

Summer 2003: How to find a Teacher

Question: How does one find a teacher and when is the right time to do so? I live in southern New Hampshire and would appreciate any advice.

Narayan Liebenson Grady: If you happen to be a Vipassana practitioner, you are in the heartland, since you live in southern New Hampshire. There are at least three Vipassana centers an hour or so away from you. There are also a number of Zen and Tibetan centers in your area as well. I would suggest you go around to the various centers in your area and have contact with the teachers there. Where do you feel most comfortable and at home?

It's important to find a teacher whose teaching style and tradition resonate with you, and who is accessible as well. You need to feel a strong sense of trust, and you need to enjoy the method that is being taught. I do think that finding a teacher is sometimes a mysterious process.

When first beginning to practice, it's usually enough to hear the teachings in a group setting where general questions are addressed. Beginners tend to share similar questions and confusions. But as your commitment to the dharma grows, it is extremely helpful (and for most practitioners, essential) to have individual contact through interviews where you can go into specific practice questions in more depth. These are questions that arise out of your own experiences and are specific to your particular set of life conditions. It is common for obstacles and difficulties to arise as practice deepens and it's often necessary to have a teacher's guidance at these times. It is possible to become complacent or to get caught in notions of success and failure; a wise and skillful teacher can encourage you to practice with a sense of immediacy and with wise intention.

Teachers can be invaluable on the path, but it's important to remember that the present moment is our best teacher. If we are sensitive and motivated, it is possible to learn from everything in life.