

## The Guru Principle *by Yogi E*

Magazine ad: A single two-lane ribbon of blacktop fades into the distance as it stretches across a sprawling expanse of desert. A lone motorcycle rider, barely discernable in the distance rides away from the camera. Headline: Somewhere a man is at 37,000 feet trying to open a bag of peanuts.

I'm that man. I miss my Harley.

I'm on my way to New York to teach, wedged into a window seat in a cramped tube of extruded aluminum somewhere over Kansas with 150 of my closest friends. My laptop glows in front of me as I put the final touches on the seminar's curriculum. I take a break from the computer to struggle with my bag of peanuts.

"I don't mean to pry, but I noticed you're writing something about yoga." The guy sitting next to me says in between tossing single peanuts into his mouth.

I stop wrestling with my bag of three peanuts and nod and smile.

"We're on our way to a yoga retreat in New York ourselves." He motions toward the woman sitting next to him. She leans forward a bit to make eye contact and politely smiles. "This is my wife, Cindy; I'm Jonas."

"Hi, I'm E." we shake hands, and I go back to pulling at this tenacious foil bag in my hands. Why couldn't the flight attendants just pop the peanuts in our mouths like the Eucharist, I think. Damned bag.

"You're E, like from Yoga Pura?" Jonas asks.

"Guilty as charged." I smile.

"I get your Inspiration articles on the Internet, my yoga teacher forwards them to me." He shakes his head, "Wow, what are the odds that we'd be sitting next to each other on a flight while headed to a yoga retreat?"

"At this point, I'd say about 100%." I mutter to myself.

"I've heard a lot about you. My yoga teacher was in one of the first yoga teacher trainings you held."

"Uh huh." I'm still overly distracted by my stubborn bag of peanuts. I bite at the corner, pull a bit too hard and the bag sprints open in a shower of salt and nuts. I watch as they bounce off my keyboard and disappear onto the floor. I shake my head. "I'm sorry. You said your yoga teacher was in one of my early teacher trainings?"

"Yeah, her name is Bonnie Sanderson."

I smile. "Yes, I remember Bonnie very well. How is she?"

"She's great; I'll tell her you said hello."

"Please do." I say, "So you are headed to a retreat?"

Cindy leans forward "We're going to see some guru; she's supposed to be quite powerful."

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"It should be a great experience." Jonas adds. "Bonnie says you're something of a guru yourself, is that true?"

Ouch, there it is: the question. One of the dreaded top three: 'are you a guru?' along with 'what kind of yoga do you teach?' and 'are you enlightened?' comprise my top three least favorite questions.

The challenge with these is that they are almost always asked from the perspective of some significant misunderstanding. A quick answer will nearly never suffice. In this case, if I say yes, they'll think I am what I'm not; if I say no, they'll think I'm not what I am. It's a classic double bind, one caused by age-old confusion around the g-word: guru.

"It depends upon what you mean by 'guru' I suppose." I say, half-heartedly trying to deflect the question.

"Well, I'm not exactly sure," he says.

"I don't have people bow down and touch my feet if that's what you mean."

"It's not just that..."

"Let me stop you and say that my answer is going to depend upon your definition of guru. So let's start there: how would you define 'guru'?"

"A spiritual teacher, I suppose."

"And so would you categorize all spiritual teachers as gurus?" I ask.

"Hmmm." Jonas pauses, "No, I don't think so."

"Okay, then what would you say separates a guru from other spiritual teachers."

Blank stare and silence. I take the opportunity provided by the lull to wave down a flight attendant. "Can I have another

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bag of peanuts please?"

The flight attendant reaches into her apron and pulls out another little silver bag of peanutty goodness and hands it to me.

"Thanks." I tear into the bag and this time it cooperates. I toss a peanut into my mouth and continue: "How about this: what is a guru's function?"

"To teach."

"Okay, that's a part of it, but don't teachers also teach?"

"Yeah..." It's evident that we are traversing over uncharted territory for Jonas.

I toss back another nut. "So what else?"

"I once met a guru who could make ash appear in his hand; I think it's called vibruti?" Says Cindy

"Vibhuti." I offer.

"Yeah, that's it. Can you do that?" She asks.

"I never tried, but to tell you the truth, I'm not sure what value it has."

"It's an indication of a level of accomplishment, isn't it?" Jonas says, "I mean, a true guru must have some level of achievement."

"Achievement is probably not the best word. You know in the Heart Sutra it is said 'no attainment and nothing to attain,' Advaita Vedanta teaches you are always already pure divinity, and in the Bible 'the Christ in you, the hope of glory.' So it's pretty clear across traditions that it's not really about achievement. I'd be more comfortable with a word like recognition or realization."

"Recognition of what?" asks Jonas.

"Recognition of one's true nature."

"So you're calling enlightenment recognition?" he asks.

"Yes. It's just another verbal pointer along with terms like self-realization, liberation, awakening and the rest."

Cindy interrupts, "But what does recognition have to do with making ash appear?"

