we have to sleep elsewhere. Or maybe we can stay for several months, a year, or several years, but eventually we have to go out into the street, in the open air, among the various bazaars, stalls, and markets, where other things we also need can be found. The buildings don't need to be knocked down. They are beautiful, and we need them. It's just that they can no longer contain all the dimensions of who we are. They need to be used differently, understood differently.

In the articles that follow, unaffiliated practitioners will find much to think about that will be of use to their situations. The question for anyone interested in Buddhist practice is, "How do I discover meaning and find transformation?" This is a challenge, whether we are affiliated or unaffiliated, though perhaps a greater challenge for those who don't enjoy the resources or the support of coherent institutions and communities. For them there is perhaps more loneliness, more doubt and confusion. The essays that follow will help. But the unaffiliated practitioner can take some heart, I hope, in the reflections above. You might well be engaged in pioneering work, whether you realize it or intend it or not. Though you may feel alone, I am sure that religious practice is always a community endeavor: we always practice together, even if it seems that we are apart, each of us doing what we can, what we are given to do by our situation and our passion.

I have a strong desire for spirituality and a weaker desire for religion. Sometimes I long for religious ritual and the feeling of belonging, as well as the support for spiritual practice that they give, but I often get put off by the cultural baggage. I have an aversion to adopting another culture's "stuff." I would like to find a Zen group that has a local (I guess we could say "American") flavor, but visiting most groups feels like a trip to Japan for me. I like Japan and the history of Zen culture, but it's just not me.

Chris Herrod
Healdsburg, California

I prefer to practice on my own using downloads of dharma talks from Dharma Seed and other sites. Currently, I'm focused on Tara Brach's work. In addition, I read your publication and books by Buddhist writers. At this point in my practice, I would find a sangha both confining and distracting. I have many virtual Buddhist friends on Twitter. I am the happiest and most present I've ever been, so it must be working.

Diane D'Angelo
Phoenix, Arizona

What I find most difficult in solitary practice is to be consistent—that is, to sit every day. What has been helpful to me is to commit to a practice I know I can fulfill. In my case, it's doing nine bows (prostrations) first thing every morning. There's always time for that, and it lives as an invitation for the rest of the day—to sit in the evening, to be mindful during the day. Bowing is also great medicine for resistance!

Though I'm currently unaffiliated, I have practiced intensively in both a Buddhist center and a temple. Practicing with a community has made a fundamental difference in my ability to practice alone, and without that communal "whetstone practice," my solitary sitting would be weakened, sporadic, and more of a "want to" than a "glad to."

Dave Laser
Rio Rico, Arizona



There is a long history in Buddhism of hermit monks, which has been lost a bit but can perhaps be seen rising again with the many lone-wolf practitioners around the world. The hermits still studied with others from time to time but knew that it comes down to the individual practicing. After all, the Buddha was just one person meditating off in the woods; he didn't mean to set up a formal religion. Who knows what he'd think of our sanghas today, especially how they are structured in the West. I think monasteries and temples are important to maintain and keep, as they train the next generation of teachers and students looking for more instruction and structure. However, I think one can still fulfill taking refuge in the sangha without having to physically take up space.

James R. Ure
Loveland, Colorado

I live in the Great Plains. In my town we are lucky enough to have two very small Buddhist groups. For a Midwestern town, this is practically a smorgasbord. We are a loose group of learning, struggling, and eager Buddhists. I prefer this situation to that of a large zendo or temple. It affords me the freedom to practice from each of the vehicles as I see fit, and to study Buddhism without the constraints of a hierarchy or institutional dogma.

While I sometimes wish I were involved with a larger group or a more experienced teacher, I think my sangha is just fine the way it is. And when all else fails, I check my iSangha.

John Pappas
Rapid City, South Dakota



Teachings: Get Ready to Dive In

By Judy Lief

Thanks to the efforts of translators, practitioners, and scholars, we have access to an abundance of magazines, journals, books, articles, videos, podcasts, and websites about Buddhism in all its diverse forms. Different Buddhist schools emphasize different aspects of the tradition and have varying guidelines regarding the proper balance of study and practice. And when it comes to study, different schools of Buddhism focus on completely different primary texts and commentaries.

