

Finding a Teacher

What to Look for When Looking for a Zen Teacher:

(From Zen Master Who? A Guide to the People and Stories of Zen By James Ford)

Before seeking out a Zen teacher in the Zen tradition, it would be wise to read a little about all the traditions you sense might help you. If, after a period of reading and questioning, you think Zen might be the path for you, then continuing to read about Zen is important.

But more important, if the Zen path sounds right for you, I would suggest you start by taking up the practice of Zen meditation pretty much right now. You can get the basics out of many good books: John Daishin Buksbazen's Zen Meditation in Plain English would be a very good way to start, as would Robert Aitken's Taking the Path of Zen. A visit to a local Zen group of any flavor can provide some hands-on instruction that can clarify most beginning questions

You don't have to sign up for anything other than an introductory class, nor, I strongly suggest, should you. Just check things out. If you like the group perhaps keep going from time to time. But do begin to sit at home regularly. Cultivate a discipline. If after a reasonable amount of time, perhaps six months or so, maybe a year, the practice doesn't feel right, you really don't need to look for a Zen teacher. After all, any real Zen teacher is going to return you over and over again to the practice. If you don't feel a connection to zazen, you can probably find another practice tradition that will be more fruitful.

If, on the other hand, Zen continues to seem to be the best way of addressing the concerns that propel you on the spiritual path, then – and really only then – should you begin to look for a teacher in earnest. At that point, it becomes important for you to sort through the hundreds of teachers and dozens of communities to find one that fits you well. If this book helps with nothing else, I hope it shows how different Zen communities might be, how one could be completely wrong for you and another could be just what you need.

I cannot recommend a seeker join any community led by Zen teachers who will not say who taught them and who gave them permission to teach. Though such people may perhaps be wise beings, the problems that can hide in the shadows of such a stance are just too numerous and too potentially dangerous. If you're in doubt whether a teach is what she or he says, you can look at the website of the American Zen Teachers Association (www.americanzenteachers.org). While not a complete list of all authentic Zen teachers in America, it is a list of a large majority of them. If a prospective teacher (or her or his teacher) is not on the list, chances are that person is significantly outside the mainstream of Zen. [Also see the list of affiliated teachers here on the SZBA site.]

Next, consider the possibilities within the authentic Zen paths. Do your inclinations take you toward monastic practice? Are you attracted to the priestly traditions? Or perhaps a lay-led community feels best. Hopefully this book has helped to show what these distinctions mean. Clarifying this can really help in finding the right teacher and the right community.

That said, at the beginning it's hard to know what will be best in your particular situation. Here trusting one's instincts isn't a bad thing, particularly if you're also open to being wrong and have cultivated some sense of humility as you begin to explore unknown territory.

Ask people you respect who have walked the spiritual path for some time whom they might recommend – just like you might if you were looking for a good doctor. Also: most Zen groups now have websites. Read them. And visit. Those things alone will reveal a great deal both about the teacher and the community. I recommend you do this with several communities. Since you're already maintaining a practice, there's no rush to sign on with a teacher. Take your time. Choose carefully.

But please be very clear about this: Zen teachers are not gurus. They – we – are not perfect masters. A real Zen teacher is completely, unambiguously, human with a full complement of challenges and shortcomings. Every teacher has flaws. The task is not to find a perfect teacher (you can't) but to find one who, warts and all, can be a good-enough guide on the Zen path. You need to be ready to be surprised.

It's probably not wise to make a decision about the right teacher based mostly on witnessing their public persona. It's really impossible to make a useful judgment of a possible teacher by how they give a Dharma talk, what they say in one magazine interview, or even what they write in a book.

I suggest a different approach: when visiting a teacher or a center examine the teacher's students. Are they simply clones-in-training of the teacher? This is probably not a good thing – after all, Zen is about becoming more fully yourself, not becoming more like your teacher. On the other hand, do the students seem to be people you like, and might like to be with? Can you recognize the values they advocate? Are they independent and engaged in the world? Can they joke about themselves? And, importantly, can they joke about their institution and teacher? And more important still: Do they seem to be genuinely on a path that is freeing them from their suffering?

This step of evaluating the community is an important one and one I strongly urge you not to skip. After all, the community, the sangha is as much the teacher as the person with the title. Often, actually, the community is even more the teacher than the person with the title.

I wish you well in your journey!