

The Seekers Forum Transcript

Teacher & Gurus: Choosing Wisely

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Hello. Welcome to this month's edition of The Seekers Forum.

Today we're going to be looking at the question of how to choose a teacher, which is one of the most important and complex issues faced by people on the spiritual path.

The guidance of someone with superior knowledge and mastery can be indispensable to spiritual practice and awakening. There comes a moment in every seeker's life when he realizes that without a role model of enlightenment, preferably one who's living and available for personalized help along the way, it's next to impossible to make real progress.

That's because the very thing we seek, spiritual experience, is outside our frame of reference. It's a world unto itself with its own signs and guideposts and levels of consciousness that few of us are qualified to judge or navigate for ourselves.

In order to penetrate the mysteries of this world, to gain entry into that unseen dimension represented by the spiritual, we need the examples of guides who are further along the way than we are to help us light the way, to correct us when we fall off course, train us in the best use of different kinds of practice, and support a vision of spiritual life that we have glimpses of but little to no direct knowledge of.

Though few of us would go on a major hiking expedition without a trained mountaineer or deep-sea diving without a certified instructor, we regularly turn our spiritual education over to teachers without any proven track record.

The trouble is that there are no credentials, per se, for the person professing enlightenment, except for titles and imprimaturs by the church or chosen traditions; nor can we identify enlightenment by what people say, however wise, since words are easily manipulated.

We can only know the genuineness of a teacher by who they are, the quality of their presence and the power to transmit unconditional love.

There's a story in Hasidic lore of a student traveling many miles to visit his teacher, not to hear what he had to say, but to watch how he tied his shoes. In other words, to observe how his being conducted itself in the ordinary world.

Unfortunately, though, appearances can be deceptive and we are easily duped by spiritual imposters. Meeting a self-proclaimed master, we cannot prove that they're not what they say they are, however vividly we may doubt it. Falling under the sway of charismatic personalities, we don't have the expertise to recognize that all that glitters is not gold.

The notion that spiritual teachers are necessary is nothing new, of course. What is unique and complicated about the time that we live in is the mass marketing of spirituality as a consumer product.

Faith and wisdom are put on sale like so many brands of detergent or breakfast cereal. In this super store of spiritual goods, from the latest New Age fad to the assimilation of ancient

traditions into user-friendly forms, the seeker/shopper is bombarded with products and practitioners to choose from.

The age-old challenge of how to decide which path and teacher to follow has multiplied nearly beyond recognition. Mystic traditions, including Buddhism and Vedanta, whose teachings were once kept secret, are now wildly available to the public. Esoteric knowledge that used to be kept out of reach from all but the most serious practitioners can now be accessed with the click of a mouse.

Though this surfeit and easy access of spiritual knowledge would appear to be good for humanity, in the long term it degrades the value of authentic practice. The commercialization of spiritual life has trivialized the sacred, creating a smorgasbord approach to the matter of choice.

Again, this is not necessarily a bad thing. Personally, I spent many years reading and practicing in a variety of traditions and meeting a lot of different teachers. But, over the long run, it is not sustainable.

Sooner or later, we must stop and choose. As the great Parsi master Meher Baba instructed, dig in one place. Unless we commit ourselves, we cannot deepen or put down roots in the richness of a mature, spiritual life.

On the subject of fraudulent teachers and gurus, Meher Baba himself was unflinching. In an essay that was taken from his talks, called *Spiritual Jingoism*, he warned forcefully against being fooled by the appearance of holiness in teachers who are secretly driven by greed or the power hunger of their own egos.

This is what Meher Baba said: “In no area of life is jingoism more rampant than in this field of spirituality. The whole world is pining for light and freedom. To meet this recurrent and poignant demand there always arises a plentiful supply of those who claim to meet it adequately. Most of these claimants are imposters.”

Meher Baba acknowledged that these imposters range in culpability from innocents to scoundrels, from those convinced of their power to those aware that they are con artists.

He goes on: “It is very natural for a person to take imagination for reality and to believe he has realized in his search what he has only imagined. This is the origin of the fraudulent saint or spiritual jingo who walks and talks with his nose in the air and his arms akimbo as if he were somebody very special.”

Most of us are aware of the kind of tin pot teachers and gurus that Baba is talking about, whether we live in the East or the West. The challenging truth is that fewer roles are easier to impersonate than that of a spiritual master. By putting on a robe or collar, shaving one’s head, or assuming any of the other tropes of holiness, anyone of us can impersonate an enlightened person if we choose to.

