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Fo Guang Shan Institute of Humanistic Buddhism, Taiwan
and
Nan Tien Institute, Australia

**PERSPECTIVE:
THE TEACHER AND LATE MODERN
BUDDHISM IN THE WEST:
COMMITMENT AND DILEMMAS**

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Source

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The teacher plays a key role in Buddhism. In some traditions, the practitioner is advised to remain patient and persistent in the search for a life-long teacher, as the right teacher is said to appear only once the practitioner is “ready.” The teacher may be the abbot in a monastery, the *geshe* in a *gompa*, or the *roshi* or *ajahn* in a temple. However, in this late-modern world, it is becoming increasingly common for Convert Buddhists to have no link or personal connection to any such organization or individual Dharma teacher.

This raises countless associated questions. For example, is practicing without connections to a teacher or indeed, any Buddhist organization, skillful? And if not, where does one find a Dharma teacher, particularly during a global pandemic? Does one still need to travel to a faraway land to find a guru, or has this Western practice lost its currency? Is it preferable to have a ‘personal’ relationship with the teacher or is it enough to simply read their books, listen to their talks, and/or connect over the internet? Further, when a practitioner finds a teacher, must they commit for life? Or only until they feel they have learned what they need? And what are the parameters of such a relationship, how are they set, and by whom? These questions have begun to be taken up by a range of teachers and scholars,^{1,2} particularly in response to the many troubling revelations that have emerged regarding sexual abuse and the misuse of power in the teacher/student dynamic.

Historically, Buddhism has developed across multiple traditions, which have flourished, declined, and transitioned across different cultures, modifying practices and shifting focus according to the cultural, societal, and spiritual needs of the milieu in which it has interacted. Yet each iteration has retained Buddhism’s claim to the “spiritual” aspects of the religion which originated over two thousand five hundred years ago in India with Siddhārtha Gautama/Śākyamuni Buddha, the first teacher of Buddhism.

In the last one hundred and fifty years, Buddhism has begun to appear outside Asia, during the time when European empire builders and colonizers were busily imposing their political, economic, and religious systems on Asian societies. They were unwittingly creating bidirectional pathways for

the transmission of cultures, philosophies, and social practices. For example, Japanese art had an enormous impact on European creativity at the turn of the twentieth century. Buddhist texts and practices were carried by European travelers, including several women of note. In 1880, Helena Blavatsky (famous for founding Theosophy) became the first European to declare herself a Buddhist, while Alexandra David Neel spent many years studying and practicing Buddhism in Tibet and other Asian countries, as well as writing books on Buddhism for European audiences. The British scholar I.B. Horner spent some years in India, before becoming one of the key translators of Pāli texts for English readers.

Following the upheavals of global wars and decolonization, Buddhist teachers, usually ordained Asian monks, began to join these travelers in bringing the Dharma into the West. Notably, the first teacher to visit Australia was a woman Buddhist—Sister Dhammadinnā, who arrived in 1952. For a brief moment in the 1960s and 1970s, it became possible for young Westerners to travel with relative ease to meet and train with Buddhist teachers on their home ground. Some became ordained and were therefore granted licence to teach the Dharma themselves. The process of transmission began as they and their Asian teachers established Dharma centers in the West. This meant that students and teachers needed to find ways to access each other’s language.

So, in this sense, the encounter between Buddhism and the West also became an encounter of languages. Not only between the multiple languages of contemporary Asian Buddhism and Western practitioners, but also the languages of the foundational Dharma texts, namely Pāli and Sanskrit. Thus, translators also played key roles in Convert Buddhism, even if they have sat in the shadow of the teacher’s throne.

In this article, we offer our personal reflections on our own search for a “teacher” and “tradition” within the Western world, with the hope of contributing to and expanding this discussion to include more diverse voices. We are both white, cisgender female, feminist academics from working-class backgrounds, and we have both identified as Buddhists for over two decades.

We have been pondering our experiences through many conversations over almost as many years. Like many other Convert Buddhists, we have increasing opportunities to engage with the many forms, techniques, and approaches which are being generated from close connections to the traditions of Buddhism practised in Asian societies. In recent decades, these changes have begun to produce versions of Buddhist practice which warrant new designations such as Western Buddhism, Modernist Buddhism, and even Secular Buddhism.

