

Evaluating a Spiritual Teacher

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Sitting in the Tokyo airport on my way back home from India I was feeling disappointed, disillusioned and somewhat sad. For the second time in this life I had realized that a spiritual teacher who I was following was disingenuous. I had been lied to and conned and I was finished with this “spiritual teacher”. I questioned if there were any true teachers- anywhere. As I measured my predicament I wondered how many other seekers of truth had found themselves in this situation? It was then that I began to consider, and in no uncertain terms the requirements of a teacher. This experience in the airport was the catalyst for later compiling a list of specific requirements which a spiritual teacher should and should not possess. This list is the topic of this presentation.

As you read below you will see that I have very specific ideas of what a teacher is and is not. However, I do not have all the answers and for many I may have no answers. I am not a sage but merely a seeker on the path who has learned that the path can contain the treacherous. I hope my story and points can keep you from some of the spiritual landmines which I have seen and sometimes detonated. It is my heartfelt wish that you have or may find a true teacher.

Spiritual seeking has the not-so-modest goal of revealing nothing less than the Divine, the Truth or Ultimate Reality. For far less modest goals than this we would not dare attempt their achievement without a qualified teacher. Our universities and the degrees they confer bear witness to this fact. For example, we would never attempt to acquire the skills of a professional airline pilot with mere reading, nor would we dare take instructions from someone who himself had never flown. Common sense requires that we approach subjects such as aviation or any number of other technical subjects with the help of skillful teachers and tried and true curricula. Why then would we assume that the highest and arguably the most difficult of all goals could be achieved without a teacher or guide?

The West, in spite of its heavy reliance on rationality, seems to have missed this inescapable logic, for more often than not in the West the spiritual seeker avoids any type of spiritual teacher. Our Western independence and individuality play a prominent role in this phenomenon: in the West we hold the social notion sacrosanct which tells us that all men are equal and therefore that social hierarchy should be disdained and authority held in suspicion. Social hierarchy and its attendant respect for authority seems to be a hallmark of eastern cultures and is pivotal in those cultures' relationship with spiritual teachers. Conversely, many of us in the West have a difficult time submitting to spiritual seniority with its implied authority and implicit suppression of individuality. Fear of being submissive (and the consequent damage to one's pride) and the foreign concept of spiritual teacher (*guru*) are common reasons for avoiding the formal teacher-disciple relationship. Add to this the fact that the media—often accurately—depicts “spiritual teachers” as charlatans and it is not hard to see why most western seekers are reluctant to seek such guidance.

To seek for the truth sounds simple, but once the search begins the enormity of the task begins to emerge. A guide or teacher is not only desirable but, practically speaking, a necessity. The Persian mystic Rumi warns: “ Seek a perfect Master, for without the Master this journey abounds with perils, lures, and pitfalls...without the protecting hand of the Master...you will be bewildered.” And in The Zen Teachings of Bodhidharma, an aspirant is admonished: “ If you don't find a teacher soon, you'll live this life in vain. It's true, you have the buddha-nature. But without the help of a teacher you'll never know it. Only one person in a million becomes enlightened without a teacher's help.” In the East, it is axiomatic that a genuine teacher is required if the seeker is to make any real progress.

A truism holds in this field as well as others that the student cannot learn more than the teacher knows. But the problem in the spiritual field is that it is difficult to know what the teacher knows. Unlike other areas of knowledge, where certificates of competence such as the Ph.D. are issued and serve as bona fide evidence of accomplishment, there are

no such certificates in the spiritual realm. To make matters worse, self-proclaimed spiritual teachers usually are neither spiritual nor teachers.

I am reminded here of a “spiritual teacher” from India whose web site advertises him as profoundly enlightened. I had occasion to experience first hand just how profoundly enlightened he was. On a trip to India I was asked by one of his American disciples to deliver a parcel to him as he was in India at that time. For customs purposes I insisted upon knowing the contents of the parcel. A partial list included: “soma vision” (a personal electrical strobe light which could be worn as a pair of glasses), and a pair of Nike running shoes. I suspected then I might not be meeting with one of the spiritually elect. Confirming this was a list of enlightenment courses, which were enumerated on the Swami’s web site. The courses increased in cost as the degree of enlightenment sought increased. As I recall, you could buy a fairly high degree of enlightenment for around \$900.00. The swami was disappointed that we were unwilling to donate to his organization. All in all my wife and I had a good chuckle. Only later did we realize the damage this man was doing: people actually follow this man for spiritual advice, thereby exposing themselves to a form of psychological damage so subtle that it is difficult to correct.

