

Spiritual Traveler: Need for a Teacher?

By Dr. Stewart Bitkoff

Each spiritual traveler's journey is both individual and collective. With the sequence of learning experiences varying according to the person, the time, and their higher as opposed to emotional need. This sequence is established by the Teaching, the teacher, and the path. It is a sequence that originates from another dimension, has baraka or grace attached to it, and operates within its own rules.

Finding a Path

In our culture, many are searching for a path that will bring them personal fulfillment. In this respect, this search is similar to other cultures and times. However, because of the present societal emphasis upon the role of the individual and the importance of personal fulfillment, many believe they can pick and choose a path or teacher like they are shopping for a new car. Having specific requirements they are searching for the right deal or fit.

Often spiritual travelers seek a path that is fulfilling in a manner as defined by them. They want learning experiences that will 'make them whole, peaceful, happy and connected to the larger universe.' Of course, travelers are free to want these things or establish their own learning criteria. However, authentic paths do not adhere to this structure. Like other serious forms of learning, the path has its own entrance requirements that the traveler must meet. The path exists to fulfill a function and is secondarily concerned with individual emotional needs.

In understanding this structured requirement, the traveler is usually lacking. Often insisting upon emotional stimuli a true path cannot meet, and unaware there might be other criteria necessary for learning. For example, the path exists to teach the traveler how to *quiet* emotional stimuli, and bring forward, from within, latent spiritual capacity. This capacity will not operate when the traveler is overly expectant or concerned about feeling happy or peaceful; this expectation or mind set actually *blocks* the higher element from coming forward. To be accepted, the traveler must have the innate capacity to push aside or detach for a time from specific emotional stimuli. Usually, beginning travelers do not realize, they have defined their spiritual search in emotional and expectation terms.

Because this need may not be conscious or the traveler may be unable to minimize their need for emotional fulfillment, without further work, what is generally provided by authentic paths is education about the matter. 'Before being accepted by us, first you must learn how to learn,' and are not ready for what we have to offer. Familiarize yourself with our materials, then, when you are ready (i.e., learned what you needed to learn), present yourself again.'

Typically, the spiritual traveler does not understand the need to make oneself ready for admittance to a mystical school, and wanders about wondering why they cannot seem to find the right teacher or path.

Need for a Teacher

Instead of fully examining the need for necessary preparation, what happens is an emotional response at being 'rejected' or perplexed as to why the teacher has not yet called them to this form of learning. In all complex learning systems, the entrance criteria are multiple, often refined and subtle. Ultimately being set by the Teacher and dependent upon what is being taught. Consider the skills necessary for the surgeon, before he can actually attempt brain surgery; consider the extensive preparation required before working on a human brain. Here the requirement is similar.

When the traveler is ready, the teacher will call. Perhaps, at this point, the traveler will feel a *need* to present themselves for admittance. All prospective travelers are observed for the necessary qualities. This evaluation is ongoing and occurs on many levels. Usually, the prospective traveler is unaware it is occurring. Because we are dealing with 'the original classroom without walls,' students can be observed and evaluated at a great distance. Usually, it is not as mysterious as this, and the evaluation occurs while the prospective student is in close proximity; while at work, school, attending worship or perhaps a lecture on spiritual studies.

A question arises concerning what travelers can do or how they should occupy themselves while waiting to begin formal study.

- Examine personal assumptions about readiness for this type of learning.
- Develop 'sincerity' concerning motives and why one is interested in higher consciousness.
- Lead a balanced life. Fulfilling the minimum requirements necessary for the social structure in which you live.
- Consider that much of your responses to this learning are emotionally and excitement laden, and are the door which is in your way.
- Familiarize yourself with the body of work by a teacher; the entrance criteria will be specified. For example, read the material developed for this purpose by Idries Shah, and when ready contact: The Society for Sufi Studies.
- Associate with other travelers who have something to offer concerning the inner journey. Usually, these travelers will present themselves as ordinary, not strange, and having adapted to their present culture. Typically, being the type of person you would feel comfortable introducing to your mother and bringing home for dinner.
- Pray morning and evening to fulfill your higher destiny and the higher destiny of the universe.

- Remember in this endeavor it is a question of love. The lovers who wish to serve their Beloved are accepted. Love is never an easy path.

Finally, after considering this list of requirements, the traveler may become discouraged and wonder: is it worth the trouble? Surely, there must be an easier way? These requirements are just to get started. In this journey, it is a matter of burning. Those who reach journey's end are those who *have* to travel. For them, there is no other choice. They must reach the object of their love or perish.

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Finding a Teacher*

Q: *Is a teacher absolutely necessary in the Sufi Way?*

A: Yes. For practical purposes, absolutely necessary.

Q: *How should people seek teachers?*

A: By fitting themselves for the search, by familiarizing themselves with the materials which a teacher provides for primary studies. Then by approaching a teacher and asking whether one can become a pupil.

Q: *But is that not what people always do?*

A: Very far from it. They do not bother to think whether they have taken the trouble to absorb what a teacher may have provided, preferring to look for a teacher and to put all the onus upon him to teach them. This attitude debars them from learning, because the assumption is based on the vanity which the preliminary familiarization is designed to help to reduce.

Q: *Where exactly is the vanity in just looking for a teacher?*

A: It lies in believing that one can and should be taught direct by the teacher without taking the preliminary step of getting to know his work on the primary level.

**Finding a Teacher*, question and answer segment taken from: Idries Shah, The Commanding Self, The Octagon Press, London, 1994, pgs. 102-103.