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The Dos and Don'ts of Picking a Spiritual Master

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As the new school year begins, we are reminded that the most effective way to learn anything is to study with teachers and mentors who have already mastered it. Meditation and spiritual practice is certainly no exception. Over the years we have been fortunate to study closely with hundreds of the world's most respected and realized teachers from a variety of wisdom traditions and mind-science research backgrounds. Their diversity of styles, depth of wisdom, kindness and examples of wisdom and compassion in action have profoundly inspired our lives, work, how we live, teach and conduct ourselves as teachers.

In training the mind through meditation and contemplative disciplines, a helpful analogy is to regard the mind-brain-body as a remarkable musical instrument that is capable of generating the sweetest of music, yet all too often is poorly maintained, left untuned and plagued with chaotic and noisy sounds. If we sincerely wish to learn to play beautiful music, we must study with a master who knows the instrument inside and out. Both teachers and students alike need to know how to quiet their stress, maintain emotional awareness and receptiveness for learning. In order to develop a calm, clear, joyful, and loving mind, we need the guidance of someone who thoroughly understands what the mind is, how the mind works and how it can be transformed ... someone whose own heart-mind is truly open to the full depths of being and embraces the full dimension of all creation.

As we travel and teach around the globe, many people ask us, "How can I find a qualified meditation teacher?" The answer is not always an easy one. When we first began our own practice, there were three meditation centers in Seattle and two yoga teachers. Now, there are thousands of yoga and meditation teachers and hundreds of meditation centers! In looking for a spiritual or "mind fitness" teacher, the qualities to look for include compassion, knowledge and insight, morality, sincerity and skill -- both in teaching and in their way of living -- and a greater realization of their true

nature and highest potentials than you have. From your own side, you should have confidence in your teacher and be able to communicate well with him or her. However, don't set out on a frantic guru hunt! We encourage you to proceed slowly, mindfully, and to be both open-minded and very discerning. It may be a matter of years before you meet the person who can answer your questions and be this special spiritual friend and teacher for you.

Meanwhile, you can begin to practice meditation from what you read and from podcasts or recordings on the web, and seek the advice of any meditators whose qualities you admire. The role of any good teacher is ultimately to help you learn to trust your own intuitive wisdom, your own inner guru or inner guidance system, which will ultimately be your most reliable source of true direction.

Because it's so important, and fraught with so many potential pitfalls, the subject of finding a teacher deserves a special subset of guidelines of its own. A [classic Buddhist teaching on "The Four Reliances"](#) advises the spiritual seeker to:

"First rely on the principle, not on the person. Second, rely on the spirit, not the letter. Third, rely on wisdom, not conditioning. And fourth, rely on complete teaching, not incomplete teaching."

There are many perils on the path of meditation and spiritual growth. Keep your eyes open and your discerning wisdom keen. There are teachers and traditions that are rare and precious beyond belief. If you are fortunate enough to be able to spend time with them, your life will be truly enriched. And, there are teachers and traditions that quite honestly, we don't send people to. How do you know if you are pursuing an authentic spiritual path, or have met a good teacher?

Signs to watch for are: ethical and moral integrity; service to others; compassion; respect for discipline; personal accountability of both leaders and community members; faith; embodiment; groundedness; respect; joyfulness; fellowship with, or at least tolerance for, people of different faiths; an inspiring lineage of practitioners whose lives have been enriched; a community of kindred souls that inspires your respect and admiration; love; celebration; humanity; respect for silence as well as questions; an honoring of the mythical and the mystical as well as clear reasoning that welcomes debate; a balance of prayer, contemplation, study, and service in practice.

If you find that you are the type who is easily confused or bewildered by exploring many paths or studying with many teachers, it may be wise to simplify your spiritual pursuits. Research and visit different meditation centers and teachers until you find a path that is spiritually satisfying for you, and then through study, practice, and contemplation, go deeply into the heart of that path.

If you are by nature a weaver and synthesizer, your temperament may better suit you to seek inspiration from study and practice with a diversity of traditions. Seek to find the common heart and core around which they come together, and appreciate how each contributes to deepening your wisdom and love, and to strengthening your faith.

If you are a mature practitioner with a clear sense of your path and tradition, there is little to fear and much to gain through encounters with other traditions. These will likely serve to only clarify and deepen your faith and insight. Keep an open heart, an open mind, and seek for a path that works for you.

Spiritual communities, though potential havens, can also become escapes for the socially challenged. And teachers from other cultures, though masters in their spiritual disciplines, may lack the experience they need within their new culture to give realistic counsel to their students -- and sometimes get distracted as they encounter the enticements of the West.

We wholeheartedly encourage you to keep your eyes wide open. Open-minded skepticism will help you to find a healthy balance between over-critical cynicism that may miss the real thing, and gullible naiveté that is easily duped into signing up for misleading or dangerous pursuits.

Over the years, in search of a deeper understanding, our work, travels, and research have lead us to encounter many different spiritual paths. Having also encountered many of the perils of the path -- and having worked clinically with some of the casualties -- we offer the following list of cautionary guidelines to check out before you "sign up" with a spiritual teacher or group. Though it is possible you may find some of the following warning signs on an authentic path, they are often associated with less trustworthy situations. It is always wise to observe the integrity of people's behavior carefully, and ask yourself these three essential questions:

- Does what I hear make sense to me?
- Does it conform to the golden rule, empathy, and compassion toward yourself and others?
- What is the intention? Is it to harm or to help? Is it for limited self-interest -- or service for the good of the whole and benefit to many for generations to come?

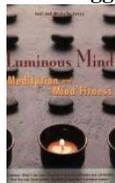
Beware if you encounter any of the following "red flags":

- Teachers or circles of practitioners who are out of integrity, or who don't practice what they preach.
- Settings where questions are not welcomed or answered in straightforward ways, or where raising concerns about conduct or ethical violations is frowned upon -- especially if you are told you are being "too judgmental" when you do raise honest concerns.
- Anyone who claims that they can give "it" to you, especially for a price.
- If the price of admission excludes people who are truly sincere.
- If you are expected to purchase lots of expensive merchandise or paraphernalia to get on board.
- Slick, extravagant trappings or heavily marketed, empire-building enterprises.
- Discrimination or attempts to turn your heart against others.
- Hidden agendas.
- Fanatical, narrow-minded sects claiming to be "the only true way."

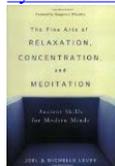
- A heavily authoritarian, paternalistic, sexist, or militaristic scene.
- Practices that work with intense energy manipulation or heavy breathing practices without having first established a strong foundation in ethics and personal grounding.
- Teachers, paths, or seminars that seem ungrounded, make outrageous claims, use coercion tactics, or hustle you to get others to sign up.

Be especially discerning if you encounter people who seem to display unusual or extraordinary powers. Spiritually naïve people may easily confuse psychic sensitivity with spiritual maturity, deluding themselves and others. Purported channeling and clairvoyance *may* have little to do with authentic spiritual teachings. Because some teachers misrepresent themselves, claiming spiritual authorizations, realizations, or backgrounds that are downright lies, it's always good to check references or question their authenticity. If the biography of a spiritual teacher heavily emphasizes their attainments in past lives, (maybe, but who knows?) we suggest that you stay focused on the integrity of the one you can see sitting in front of you.

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[Luminous Mind: Meditation and Mind Fitness](#)
by Joel Levey



[The Fine Arts of Relaxation, Concentration, and Meditation: Ancient Skills for Modern Minds](#)
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