I began to realize then that choosing a Spiritual teacher for many is not considered a decision requiring intellectual deliberation and discrimination. Such casual choosing usually has the not so surprising result. That result tends to be disappointment and disillusionment. As such careless seekers will tell you: caution and careful consideration are important in this search. In the West we are not familiar with the concept of a “spiritual master” and even less familiar with what to expect from such a person. Little is known or written on how one should assess a teacher.

Where to begin? Having garnered the experiences of many seekers, as well as personal interactions with numerous would-be teachers (and also considering interactions with persons I personally believe to be genuine spiritual masters), several observations emerge. I always consider that anyone can claim to be a spiritual adept, and unfortunately

most claimants are counterfeit. For every 100 so-called masters only a few are genuine. There is a strong motivation these days to go into the guru-business: it's profitable and brings prestige. And it's easy to get into this business. In India, for example, the purchase of saffron robes and a few sets of used beads are all that's needed to start such a business. In the West it's a little more complicated (robes, for example, are not as appealing as, say, a medicine man's herb-bag hanging around one's neck). If you can say that you are a channel for some archangel, all the better. I think you get my drift of how easy it is for the unethical to be tempted by this easier way to make a living.

Many people can be lured to follow a spiritual counterfeit. I say "many" because I include in the counterfeits the Jimmy Bakers of the world as well. I personally have been fooled twice. Seeking a spiritual master is an arduous pursuit filled with traps, snares, emotional investment and often heartbreak. Many will give up after realizing they've been deceived.

So how can one tell if a master is genuine? Actually there is a wealth of information on this subject, most of it from the Eastern scriptures or Indian masters and, of course, some is simple common sense.

I would caution the reader that the following are my opinions only. I have used these in my own seeking and am not saying these are the only way or even the right ways to qualify a teacher. I am saying that they seemed to work for me. If I sound a bit like I'm preaching from the pulpit please excuse me, my intention is to submit these as ideas not dogmas.

I would consider several early warning signals which may be applied well before deciding to follow a teacher. First: Paying money for spiritual guidance is a violation of fundamental spiritual principles. In my opinion taking money is the number one "no-no" in conveying this knowledge. If you are asked to pay money to learn a spiritual path, walk away--no run away! The rule of the transmission of spiritual teachings is that one does not charge a fee for such knowledge. Most established traditions confirm this. One

may be asked to alter your lifestyle slightly or to take up a different diet or to commit time to practice the spiritual exercises. These are the true payments. For the payment is *from you* to the Ultimate Truth, not from your bank account to someone else's.

How a spiritual teacher handles money will tell me a lot about the worthiness of the teacher. Which brings us to the second point: a teacher who lives lavishly is suspect. Numerous luxury cars, large estate-type living, multiple "retreats," and opulent offices are more often associated with the spiritually challenged than with the spiritually advanced. These trappings are especially ominous if they were purchased from "contributions" of his/her followers. Charities, humble ashrams or headquarters housing older vehicles are more desirable when looking for the accoutrements of a master. Less emphasis on money is better in the spiritual realm of masters. Optimally, the teacher should live on his own income which is not derived from his followers. A true teacher only gives, he does not take. The fact is we have nothing a true spiritual master wants. If he takes contributions and lives a lavish life, then he "needs" followers to support his lifestyle. This type of need is a red flag signaling that this person will lead one to a spiritual dead end or worse.

Third: those would be teachers who promise immediate spiritual riches are questionable. The West has become accustomed to immediate gratification in the material world. We have fast food, fast cars, fast jets, high-speed everything. Why shouldn't we expect the same in the spiritual field? Those unscrupulous "spiritual adepts" wise to our thirst for instant gratification gladly advertise the same in the spiritual realm, usually for a fee which is equal to the desired speed. After all, higher speed always costs more, right? The reality is, spiritual progress is something that requires a lot of hard work, usually spanning a lifetime. It requires consistent, diligent work. There should be definite, observable results for this work, but they probably won't be immediate. Trust a teacher who recognizes the *real* price of the spiritual venture.

I have found that in applying these first three screens, you have effectively filtered out the majority of the disingenuous teachers.

You may have other initial evaluation tools of your own, but generally if the teacher can pass these first three tests then he is worth looking into further. Once I have accepted a guide, I continue evaluating him as long as I am his student. Below are additional danger signals which usually are not discovered until after accepting a spiritual teacher.