Practitioners studying within a particular sangha may follow a customary curriculum, and be guided in their studies by teachers within their community. But for the independent practitioner, there is no clear roadmap. The sheer volume of material to study can be overwhelming, and so can figuring out where

to start. So it is probably best to begin at the beginning—with yourself.

Some people love to practice and hate to study, and other people love to study and hate to practice. Which type of person are you? If studying comes easy for you, it is possible to confuse intellectual understanding with real understanding. If studying is more difficult for you and practice is easier, it is possible to hide out in a vague understanding of meditative experience and fail to challenge yourself intellectually or to develop a sophisticated understanding of the dharma.

So before you launch into further study, study yourself. If you are more scholarly you could balance that by more practice, and if you are more practice-oriented, you could balance that with more study and analysis. Bringing together study and practice so that

they balance and support one another creates a strong ground for developing your understanding of the dharma and progressing along the path.

Having established that ground, look into how to study the teachings. Dharma study is not simply about acquiring information; it is a process of transformation and deep reflection. Instead of reading one book after another, amassing more and more information, you might go over the same text, or even the same short passage, over and over again, and come back to it year after year. Each time you go over it, question what is really being said, its relevance, how it can be applied, and whether it rings true to your own experience and observation of the world.

Traditionally, it is said that dharmic understanding develops in three stages: hearing, contemplating, and meditating. Developing an intellectual understanding of a text or presentation is just the first step, called hearing. You then need to wrestle with the material so that it begins to sink in, so in the practice of contemplation, you make a direct, personal, and quite intimate relationship with the material you are studying. When your understanding deepens to the point of mastery—when it's in your bones—that is the third stage, meditating.

Once you have examined what it means to study, how do you choose *what* to study? A smorgasbord of options awaits, and you could begin almost anywhere. You could choose to explore a particular tradition such as Zen, or you could begin with an overview of

the Buddhist tradition in general, or the life of the founder, Shakyamuni Buddha. You could explore the many different styles of teaching, from traditional sutras and commentaries, to biographies and life stories, to works by contemporary Asian meditation masters or Western Buddhist teachers. You could listen to talks online, read poetry, look at art.

There are many different teachers, many different styles of dharma teaching, and many different media for presenting the teaching. You could begin by exploring widely, and in the process you may discover an affinity for one or another teacher, tradition, or approach, which may help you to narrow your search and guide your studies in a certain direction. It is also possible that as you are looking for the right book, unexpectedly, the tables are turned and the right book finds you.

At this point in history, there is a greater abundance of dharma available to ordinary practitioners than in any previous era. That is a great blessing, and at the same time, quite overwhelming. But no matter how much you read, how many talks you hear, or how many websites you visit, there is no guarantee that there will be any real benefit. It is good to accumulate knowledge, but it is better to let that knowledge transform you. The benefit comes in the meeting point between you and the dharma, when a seemingly outer teaching strikes a deep inner chord.

Only you know how you are approaching your studies. Only you can decide



what kind of relationship you want to have with the dharma, how deep or how shallow you want it to be. Basically, how much you put into it, is how much benefit will you derive—no more, no less. And as you progress, the effect of your study will be determined not simply by your learnedness, but by the changes in your character, by your further gentleness and sanity.

The dharma is like an ocean, which is too big to consume and too heavy to carry along as your accoutrement. You cannot put it into your book bag or capture it in your DVD player. No matter where you begin, or whether you are an independent practitioner or affiliated with a particular tradition, there is plenty of room for you there. All you have to do is to dive in.

JUDY LIEF is an *acharya*, or senior teacher, in the Shambhala Buddhist tradition and the author of *Making Friends with Death: A Buddhist Guide to Encountering Mortality*.



Practice: You Can't Do It Wrong

By Barry Magid

Zen master Dogen (1200–1253) said that zazen was not a meditation technique but was instead the dharma gate of enjoyment and ease. Yet how often we stray from that reminder, especially when we are sitting alone.