Suzanne spent her early years as a Convert Buddhist being taught a form of meditation by lay students in a Tibetan Buddhist *gompa*. She listened to a Tibetan *geshe*'s teachings via a translator, a woman who was highly valued by students for her skill in making the Dharma texts, including the teacher's commentaries, very clear. In contrast, the subsequent translators at the *gompa* were much less committed to dialogue between the *geshe* and the students, as they seemed intent on maintaining the language barriers and hence the knowledge barriers between the *geshe* and their students. Fortunately, the publications of work by other translators and teachers in the English language gave Suzanne a form of democratic access to Buddhist teachings and commentaries. Books, papers, whole journals, and even the occasional film became available, although for English speakers these were largely dominated by writers in the US and the UK. The internet also allowed recordings of teachers to be heard and seen everywhere with the result that one was no longer dependent on a single teacher or a local Saṅgha.

Nadine began her journey also practicing Tibetan Buddhism, although many of her initial teachers were native English speakers. She recalls such Western teachers emphasizing the idea that finding a qualified and reliable guru was essential to awakening. Such a guide, they explained, could use the sword of wisdom and "clear seeing" to cut through the ways in which we delude ourselves and shed light on the ways that we misinterpret and misapply the Dharma. Without commitment to a teacher, it was reiterated, students were missing out on the potential for spiritual maturation that comes from working through the more complicated and interpersonal aspects of the path that invariably arise in a long-term relationship with a guide.

However, as feminists trained in critical thinking, we both found the notion of long-term commitment to one particular teacher within one particular tradition problematic, not necessarily out of the question, but problematic. There were several reasons for this.

First, we noticed a hierarchical teaching approach in the centers we frequented. Suzanne spent many years with the Gelug wing of the Mahāyāna tradition, mostly at the one *gompa* with the final few years at a second but related *gompa*. Much of her experience hinged on going to regular weekly teachings or courses taught by the resident *geshe*, usually shaped by working through a text and the connected commentaries. The method was traditional and structured, questions were not encouraged and accorded little time.

For Suzanne, there was something calming about this experience, especially in the early years when sparks of insight would flash out from the teacher's words. In terms of the Dharma, she felt the value of paying attention to body and mind growing slowly throughout these years. However, the interest and the curiosity of the experience of sitting within a Saṅgha at the feet of a teacher began to diminish as the Saṅgha's subservience to the *geshe* became more overt and apparent. She noticed a general refusal to engage in contemporary philosophical debates on language and truth, with classical metaphors and simplified understandings of everyday life accepted as reality. Thus, an early problem for Suzanne emerged with her growing antipathy toward the rigid interpretations of the Dharma and simplistic representations of modernist Western society in the teachings. She recalls statements like, "Westerners are all obsessed with consumerism (especially cars)," among others, that offered little to engage or enhance her understanding of the Dharma and consider its applicability to the complexity of her life as a woman.

Her impatience was sharpened with the discovery of the work of lay teachers such as Martine and Stephen Batchelor, and some of the Insight Meditation Society teachers, especially Joseph Goldstein, Sylvia Boorstein, and Jack Kornfield. Their teachings offered practices and interpretations that were contextualized by their representations of the social history of Asian and Western Buddhism, by their attention to the body, and to the nurturing of heart

and mind. Suzanne began to broaden and, she hoped, deepen her Dharma practice through her reading of contemporary Dharma texts, especially those creating so-called secular interpretations. Although wary of the risks of dilution of the Dharma, she found that these texts opened creative and evocative possibilities for appropriate and inspiring ways to practice. The opportunity to take silent retreats with Insight Meditation groups, framed by secular Dharma teachings, gave her a taste of the power and value of concentrated practice. Retreats also highlighted the importance, but also the unpredictability, of the impact of the teacher.

From early on in her path, Nadine experimented with multiple traditions. She remembers sitting straight-backed in the *zendo*, prostrating to the feet of the Tibetan *lamas*, circumambulating *stupas*, talking crazy wisdom with the Shambhala community, and mindfully walking in the park with Thich Nhat Hanh's Order of Interbeing. Like Suzanne, she also became deeply engaged by the works of Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein, and Sylvia Boorstein³ and began a daily Insight Meditation practice—an approach she felt mirrored and resonated with her experiences within the Western cultural milieu. During this time, she recalls asking repeated questions to a variety of teachers about the relationship between the traditions and at times being dismissed, often by male teachers, for “mixing up” and “confusing” traditions. Were the teachers simply out of their depth? Or was she being dismissed on the basis of her age and sex?

