

SUMMER 2007: FINDING A TEACHER

QUESTION: For the last five years, I have been committed to meditating daily, either at home or at the zendo I currently go to. I also participate in our monthly daylong sesshins, zazenkais, and week-long retreats. Actually, practice has gotten to be almost addictive!

I respect and admire my current teacher, but recently I participated in a zazenkai with a teacher at another zendo and really liked her dharma talk and the sangha members. I originally chose my current zendo mostly because it is near my home, making morning sittings convenient. But after hearing this other teacher's dharma talk, I got a sense that a teacher-student relationship with her would be more supportive and nurturing.

I feel I'm being disloyal to my current teacher for considering moving to another one. Yes, "it's a poor workman who blames his tools." Am I just imagining that my practice would grow and strengthen with another teacher? What if it really would? I find myself going from one teacher to the next—a few years with one, a few with another. Living in New York, I am fortunate to have a variety of Zen teachers from various schools and backgrounds available to me.

How do you know if you should be with one teacher or another?

NARAYAN LIEBENSON GRADY: In the Theravada tradition, teachers cultivate an attitude of non-attachment when it comes to working with yogis. A teacher is called a *kalyana-mitta*, which means spiritual or noble friend, someone that you sense has realized more wisdom and liberation within them than you have. It follows that we can have more than one spiritual friend in our lives. It's more a matter of freedom and choice than a question of loyalty.

As an example, at the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center we have had three guiding teachers for the past many years. Members can choose to work with one of us or two of us or all three of us. One may start with one of us and then move to another. For our part, there is no sense of attachment or expectation that someone should be working with us in an enduring way. Of course, many people do work with one of us over the long term, but what really matters is that it is a beneficial relationship.

Knowing whether you should be with one teacher or another has to do with trust and affectionate resonance, as well as a sense that, at least at times, you are being stretched. Is it someone you are learning from? In this case, it's not that you don't appreciate what you have, it's that you feel you might have a better fit with another teacher. Maybe you would, maybe you wouldn't, but there is no problem in finding out. In any case, it's always best that when you leave one teacher for another, you do so with gratitude for what you have learned,

The other side of this, of course, is that you do have to be with a teacher long enough to let that person get to know you. As trust grows, more is possible in the teacher-yogi relationship. The particular patterns and habits and torments of the heart can be seen more clearly by the teacher, which can really benefit the yogi.

Geography is not unimportant. In the midst of our full lives, it can be very beneficial to practice at a center that is close to you. On the other hand, going out of your way or letting go of convenience to study with someone you want to study with is also highly beneficial because it points to one's commitment and dedication. And of course, it is great when the person you want to work with lives close to you as well.

To me, you sound perhaps a bit too focused on getting or not getting something instead of recognizing that there is nothing to get or get rid of. Why don't you have a chat with your current teacher and talk this out? ©