

The Seekers Forum Transcript

# Teachers & Gurus: An Interview with Polly Young-Eisendrath

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The Seekers Forum  
Awaken To Your Life

*Hello, welcome to The Seekers Forum Guest Interview series. It's my pleasure to welcome my friend, Polly Young-Eisendrath, back to The Seekers Forum. Polly is a Jungian psychoanalyst, psychologist, author, and speaker. She's the author of many books including, The Present Heart: A Memoir of Love, Loss, and Discovery, The Self-Esteem Trap: Raising Confident and Compassionate Kids in an Age of Self-Importance, and The Cambridge Companion to Jung: New and Revised. Polly's new book, which sets out the principles of dialog therapy for a general audience is called, True Love Ways: Relationship as Psycho-Spiritual Development. In addition to Polly's work as a psychologist, she's also a Buddhist teacher and practitioner of many years which is why I wanted to talk to her about this month's topic, Teachers & Gurus: Choosing Wisely. Polly has a lot of quite direct and sometimes provocative things to say on this subject and I hope you enjoy our conversation.*

**MM:** Welcome today to Polly Young-Eisendrath who is one of my favorite teachers and a dear friend. Thank you for being with us today.

**PE:** Thanks for having me, I'm really looking forward to our visit.

**MM:** We're going to be talking about teachers and gurus, choosing wisely. I want to start by asking you, what is the right balance in a teacher-student relationship between surrender and discernment? Where do we have to obey and surrender, and where do you recommend that we maintain discernment?

**PE:** Well, you know, I've never really thought about those two together so it's going to take me a moment. My first thought is that you should never lose your discernment. When I talk to people about working with a spiritual teacher, and I assume we're talking more about a spiritual teacher – although we could be talking about your English professor, it could be anyone you hold in high esteem, but especially your spiritual teacher – you should keep your eyes and ears open. You have a responsibility to yourself to always choose what you are doing, because you are responsible for your own actions, you are responsible for your own speech as well. Keeping your eyes and ears open is something that I think goes along with everything.

But, there are certain kinds of surrender that are necessary in spiritual practice and probably also in other kinds of spiritual learning; you have to surrender to the expertise of the other person. Where I think surrender is important is to recognize that the teacher, the guru, or your guide has been on the path much longer than you have, and that person has abilities, skills, capacities, insights that are very important to develop your own spiritual practice and you won't necessarily understand those skills, practices, expertise all at once.

My first spiritual teacher was Philip Kapleau and I chose him very spontaneously, it was very much the feeling of falling in love. I was very young, about twenty-two, he was what I considered "old," he was 56. Yet, when I heard him speak, I had this feeling like falling in love. I knew, *this is the person that I really want to learn from.* As I went into Zen practice, when I took the vows and so on, there were things that he demanded that I simply didn't understand. For example, back then, he said I could not go to personal psychotherapy. In order to practice with him I had to simply follow his direction on everything. He said it would be like following two masters and one could not do that. I conformed to that for about four years and I realized I was

suffering psychologically just too much and that the Zen practice was not addressing that suffering. So, in order for me to go to therapy I had to leave the practice with him at that point.

**MM:** Was that a difficult decision to make?

**PE:** Yes, it was. Although, when I went to talk to him about it, he was remarkably understanding. What he said was sometimes people need to follow an individual path for a while but not lose track of your practice, which was really very good for him to say because in fact, then I didn't feel I was losing my practice; I felt like I was going to psychotherapy and exploring some other ways of dealing with my mind, and eventually I did go back to practicing with him. I went back to Zen practice with a lot more understanding of Buddhism when I returned. For a while, I surrendered to what he was asking. I followed his way, it just didn't work for me.

**MM:** In retrospect, were there benefits to his recommendations? Even though you were suffering more, do you see why he recommended what he did?

**PE:** I do. I would say in retrospect, it was the wrong recommendation, the people at Rochester Zen Center do not have that point of view anymore, and in fact, Kapleau changed his mind as well. When I went back to practice with him in the nineties, he said he regretted that he demanded that of his students. On the positive side, I think there was so little understanding in our culture during the 1970s – that's when I started there, taking my vows in 1971 – but at that time there was so little understanding of the world view that goes along with Buddhism and Zen, I think that, had he let his students just kind of muddle around, there could have been a lot of confusion. By demanding that we step in with him deeply, right at the beginning, and basically not read any books except *The Three Pillars of Zen*, confusion would be lessened. We were to read his books, the practices he was assigning and we were to go to the retreats at the Rochester Zen Center and that really did allow us to do a deep immersion into the practice that might not have been possible otherwise. I see the point of it.