A technique is something we can do right or wrong, well or badly. True practice is about being grounded in a place free from these dichotomies. So we need to frame our practice in such a way that we do not get lost in dualisms of right or wrong, progress or the lack of it.

I have found that a good way of maintaining this perspective is to liken sitting to looking in a mirror. When you sit down on your cushion, the

state of your mind and body automatically appears to you, the way your face instantly appears in a mirror. The mirror does all the work. You can't do it right or wrong. Approach your sitting in the same way. You can't do it wrong. It's not a technique to master or something you can fail at. It's just being yourself, being your experience of this moment, over and over. It's simple, but if we're honest, not always easy.

Why? Because we don't always like what we see in the mirror. We are tempted to either turn away or try to touch up our image. We want our sitting to make us what we are not; we want to be calm, clear, or enlightened. We'd



unavoidable physical vulnerability leads us in the futile attempt to hold onto something permanent, to imagine—against all the evidence—that our “self” can somehow be made invulnerable. Though we may start out with the fantasy that practice will be the road to that invulnerability, it turns out to be just the opposite. Practice teaches us to sit with the vulnerability we all try to avoid, and to gradually learn to abide within the ongoing flux of our ever-changing consciousness and ever-shifting physical sensations.

When we first look into a mirror, we naturally focus on our own face and how we think we look to ourselves and others. But if we look longer, and gradually become less preoccupied with how we look, we may start to notice that the rest of the room behind us is also reflected in the mirror. Maybe there is even a window in the room, and the world outside is also glimpsed in our mirror. The room, the window, the outside world—all that is also part of the “me” we see in the mirror. The more we look, the more we see in the mirror, the more we include, and the harder it is to draw a boundary between “me” and everything else in the mirror. It’s all “me.” So although you think you are sitting alone, you may gradually become aware that you are sitting in the midst of the whole world.

If you’re reading this, you’re not practicing alone. You are connected to a community of fellow readers and practitioners who are all trying to find their way on the path. Let us enjoy our practice together.

BARRY MAGID is a Zen teacher and founder of the Ordinary Mind Zendo in New York. He is also a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst and the author of *Ending the Pursuit of Happiness: A Zen Guide*.

I subscribe to and read a few different Buddhist journals, and probably read a book or two a month on the subject, and I’m constantly reminded that if I really want to develop my practice, I need to join a sangha. Despite the fact that I don’t have that opportunity here in Idaho, I’ve never really understood how joining a sangha would help my practice. My “practice” is Zen: the art or practice of being mindful.

I try to meditate fifteen to thirty minutes once or twice a day (depending on whether I’m working fifty or sixty hours that week), and to be awake and present wherever I am, and in whatever I’m doing. So what is it I’m missing by not joining a sangha? How would it help me? What would I “gain?” (And is there really anything to gain?) I’ve asked myself these questions numerous times, but haven’t been able to answer them.

Timothy David Orme
Boise, Idaho

I have tried attending formal sanghas, but it never felt right for me. Since I am more in the Stephen Batchelor mode of Buddhism, many sanghas are too traditional for my taste. It probably has to do with worldviews. The more our beliefs tend toward the mythic and traditional, the more we will need a formal group to provide structure for our practice. And the more we tend toward a rational and postmodern worldview, the less structure we will need. Either way, we need contact with other Buddhists to act as reality checks, inspiration, and motivation.

William Harryman
Tucson, Arizona

like to be able to call that rejection of our self just as we are “aspiration,” but all too often it’s just another word for self-hate. Sitting, first and foremost, is sitting with who we are—what we see in the mirror. Our practice is to sit and look and say to ourselves, over and over, “That’s me.”

Cherish your questions, but do not chase after answers. Sit still amid your doubt, restlessness, loneliness, and anxiety. They are not obstacles to your practice—they are your practice.