The eye is so easily convinced by surfaces that any old huckster, not to mention sociopath or criminal, can seduce vulnerable seekers hungry for guidance and willing to be fooled. No offense to Catholics, but we need look no further than the Mother Church to find legions of priests who've hidden their predatory natures under their white collars.

This happens in every tradition, however, where devotees and students have been deceived and abused financially, psychologically, and sexually by mentally unstable men in holy people's clothing. Unfortunately, it is almost always men. These exploitations range in seriousness from negligible to the obscene, from cult leaders, such as Jim Jones or the evangelist Jim Baker to Hindu gurus, including Rajneesh and Muktananda, to abuse troubles among Zen Buddhists, including Richard Baker, to Tibetan Buddhist scandals, including Trungpa Rinpoche, founder of the Shambhala movement, whose cocaine and alcohol fueled bacchanalia in Boulder, Colorado are legendary.

For an artist's take on Trungpa, I highly recommend that you read the testimony of W. S. Merwin, which you can now find in The Seekers Forum Resource Library.

Unmistakable commonalities exist among abusive teachers. For example, Trungpa and Rajneesh, who later dubbed himself Osho, when his brand became tarnished by crime and scandal, were both intellectually brilliant men, physically seductive, adept at certain mystic practices, tyrannical over their spiritual community, and addicted to numerous substances supplied to them by loyal students.

They shared many of the characteristics typical of half-baked teachers that we're going to cover at the end of this talk, most of which arise from a lopsided personal development on the part of the teachers who have mastered spiritual practices without dealing with psychological issues.

It's important to remember that spiritual teachers do have their own psychologies and biographies which are often at odds with their public teaching. The problem arises not from their human imperfections, however, which are inevitable, but from their unwillingness to admit to them and hide behind a mask of the holy.

When the American teacher Gangaji, who was our guest in The Seekers Forum a couple of months back, discovered that her own husband, the teacher Eli Jackson-Bear, had had an affair with a member of their community, she insisted that he admit his mistake and that they as a couple work openly with the community in healing the effect of her husband's betrayal. That's conscious healing.

When the Zen Master, Maezumi Roshi, was confronted by students regarding his drinking problem, he agreed with them. He didn't put up defenses and he started going to AA meetings. If anything, Maezumi's students respected him more for his humility and there's no indication that his human failing damaged his community.

The same cannot be said of Trungpa who drank himself to death, or of Rajneesh who was kicked out of the United States on a variety of felony charges. Such lunatics, a group that also includes

the American, adept Da Free John, occupy a distinct category of spiritual teaching that's commonly known as "crazy wisdom."

Crazy wisdom is a tradition of non-dual, outwardly mad spiritual teachers who are given to unconventional methods intended to shatter the student's ego by what appear to be cruel or destructive means. Traditions are full of stories of crazy wisdom teachers doing the most outrageous things in the service supposedly of the student.

A woman that I know many years ago was thrown on the bed by her Tibetan Buddhist teacher who then proceeded to lie down on top of her and afterwards insisted that he was really just giving her a powerful teaching, pushing her out of her comfort zone as a way of waking her up. My friend, Ashley, appeared to believe this and so I refrained from telling her my honest opinion, because it's rarely a good idea to get between a student and their teacher if you value the relationship.

But today I would tell her unequivocally that what he was passing off as crazy wisdom and what most teachers pass off as crazy wisdom is just repressed shadow creeping into a relationship where the teacher holds the power. It is the teacher's responsibility to own their mistakes, not the student's (responsibility) to shut up and take it.

While most teachers deserve to be forgiven if they admit their mistakes and make amends, there's a difference between a stumble and a fall and between faults that impact only themselves – such as Maezumi Roshi's drinking – and those that are acted out on their followers.

How do we learn to choose wisely?

How do we allow ourselves to surrender without losing our ability to discern, to disagree, and to change our minds?

What is the right relationship between a student and a teacher?

Must we pledge our fidelity in order to benefit from their teaching, to dig in one place, as Meher Baba said, and once we've made that commitment, to stick to it in order for our spiritual roots to grow?

Or, is it okay to double-date spiritually or even commit polygamy by working with a number of different teachers at the same time?

These are complex and crucial questions to ask in the spiritual marketplace that is growing and growing around us.

Finally, what are the telltale signs that a teacher is not what they claim to be, the red flags, the definite no-no's? And on the other hand, what qualities are proof of authenticity? What evidence can we actually trust when deciding what is real and what is not?

Let's start with the positives.

Recent discoveries in brain science neurology and psychology reveal that certain spiritual practices, meditation among them, change the brain in measurable ways. I'm reading a book at the moment called *Siddhartha's Brain* by James Kingsland who's an English science writer, which is really excellent and I highly recommend it. It's now also in our resource library.

