

When the Student Is Ready

Finding the right spiritual teacher begins with knowing

what you need at each stage in your development.



SHE WAS A 28-YEAR-OLD, smart, “together” American woman who was committed to developing her spiritual life through the eight limbs of yoga and had become a popular yoga teacher. She was also devoted to her swami. He was her teacher, and insofar as she could, she practiced surrendering to him, responding to his guidance as one who deserved absolute love and trust. He was her guru. One day he surprised her with a mind-numbing announcement: She was to marry a man who was also a devoted follower of the swami. She had met this man, who lived in a different part of the United States, only twice. He seemed nice enough, but

why should she marry him—or any other man she did not know? What about shared dreams, compatibility, and most of all, love? The swami assured her they matched and would be happy together. She argued with him, voicing all the reasons why it did not make sense.

Yet the swami was insistent, and he was her teacher. The woman was trying to free herself from her ego-driven self-reference, so how was she to interpret this situation? Was her resistance one more act of egoism, or was the teacher off base this time?

Upon hearing of this woman’s dilemma, most yogis become impatient and indignant. “How could she possibly take such a suggestion seriously?” they ask me. Maybe you find yourself a little agitated just reading about it. Western students have a natural resistance to authority; therefore, power issues often arise in teacher-student relationships. Most likely the idea of some guy in an orange robe telling you who to marry is so far past your rebellion point that it is hard for you to even examine your mind’s reaction to this idea. But the yogi had much to learn in taking the swami’s request seriously. She saw how attached she was to the preferences of her ego and how those preferences evolved into overwhelming desires. She could see that living from the deepest part of her being meant not trusting those desires or someone else’s desire, even her teacher’s. Instead, what was needed was listening to her heart’s deepest intention toward life and staying true to it.

The Need for a Teacher

IT IS VERY DIFFICULT to develop along one of the traditional spiritual paths without the benefit of teachings and at least occasional guidance and instruction. If you are on an inner journey, the question inevitably arises: Do you need a teacher, and how do you find one? A teacher is someone who helps you sort out for yourself what is of essence in life from that which is transitory. A teacher does this by informing, challenging, and setting an example for students, based on what he has learned in his own practice.

If you are going to study intensely with a teacher, you will sooner or later find yourself struggling with the kinds of doubts the woman felt when the swami told her to marry her fellow yogi. It may not be so extreme, but how you embrace the teaching will be just as significant because you are learning how to respond wisely to all you will ever feel in your life.

So how do you know where to place yourself in regard to this question of finding a teacher? Maybe the answer is that you only need to be sincere in your practice, staying grounded in the intention that motivates you to practice. There is an ancient saying: "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear." After years of skepticism, I've come to see the truth in these words. Most people begin their spiritual journey in response to encountering hardship and loss or through experiencing a sense of dissatisfaction with life. Out of difficulty comes the need to find greater meaning in life than pursuing immediate ego satisfaction. This in turn leads to a search for what really matters. Sooner or later you come to the realization that to avoid being lost in the endless wants, negative emotions, and confusion that arise in the mind, some sort of a spiritual discipline is necessary, whether it is prayer, meditation, study, service, or a combination of these four.

The examined spiritual life—be it in a Catholic retreat center, an Indian ashram, or a Buddhist meditation center—begins with finding a style of practice that appeals to you, then developing the discipline of mind that allows understanding to arise. Inevitably there is resistance, confusion, and confrontation with your own emotional issues. The role of a teacher is to aid you in this inner process, not to make your decisions for you but to empower you in your own journey of discovery. You may well go through a number of systems and teachers before finding a practice that works for you. Even when you have found a practice, it may be years before you develop a close relationship with a teacher. The Dalai Lama, whose Tibetan lineage places great importance on the teacher as a guru, says that one should study with a teacher a

number of years before making a commitment of allegiance.

In looking for a teacher, it may be helpful to reflect on the three different kinds of value a teacher can contribute to your practice. First, the teacher can be a provider of knowledge. Finding your spiritual path requires practical knowledge just as much as daily life does, only the knowledge is more subjective and elusive. A second way that a teacher provides assistance is through inspiration, which is different from knowledge, although knowledge itself can be inspirational. Ideally, at some point you find a teacher who both has knowledge and is a source of inspiration. Practice is hard, and letting go of worldly desires is very difficult, so it is of great value to work with someone whose life or practice inspires you. Better still is finding a teacher who believes in you just as you believe in her or him.

The third category of value that a teacher provides is what's described as transmission of direct understanding, which does not occur primarily through the intellect. Many people don't believe that there's any such thing as transmission. It is also hard to explain exactly what is meant by transmission, since each of the traditions has its own interpretation. Yet many yogis report having an experience with a teacher that was beyond knowledge and inspiration, in which there was a direct transfer of understanding that as far as they could tell did not rely on the intellect. Often a yogi will spend years after such an experience coming to terms with what was felt. But until such an experience is integrated, the transmission may seem more like internalization of the teacher's good intent rather than authentic inner development.