Doubtless, the easiest way to recognize a false spiritual teacher is to examine his moral life. Dishonesty and lying are absolutely unacceptable from a spiritual teacher. In fact any type of unethical or immoral behavior is my prompt to leave.

It seems easy enough to recognize unethical or immoral behavior, but these types of behavior are rarely overt and generally are obscured under some form of an exalted justification. For example I was once told that it is permissible to deceive others in order to persuade them to join the “spiritual community” because after all I will in the end be helping that person. If one actually finds oneself in this situation, it will probably sound incredibly convincing. However, I always remember that deceit is never a trait of a true teacher. Integrity is the litmus test of the spiritual life, and therefore all the more so of a spiritual *teacher*.

There is more than one case of spiritually challenged teachers taking sexual advantage of their followers. It is often later revealed that those who were sexually preyed upon were told that they were specially chosen to have this sexual experience and that it is solely for their benefit and greater good. From the outside this is obvious sexual misbehavior bordering on rape, but an insider, who is psychologically invested, may buy into this reasoning. Think of the difficulty of admitting that not only were you sexually used but that your entire spiritual paradigm is wrong. It takes a strong person to face up to this.

I do not personally tolerate lying and stealing in any form nor do I tolerate deceit. I know of an organization whose spiritual misfit of a teacher routinely had his disciples smuggle electronic equipment across European borders to avoid import duty. The rationale was that since this was work for the divine it was okay to dispense with the more earthly rules

such as import duties. This is easy to justify, since spiritual law transcends man's law. True enough, out of context. However, I try not to be fooled by such crafty justifications for transgressing the law. See it for what it is: theft. Maharishi Mehi of Bihar adds the additional danger of following a morally corrupt teacher when he says: "...in following an immoral teacher the aspirant would have the difficult task of not going astray, much less advancing on the spiritual path."

Immense egos which are easily bruised are sure signs that it's time to abandon this particular "path" and resume the search. A true spiritual master has such power that it is not even imaginable to most of us. But it seems that an equal or greater degree of humility comes with such power. While a master may feign anger (and it is usually obvious), he will never banish an aspirant who has been rebuked. I have seen an aspirant who has been banished permanently because he inadvertently bruised the `teachers` ego. A true Master should not have lingering anger or a colossal ego. The words of Kabir, the 15th century Indian Master summarize the above: "Surrender yourself to him who has no worldly desires, who is devoted to God and who has foregone his ego. Do not take long in leaving the association of a false teacher for you will wander time and again and will not find the entrance to the Divine..."

The guise of the spiritual teacher is another possible clue as to his genuineness. The spiritual path has established traditional methods, manners and modes of operation. I avoid those would be masters who are self-styled (who have "invented" a method). Spiritual seeking is hard enough without following an untried path. The West tries to lend to spiritual seeking the same creativity that has made it great in the field of material wealth. Unfortunately, the rules change here and tradition, tried and true, are the best road to travel. While there are more than one genuine spiritual path, they are, nevertheless limited in number. I always avoid channelers, so-called psychics, shamans etc which do not come from an established path. If someone needs to employ themselves as a channel to connect to the "other side," they are not worthy of the title master. A true master effortlessly is connected not only to the "other side" but to the Divine as well. If a prospective teacher claims to be a messenger from some extraterrestrial place and offers

instant spiritual endowments then I consider him a spiritual forgery. I Look for the exits and get out. I Look for traditional lineages in traditional cultural settings. The cultural setting does not have to be mine but the teacher should be from a traditional lineage. Since spiritual paths are an area where the West clearly does not excel; why not utilize those traditional paths that have the endorsement of voyagers of those paths? To give an idea of what is meant by “traditional,” here is a list which I consider to be traditional lineages: the Hindu masters and traditions of India, Sufi traditions, Tibetan Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Orthodox Hesychasm, and certain recluse Catholic orders who employ structured meditation such as “The Jesus Prayer”. There are many others. A note of caution however is that having a teacher from such a tradition does not guarantee that such a teacher is qualified or even fit to teach a spiritual path.