"Nothing at all," I say, "nor does it have anything to do

with being in two places at once, or transmitting shakti, or any of the other spiritual powers that some gurus toss around." I pause to chomp another couple of peanuts. Peanuts are yummy.

"And that's precisely the point." I continue. "These out-

ward appearances of so-called spiritual accomplishments are largely distractions from the real transformative power that the guru-disciple relationship has to offer. So, back to our question: what is the guru's function? Any ideas Jonas?"

"I know that 'gu' means darkness or ignorance; 'ru' means light or liberation." He starts in, "So I suppose, in

addition to teaching, the guru's role is to help you find enlightenment, to help you from the darkness to the light."

"You're on the right track, but let's reword that to make it a bit more accurate: how about we say that the role of the guru is to help you awaken to the truth of who you really

are," I say, "and one of the things she might do to help you is to teach you something."

"Ahh, I see what you're saying," Cindy speaks up, "the guru only has one role: to help you awaken, yet she might use all sorts of techniques in order to support that one goal."

"That's it, and of course there are many other techniques in addition to teaching that the guru may use with the disciple." I say. I finish off my peanuts and wipe the detritus from my earlier explosive peanut encounter from my laptop, before closing it and sliding it into the seat pocket in front of me.

"Okay," Jonas continues, "so are you saying that these spiritual powers aren't the main thing to look for in a good guru?"

"I'm saying they have nothing at all to do with being a good guru. And I'll add, they can actually poison the entire process; I've seen it myself many times over." I say. "You

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see, when a guru starts throwing around her accomplishments, it becomes a show about her--and it's not supposed to be about her, it's about the students. The students naturally begin to focus on her abilities, comparing themselves with her, and thinking that if they can achieve what she has achieved, they too will arrive."

"Isn't that true?" Jonas asks.

"Not at all. Whatever powers the guru, or anybody has are powers that belong to the person or body/mind organism. They have nothing to do with the recognition of your true nature. In fact, accomplishments of this sort tend to move us deeper into bondage: the ego pats itself on the back and proudly shows them off to the world. 'Look what I did.'"

"I see," Cindy chimes in, "so you're saying the efforts I make to become special or more spiritual in any way actually reinforces my identification with the person or body/mind."

"Yup. And this is precisely why Patanjali in the Yoga Sutras goes to great lengths to enumerate all the various powers that can arise from spiritual practice and then at the end of the list says: don't touch them."

The plane banks to the right and I gaze out of the window. The tip of the wing tracks a grand arc that mimics

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the bend of a lazy river below before coming back to level flight.

"I don't get it." Jonas scratches his head, "If it's not about achieving what the guru has achieved, how does the process work?"

"Look at it this way, Jonas, the whole relationship between guru and disciple is simply a kind of a living yoga posture."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm sure your teacher, Bonnie, has taught you a bit about how yoga poses work?"

"You mean the alignment and all that?" he asks.

"Not really." I say, "I mean more like how does standing in a funny shape help you to awaken to your true nature?"

"Oh, I know," Cindy blurts out, "It has to do with surrendering to what is, doesn't it."

"It does." I nod.

"Okay, I know what you're talking about now," says Jonas, "so just like a yoga pose puts us in experiences the ego doesn't like, so too does the guru-disciple relationship."

"And your job in the middle of it all is?"

"To surrender." says Cindy.

"And what value does surrender have?" I ask.

"It has something to do with our habits, right?" Jonas asks.

"It does indeed. Through surrender, we learn to let go of action on the behalf of the separative ego. Little by little we learn to release our need for things to be a certain way and gain the ability to relax with what is, as it is. This paves the way for us to ultimately disentangle ourselves from the whole mess."

"Thy will be done, not mine."

Cindy adds.

I nod.

"So what's the point of the guru then?" Jonas asks, "I mean if it's just a pose, why not just do triangle or downward dog?"

"One reason is because the guru-disciple relationship, if practiced with an authentic guru, can be many times more powerful than a traditional posture." I say, "Part of this power lies in the guru's knowledge and experience. When you misuse downward dog, downward dog can't bring you back in line. When you take a wrong step in a guru-disciple relationship however, the guru is there to remind you of your job--to adhere to the form despite your ego's resistance--to surrender."

"It's kind of like the guru is perpetually modifying the posture so that it is always tailored for where you are?" asks Cindy.

"Uh huh."

"So the guru is there just to push your buttons?" Jonas asks.

"That's an oversimplification. Really the guru has three main jobs:

1. Draw the map of the territory. Teach her students what delusion is and what liberation is. How does the process of awakening work, and what are the pitfalls that are likely to trip them up.

2. Teach the techniques for traversing the territory. This can include the use of forms like yoga postures, pranayama, meditation and a whole range of other tools. The goal here is to help students be skillful in their practice.

3. Monitor progress and provide guidance. Once the students understand the process, the guru's job becomes one of closely supervising them. This is an extremely important

aspect of the process because the ego is always co-opting spiritual practices to make itself feel more accomplished."