Provider of Knowledge

THE TEACHER-STUDENT relationship isn't supposed to be perfect. You can be quite disappointed with the teacher while also finding his teaching valuable. I once studied for a time with a teacher who had an abusive personality. But he had knowledge that was very stimulating to me. His emotional volatility, meandering teaching style, and self-glorification were con-

stantly challenging.

Yet when I was in his presence, I mostly experienced gratitude, for without him and the center he had created I would have had nowhere to practice. I seldom complained about him during the time I was studying with him, doing so always seemed ungracious and disrespectful of the teaching.

Of course, I also did not sing his praises, allowing my silence to speak for itself. My contact with him was mostly with other yogis in a group setting. I learned a great deal that was crucial, and from this experience I learned how to wisely utilize a teacher when I finally found one that was more suitable for my temperament.

Currently, I study with a meditation teacher I find to be both knowledgeable and inspirational, who tells how he was so taken with his own teacher upon first meeting him that he essentially stayed with him from that day until the teacher died many years later. He absolutely adored his teacher although he also saw his shortcomings. He once went to the teacher with a list of his faults and suggestions as to how the teacher could improve. His teacher listened to the complaints then said: "Well, I am glad to know that you are not confusing me with your own perfect Buddha nature." What a wonderful teaching for us all.

As a student often you will not be able to immediately perceive the real lesson in an instruction, story, or interaction. Understanding requires cultivation, repetition, and reflection. When your mind is locked, it may well be that the best way for a teacher to help you gain clarity is through creating so much confusion or frustration that your mind finally lets loose. This is never fun and can seem so illogical that you doubt the truth of it.

It is also true that a teacher may not know what you need to learn. It is up to you to periodically check in with yourself and see if it feels as though you are learning what you need to know. Remember, it is how you work with the teachings that determines the unfolding of your journey. As the Buddha taught, the teacher is only pointing to the moon; it is your task to find your direct experience of the moon.

There is a distinction that is sometimes made between providing “knowledge” and providing “instruction” with the expectation that much less is required of a teacher who is giving instruction than of one who is providing knowledge. In the beginning stage of practice, the best combination may be finding a teacher who provides great instruction and someone who is incredibly inspiring. Your time for receiving knowledge may not yet have arrived. This may seem disappointing at first, but it is actually quite freeing just to be a beginner and allow the practice to unfold at its own pace.

Source of Inspiration

A TEACHER MAY HAVE a love and enthusiasm for spiritual truth that becomes your inspiration. Or a teacher may display a lot of interest in your practice, and the energy of this attention inspires you to keep going. You may feel “seen” by a teacher, and this acknowledgement provides the faith in yourself you need to persevere. The teacher may seem to dwell in such a state of love for others that you feel safe and accepted for the first time in your life.

With any of these experiences, the sense of meaning that arises should not be understood as an end but as a beginning for your own hard, slow work of coming to the place where you generate this experience for yourself. A common pitfall with inspirational teachers is that yogis forget the inner call and only look outward to the teacher.

I was not someone who easily took to working intensely with a teacher. I knew that I needed one, but which one? I was too aware of the human flaws of each teacher I met. Accustomed to relying on my own counsel, I sought knowledge from one teacher after another without extending the trust that would have left me feeling vulnerable. I made many mistakes along the way because I didn't have a teacher to help me interpret my experiences at key junctures in my life. I was finally able to overcome this difficulty only when I encountered a teacher who was so dedicated to his own liberation that teaching was secondary. The key for

me was the teacher's sincerity and the integrity of his daily practice. He was an inspiring model. I wanted my practice and my life to be in accord, just as his was. He did not have to be perfect in his knowledge or behavior for me to be vulnerable to him.

A good teacher can inspire by her manner of teaching or by the state of her own inner being as reflected in her words and actions. She may create an atmosphere in the room that stimulates your practice, or she may be such a great listener or storyteller that it kindles your enthusiasm. It may be the teacher's life story or specific experiences that inspire you and keep you going in your practice.

Some yogis tend to be drawn to charismatic teachers who evoke the imagination of practice, like a great movie evokes the imagination of the audience, without the yogi doing the work necessary to have the experience itself. Having a relationship with such a teacher can be harmful to your inner development. The illusion of insight arises from the intense emotions you experience, but the foundations of your practice and your life are not really being transformed.