**MM:** Right. Speaking of teacher fallibility, you mentioned that Philip used the wrong recommendation, what do you think about this idea of separating the teacher from the teaching in the sense that you don't have to walk to the talk if you can talk the talk? How much does a teacher need to embody what they are teaching the student?

**PE:** Well, this is a very big conversation in Buddhism, particularly because of enlightenment or awakening. There's an argument. I'll tell you what my view is in a moment, but let me just say that there is a big argument that comes particularly from Tibetan Buddhism, but also from Zen Buddhism that IF you are awake or enlightened, then you act wisely all the time, so that you have a natural ethic about yourself. You know how to choose the wisest, most ethical and perhaps the most compassionate way to respond to life and difficulties and so on. So, there is this argument that an enlightened teacher does not act unwisely or unethically. What may look like an unwise, unethical action to people that are not awake will look differently if you are awake.

That's one argument. The other argument is that there really isn't an enlightened person but there are enlightened actions. And so, teachers who are to be respected, they can act in enlightened ways but they're not awake themselves in all of their actions. They're not always acting wisely,

but they know how to do wise, enlightened actions with wise enlightened teachings. I actually subscribe to the second position rather than the first. So I have now in my many years in practicing Buddhism come across many, many teachers and many students of teachers as well, and I know some really clear cases of teachers who have offered some great, wonderful teaching, enlightened teaching like Sasaki Joshu from Mount Baldy who also have personal feelings and sometimes even unethical actions, Trungpa might be an example. In other cases I think it's very possible for a teacher to have wise, enlightened, ethical actions in some areas of their life and aspects of the psyche and then still have some psychopathology or some failure in other areas. I don't think it's a unified picture. Does that make sense?

**MM:** It makes perfect sense. How does a student who doesn't know a whole lot about all of this, and certainly not enough to oppose the claims of a teacher, how does a student discern which flaws, imperfections or missteps of the teacher are forgivable and which actions might impinge upon their own spiritual development?

**PE:** Again, I think this is a complicated question, actually. My first recommendation to people when looking for a teacher is to keep your eyes and ears open. You are responsible for the choices you make and you will have to decide whether this smells good or doesn't smell good. Now, that's not always easy to do. It is true in some of the more esoteric practices, as in Tibetan Buddhism, they have aspects to them that are pretty unfamiliar to Westerners. For example, in gu-yoga, where you actually make your teacher into a deity in the practice, it's offensive to Westerners often because we don't deify people. But, it's a practice and it really isn't intended as a deification of the teacher, however, while you're engaged in it, it certainly looks that way, it smells that way, it feels that way. I certainly think in the case of any individual, if that practice is not appealing to you, if you feel really thrown by having to treat your teacher like a deity, I think, probably that's not a good teacher for you. You should feel stretched by what your teacher requires of you but you shouldn't feel totally off center, because then you kind of lose your own adult sense of being a responsible person if you're doing something that you really feel is wrong, or really puts you off a lot and you're doing it simply because somebody else says this is a good thing to do.

I think most adults – now this isn't also across the board because are seeking a spiritual teacher when they're in a lot of psychological difficulty, maybe sometimes they've experienced abuse of they have traumatic experiences in their early life and so on, they may not have good discernment. They might not know if "this" is a good thing or a bad thing, but I think in general when you reach adult life you have a responsibility and you should use your good sense, your common sense as well as your intuition about whether "this" seems right or not *for you*. It might be right for somebody else but not right for you. There are levels of discernment in choosing a teacher.

Number one, does this person have something to teach you, do you feel inspired by this person, do you want to develop these teachings in yourself? Number two, does the teacher offer these things in ways that sit well with you and, number three, do you see the teacher doing things that are deeply unethical? If you say "yes" to number three, then that is not a good teacher, and maybe even that teacher needs to be reported. I think it's pretty rare these days that teachers are doing really deeply unethical things in a way that is shown to the general public.

**MM:** I just got a terrible email about Sogyal Rinpoche who had problems in the past with sexual abuse, I hadn't read the whole list of accusations. It was really shocking, and it was hard to see how some of those actions, like whacking someone across the face, it was hard to see how those things could be anything but bad behavior on Sogyal's part. There are things about him I respect, I worked with him.

