



So, You Don't Need a Guru?

By Sadhvi Parananda

I cannot count the number of times people have said to me that they have their own path and don't need a guru. Using all of the discipline I can muster not to say

"REALLY?" I simply say "Hmmm, good luck with that."

Equally amazing to me are people who have learned from a book or a video, or have taken a weekend class, and then started teaching. I often laugh to myself and think "that is the difference between a lawyer's mind and a marketing person's mind." It takes me a *very* long time before I admit I know *anything*.

The reality is that we only can teach what we know, and as Albert Einstein said:

"If you can't explain it to a six-year-old, you don't understand it yourself."

True knowing takes more than a minute (or a week or a year). We must marinate in the understanding. We must absorb the information so deeply that the knowing, along with experience and good decisions, becomes wisdom. Wisdom is not so easy to acquire without contact with someone who has mastered the information and can encourage and guide us as we absorb the energy of the knowing.

But so many times we are impatient. We are in a hurry and we think that if we have read it or experienced it once, then we have been there/done that. There is a vast difference between intellectually knowing information and having acquired wisdom with regard to the topic.



As times have changed, the way people accept information has shifted. In the academic world, the way people today accept information is greatly different from the past. A friend of mine who is a professor at an Ivy League College recently quoted to me a phrase that is reiterated at every faculty staff meeting they have:

"You no longer can be the sage on stage. You must be the guide beside"

So many college-aged students have no interest in the wisdom or experience of their gurus (professors).

They want someone to help them do what they want to do. How challenging it must be to make this adjustment in teaching style.

I also heard recently from a friend on the east coast that the really fine professors at Boson's most prestigious universities are not in favor of on-line courses. Though they cannot clearly articulate the reasons why, there is a sense that something magical happens when teachers and students meet in person. We would call that magic a form of shaktipat. Shaktipat is translated as "descent of grace." It is an energy transmission that happens through the touch, thought, word or sight of a master.

Our dear friend John Tyler Bonner, Princeton University's George M. Moffett Professor Emeritus of Biology, is one of the world's leading experts on cellular slime molds. I asked John for his view on gurus. His quote to me is this:



"It has struck me what I have learned from my visits to the ashram over the years and what I have learned as a recent resident, is the critical role played by a guru. It occurred to me there was a close parallel between the spiritual guru and my own biologist guru who was so important to me during my university years when I slowly became a real biologist. We first met when I took his botany course my freshman year. Professor William H. Weston ("Cap" to his older students) made a deep impression on me – so much so that I continued working as his student right through to my Ph.D. (with a slight intermission in the US Army). He was a person of great warmth and charm. He gave the feeling one was part of him and we were coping together, side-by-side. He let me go my own way, but he was always there when I needed him; supportive in the gentlest sort of way. He made me feel that when I grew up, I wanted to be like him. And I still find in myself saying and doing things today that I know come directly from my old guru, Cap Weston."

How beautifully articulated. John truly is a master in his field and he readily acknowledges the very important role of his guru/teacher/guide. Masters know and appreciate the source of their wisdom.

Today we have fitness gurus, sports gurus and financial gurus. We acknowledge that we need people to guide and support us. But somehow, spiritual gurus make people nervous, especially in the United States. If you want a perspective on mastery, think about how you would feel if you had learned something about music and you began to play...and then you met Mozart or Beethoven. If you were interested in improving, and you could talk these masters into letting you sit in their presence so that you could learn from them, what an amazing gift and blessing that would be.

Spiritual Gurus

In recent times there has been an endless amount of criticism and judgment about spiritual gurus. Actually, just being one seems to be cause for distrust. How sad, really. Though I recently have learned that throughout history -- in every culture -- disciples regularly have been upset with their gurus and have started their own movements, I am not sure whether this is because of the quality of the guru or because of the quality of the disciple!

Early on in my spiritual training I read a text translated by M.P. Pandit called Kulārṇava Tantra, which

was published in 1973. In that text it listed the types of disciples that a guru should desist from taking. The list went on and on for more than a page and a half. It dazzled me. From that I learned it is the quality of the disciple that matters. Maybe we should consider what kind of student we are before we start criticizing the quality of the guru with whom we study.

In the Indian tradition, disciples are distinguished from devotees. Devotees admire and respect gurus and receive great benefit from contact with them. A disciple (shishya) has asked to be a guru's student and has been accepted as such. Being accepted as a student is considered a great honor. It is a status that cannot be assumed as a given, because once the guru has accepted the student, then an energetic connection is established that is powerful and lasting.

Also in Indian culture we find that students touch the guru's feet. This happens because feet generally are considered unclean. The student accepts that the guru has walked on the earth and has human qualities. They acknowledge the human side and make no judgment about the worldly aspects. It is the energetic force that the guru (literally "dispeller of darkness") represents to which the student relates. Contact, alignment and flow is what is important. The spiritual connection and doorway to the divine has been opened and the student expresses gratitude and respect for this person's presence in their life.

Try this.

The next time you are upset or judgmental about your teacher, envision your life without that person. Envision your life if that energetic connection never took place. If you feel you are better off having never met, then carry on and pursue your own path. Be your own teacher, or find another one.

If, however, you acknowledge the gift you have received as valuable to your life, feel gratitude every single day for that energetic connection. Feel gratitude that someone cares enough to accept you as you are, warts, issues and all. By valuing that gift, the contact, alignment and flow will grow, and grace most definitely will be bestowed.

Namaste,

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