Because of the tendency to glorify the ego, you are always called on to honestly work through the motivation of your spiritual seeking, owning the fears, the escapism, and the spiritual ambitions that are inevitably there. Gradually, you begin to uncover your heart's spontaneous yearning to be aligned with the ground of life itself. Sometimes it is hard to believe that this innocent, sincere yearning is in you, but it is there, and a teacher's job is to hold that faith with you and help you find it for yourself. This is why it is so beautiful when the teacher-student relationship has truly unconditional love as its intention, no matter the bumps and imperfections of both parties. Sometimes yogis feel hurt over a kind of impersonal feeling that they detect in their teacher, but it is actually the teacher who has too much personalness, too much “I-ness,” that leads to the various boundary problems of neglect or inappropriateness.

Means of Transmission

YOU DO NOT get to choose the experience of transmission. It is something that happens to you. There have been notable teachers with whom a number of students have reported experiences of transmission, including Neem Karoli Baba, Ramana Maharshi, and Poonjaji.

However, many people who studied with these teachers felt no such transmission. Transmission is most commonly described as a deep feeling of unconditional love, which is so intense it brings about inner change. But rather than look for intense experiences of transmission, I suggest you develop your subtle awareness of how you are altered when you experience moments of fresh understanding or moments of freedom from your usual fears and wants. These subtle moments of clarity are genuinely transformational when fully received. I am not referring to the big emotional releases of anger or fear that often occurs in practice. I mean the small, quiet, inside-your-own-mind-and-heart experiences in which you are grounded in the wonder of life's unfolding. It is through these moments, most of which go unnoticed, that your life is slowly reconfigured. Every wise teacher fosters these moments in you, whether through knowledge, inspiration, or even transmission.

The Inner Teacher

WHEN YOU FIND a teacher with great knowledge or who is inspirational, it's worth investing in the relationship, and usually this is challenging. Your teacher may not be readily available; still it is up to you to find a way to be in his presence. You may not have much personal contact with your teacher for a long time. It is surprising how little difference such contact makes compared to taking your teacher inside as an inner image. It does matter, however, that you have the exposure to really understand what is being taught, but you can do this through books and tapes and studying with other teachers whom the teacher has taught. You can study with a number of teachers while still staying rooted to one primary teacher. Ironically, in the early years of practice,

your teacher need not know you have selected him; you can just let events unfold without trying to be in control.

The teacher-student relationship is just as difficult and frustrating from the teacher's perspective as from yours. Some teachers refer to "How do I find a teacher?" as one of the "dreaded questions." The needs and expectations of students are so varied that anything that is said can be misleading or become a stimulus for spiritual ambition. There is much disagreement about the proper role of a spiritual teacher among the various traditions. Even within the different schools of a particular tradition, there are sharply divergent views. In some instances the teacher's role is held lightly—the teacher is a "spiritual friend"—while in others it is deemed absolutely essential to have a root-guru for there to be the possibility of spiritual liberation. Then there is the problem of ambitious teachers of all religious, psychological, and inner-growth stripes saying, "Choose me, choose me! I know the answers!" without acceptance from the larger teaching community. It is because of these difficulties that many teachers are reluctant to answer your questions about finding a teacher. This is yet another reason for you to be slow and steady in your pursuit of a teacher.

When the Teacher Appears

IDEALLY YOUR teacher will be a port for some of the storms in your life, but there is no guarantee of this. The power and responsibility for your practice lie within you. With clarity of intention, integrity of practice, and genuine humility, you are able to separate the teachings from the teacher. Then if the teacher disappoints you by not having what you need, by not being interested in you, even by acting in an abusive fashion, you survive. You are intact and able to move on because you have not forsaken yourself.

The woman who was told by her swami to marry another devotee is an inspiration in integrity and strength of intention, even if you disagree with the decision she made. After many struggles, she acquiesced to the swami's

direction and agreed to marry the other yogi. To do so required the courage to overcome her fears and attachments without abandoning authority for her own life. Although filled with doubt and distrust, she came to believe that the practice of surrendering was more important than all the reactions of her mind, so she decided to go forward. Imagine yourself doing this; think of what it would require.

She never gave up her own judgment or the right to assert herself. She married the man and they began a long, slow process of becoming friends and companions, always keeping dignity and respect for the other first and foremost. In time, she decided the swami was no longer the right teacher for her, so she left—but she stayed married.

Eventually, she had a child with the man. Later they divorced and are now good friends, raising together the child they both love.

So was she wrong to have given in to the swami, and was he distorted in his judgment? Who can say? Maybe she would never have had a child without the swami's intervention. There could be a thousand other "maybes." In the end, what matters is that she was able to surrender her preferences without surrendering her inner authority. For this reason, her life has unfolded in a beautiful way with her child and her teaching, and she is still walking the path of sacred inquiry. She still studies with various teachers and tells her students that receiving the teachings are a necessity.

She reports that she has no need to make the swami or herself right or wrong. She is just grateful that the integrity of her practice kept her aligned with her own intention throughout her many trials. Like her, it is your task to use your practice to clarify the ground of your true intention. There will come the day when your teacher will appear, and you will be ready. ■

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