

Being a smart yoga student....

The 'student-guru relationship' features strongly in the yoga tradition. The long-term commitment to, and association with, one's guru is a feature of the lives of many well-known teachers responsible for 'bringing yoga to the west'. Pattabhi Jois, BKS Iyengar, and TKV Desikachar, to name just a few, all spent years of study, apprenticeship and mentorship with their guru, Krishnamacharya, who himself spent a prolonged period of study and servitude with his own teacher Yogeshwara Ramamohana Brahmachari.

Most modern yoga students do not have the opportunity to work in close association with such experienced teachers. Many of us behave like yogi shoppers. Buying time at this yoga shala or with this yoga teacher for a weekly class, weekend workshop or week-long 'retreat'. Even those of us fortunate enough to believe that we have found our guru, or at least have made a commitment to a key teacher, often spend relatively little time with that person, certainly in comparison with the Indian examples given above.

So does that mean that the yoga path is diluted or perhaps even unavailable to us? Perhaps it is worth considering the words of another yogi who went on to develop a practice form that has evolved into Buddhism in all its various manifestations – Gautama Siddhartha. In the Kalama Sutta the Buddha entreats his followers to explore and test his teachings for themselves in order to determine whether or not they are useful and helpful. Even more clearly perhaps his final words are recorded in the Mahaparinibbana Sutta as "...be a lamp unto yourself".

The Buddha encouraged all students to 'trust the teachings' but to engage and develop one's own understanding of them rather than taking anything on 'blind faith alone'. I would suggest that this is as applicable to yoga practice as it is to Buddhist dharma. I want to be clear that I am not advocating a 'free pass' to pick and choose those aspects of teaching that we prefer or that seem to suit us best. It is much more difficult but empowering path than that, for it requires us each to ultimately become our own guru. It requires us to use to best effect the extraordinary opportunities of access to varied and high quality information and teaching that our time and culture afford us.

There is another reason to support the idea that modern yoga requires a reconsideration of the role of the guru. Celebrity is a modern and, at times, insidious form of notoriety that has crept into the yoga world as a kind of 'guru substitute'. Unfortunately in our culture, celebrity in general is often more indicative of marketing and self-promotion than of quiet wisdom born of a lifetime of practice. However, most well known teachers are no doubt sincere and dedicated practitioners. The greater problem perhaps lies with us as students rather than with the celebrities themselves. Even in a short workshop attended by tens or even hundreds of students, we yogi shoppers seem keen to project on the teacher an authority and sense of connection that might reasonably only be expected in a long-term and far more personal guru–student relationship. I wonder how much this attitude is responsible for the development of a wide variety of difficulties or sources of confusion, for example:

- Useful 'rules of thumb' can become rigid and in some cases misleading or even harmful 'absolute truths'
- A suggestion to one student dealing with a particular issue can become a 'general rule' that others try in vain to apply to themselves or their own students
- A teacher's personal experience can be portrayed and/or interpreted as universally applicable or true even though their circumstances may be wholly or largely different to those of the yoga student

At its extreme, scenes from Monty Python's 'The Life of Brian' spring to mind! Given the possibility of such misinterpretation and confusion, whoever the teacher, their reputation, their 'YouTube' notoriety etc, a wise stance for a yoga student to adopt might perhaps be this:

- Assess the sincerity and experience of the teacher with an open heart and if he or she seems someone who has something to offer then:

- Surrender early judgment and intellectual challenge as far as possible. That is, assume everything is worthy of inquiry (this is very different to 'assume everything is fact' or indeed to the scientific principle of 'test to destruction')
- Over a period of time (and in some cases this may need to be months or years rather than days!) use our own intelligence and awareness to review the truth and results of such inquiries from our perspective. This is more taxing than simply taking everything on faith but much more authentic in that what we understand we have understood for ourselves.

Of course, if we do not get a sense of sincerity and experience, then we should perhaps proceed with greater caution and scrutiny with regard the teachings. This is perhaps especially the case where we are 'told' something as opposed to being 'invited to consider'. Absolutism is often a poor indicator of wisdom!

Additionally, even if we are lucky enough to work with a good teacher in the longer term, the same principles should probably apply. The key difference is that we might reasonably expect a long-term regular teacher, to begin to know our individual physical and mental tendencies. A skillful teacher in such a relationship can begin to be more personalised in their guidance and assistance. As smart students, here too we need to begin to recognize what is a general truth and what is personal to us at this particular moment. Such recognition means that we can be clear in our communications to others and that we can remain aware of the possibility of us growing out of any particular modification, practice, principle etc.

It is undoubtedly true that good teachers are essential to a student's development and understanding. However, it is also true that great teachers are those that help us see and learn for ourselves. If we can begin by learning to be a smart student, with help and time we can aspire to become a great student.

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