

The Seekers Forum Transcript

Spiritual Commitment Versus Escapism: An Interview with Yogacharya Ellen Grace O'Brian

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The Seekers Forum
Awaken To Your Life

Welcome to The Seekers Forum Guest Interview series. Today Mark speaks with Yogacharya Ellen Grace O'Brian, known as Uma to her students. She is the spiritual director for the Center of Spiritual Enlightenment at San Jose, California. Uma was ordained to teach in 1982 by Roy Eugene Davis, a direct disciple of Paramahansa Yogananda who brought the teachings of Kriya Yoga from India to the West. She is the author of numerous books including, "Living the Eternal Way: Spiritual Meaning and Practice in Everyday Life." Mark talked to Uma about the importance of commitment and discernment in the seeker's life. Now, here's Mark.

MM: Hello, Uma. Welcome to The Seekers Forum. It's great to talk to you today, thank you for taking the time. I'd like to ask you about the question of spiritual commitment versus escapism. We live in an age where there are so many choices and a lot of seekers tend to shop around and have trouble committing to a single practice. What is your attitude toward this?

EO: Well, first Mark, thank you so much for your invitation. It's such a delight to connect with you and to be on your program. This topic is very dear to my heart. Let me start by saying that both shopping around and committing have their place. In the beginning of our spiritual journey, very often, it's important to look around, to investigate and to learn about the paths that are available, and discern: what is your right path, what is your right way? Most importantly, who is the teacher for you? Once we find that, the best way is to then stay in one place and to cease wandering. On the path of yoga, yoga is about clarifying our consciousness, our hearts, our minds and bodies as well. Any constant movement is counterproductive to that long-term goal.

MM: And how do we know when we have found the right practice?

EO: I can only speak from my experience. From my experience, it was a matter of meeting my teacher and hearing the teachings in a way that spoke to my heart, my mind and to my soul. I had been searching for a long time like many people do, but I always felt like I was having to "edit out" things that didn't work for me. When I met my guru, Roy Eugene Davis, who was a direct disciple of Paramahansa Yogananda, I just had the experience that I could relax. I didn't have to fight with what he was teaching, it felt very familiar to me at a full level and I felt a deep attunement. Then of course, [in our search], we find that connection and to me, it was like a homecoming. It was a felt experience, an intuitive experience. Plus, my mind was there too. The discernment needs to be used. It's not just that you fall in love with someone, you have to discern: is this the right path?

And then, we start in. To practice what we have heard and to prove it out in our own experience, that's the call of yoga; not to just follow anyone blindly, but to test out what we are learning in the laboratory of our own experience. When we do that, when we begin to have some experiences ourselves, then our experience is verified.

MM: After you committed to your guru and to this path, were there no doubts left for you?

EO: I wouldn't say that there were no doubts left for me. I would say that there was a shift in my perspective that allowed me to deal with my doubts in a more productive way. What I mean by that is that when we find a path and commit ourselves to it and we're ready for that, when we have what our yogi's call a deep, burning desire, that was there for me.

Once we find the path and we commit ourselves to it, there is a shift that occurs in us from looking outwardly for the solution, for the key to our happiness and our security. We begin to develop our ability to follow the inner way. It wasn't that I didn't have any more questions or doubts, it was that my focus shifted from outer to inner. I began to do the inner work rather than looking outside for some solution.

MM: That's an important point, one that folks, in the beginning, don't always understand. In the beginning, we're looking for salvation; we're looking for someone to answer all our questions. In a way we're looking for the practice to do it for us. This seems to be an important distinction you're making, from looking outward to begin to look inward.

Uma, let me ask you, did you look for a long time before you found your guru?

EO: Well, I guess that depends on how we see that. For me, I was thirty years old when I found my guru, or just about to turn thirty. That could be a long time. Even at that point, I didn't actually know I was looking for a teacher. It's very interesting. Through the grace of God, if our yearning is strong enough, there is that teaching that when the student is ready the teacher will appear, certainly that was true in my case. I had a readiness to embark upon the path.

At that juncture, my motivation was sorrow, suffering, feeling that something was missing in my life. Later I discovered this is absolutely common, it's a primary motivation for people to get on the path and find a teacher. That was my motivation, I didn't really know I was looking for a guru or a teacher but one appeared as a universal response to my prayer which was very inarticulate but heartfelt: 'Help me, help me.'

MM: I know that prayer. (Mark and Ellen Grace giggle softly.)