Practice will expose the roots of our emotional distress. The Buddha taught, and our practice will reaffirm, that our underlying fear of change and our

Community: Extending the View of Sangha

By Gaylon Ferguson

I live in what I think may be the biggest metropolitan area anywhere with no Zen centers. No worries though. I listen to dharma talks from San Francisco Zen Center, as well as ones by Steve Hagen in Minneapolis. Then I ride.

When I'm on my Harley, I'm awake and aware and free. I have to be, or I'll get run over. I try to maintain that mindfulness throughout the day. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. When it doesn't, I note it and return to what I'm doing.

Between riding, reading, and listening to the talks, I walk the path as best I can.

Walter Riggs

Birmingham, Alabama

I have never been a joiner. I'm mostly a loner, and I'm currently also fairly immobile without a cane or two (soon I'll need a walker). I have decided that coming out of ritual-heavy religion as I did, the truest form of practice for me is simply acceptance and gratitude. No formalisms, no weird rituals.

Joan Ryburg

Cave Junction, Oregon

I suspect that we unaffiliated Buddhists represent a major component in the current growth of Western Buddhism. I live in a major European city and, in theory, have many opportunities for practice in a sangha or group environment. However, because of the heavy demands of work and family life and (to be honest) a certain individualistic propensity on my part, I prefer to practice alone.

I'm sure that attending group meetings would make my practice more disciplined than it is. Yet, in a very important sense, I do feel that I am part of the ever-growing Buddhist community on the internet.

Paul

Barcelona, Spain

We are human beings walking a path of liberation, and the value of community is linked to our fundamental humanity.

As Suzuki Roshi said, "Buddha-nature is just another name for our human nature." As human beings, we are strongly affected by those around us: we share in their joys and sorrows; we look at what is happening in our immediate environment and feel discouraged or inspired. Nowadays, evolutionary scientists tell us we are "hardwired" as social beings; it is human nature to be influenced by our association with family, friends, colleagues, neighbors, the communities we work and live in. The English word "influenza" comes from the same root, and the view here is that awakening is positively contagious: we catch each other's wisdom and compassion, because wakeful examples resonate so strongly with our own innate nature.

In the various Buddhist traditions, "sangha" sometimes means, primarily, the community of nuns and monks walking the path, but more generally it includes all those committed to waking up. So we could extend this view of practicing in community—let us receive inspiration from the examples of basic goodness we encounter around us, from the people who are manifesting bravery and compassion in everyday life. Whether they are religiously affiliated or not, surely these are spiritual warriors, and our own commitment to cultivating fearlessness is strengthened by their shining examples.



When we appreciate the kindness of a co-worker or the thoughtfulness of a neighbor, we enter a virtuous gathering—whether we are in a zendo, temple, or meditation center at that moment or not. So, finding the noble community of the wakeful is in part a matter of perception. In this wider sense, traditional teachings on the supreme value of Noble Sangha are part of a "lion's roar" proclaiming the fundamental goodness of all beings, encouraging our appreciation of the sanity and warmth in the diverse communities around us.

Yet what about the neurotic confusion, the selfishness, and the greed we also see in our social environments? These too act as a mirror for us, reminding us of the strength of our own habitual patterns of delusion. There is something uncomfortably familiar in seeing others' acts of stupidity and aggression. Inner mindfulness is sparked to take note of our own thoughts, speech, and actions—and their harmful or helpful effects. As Jamgon Kongtrul the Great wrote: "Seeing bad qualities in others is like looking in the mirror at the dirt on one's own face." We are all engaged in a learning process together, and the feedback we receive from others (even if not always egolessly pure) can be very valuable in guiding our journey.

So the path here is to value our existing connections, whether it's as part of an environmental action group or hanging out with others after a strenuous yoga class. Our individual spiritual practice bears fruit in these collective human interactions.

The great Tibetan meditation master Patrul Rinpoche often greeted his students this way: "Has your heart been kind?" How we are with others is a revealing mirror. We should be somewhat suspicious of any developing sense of "personal awakening" that does not show up as increased compassion and care for others' well-being. Wisdom shows its smiling face in the spontaneous joy of being with others.