Nadine felt that the notion of commitment to a singular path and teacher did not reflect the fact that as she changed, her spiritual needs changed. Initially, as a woman in her early twenties, many of her needs were what one might call “psychological” in that they were largely linked to her formative experiences growing up, but as time went on, she became more concerned with collective, relational, and existential matters (though, of course, these domains cannot be fully separated). She began to feel it was not skillful to remain committed to a teacher out of obligation, but rather to continue only while they met her where she stood and linked her to her own capacity for love and awareness as she grew and changed.

Early in her Dharma journey, Nadine was troubled by the idea that when things got too difficult, she would flee. And at one point, she did flee. Having sat regularly for several years with a male Zen teacher, she began to deepen in her practice and feel overwhelmed by a type of precognitive anguish, not linked with any particular words or images. Without adequate language to explain her experience, as well as the intuitive sense that discussing such emotions fell outside the discursive parameters of the Saṅgha, her experience felt almost unspeakable. Slightly out of conscious view, she reasoned that the best course of action was to stop the practice and leave the Saṅgha altogether, which she did.

This type of experience is not rare. Some suggest that long periods of practice can lead to the relaxing of bodily and psychological defenses and that unresolved grief and afflictions can come into full view. However, as Nadine discovered, relying on the support and expertise of one single teacher in cases like this poses potential risks. Such teachers may not have the resources and/or language to support their students or the capacity to recognize the need to draw on external support structures. Moreover, Nadine found that her suffering was culturally specific, linked to both her gender and class background, as well as Western understandings of emotions—something which she intuited lay beyond her teacher’s experience.

Simultaneously, the more we talked together, the more we both became concerned about the patriarchal assumptions that circulated through the meditation halls in which we sat, particularly the scarcely critiqued notion that being born a woman was a major hindrance to enlightenment. This was the early 2000s. A more complex, but equally common, version of the issue of gender and the Dharma was reported by Judith Simmer-Brown:

How can you say women can’t get enlightened? He [her teacher] just stared at me and pointed his finger and he said, “So you’re a woman?” In other words, I had grasped the man-woman concept. He was saying that you can’t attain enlightenment if you hold on to

that self identity. I really liked that approach.⁴

The stumbling block for us was (and still is), that if gender identity is irrelevant, or a failure of the mind to let go of dualism, how is it that Dharma teachers in every tradition are almost exclusively male? Why are senior nuns expected to bow to even the most junior monk in some traditions? Such uncritical and discriminatory assumptions led us both to a sense of disconnect from the value of the teachings (and the teacher) that felt almost impossible to overcome.

We were also both troubled by an apparent lack of fresh or critical views we observed in certain Buddhist communities. We noticed many of the traditions we practiced with included ideological and/or doctrinally driven practitioners that did not demonstrate an openness or spirit of inquiry, which we both believe is a fundamental aspect of Buddhism. In fact, this is something repeatedly emphasized by His Holiness the Dalai Lama: critical inquiry forms the bedrock of Buddhist practice.⁵

In talking over our experiences and questions with each other, we gradually came to feel compelled to develop a broad understanding of multiple traditions and to compare different approaches and techniques with the aim of assessing which aspects were most applicable to our lives as we navigated our own suffering—much of which was culturally-specific and gendered.

Despite the notion of devotion to one tradition or teacher, we developed our own form of commitment, which we can only name with the gift of hindsight: a commitment to deep investigation, critical thinking, and to situating each tradition, and its contemporary manifestation, within the context of the cultural milieu in which it appeared and arose from. This is a huge task for lay-people, and is still very much a work in progress. Despite both feeling somewhat concerned about “shopping around” it was a commitment to learning, investigating, and situating knowledge within its socio-historical context that led us both to interrogate, compare, and practice with different Saṅghas and teachers.

Nadine now sees that having a sense of the varying traditions and a taste of the range of teachers within Buddhism gave her greater capacity to make sense of her specific flavor of *dukkha* and to stay with its unfolding. With time and a combination of practices and teachers, she feels better able to pay particular attention to its shape, texture, and rhythm in her experience. The archetypal qualities of Avalokiteśvara provided a safe psychological refuge and a soft place to land when the small self alone could not carry the load. Tibetan Buddhism also encouraged her to work with the notion of great compassion that challenged the thought, “Why me!” The Zen tradition brought her closer to a sense of the ground she sat on and the bones that sat on it, as well as intimacy with the exquisite orchestra of sensations (some of which are unpleasant) that animate this very body. It was teachers from the Theravāda tradition who were her companions through periods of serious doubt, reminding her that liberation was very possible and that there is a clear map showing the way out of suffering.