In this book he details many of the known benefits of spiritual practice, including not only increased compassion, equanimity, and so on, but also physical changes, such as increased immune function, lowered stress, and other biological markers.

These qualities combine to create noticeable differences between individuals who've engaged in intensive spiritual practice and those who have not. Among other findings, scientists have seen a dramatic increase in gamma energy which is sparked in the part of the brain associated with positive emotions, proving that through concern for others and deep spiritual practice we can create measurably greater well-being in ourselves.

Whether meditation is the practice or not, the fact remains that master practitioners can be known by actual changes in their physical being that produces an energetic result. Eastern spiritual traditions, of course, have long been aware of this. In traditions like Vedanta and Buddhism the components of this spiritual energy are as carefully quantified as waves and particles are in physics.

A few years back I spoke to Dan Goleman, best known for his book *Emotional Intelligence and Social Intelligence*, who first became aware of this spiritual energy three decades ago in Asia. Dan was a Harvard graduate studying meditation in India when he noticed that most seasoned practitioners exuded what he calls "a special quality magnetic in a quiet sense."

Contrary to the stereotype of spiritual practitioners, these people did not seem other-worldly at all. In fact, as Dan told me, they were lively and engaged, extremely present, involved in the moment, often funny, yet profoundly at peace, equanimous in disturbing situations.

What's more, Dan noticed that this quality was communicable. And this is really the key, it's communicable. He said you always felt better than before you'd spent time with them and this feeling lasted.

One of the words used to describe this magnetic state is *sutka* which is a Pali term denoting a sense of repleteness, contentment, delight, a calm, abiding joy regardless of external circumstances. This quality, *sutka*, is selfless in nature and connected to a greater purpose which is why it increases through service to others. Traditional cultures have long recognized that spending time with individuals who radiate this quality is nourishing in itself.

In the Hindu custom known as *darshan*, which is presence, to be in the presence of a teacher, the people "tune into someone who is already in that magnificent internal space," as Dan told me, "catching it, so to speak, and carrying it out to others."

As far out as this may sound, such transmission is more palpable than a skeptic might expect. I spoke to a psychologist named Paul Ekman in San Francisco who had just come back from

spending a week in Dharamsala with the Dalai Lama. And Paul was very funny. He said that at the airport afterwards his wife looked at him and said you're not the man I married. He said, "I was acting like somebody who's in love."

The foremost authority on the physiology of emotion, Paul Ekman, who was not a Buddhist, had been invited to engage in a cross-cultural dialogue between Western scientists and his holiness along with several monks. And he left that meeting deeply moved. What he said to me was that "these monks were unlike any human beings I'd encountered before. They were joyous in a way I had never seen, except perhaps in my daughter at two or three years old."

Ekman detected four characteristics common to people with this energy. First of all, a palpable goodness that went far beyond some warm and fuzzy aura and seemed to arise from genuine integrity. Second, an impression of selflessness, a lack of concern with status, fame, and ego, what he calls "a transparency between their personal and public lives that set them apart from those with charisma, who are often one thing on the outside, another when you look under the surface."

Third, Ekman noticed that this expansive, compassionate energy nurtured others. And finally, he was struck by the amazing powers of attentiveness displayed by these individuals and the feeling he had of being seen in the round, wholly acknowledged and embraced by someone with open eyes.

If these qualities were unique to masters, they wouldn't be half as compelling, of course. What inspires us and what inspired Paul Ekman, the scientist, was witnessing that transformation is possible for the rest of us. He said it wasn't luck or culture or genes that created this qualitative difference. These people had re-sculpted their brains through practice.

Contrary to the old hardwiring theory that posited the human brain as fixed from birth, the emerging theory of neuroplasticity has revealed that our minds are reshaped through repeated experience.

This ability requires practice. As a biofeedback expert told me, everyone can draw, but not everyone's a Picasso. In other words, spiritual masters have cultivated a gift, an inborn potential that is latent in every one of us. When we realize this, we also see that if we did not contain this same light in ourselves, the same consciousness, we wouldn't be able to recognize it in others.

It's this feeling of kinship that transcends personality, that marks the unique rapport between an aspirant and a teacher, rather than some feeling of otherness or untouchability.

When I asked my own teacher Mother Meera about how to tell a real from a half-real guru, she confirmed this by saying that the only criterion we can trust when questioning a teacher's authenticity is how we feel when we are with them. Having said that, she was also quick to say that genuine teachers are extremely rare and how important it is for one to be discerning.

