

What is a Guru?

"I always bow to the Guru who is bliss incarnate, who bestows happiness, whose face is radiant with joy. His essential nature is knowledge. He is aware of his true self. He is the Lord of yogis, he is adorable, and he is the physician who cures the disease of birth and death."

- Sri Guru Gita—verse 93.

A few examples of yogic Gurus

- **MAHAVATAR BABAJI**
Perhaps the most revered yogi to touch the earth, a yogi who is reported to have been meditating in the Himalayas for many centuries, guiding the course of yoga's constant expansion.
- **PATANJALI**
Creator of the Ashtanga (eight-limbed) yoga system still in use today, thought to be born around the 2nd century AD.
- **SRI RAMAKRISHNA**
A Bengali saint, born in 1836, who inspired the world with his deep spirituality and devotion.
- **SWAMI VIVEKANANDA**
Great scholar, spiritualist, and in 1893, the saint who brought yoga to the west.
- **SRI ANANDAMOYI MA**
Revered female Guru, born in 1896, esteemed for her Bhakti (devotional) yoga and highly blissful states of consciousness.
- **SHRILA PRABHUPADA**
He was the founder of the Krishna consciousness movement (ISKON), which brought the power of mantra to the west in 1965.
- **PARAMAHANSA YOGANANDA**
Founder of Yogoda Satsanga, and Self-Realisation Fellowship, introduced the highest form of yoga – Kriya yoga, into the west in 1920.

In the modern world, the word - "Guru" is a term often loosely applied to anyone who has achieved some mark of status within a particular profession e.g. a fashion Guru, a computer Guru, or a marketing Guru. Within the western yoga world, a Guru appears to be any teacher with charisma, students, a penchant for ochre robes, and an ability to recite a few Sanskrit verses from yogic scriptures whilst doing a headstand!

Over the past 50 years in the west, commitment to a Guru has been the natural path of development taken by many serious yoga practitioners. A Guru is taken to be someone who can elucidate spiritual teachings and safely take students of yoga to higher levels of consciousness. But beware, not all teachers are Gurus. Having hundreds of loyal students beneath them has corrupted many accomplished yoga teachers, and turned them into self-appointed egocentric yoga masters. Under the guise of a Guru, many have taken advantage of their naïve disciples, a typical example of the "blind leading the blind."

These modern notions of a Guru are far removed from the true meaning, role, and power of a traditional Guru...so what is a real yoga Guru?

The original purpose of yoga was not simply to exercise the body, the breath, and the mind. These functions were kept healthy for the pursuit of a much higher goal – finding the answers to life, death, and everything in between. It was widely experienced and documented that the answers to life's conundrum were to be found in a being, realm, or entity beyond nature, humanity, and the universe - a force, which the ancient Indians chose to call Brahma, Spirit, or God.

Many souls have attempted to find God, but only a few have succeeded. Those who have saw it as their duty to impart their techniques to society. In the olden days, God-realised masters only gave their wisdom verbally or spiritually (books were seen to diminish the power of the mind by reliance on paper and words), and the masters limited their teachings to those students who showed dedication, desire, and the necessary commitment required to enter the world beyond the stars.

Those masters who first unified themselves with God in ancient India are the original yogis. They managed to overcome the darkness of this world (or Maya – cosmic delusion), understand its meaning, and liberate themselves into the light of God (an experience known as Samadhi).

The original yogis could have entered cosmic bliss and melted away into heaven without leaving a mark on the earth. But how would anyone know how they had done it, unless they were selfless enough to teach? The literal translation of the word Guru is dispeller of darkness (gu – darkness, ru – “that which dispels”), and that is the role of a Guru - one who has the power to instil bliss, wisdom, and love in place of negativity, ignorance, and suffering in people's lives.

Were it not for the magnanimity of the yogic masters of old, we would not have yoga today. For at least 5,000 years, yoga has gone from being practised, protected, and hidden in the Himalayas, to being taught, and edited into the form we recognise today. The 2nd century yogi Patanjali is responsible for the Ashtanga (eight-limbed) path of yoga we all draw from (Ashtanga is also the name of a popular style of physical yoga, but this style is just a variation of hatha yoga and not the same as the eight-limbed path of Patanjali). So, in a sense, all practitioners of yoga are disciples of the great yogi Patanjali, for we are all learning from his perceptions and reconstructions of the ancient divine system.

Of the Ashtanga path of Patanjali, hatha yoga, which is comprised mainly of postures, is just one step. The highest and final step is Samadhi, complete wilful immersion in God - bliss, truth, consciousness, and peace. As you can appreciate this is not an easy task, nor will it be the ultimate aim of all yoga practitioners. But if emancipation from a materially mundane and bewildering life into a practical spiritual life is your calling, it is the Guru's work to take you there.

For many, like myself; yoga is an integrated physical and spiritual practice. As in Patanjali's yoga sutras (verses on yoga), yoga is taught as the path to liberation, inseparable from spirituality.

The scriptures of India point out that an aspiring yogi cannot attain God-realisation without the aid of a Guru. To accumulate all the techniques, to discipline ones self, and to gain the wisdom and humility needed in the short period of one lifetime by ones self, would indeed take a whole lifetime! After that, there would perhaps be little time to exercise the techniques and strengths one has garnered.

Some describe the spiritual dissemination of a Guru as the speaking voice of a silent God, while others think of the Guru as the complete embodiment of Divine Love. A true Guru will set a path before you, give you the tools you need, and help you along your way. However, it takes humility to pledge to a Guru, perhaps this is the reason it is a pre-requisite to attaining God-realisation. To absolve one's pride and bow down before another human being is insignificant compared to having to humble yourself before a spiritually realised being as your master and eventually, surrender yourself to the Supreme Being in order to achieve enlightenment.