**PE:** I knew about that history. Actually, my literary agent was friends with his literary agent. She told me there was a ten-million-dollar lawsuit that was filed against him, then it was settled for a million dollars and silence. I think on one hand you could say, perhaps there are Tibetan practices that have to do with consorts. Consorts are often young women that are brought to the monastery, often brought by their parents, often families that actually want their young girls to go to the monastery to do this. He was in Los Angeles and that wasn't part of the culture there. He apparently felt very determined to do it his way. When all of that broke, he did then go to psychotherapy, he did take on a different persona, but then I have understood that that has slipped since that original time. I'm a psychologist, I'm a psychotherapist, I meet with people in an ongoing, repeated set of meetings about their unconscious motivations. It's really the stuff that we don't know about ourselves, or stuff that we can't see that we're doing that tends to get us in trouble. If you're a spiritual teacher you may not be able to see very clearly what your own unconscious motivations are because nobody has worked with you to see those things and you have a pretty good way of rationalizing them too. If you come from a culture, for example, where it's okay to beat up a young person to get that person to line up with what you want. I know many stories about many different kinds of teachers from Asia who came here without really understanding anything much about American culture, and started meeting with students, particularly in that early period about fifty years ago, where young people who were often hippies, who were just generally wanting to explore consciousness and, there were all sorts of dynamics that were not at all what would have happened in Asia. So, teachers began to act in ways also, that were definitely unethical in our culture, really sometimes unconscionable. Perhaps in their own culture there was a different view.

**MM:** That's the complicated truth.

**PE:** Yes, it's complicated. I think that, again, so many things that all of us experience in going to authority figures, even therapists, to priests, to teachers, to gurus – we really have to keep our own eyes and ears open. Perhaps, for example amassing a lot of money might be okay for a guru in India, but for that same person in San Francisco, it looks very different. You have to say for yourself, is this something that I actually feel comfortable with that I can respect, or is this something that's really going to interfere with developing my spiritual skills that I've come for? I don't even know if there's a general guideline except, keep your eyes and ears open; if it smells bad, really ask yourself questions. If it really looks bad, leave and report it.

This is all sort of the negative side of choosing a teacher, I wonder if we want to switch to the positive side, what are we looking at?

**MM:** Yes, I was just going to ask you, yes. What are the signposts of a healthy student-teacher relationship? What do we want to look for in that kind of relationship?

**PE:** On the positive side, I have many times gotten this question and so I do have an answer that sounds like I've already done this answer already and it's true. For spiritual teachers, I think there are two principal things that can happen to us when go to hear a teacher or we go to experience a teacher's teaching, both of which I think are completely legitimate for choosing a teacher.

One would be the feeling of falling in love and from a Buddhist perspective, that would be a karmic connection. It's a feeling of *I already know you*. When I walked in and heard Kapleau speak, those few things went to my heart and I felt, *Oh my gosh, this is incredible*. I can see great wisdom in a simple statement, that was the experience I had when I met him and as I came to know him over the years, and then knew him particularly during the later years, during the last ten years of his life I was quite close to him and, I really felt I was correct. This person had tremendous wisdom for me, I gained so much and it was really almost like a father-daughter relationship.

Now, about my other Buddhist teacher, Shinzen Young. When I first met Shinzen, I thought he was very smart and very good at what he does and how he teaches. But, he wasn't my cup of tea. I felt like he was interested in computers, he was into algorithms, he talked about mathematics, he went on and on about abstract ideas, and he kind of believed that machines could relate to people, like a computer. All of these things threw me, I thought: *Wow, I don't really agree with him on some of his opinions*. I started going to retreats with him and he had an extraordinary way of teaching and so, I realized, here is a person that I can learn so much from and I'm choosing him because he is very skilled and because he knows all the languages, he's studied everything so thoroughly and I really want to learn from him, I want to learn skills. But, I don't feel like we are two peas in a pod, and in some ways, we are antagonistic to each other. It's been a terrific, wonderful relationship with him. We continue to be antagonistic in certain ways and yet, I learn a great deal from him and he never disappoints me, he's always ahead of me and he has opened up my practice in so many ways. He endorses me going to any retreat with any teacher and I can talk to him about what I've discovered. So, he's been like an expert witness or something, and I think that's also a good kind of teacher, somebody who's really ahead of you and has skills, even if you don't really agree with everything or maybe even certain aspects of their style. I think you can choose based on karmic connection, you can choose based on the teacher's knowledge and skills, and they are both good ways of choosing.

I do think it's very important if you are really going to follow a long path with a teacher, I do feel it's a good idea to have a teacher, then; it's almost like a marriage. You have to be willing to go through the hard places.

**MM:** Thank you, Polly. This is exactly what I wanted to ask you about and your wisdom has been really helpful to me, not only in this area, but in the course of our many other conversations over the years. So, thank you very much for talking to The Seekers Forum, Polly.

**PE:** You're so welcome, Mark. I can't wait to talk to you again.