Mentors: Spiritual Friends Help Guide the Way

By Sylvia Boorstein

Appreciating spiritual companionship means associating with any wakeful groups dedicated to compassionate activity. If slander and sarcasm are the daily bread of our communal meals, the determination to awaken gradually weakens and grows dim. Basic confidence and life-force energy decline. In a chapter in *Ruling Your World* called “Hanging Out With the Right Crowd,” Sakyong Mipham asks: “Life is precious. Whom are we going to spend it with?”

GAYLON FERGUSON is the author of *Natural Wakefulness: Discovering the Sanity We Are Born With*. He teaches religious and interdisciplinary studies at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado, and is an *acharya* in the Shambhala Buddhist tradition.

SANDY MANSFIELD

Two of my most significant ongoing practice opportunities are dedicated commitments with friends who live time zones away and whom I rarely meet in person. My friends are teachers, as I am, but in both cases we are not trying to teach each other. Rather we are friends learning together.

The Buddha emphasized the importance of spiritual friendship. It is said that Ananda, one of his principal disciples, asked, “Is it true, Lord, that noble friends are half of the holy life?” The Buddha is said to have responded, “No, Ananda. It’s not true. Noble friends are the whole of the holy life.”

Carol and I have been sending each other daily gratitude emails for several

years. The general form is, “Today what I am grateful for is...” They aren’t letters. Sometimes one of us responds to a specific item in the other’s email. “I’m grateful for your colleagues who support your being with your family during this difficult time,” or, “I’m gladdened to know that you returned from that long trip safely and feeling good.” For the most part, though, we each use the daily communication as an attempt to continually frame our experience in a way that preserves (or establishes) mindful acceptance of it. I might, for example, write: “Everything went wrong today. There was terrible traffic and then...” You get the idea.

Often a complaint narrative works

itself out in the telling and some redemptive aspect of it becomes apparent. Sometimes that doesn't happen. Then the email might end, "So, you can hear that I am completely annoyed and irritable and that I haven't fixed that up, yet so I am grateful that it is you that I am writing to and that I can depend on you to hear me fraying at the seams and love me anyway." The final gratitude is often enough to undo the mind's grasp of the "I'm so mad!" story. It disappears—"Poof!"—just like that, and I end up laughing. Carol and I are teaching each other about love and emptiness.



Jashoda lives in Mexico and we keep our connection going by reading books we've chosen together and talking by phone once a month about what we've learned. Often, but not always, the books are explicitly dharma books. This month we are reading Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche's *The Joy of Living* (new to both of us) and Herman Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game*, which we both read long ago and think we recall as being something wonderful. I find that having "homework," a task I need to complete by a certain date, energizes me. I like the feeling of being a disciplined

person in relationship. I'm traveling all this month, and seeing the books as I pack and unpack at each new place keeps Jashoda and our pact of mutual support in my mind. Without my "study buddy," I might not make the time to read these books or to process them in the same way.

For me it's a real blessing to know that I have friends who are interested in my inner life and are willing to listen as I explore it, and I love offering them the same attention. The forms my friends and I have chosen, exchanging emails and reading books, work for us. But the forms can be varied. I can imagine friends committing to communicate regularly about their meditation experience, or about their progress in cultivating patience, or generosity, or truthfulness, or indeed, any of the virtues that are fundamental to Buddhist practice. The hallmark of any spiritual friendship is the shared commitment to partnering on behalf of awakening. That's what matters most.

SYLVIA BOORSTEIN is a founding teacher of Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, California. She is a psychologist and the author of *Happiness Is an Inside Job: Practicing for a Joyful Life*.

What if? Guidelines for Choosing a Teacher

By Lewis Richmond

You may be perfectly content to study and practice the dharma on your own, without a Buddhist teacher or community. But the time may come when you feel that isn't enough, and you decide you want to seek one out. If that happens, how do you go about finding a teacher (and by extension, a community) that's right for you?

It's important to know that the wisdom you're seeking is already within you. It guides your spiritual search, and is the reason you are already on the path.