EO: I think most of us do.

MM: Had you tried a lot of practices before coming to a guru, that is what I wanted to know.

EO: No. Not really "practices." I had gone on to college and had read widely. I think my first exposure to Vedanta, in an interesting way, was through the writings of Alan Watts. I had read pretty widely but had not entered in from sadhana. I think that's what was missing for me.

MM: So, it was more intellectual for you and you hadn't yet brought it into your practice then?

EO: Exactly and that's because I didn't know how to do that. I think that's a critical component, that sometimes, we're caught in that whirlwind of what the yogis call samsara, the suffering of the world. We're going round and round, we're collecting books, maybe even collecting teachers, trying to find a way out of that suffering. But until we find the key to make that turn to the inner way, the way that shows us how to look inside, how to discover the divine self within, then I think there is that tendency to just keep shopping. What is needed is a way in.

All of the mystical traditions provide that key. Most often, you need to get this from a teacher who can share consciousness with you, who can share the practices with you and be an inspiration for beginning to turn your life around, from the outer to the inner.

MM: You make an important point. I want to ask you about this popular cliché now that tells us we need to separate the teacher from the teaching. In other words, don't look too close at the teacher's own behavior and just listen to what he or she says. What is your attitude toward that?

EO: I have a couple thoughts about this, Mark. There is wisdom in the adage that says look to the teachings and look to your own practice, and look to your own self. That's where the work is really done. The teacher can't do it for us although the teacher is a bridge for us. We do have to look to the teachings and not the teacher in that regard.

I wrote a little saying, '*The ticket to enlightenment is not transferable.*' A teacher can't give it to us. We have to immerse ourselves in the teachings and practices we are given. Then there is the element that all teachers are human, regardless of how revered or enlightened they are; they are human beings. They're all going to have human characteristics and flaws of one sort or another, so we have to keep that in mind. I'm not of the school of thought that one should ignore ethical violations of the teacher, for example. We have to take our hearts with us into our relationship with our teachers, but also our minds. We love the divine nature that we revere in our teachers, in the teachings, and importantly, in ourselves, we also recognize they are human beings and we treat them with respect. We also hold them accountable as we would any other human being. I think many of the problems Westerners got into with gurus had to do with leaving their discernment at the door.

MM: And when the teacher is not walking the talk, is that a sign for us to look elsewhere?

EO: I think it depends on what it is. If there is something egregious, it needs to be addressed. Sometimes, a student won't understand a teacher's behavior. I think it's useful if there is some way to be able to ask about the confusion, where a student can say, 'I'm confused about this behavior and this is the teaching, can you help me understand?' Isn't it an ideal situation where one can have a respectful conversation about how the teachings

are to be understood? Sometimes it can be a point where the student doesn't understand, other times it might be a break with the teaching where the student will have to discuss the point with the teacher.

MM: This is a hard question to answer, but I would like to put this out to you. A lot of folks are confused about when to know when a practice is no longer working for them. There is a period of having to take the teaching in, working it in the inside and integrating it into one's life and practice. How do we know when we've taken a practice as far as it can go and it's just not working for us? How do we know when it's a bad marriage or when it's our own resistance?

EO: That is an interesting and difficult question, isn't it? I think one of the reasons it's difficult is that we are all individuals and we have samskara imprints, we have karma. Although it is a universal nature to the path, it's also quite unique in terms in of how it is we work our way along the path of the inner life.

Let me go around the question a little bit, Mark, and say that I think there is great value in satsang in spiritual community. We can also talk to others on the path, our seniors as well as our gurus, and find out about the struggles or get suggestions. In the highest sense, there is always the teacher we can go to and say, 'What is this? I've been practicing and... nothing.' And sometimes it's that we have an idea of what we should be experiencing based on what we have seen as the experience of others, but it may be that what we think is not to be our experience and that our experience is exactly right for us.

There is a beautiful story about Sister Gyanamata, one of the senior disciples of Paramahansa Yogananda. She was, as her name indicates, a yogi of wisdom and her path was ashram, counseling other disciples. He had another disciple, James Jay Lynn, and Yogananda called him Saint Lynn. St. Lynn had very dynamic meditation experiences, and Sister Gyanamata did not.

When she got ready for her transition, Paramahansa was at her side and asked her if there was anything that she wanted at that point to complete her life experience. She said she had not had the sumati experiences in meditation and she wondered if she was missing that. His response to her was a reference to a story that I won't go into here, but his message to her was:

'Sister, you are already there. Why would you want to have an experience when you are already in the light of divine truth and wisdom?'