Any teacher who claims to be enlightened or spiritually advanced in other ways- who makes known his supposed spiritual powers I assume to be unworthy. Humility and lack of ego is the hallmark of the spiritually advanced. The public display of “miracles” is to be especially suspect. I believe spiritual adepts do have the power to render miracles but rarely do so. A “teacher” who routinely performs miracles should be viewed dubiously. The following illustrates the point: Several years ago an acquaintance of my wife and I were attending the conference of World Religions in Chicago and came across a “yogi” who produced bhuti (ash taken from a sacrificial fire) out of thin air or so it seemed. My wife and I were both suspicious of this man- we kept our opinions to our self but made it a point to avoid him. Our acquaintance to our surprise was enthralled. At last he proclaimed “I have found a true spiritual adept”. We said nothing as it was doubtful we could have persuaded him otherwise. Our acquaintance proceeded to follow this “yogi” all over the United States. Finally, one day the “great Yogi” unexpectedly produced a lot of Bhuti which all could see had obviously come literally from up his sleeve. I suppose the “yogi” had a large decline in followers that day and included in the stampede was our acquaintance, who related to us that the “great yogi” was in fact not only not a master, but not even a competent magician. I might add that one of the clues to this fake was his very large ego.

Probably the most insidious of all false spiritual teachers are those who exploit their followers. On a material level the aspirant should not be asked by the teacher to give time or money. My wife and I often volunteer to give but I consider it unacceptable for a teacher to ask for money or ask for you to use your time in a way which will materially better the teacher.

If aspirants are asked to volunteer work, or worse work full time for a grossly underpaid salary, this is usually outright exploitation. Community living is an exception, of course; but lifestyles within the community should not differ much from disciple to teacher. Many genuine teachers are dependant on their followers to support their organization and there is nothing wrong with this. However, I would say the line is crossed when one is asked to give. Being asked to give even by a fellow aspirant should be carefully considered. If the teacher lives a lavish lifestyle with large well appointed residences, and expensive cars while his followers live a common lifestyle then he should be viewed with skepticism.

The reason we take a teacher is for the personal element of teaching which is so essential on this path. If the teacher is inaccessible then what is the point? Inaccessible teachers are like painted cakes- they look great but are useless in satisfying our hunger. If you cannot meet with a teacher face to face then how can you learn a spiritual path? Personal instruction with time for questions and answers is essential. An inaccessible teacher is the same as no teacher.

Speaking of meeting face to face with a teacher brings up the element of the quality of that meeting. In India this quality of meeting with a true teacher is known as dharshan. Dharshan are the spiritual emanations of the teacher which are received by the student. The result of this is a deep sense of peace which stays with the student for some time after his meeting with the teacher. This is not a mood but an actual spiritual transmission which the student experiences. For a dedicated student some form of this experience should be present after meetings with the teacher. Lack of this experience could as easily be from a lack of receptiveness as easily as from lack of an accomplished spiritual

teacher. So be careful on what conclusion you draw if this experience seems to be missing.

Finally, assuming one has had the good fortune of finding a moral and pure teacher does not necessarily mean that this teacher is himself an adept. Usually such a teacher will tell you that he is less than accomplished. This is not all bad: such honesty is not destructive of the spiritual life. Such a teacher can at least bring you up to his level. For many that would be more than they could hope for in a lifetime.

Walking away from a mistaken choice can be easy or extremely difficult, depending on the amount of emotional investment. In my own experience I do not think I have failed but rather that have learned another lesson which bring me closer to meeting my real spiritual preceptor.

So by now applying all of the above screens, tests and filters one effectively eliminate most of the candidates for the designation “spiritual guide”. That means as one is paging through the various magazines and periodicals which advertise the “spiritual elect” one can discount most of them. Pretty incredible-but true. The fact is true spiritual teachers are a rare commodity. Of course, from the true spiritual master’s standpoint, true aspirants are also rare. And only true aspirants will go to the trouble to qualify their teachers and to seek out the true teacher. It is a lot of work and requires a degree of discrimination. Guru Nanak a 15th century Master maintains:

*“Those whose guru is himself blind,
Pointless is their pursuit of Truth;
Without the guidance of the true guru
We cannot find the Name (Truth)”*

As one reads the sacred texts of the East, repeatedly the same theme is argued which tells of the necessity of a guide. The Upanishads assert:

“ Wisdom cannot be taught by one who has not attained wisdom.....The way to wisdom is through a teacher who has seen wisdom.....This sacred knowledge is not attained by reasoning; but it can be given by a true teacher.”

I guess this wouldn't be complete without mentioning what happened after my layover in Tokyo which I mentioned in the beginning. That was 19 years ago. As you might guess I did not give up. Eventually, I found a teacher who fits every definition above and continues to do this after being his student for 15 years. I found him through my lovely wife who is East Indian. He has been her teacher for the last 32 years and she can attest that he has always been consistent and pure. He is the embodiment of holiness. After 11 years I still find that he is a true teacher and exceeds all my expectations in this regard. His name is Santsevi of Bhagalpur, India and he is the true inspiration for this work.

Jai Guru