We have now come to the point of committing to a paradigm of Convert Buddhism which encompasses a plurality of teachers and traditions as they are expressed in the West. Nadine finds herself in the Insight Meditation tradition, regularly engaging with the teachings of Jack Kornfield, who embraces multiple modalities and approaches. In addition, the Insight Meditation tradition, particularly Spirit Rock Meditation Center, is influenced by the Western psychotherapeutic paradigm⁶ and, as such, treats the mechanics and particularities of one’s psychological suffering in a way that is familiar and useful to Westerners. Through this paradigm, Nadine was able to recognize and apply the conceptualizations of emotions that teachers use in this tradition, as they resonated with her own cultural conditioning.⁷ For Suzanne, emergent secular versions of the Dharma have captivated her for a number of years now. This paradigm allows her to read a variety of texts across traditions, enroll in short courses, listen to different teachers, and even participate in small discussion groups and short retreats without identifying with any one teacher.

Nevertheless, looking for answers to specific psychological concerns through experimenting with multiple Buddhist groups had a certain intelligence underpinning it. For Nadine, the decision to knock on the door of the FPMT center (Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahāyāna Tradition) at the impressionable age of fourteen, the courage to stay silent for hours at a time and ask “what is this?” and the attempt to attain concentrated states of mind to quell *dukkha* were all wise and understandable responses for a mind that aches. However, we now see that no one teacher can “fix” our unique and culturally specific problems, whatever their universal spiritual means.

For us, the question has become not “Who is your teacher?” but “Does this teacher’s tradition or technique bring you closer to your true nature?” This is the question at hand, whether it is the nature of awareness of rain drops outside the window, or the nature of the body/mind/heart in this moment. This is echoed clearly in the words of Fleischman:

An important feature of the Dhamma, as the Buddha unveils it, is its empirical nature. The Dhamma is not the Buddha’s belief or viewpoint or religion or philosophy. The Dhamma was discovered by the Buddha in the same way that gravity was discovered by Newton or natural selection was discovered by Darwin. The Dhamma exists, and those who discover or rediscover and expound it, within the human community, are known as Buddha.⁸

We now have the privilege of being able to access many teachers and traditions with relative ease. But we also have the responsibility of navigating the Dharma and Saṅghas with as much skill and mindfulness as we can. The risk is that of becoming a dilettante with only shallow understanding, and with fragile practice, unsupported by the strength of a tangible community and knowledgeable guidance. We hope that we can see the difference between running for the hills and simply yearning for another interpretation or critical response to this beautiful pursuit in which we are engaged. As the Buddha

said, “Things fall apart. Tread the path with care.” For now, we have what the Buddha recommended: strong Dharma friendship. Perhaps *this* is our teacher.

Notes

- 1 A. Gleig, “Sexual Violations in American Buddhism: Interpretative Frameworks and Generative Responses,” accessed March 5, 2020, <http://blog.shin-ibs.edu/sexual-violations-in-american-buddhism-interpretive-frameworks-and-generative-responses/>.
- 2 L. R. Owens, “Healing from Teacher to Student Ethical Misconduct,” filmed 2017, <https://www.bhumisparsha.org/videos>. Viewed 29 January 2021.
- 3 It is interesting to look back and realize that most of these teachers aside from one or two did not share Nadine’s gender. Most of the “custodians” of the Buddhist traditions we both encountered in the late 1990s and early 2000s were men, yet it was rarely discussed explicitly. We note this because of the way discourses of emotions and the body are gendered and expressed differently depending on gender identification.
- 4 J. Simmer-Brown, “The Roar of the Lioness Women’s Dharma in the West,” in C. S. Prebish & M. Baumann ed., *Westward Dharma* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 317.
- 5 His Holiness the Dalai Lama, “Critical Thinking and Inquiry are the Bedrocks of Buddhist Practice,” accessed April 15, 2021, <https://t Tibet.net/critical-thinking-and-inquiry-are-the-bedrocks-of-buddhist-practice-his-holiness-the-dalai-lama-concludes-dharma-discourse/>
- 6 S. R. Segall ed., *Encountering Buddhism: Western Psychology and Buddhist Teaching*, (New York: SUNY Press, 2012).
- 7 “Therapy culture” has gained a lot of momentum in the US and has a strong presence in Australia as well. For an illuminating discussion on the opportunities and limitations of the culture of therapy and self-help, see E. Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
- 8 P. Fleischman, “The Buddha Did Not Teach Buddhism,” *Insight Journal* 25 (2005): 7-11.

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