Discernment is the critical point. A real teacher must be able to stand up to the test, not only of time but of direct questioning and confrontation. In the Tibetan tradition, students used to be

instructed to test their teachers for twelve years before giving them their loyalty. This included observing the teacher meticulously and noticing discrepancies in their behavior, asking questions liberally, and also being willing to walk away if these standards were not met.

Unfortunately, this notion of testing our teachers, rather than just the other way around, runs counter to what we're taught about the necessities of obedience, fidelity, and spiritual devotion. Students are generally advised to suspend disbelief, to do as we're told, to trust that a teacher's words and actions are true even when they appear not to be, where we're often advised to "separate the message from the messenger," which to me sounds like a pact with the devil, if I've ever heard one.

And we're meant to trust that behind the flawed human appearance is a pure soul in disguise whose existence we must take on faith. This is patently false and bad for seekers who need to be able to trust ourselves first, including our own intuitions, and not overlook what we feel to be true.

This is not to say that devotee or student can't be wrong or deceived by our own projections into missing the authenticity of a master. Of course, we can. The student/teacher relationship is characterized by power struggle, by parental and other projections, by the desire to be rescued, and other forms of resistance that the ego manifests when it's threatened by the prospect of self-transcendence.

Yet, it must not be forgotten that we have our own intelligence, we have our own taste, chemistry, needs, and tendencies which must be respected if we hope to create a spiritual life that's actually right for us.

Just to recap a little on the positive side, the commonalities of bonafide teachers. The four qualities that Ekman noticed are good guideposts to keep in mind. First of all, a palpable goodness, a goodness that goes beyond just kind of a fuzzy feel-good thing, but feels much more unconditional. Secondly, a sense of selflessness, of it not being about them. Thirdly, a nurturing of others, so that it's passed on to others, it's communicable. And finally, attentiveness, a sense of being seen in the whole, in the round, by the teacher when they look at us.

I would add to that a quality of deep, abiding silence, however voluble a teacher might be. And love, a love that's not sentimental or necessarily personal per se, but that is steady and unconditional.

True teachers are willing to be questioned. They're open to criticism. They're loathe to take responsibility away from the seeker for his or her spiritual or ethical life or to claim exclusivity in the matter of their own holiness.

Within these general parameters there are wild differences in tone and style, presentation. Every spiritual master I've ever met has their own human imperfections and quirks and idiosyncrasies. Some are gentle and kind, others are cranky, some are strict, some are lenient, some are aggressive and nosy, some are more distant and hands off.

Just as it's a mistake to allow holy appearances to fool us into believing teachers are better than they are, it's equally misguided to mistake a less than saintly appearance for proof that a teacher is not what they say.

A great example of this in my own life was the late Zen teacher John Daido Looi, who one minute you saw him in the temple in his black robes doing his stately, serious ceremonies, and an hour later he'd be in a t-shirt with his tattoos showing, zooming around the monastery in his golf cart, smoking a cigarette.

These are matters of personality and everybody has one. But these personal quirks do not affect the wisdom consciousness that such teachers are able to share with those who come to them for help. Being enlightened does not mean being free of emotions. Far from it. Saints can be angry and bossy and very aggressive. Just think of Mother Teresa railing against bureaucrats in Calcutta who were interfering with her trying to feed the poor. Or of Jesus going ballistic on the money lenders.

The difference is that these emotions are displayed nearly always in the service of others and help students crack through their own illusions, even when that calls on them to be fierce.

Finally, let's move on to the negatives, the red flags to keep an eye out for when looking for a teacher. Some of these are already implicit, but they're still worth remembering. This is not a comprehensive list, by any means. It's just a sampling of counter-indications that I've observed myself in thirty years on the spiritual path.

Number one, teachers who don't practice what they preach. This idea of separating the teacher from the teaching is bogus. It is a means of manipulation. And it is also a tactic for leading students to not trust what they see and hear and feel with their own eyes and their own beings

Number two, teachers who cost money. The minute a teacher asks you for a lot of money, I recommend that you turn around and run in the other direction. True teachers are not driven by the profit motive. In Buddhist tradition, and in Christian tradition, there is the idea of dana, of charity, of contribution, of donation. Obviously, teachers have to live, too, and their organizations needs to be able to function, but when a teacher asks you for \$500 for a weekend that's guaranteed to lead you to enlightenment, I highly recommend that you look for another teacher.

Number three, teachers who want to take your power away. Any time you sense that a teacher is degrading you, subjugating you, suggesting that you give them your autonomy and sacrifice your powers of discernment, that is a strong indication that that teacher is working on a dynamic that isn't going to lead you to your own power and your own awakening.

