

How to Find a Temple, Practice Group, or Teacher

(from Chapter 7, “How to Find Out More,”
in *Buddhism From Within*
by Rev. Daizui MacPhillamy)

A Temple or Practice Group

To make contact with a Buddhist temple or practice group in your area, try looking in a Buddhist directory, examining the telephone book, or searching the Internet using some of the following key words. It may also help to look under the foreign words given in parentheses, [as well as under “churches”]. Some temples and groups can also be found by looking for their announcements in the local newspaper or their fliers in libraries, community centers, bookstores, or vegetarian food stores.

Buddhism Use with additional key words found below, or with country names such as Burmese, Cambodian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Laotian, Sri Lankan, Thai, Tibetan, or Vietnamese. Also try variants such as ‘Buddhist.’

Gelugpa A school of the **Tibetan** branch of **Buddhism**.

Kagyü A school of the **Tibetan** branch of **Buddhism**.

Mahayana The family of **Buddhism** which is primarily practiced in Tibet, China, Korea, and Japan. Use additional words.

Meditation The practice of concentration and insight, most emphasized by the **Theravada**, **Tibetan**, and **Zen** schools. Use additional words.

Nyingma A school of the **Tibetan** branch of **Buddhism**.

- Pure Land** (C: Shin; J: Jodo Shin) a branch of **Mahayana Buddhism** which emphasizes devotion to **Amitabha Buddha** [C: O-mi-t'o-fo; J: Amida; T: 'Od-dpag-tu-med-pa), the Buddha of Infinite Light].
- Rinzai** (C: Lin-chi) a school of **Zen** which emphasizes **meditation** and intuitive study of ancient stories of **enlightenment** ('koans'). **Enlightenment** (S. bodhi): full oneness with the truth, complete non-attachment; when continuous, called **nirvana** (P: nibbana).
- Sakya** A school of the **Tibetan** branch of Buddhism.
- Soto** (C: Ts'ao-Tung) a school of **Zen** which emphasizes **meditation**, mindful work, and precepts.
- Theravada** The family of **Buddhism** which is practiced primarily in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. It emphasizes **meditation**, study of the ancient texts, and precepts.
- Tibetan** The **Vajrayana** schools of **Buddhism** practiced in Tibet, including **Gelugpa**, **Kagyu**, **Nyingma**, and **Sakya**. They emphasize **meditation**, textual study, and ceremony.
- Vajrayana** The esoteric family of **Buddhism**. It is practiced mainly in Tibet, with some forms also found in China and Japan.
- Vipassana** 'Insight Meditation': a lay **meditation** movement associated with the **Theravada** family of **Buddhism**.
- Zen** (S: Dhyana; C: Ch'an) a branch of **Mahayana Buddhism** which is practiced primarily in China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan; it emphasizes **meditation**. See **Soto** and **Rinzai**.

[Words in **bold** type refer to other words in the list, unless the word is defined in the entry. Abbreviations: C: Chinese; J: Japanese; P: Pali; S: Sanskrit; T: Tibetan.]

Most temples are quite glad to give people a tour and to answer questions about their particular form of Buddhist practice. If your interest extends beyond simple information and you are looking for a possible place to study Buddhism yourself, then a good next step might be to spend a bit of time joining in the practice at each of the temples or groups that you have located and see how things feel to you. Finding a Buddhist tradition and place of practice to which a person can make a commitment is largely an intuitive thing; so, while I will give some tips on possible things to look for, there is no substitute for simply going to a place a few times, attending some religious activities, and getting the feel of things. If a person feels very much at home, that is a good sign. Oddly enough, if one feels both strongly attracted to the place and at the same time scared, that is also a good sign. This mixed feeling often means that a part of you recognizes that the teaching or the group is right, while another part is frightened of the challenge which this presents. On the other hand, if you feel uneasy about the place or the people, if the whole thing seems irrelevant, or if it is somehow just “wrong,” then you might want to look elsewhere.

In addition to these gut-level indicators, here are some rational ones which you can use as well. Is the group part of a larger organization, or does it stand completely alone? Being part of something larger doesn't necessarily mean that it is better, but small and alone tends to be unstable. Is it, and/or its larger organization recognized by some association of other Buddhists? While such recognition cannot guarantee high standards of ethics and quality teaching, it does suggest that other people who should know about these things have a reasonable degree of confidence in the group. Speaking of ethics, does the group have any explicit ethical guidelines, rules of conduct, etcetera, for its members and its teachers? Is the temple or group recognized by the government as a legitimate charity, religious non-profit corporation, tax-exempt trust, or similar entity? Do you feel that the group is pressuring you to join? Such pressure would be unusual in Buddhism, as the general thrust of Buddhist teaching runs towards individual responsibility and the exercise of free will. If you feel pressured, it might mean that something is not quite right.

A Teacher

For the person who wishes to become a serious practicing Buddhist, some sort of teaching relationship is advisable. The types of relationship will vary widely with different schools of Buddhism and even across different groups within a given school. They can include intensely personal, life long, one-to-one connections, very flexible study with a number of teachers, informal associations with other students in the group who are simply a little more experienced, and formal and impersonal teaching done in large groups at infrequent intervals. Nonetheless, having at least one live person, from whom one can hear advice and to whom one can go with questions, is important. This is because the words used to describe Buddhist principles are very approximate, and also because some of the aspects of the Eightfold Path (particularly the ones relating to mindfulness and meditation) have to be learned by a certain amount of trial and error. Books, no matter how good, can get a person only so far.