So what does a Guru do?

A Guru is very active in a disciple's life. When both the Guru and the fledgling student of yoga accept one another into the revered Guru-disciple relationship, the Guru gives what is called a Diksha to signify the bond. This involves a special mantra, or a meditation technique that will help bring the student to God.

However, the physical part of this Diksha is allied with something of perhaps even greater importance. A Guru's job is not simply providing the student with a mantra, a book, or a technique, and then letting them get on with it, any yoga teacher can do that. What separates a Guru from a teacher is the personal responsibility the Guru undertakes to deliver the student to God, in either this or another lifetime. True Gurus give their students a blessing and an unconditional promise that as long as they remain loyal and sincere to the path set before them, the Guru will introduce the earnest soul to the experience of God. It is at this point that the student becomes a Pravartaka, a real initiate into the practise of yoga. It is worth pointing out that only an enlightened Guru, one who is unified with God, has the power, ability, and inclination to make this kind of promise.

It is said that fifty percent of what is required for the disciple to reach God comes as a direct blessing from God; twenty-five percent comes via the disciple's own efforts, and the remaining twenty-five percent comes as a boon from the Guru. It is also said that Gurus can take upon themselves the Karmic illnesses or burdens that their disciples are suffering from (should these burdens be considered an obstruction that is no longer deemed necessary for the disciple to endure).

In Hindu philosophy, the law of karma stipulates that whatever energy you put out through thought, speech, or deed, will be returned to you in the same quantity in this or another lifetime. To the uneducated in yogic philosophy this appears as “luck.” But luck has no source; whereas the source of Karma is one’s own self. The purpose of Karma is to educate through experience. For example, if we cause harm to others, then some harm is eventually caused to us. This gives us the opportunity to reform our character through reflection on our own personal experience of harm. But a person is never given anything they have not earned, good or bad.

Many Gurus have had limps, tumours, and all kinds of diseases, which they have alleviated their disciples of, in order that they may progress more efficiently without the bother of, for example, a physical illness.

A Guru gives you something money cannot buy – eternal friendship. The Guru also acts an intermediary between God and the disciple. When the formless God appears unreachable by the lowly Chela (disciple), the Guru, walking with one foot on the earth, and one foot in Satyaloka, (the sphere of God), is a natural medium – being an “embodiment” of God. A true Guru is nothing less than an Avatar – a divine incarnation.

On physical death, the Guru makes a conscious blissful exit from the body (called Mahasamadhi), merges with God and becomes omnipresent – ever present around the disciple. By keeping the Guru’s image in mind, character in heart, and teachings alive through daily practice, the disciples keep the Guru alive within themselves. In omnipresence, the Guru can manifest blessings upon the Chelas and is ever ready to answer the disciple’s prayers in meditation and to assist the disciples in their Sadhna, (spiritual path), in any way possible. The Guru continues to be a guide, friend, teacher, and medium between God and the disciples until they too are merged with the Divine eternally. The Guru will always be helping their Chelas, and often, even before they know they need help.

A true Guru has no ego, and therefore will not be interested in taking the disciple’s identity, individuality, or freedom away. No soul has the right or indeed the power to do that, not even the Supreme Being can remove a person’s free will. A God-realised master of yoga will only have the Chela’s interest at heart. The Guru’s love is selfless; the Chela’s success is the Guru’s delight. A true master will accept any sincere student, whether they are penniless, or a king. The Guru will never require money from the Chela in the same way a teacher does, although any sized donation to the Guru’s work is always accepted as a sign of commitment and sacrifice on the disciple’s part.

Ultimately the exterior Guru’s aim is not to have disciples, but to introduce the disciple to the Guru within the disciples own heart and soul. No Guru of any measure will ever claim to want otherwise. The true Guru knows that the disciple is a cosmic sleeping giant, who merely needs disciplining (hence the word disciple), education, and nurturing in order to manifest their own God-like natures. That divine Guru must be assigned the task of assisting others not by their own aggrandizement; but by the appointment of God, either directly, or through that divine one’s God-realised master.

It is true that finding the soul, or the light of God within yourself can unearth anything a Guru can know. A Guru is simply a manifestation of the light within all of us. If a person has sufficient confidence in their own internal guided wisdom, is disciplined enough to carry out their own spiritual techniques unaided and efficiently and does not feel the need for assistance, then any devoted person can indeed find God or total bliss without an external Guru.

However, accepting help from a genuine source can only speed up and support the student of yoga's endeavours. Having a Guru is the first personable step towards realising the power within any human being.

A Guru is a divine being, around which God's presence and love can be felt. The Guru is a physical embodiment of what the practitioner of yoga must attain spiritually within. The master of yoga is the path, the destination, and the embodiment of what the seeker is searching for:

- Sat: Realisation of the individual soul as part of the vast Spirit.
- Chit: Absolute dispersion of all suffering, and the instilment of pure consciousness.
- Ananda: The height of all joy and ecstasy.

It is through the Guru's kindness and generosity of heart that the practitioner of yoga learns the means of attaining Kaivalya, unification of the soul and Spirit, the premier aim of all living entities.

Saints, sages, prophets, and yogis have dispelled darkness for their followers for centuries on this earth. The relationship of Gurus and disciples is perhaps the most treasured on earth, and has been essential to the spiritual unfoldment of this earth. The Guru is likened to the best of your mother, father, friends, siblings, and God, rolled into one omnipresent source.

My advice to anyone searching for a Guru is simple. Wait. The Guru will come not when you want, but when you need. And when you are ready. You will recognise in a prospective Guru, that you have found someone in whom you trust, believe, and can learn to love. Let the Guru's words, expressions, ideals, and manners, all play a part in your decision, but ultimately choose a Guru with your heart. Or better still; decide in the peace, harmony, and silence of your own soul.

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