"So whose job is it to monitor the guru?" Jonas asks, "I mean there have been so many scandals involving gurus."

"Gurus, like all people, can do things that your ego really doesn't want to get behind. Their humanness is part of the posture too." I say, "It's not uncommon for people to abandon the guru-disciple relationship because of something the guru said, did, or even ate."

"Shouldn't they leave if the guru does something bad?"

"Well, that's a judgment call. There are certainly some egregious acts that it's probably best not to support with continued disciple-ship--murder comes to mind. But by and large, the job of the disciple is to surrender to the divine as it arises in the form of the guru."

"So the guru isn't perfect?" Jonas asks.

"Yes and no." I respond, "I mean in one way everything is perfect, right? It's all the perfect expression of the divine play no matter what opinions and beliefs the mind may have about how things should be. But more to the point, the guru isn't perfect in the way that most people would like to think of perfect: in the always right, never wrong sort of way. That kind of perfect is simply a mental construct and one that varies from person to person."

"So you're saying that even a liberated guru isn't a perfect person."

"More to the point, I'll say that people don't get liberated."

"What?" says Jonas, his face twisted up in confusion, "Isn't the whole point here to be liberated?"

"Yes."

"But you just said there's no such thing..."

"That's not at all what I said."

"He's right sweetie, he said people don't get liberated." Cindy pats Jonas' arm.

"What's the difference?"

"There's no such thing as liberation' means just that," I say, "But people don't get liberated' means that liberation

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has nothing to do with the person."

"Who does it have to do with?"

"You."

"But I am a person."

"And it is precisely that kind of thinking that keeps you bound, my friend." I smile. "You don't get liberated *as* the person you think you are; rather you get liberated *from* the person you think you are."

When you get swept up in the idea that the guru is the guru because she is somehow morally perfect, you're focusing on the person and you're setting yourself up to

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strive for perfection as well. So not only are you focusing on the wrong thing (the person) but

you're setting yourself up for an impossible and hugely distracting endeavor: perfecting your body/mind. In case you haven't noticed, people aren't perfect, they're messy and disappointing, that's just the way it is."

The plane jostles as we encounter a patch of turbulence. The fasten seatbelts sign illuminates with a pleasing chime and the captain come on to assure us we'll most likely live through the experience.

I continue. "You see, a big part of the guru-disciple game, and thus the liberation game, is to transcend the ideas of right and wrong, good and bad, and all the other beliefs, agendas, and opinions that keep us stuck. It's the person who has these opinions, and the more tightly I hold on to them, the more tightly I bind myself to the person—the same person who can never be liberated. Therefore the guru-disciple relationship is much more about seeing the perfection in the guru as she is, than it is about holding her to a certain standard."

"Would it be safe to say that as you develop the ability to access the perfection in the guru as she is, you also develop the ability to access the perfection in the world as it is?" Cindy asks.

"More than safe," I respond, "that's a beautiful way to describe a major part of the process."

"So what makes someone a guru?" Jonas asks.

"Well in an informal sense, everyone is a guru if used as such." I say, "I mean, everyone and everything is always challenging our ego's ideas of right and wrong. To use them as such you just need to be willing to surrender your personal agendas."

"In that case," Cindy interrupts, "Jonas is my guru, I'm constantly being asked to surrender to his underwear being thrown on the floor."

We all laugh.

I continue. "But even so, the formal guru-disciple relation-

ship is potentially more powerful because an agreement has been made. The guru dictates the form, and the student agrees to adhere to the form."

"And when the guru corrects the student," Cindy adds, "the student is receptive to the correction based upon the agreement."

"You've got it, Cindy."

"You kind of make it sound like anyone can function as a guru. But are there any qualifications of a guru, I mean in the most formal sense?"

"First off, yes anyone, and anything, can function as a guru, if the student treats it as such: traffic, being fired, sickness are all potent gurus if we use them. But again, the formal guru is potentially many times more powerful, as we've already seen. As for the qualifications for a formal guru, the first and most important piece of advice would be to recognize the difference between recognition or awakening and the mastery of spiritual powers. It's the recognition that makes a guru most potent—not the powers. In addition to this apperception of the truth, I'd list three other significant qualifications:

1. Possessing a comprehensive understanding of the process of awakening
2. Being a skilled communicator
3. Having a genuine ability to put the needs of the student first."

"So we can forget about the robes, rituals, and adoring throngs of disciples?"

"As qualifications you certainly can."

"And if worse comes to worse, and you forget all of this, just remember how to spell guru, and that will keep you on the right track."

"G-u-r-u?"

"Nope, Gee-you-are-you." I smile.

"Got it." They both say in unison.

Blessings to all,  
E

**Yogi E, a.k.a. Eric Walrabenstein** is the founder and director of Yoga Pura in Phoenix, AZ. He is the architect of Yoga Pura's year-long Advanced Studies Program and trains yoga teachers nationally.

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