

Buddhism for Dummies

No, I don't mean you are a dummy. But if we believe in a Buddhism that is a dummy (not the real thing, or not useful), then we would surely not benefit, or worse, we would be taken for a really bad ride. Religion, in our age of self-anointed gurus, IT and materialism, can be a crowded and dangerous place where any kind of religion (including Buddhism) are peddled, but they are really moneytheistic counterfeits or false teachings. (Try to think what kind of people would do such things.)

Religious scriptures and commentaries are easily available in our languages and media, and this only opens the flood-gates of marketing religion. If we have a flare for out-speaking others, or enjoy an audience of some kind, we can easily start a religion, or at least promote a guru we admire.

Now, in the evening in my life, having spent some forty years with religion, mostly Buddhism, I must say that religion and evangelism can be insidiously harmful: they can hurt and twist our minds without our knowing it. Even Buddhism, often regarded as the gentlest of faiths, is too dangerous to be left in the hands of others. The safest and most effective religion is a do-it-yourself (DIY) teaching. For newbies, Buddhism is best served DIY.

For any DIY, you need manuals. The best DIY religion manual is, for me, the Sutta Pitaka, that is, the early teachings of the Buddha. "Early Buddhism" may not be the exact words of the Buddha, but that is the closest we can get. They work much better than what I can tell you, or what some paperback writer can sell you.

Mostly importantly, I do not want you to take my word for it here. Search the scriptures, look up the Suttas for yourself. Use a good translation, of which many are available today. Many online translations are freely available.¹

Start by skimming the texts, and look for something that interests you. Read as much as you like. If you look hard enough, you will find cross-references to other Suttas or related writings. Let what you do not know (eg what does anusaya mean?) spur you on until you understand the topic or teaching.

It is even better if you can communicate or email with a proper teacher, especially if you are studying his books or teachings. If he is patient and wise in responding to your queries, that is good. The most important topic to learn from a living teacher is, of course, meditation. This is best done face to face, so that you are guided step by step.

However, if you are living in Peru or Greenland or China, this might be difficult. In that case, try to look for simple guidelines by professed Buddhists, and try out at least two basic meditations, that is, breath meditation and lovingkindness meditation. With such hands-on experience, it is easier to communicate with an experienced and compassionate teacher who is willing to help you out online (as a start).

One caveat. Don't rush panting up to a Buddhist-looking figure on the road or some place. First, we have the problem of those who self-ordained themselves, even declaring themselves to be saints. If you are fortunate enough, they are eccentrics at best, and may be good tale-spinners. Secondly, we have ordained priests who abscond once they are given the religious

¹ For example, <http://www.accesstoinight.org/> or <http://dharmafarer.org>

dress, that is, they do not undergo proper training. Thirdly, there might be those who have very strange teachings and habits who promise you easy answers without your having to do anything! For your own safety and sanity, and for the sake of your loved ones, please keep away from such gurus.

Every person, lay or ordained, Buddhist or not, has the right to ask the following questions to a monk or priest, to have a good idea that he is bona fide. Ask:

- (1) What is your name and which temple are you from?
- (2) Who is your teacher and how many years are you a monk or nun?

How he answers can tell a lot about him. If he is upset, you should at once bid him goodbye. If he launches a sales pitch (Why do you want to know these things? etc), and is evasive, you should leave as soon as possible, too.

On the other hand, he might actually tell you the facts. If he says he is five years or less as a newly ordained monk, then you must tell him that he should be with a proper teacher, and not be freelancing. Be firm in telling him that you and your colleagues would never support such monastics or priests. Even if he claims he has been wearing the cloth for many years, you should observe his behaviour, which needs a bit of know-how.

If a monastic tells us that we should not be reading or knowing the Vinaya (the monastic discipline), you can be sure something is amiss. The Vinaya is not a business secret for monastics only. They contain rules and disciplinary matters, many of which are laid down by the Buddha himself. Good monks have even written such booklets as “The Bhikkhus’ Rules: A guide for laypeople,”² which you are recommended to read and tell others about it.

The best way to protect the Three Treasures from “yellow-necks”³ and false teachers are for us to study Buddha Dharma and practise it ourselves. A key teaching to look for is how to overcome the idea of “self,” and learning to care for others as we would for ourselves. These are the “five basic Buddhist practices”:

- (1) Love life and living beings; be as non-violent as possible.
- (2) Do not take the not-given; give freely what can truly benefit others.
- (3) Respect your person and that of others; sex is best served with lovingkindness.
- (4) Tell the truth in a timely and beneficial manner; above all, be true to ourselves.
- (5) Do not take any substance or indulge in any activity that is addictive and dulls the mind: for, our body-mind is the vehicle to inner peace and awakening.

The safest place for the Dharma is in our own hearts.

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² See <http://www.buddhanet.net/cmdsg/layguide.htm>, or download from <http://enlight.lib.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-MISC/misc140954.pdf>.

³ In the **Dakkhina Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 142), the Buddha prophesizes that “In the future, Ānanda, there will be members of the religious lineage who are ‘yellow-necks,’ immoral, of evil nature” (M 142.8/3:256) = SD 1.9. People will give them gifts for the sake of the Sangha.” In Pali, *kāsāva, kaṇṭha*, ie those who ritually don the saffron robe, and when they remove them, leave the saffron taints on their necks. The Commentary says that they will go about with only a piece of yellow cloth around their necks or arms, and will support their wives and children by engaging in trade and farming, etc (MA 5:74 f).