So, her way was different than the way of St. Lynn.

MM: So it has a lot to do with expectation.

EO: Yes, I think it does. And, when we are in a community, it can happen like that. We compare ourselves to what others are experiencing and that's an obstacle.

MM: What about when you have committed to a path, what is your attitude toward bringing other practices from other traditions into your hybrid, personal, spiritual life?

EO: I think that one needs to be dedicated to their particular path for a period of time, and usually years, until they're stable on that path, and then there's no problem with being inspired or enhanced by something that you might bring in from another path, a reading, literature from a another path or, trying a different form of meditation.

We have to understand that ultimately, a spiritual path is about freedom, that's an important thing to understand. But, we have to ask: What is real freedom? Is it real freedom to just move from system to system, from practice to practice? The yogis would say, 'No.' Is it real freedom to be so constrained that you feel you could never be inspired by anyone or anything that's not part of your lineage? That's not freedom either.

MM: So, it's the middle path then. (Mark and Uma both chuckle.)

EO: Yes. Somebody said that, Mark. (They both share another warm laugh here.)

MM: Let me ask you about discipline, Uma. When folks hear that word, they think of a tyrant with a whip. As a teacher, how do you define and teach discipline to your students? How should they think about it?

EO: That is such a beautiful question. I agree with you. It seems that students from the West, new to sadhana, do hear the word discipline as self- punishment or doing something that you don't want to do, because it's supposed to be good for you. The first thing I do is explore that. I ask questions of the students: 'What is your experience?' I invite students to re-define it, and what I think of as a deeper spiritual line; I define discipline as doing what pleases the soul.

MM: Beautiful.

EO: Yes, just beautiful, isn't it? It opens like a flower. It holds up to examination. The right kind of discipline, whether it's the right diet or a daily meditation practice or being kind in a relationship—all of those things are disciplines for us, are pleasing to the soul. They do bring us higher or deeper happiness. I have really focused on self-discipline as being that kind of self-care, if you want to say a self-love, but of course, that is the capital "S" Self-love.

MM: So, discipline may please the soul but it may not please the ego.

EO: Yes, this is true, very often in the short run it does not please the ego. In the long run it works out. The goal is to purify the ego and have the ego serve the soul.

MM: One last question. I want to ask you about spirituality and escapism. A lot of folks use the seeker's life to feel special and to feed their spiritual ego and to separate from their familiar context that truth and wisdom are always somewhere else, and the concept

that spiritual life is elsewhere, somewhere out there. What do you think about bringing spirituality home and the separation that can happen when deciding what is spiritual and what isn't?

EO: Paramahansa Yogananda said that it's an obstacle when we create a false separation between our material and spiritual existence. There is no separation. I will say, for me, as a devotee on the spiritual path, I came to the path hoping to escape. That was my hope. I thought, *Oh good, meditation and transcendence, get me out of 'here.'* Life is messy, relationships are messy, the body can be difficult. I thought, *Oh good. I can just meditate and leave it all behind.*

Of course, that's not the case. What I discovered, even initially, with that hopeful leap forward toward transcendence and escaping, I had the experience. Initially, yoga really did take me out of the WORLD, in that I shifted my focus from being so engaged in the world and started to develop an inner life, but I discovered as I think others do, the more you develop the inner life, the more you come into touch with your self, with others, with the world. My experience is that yoga took me out of the world but brought me back into the world in a very profound way. It didn't allow me to escape, it just transformed my relationship with the world. I think, perhaps, we might count that as one of the benefits of sticking to a path.

MM: So, the spiritual ego doesn't have a chance to get inflamed because we're integrating our practice with our everyday life.

EO: We have to. I find living in the world as a spiritual teacher, as a spiritual practitioner, is so beneficial. If I were on a mountaintop, I wouldn't have the richness of the encounters with people myself, with everything that shows me I still need to grow, I still need to wake up. Being in the world is so helpful because it gives us that sand to polish the oyster. There is that saying, 'It's easy to be a saint on a mountaintop.' Working on our spiritual practice in the world, now that is most efficient, I think. I tell people, 'You don't have to go looking for a spiritual intensive, you have one just living your own life.'

MM: That's so great! Uma, thank you so much for your time, it's great talking with you.

EO: Thank you so much Mark.