So, when teachers want to take your power away or overpower you in any way, I suggest that you take a big step back and look at what's going on in that relationship and observe their behavior with others, as well as over the organization that they preside.

Number four, and this is related, teachers who demand great sacrifice out of the gate. If a teacher requires celibacy, vegetarianism, or leaving society in order to sequester yourself with their community, that's an indication of power-mongering that is important to pay attention to. That's how cults are formed. So, be very mindful of what the teacher is asking you to give up and why.

And then choose to do that or not based on your own values and standards and intuition, not based on some imposed idea of who or what you're supposed to be.

Next, teachers who are unreliable. Unreliability is a giveaway when it comes to the quality and the authenticity of a teacher. Every master I've known shows up in an unchanging way in spite of external circumstances. So, if your teacher is not reliable in whatever way, that is a red flag to look at; that means that they're dealing with own imperfect formation, which may or may not be something that you can or should live with as a student.

Next, teachers without a pedigree. The New Age is rife with teachers who claim complete enlightenment without attributing it to any practice of their own, any teacher of their own, any tradition of their own, that roots them in legitimacy. If a teacher has no pedigree whatsoever and claims no lineage, that is something to look at very, very carefully. It's all too easy to pretend to be this fully formed enlightened being with nobody to answer to.

Next, teachers who are unwilling to listen. Do you feel heard by your teacher? Do you feel like your questions are welcomed? Do you have a sense that your voice is honored? Or are you meant to simply shut up and put up, which is the case in a lot of teacher-dominant relationships.

Look at whether you feel that your opinions and your feelings matter in the teacher relationship, not that they are going to privilege you over somebody else, or let you be deceived by your own delusions or feelings that are trying to sabotage your spiritual progress. No, but that they hear you, that they are capable of listening, because narcissism and superiority are two of the qualities that corrupt teachers, even some of the best ones into silencing and repressing the people who come to them to learn.

Next, teachers who lie, cheat, steal, or sleep with their students. Those are four big no-no's, that if they exist, are reason enough for you to take a good hard look at that community and probably find one where those things aren't going on, unless the teacher, like Eli Jackson-Bear, makes amends and is willing to admit their mistakes in a humble and transparent way, which is very, very rare.

Next, teachers who promise you the moon, and that goes back to the idea of exploitation with money. It's all too common to meet teachers in today's marketplace who guarantee results if we pay them in money or allegiance. No true teacher will guarantee results, because every true teacher knows that it is up to the student and the student's own trajectory where they move with the practice and how they benefit from it.

If a teacher tells you that if after a weekend you're going to have this or after six months you're going to have that, that's a really good indication that that teacher is passing off for a certainty what is actually just potential.

And finally, teachers who need their egos stroked. This is a very obvious thing. Teachers who require aggrandizement, who require that students obey them in ways that take away their own power, or teachers who tell them simply how wonderful they are, which is something that happens a lot. It used to happen with Rajneesh and it certainly happened with Trungpa as well. They bathed in the admiration of their followers. They needed to be put up on a pedestal in order to feel powerful and important in the world.

If you have the sense that your teacher needs to be stroked, that your teacher needs something from you at all, that is reason to take a second look. A true teacher needs nothing from a student. The great saint Anandamayi Ma puts it like this: “A tree is like a saint. It calls no one to itself, nor does it send anyone away. It offers to protect everyone who wants to come to it, whether this be a man, a woman, a child, or an animal.”

That’s the feeling that we want from our teachers, the sense that they are what they are without our needing to prop them up, inflate their egos, or put them in any way above ourselves.

Any of these red flags should be enough to put a seeker on their guard. The true teacher/student relationship has nothing to do with power. Instead, its purpose is found in the way that our own spiritual natures are enhanced in their presence. The examples of enlightened persons matter because they remind us of what is possible in a human lifetime. We go to them not for some other worldly experience, but to meet the enlightened parts of ourselves.

All genuine spiritual masters reflect back the power that we, too, possess and enkindle the eternal spark that is burning in us at every moment, because at the end of the day it is we who are responsible for our own awakening. We must become our own teachers in the end, locate that wisdom voice of guidance and freedom within ourselves. When the Buddha instructed that each man become a lamp unto himself, that’s what he was talking about.

As we come to recognize our own light, we also learn to trust that god within us to guide us toward our own liberation. Whether we give ongoing allegiance to a teacher or learn from many along the way, the same self-empowerment is the goal and the great reward of spiritual life.

That’s what I wanted to say to you today about choosing teachers wisely.

If you have any questions, please let me know. I’d love to hear from you and I’ll speak to you again next month. Thanks a lot, bye-bye.