So to some extent you can rely on your own instincts and intuition to help you.

With that in mind, I recommend approaching your search as a five-step process: *watch, ask, feel, try it on, and commit*.

Watch what the teacher does and says, and how he or she treats people. Kindness, friendliness, humility, a sense of humor, and a forthright and honest manner are qualities of spiritual maturity recognized by every Buddhist tradition. They are the precepts in action.

Some say you should watch a teacher for three years before accepting him or her. I'm not sure that is realistic or necessary, but whether it is three weeks or three years, take your time.

Ask questions, and don't be shy. See how the teacher responds. Don't be rude, but don't hold back either. Questions that feel dumb are often the best questions. When I was with my root teacher, I wanted to look good to him and so I tended not to ask questions that exposed my ignorance. I regret that. A good teacher will not be offended or defensive about such questions.

Also, when asking questions, ask everyone. The teacher's close students know him or her best. Find out what they know or are willing to share. In assessing their responses, use your "wisdom stomach." If there are any secrets about the teacher or the community that you need to know, these students are your best sources.

How do you feel? After watching and asking, take stock of your own gut feeling. Is your feeling about the teacher pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral? That feeling is a clue. There is a principle in Buddhism—in Zen we call it *innen*—which can be translated as "affinity" or "coincidence." It refers to the causes and conditions of human relationship that have brought you and the teacher together. For a teacher–student relationship to work, there needs to be this sense of affinity. You should feel a positive regard for the teacher. If not, this teacher may not be right for you.

Try it on. After watching, asking, and feeling, it may be a time to "try it on." A good teacher or community will offer some level of provisional commitment—a chance to accept the teacher more deeply without throwing yourself off a cliff. Depending on the tradition, this might involve a ceremony, private interview, or acceptance into a retreat or more intensive level of practice.

Be cautious about a teacher or community that requires a life-changing, irrevocable commitment up front. Quitting your job, being ordained as a monk or

nun, giving away money or property, becoming a full-time resident—these might conceivably be in your future, or not. But wherever your spiritual path leads you, these decisions are yours, not someone else's.

Time to commit. The Buddhist path eventually requires commitment as well as trust. In your developing relationship with a teacher, there may come a time when both of you are ready for a commitment. If this time has come, don't hold back. Perhaps it will be good; perhaps it will turn out to be a mistake. In the end, you need to put one foot in front of the other, and see where the path leads you. All seekers of the Way have done this.

In dharma, as in life, there are no guarantees. Things that count involve risk. As they say in sports, "No guts, no glory." Good luck! **BD**

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I really enjoy practicing on my own *and* having occasional exposure to a wider community through our tiny local sangha. Having to be at a certain place at a certain time can sometimes feel stifling, but most of the time it is a nice ritual, a way to connect with other people and be reminded that my interpretation of the dharma is not all there is to it.

I am definitely more of a loner in my practice, but I would strongly encourage participating in a small meditation group, or even starting one. Ours is only about four to six people, which is intense sometimes but still a lovely support.

Thich Nhat Hanh has a great book called *Friends on the Path: Living Spiritual Communities*, which is a very practical reference for those squeamish or shy about building or joining a sangha. My favorite story in it is called "What to do when no one shows up."

Anonymous

Individual practice is definitely a plus sometimes, because we are not following someone just for the sake of having a teacher. On the other hand, though, we can get stuck and need help. I know my practice has gone stale from time to time and I've had a question or two to ask. I've reached out to many people—through the internet, phone calls, and attending dharma talks—and asked some close friends who are also on the path.

A teacher can be found anywhere. I know, because my main teachers, or "root gurus" as they are sometimes called, are my children. I learn many things from them, such as patience, compassion, and right speech.

To sum it up, individual practice can be very enlightening, but sometimes we need a nudge or some guidance from someone who may have traveled a bit farther along the path. The great thing is, we can take the advice and implement it, or reflect on it to make sure it is right for us. Regardless, the fact of the matter is it's up to us how we do it. But the key is doing it!

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