How does one find such a teaching relationship? First, you have to find a suitable temple or practice group, since that is where teachers are usually located. As with finding a group, finding a teacher or teachers is largely a matter of what feels right. All of what was said about the intuitive side of locating a suitable place of practice also applies to locating a suitable person to guide that practice. In addition, here are some other questions to consider. Who was the teacher's teacher? Buddhism has been around for a very long time and its teachers are usually members of long lineages. A teacher who did not study with, and was not certified by, their own teacher is far less apt to be reliable than one who did. How long did the teacher you have found spend in religious study before starting out to teach on their own, what levels of certification do they hold within their organizations, and how long have they been teaching? As in any profession, experience and level of training may not guarantee excellence, but 'more' is generously better than 'less.' The question of whether the teacher is ordained is a bit tricky, as some schools of Buddhism have lineages of excellent lay teachers, others give ordination only after a great deal of teaching experience, and yet others require ordination before even starting to train someone as a teacher. Nonetheless, ordination is a meaningful concept in most types of Buddhism, and it is worth asking about what it means in the tradition you have encountered and where the teacher stands in respect to

it. If ordained, has the person vowed to follow certain rules and precepts; if not, is he or she subject to some other set of ethical guidelines?

One of the most fruitful areas to examine with regard to a teacher is the state of his or her students. After all, as my own teacher pointed out to me when I first thought of studying with her, the teacher is the 'product' of study and practice under a previous teacher, and that earlier teacher is not the one you are thinking of studying with. So, it is your fellow students who can show you what to expect as a result of studying with the teacher at hand. Are they becoming as you would wish to be? It takes a bit of time to get a sense of how that question is being answered, but it may be the most important question to consider. All of the other questions mentioned above might be helpful, but they're a bit theoretical; this one goes to the heart of the matter. It goes right back to the advice that the Buddha gave to those village elders long ago: discern the wisdom of a teacher by the actual effects of his or her teaching on real people. Each of us is different, of course, and there is no guarantee that the effects would be similar for you, because, among other things, a whole lot depends on what you do with that teaching. Yet if you feel that most of the students are moving in a direction that you would like to go in, that is a very good sign.

While waiting for such a feeling to develop over time, there is another question that is worth asking. Are the students or group members nice; are they normal? Are they 'regular people,' 'good folks,' or is there something a little odd, cold, self-important, or even creepy about them? The latter signs do not speak well of their teacher, since Buddhism, when properly taught, cuts away at the roots of the things that make people strange, aloof, proud, etcetera. What typically arises when these roots are cut is a warmth, gentleness, generosity, empathy, and genuineness that make someone a pleasure to be around. These qualities are the only outward signs of enlightenment, and they are a long way from the penetrating stares, self-important speeches, demonstrations of personal or psychic power, and other magic tricks which the misguided occasionally come up with.

One final word of advice to the person who wants to take Buddhism all the way. Once you have found a suitable tradition, group, and teacher, *stay with them*. Things will not always go well, and not everything will please you or be as you think it should be. That is inevitable for two rea-

sons. First, because each of us brings to Buddhist training our own set of attachments and delusions, they are bound to 'rub the wrong way' against parts of a genuine practice. Second, even the best teacher and group are human and they will make mistakes from time to time. The fact that they sometimes 'mess things up' does not mean that they are unworthy of being your teacher and fellow students: it simply means that their personal training is ongoing. Since enlightenment is not a finished thing but rather an ongoing process, and since even the continuous enlightenment of the arahant does not confer omniscience or infallibility, mistakes are going to be made. If seekers after Buddha's Way require that their teachers or religious groups meet the ideals floating around inside their own heads, they will never find what they are looking for.

The same is true if one goes from teacher to teacher, group to group, tradition to tradition, sampling what is offered by each and then putting them together into one's own personal mixture. This is tempting, but it guarantees frustration. The first reason has already been mentioned above: it's the 'prickly bits' from which we sometimes learn the most. If an individual picks and chooses only the parts of various teachings which he or she likes, the most useful parts will tend to be left out, and the person will be apt to stagnate.

Second, the existing traditions of Buddhist practice have evolved into their present forms over hundreds, often thousands, of years. That process has distilled the wisdom of many generations of sincere people seeking after truth. Why would one deliberately ignore the assistance which they have so kindly offered to us and insist upon 're-inventing the wheel' by creating a new form of practice?

Are there some imperfections in those traditions? Of course there are; it seems that this is true of all religious traditions, Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike. And I suspect that, by setting aside our personal ideas of perfection, committing ourselves to a particular religion wholeheartedly, and doing the very best training we can within that tradition – with its imperfections alongside its wisdom – each of us unknowingly joins in the age-old process of improving both our own religion and ourself. Perhaps, in this way, all humankind moves just a little closer to truth. At least that's how it looks from within this Buddhist.

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