

# The Search For The Spiritual Teacher: Do I Need A Guide?

By Richard Harvey

If you want to embark on the road of self-discovery and true spirituality by yourself, in isolation and governed by your egoic processes and character defenses, you will not get very far. The personality, the character, the individual and egoic processes of aggrandizement, self-serving, replenishing, suffering, and unhappiness that we call our individual life is a sheep-like figure with no coeur, no courage. The ego-self has no heart to penetrate, to annihilate itself or loosen its attachments to the fetishes and bonds of egoic existence, which takes even the most beautiful and precious human accomplishments and events, and reduces them to self-success. Furthermore, personality and character are comprised of so many aspects within you, there are so many different beings inside you that you cannot possibly know what is best for you. That's why, it has been said so many times, although we seem reluctant to hear it: you must have a master, a teacher, a real friend, a guide. Whoever this person is and whatever title they go by, they know you better than you know yourself. This is the crucial sign. When someone enters your life and he or she clearly is not only wise and compassionate, but knows you better than you know yourself, you are offered a gift from the universe and Providence has entered into the path of your destiny.

Remember, you cannot possibly know what is best for you from the point of view of psycho-spiritual development. Since there are such a diverse set of beings within you, it can be impossible to tell how far you are even being consistent. If you are serious about self-discovery, you must learn to surrender, to let go, and to allow in order to get anywhere in the psycho-spiritual endeavor.

Surrender wasn't very difficult for me at the outset of my journey. I was sure from the beginning that my therapist and spiritual teacher knew me much, much better than I did myself. At times he cajoled, at times he humiliated, at times he ridiculed, by turns he praised and honored and respected, then ignored, derided, betrayed, and abandoned me, and yet he stood by me like a father, like a best friend, like a lover, like a Zen master, as a teacher until all my fears had manifested through him out of his behavior. I couldn't put my finger on him, I could not tie him down and I couldn't reduce him to my points of reference, because he had none. He was free.

Sometimes people speak of time healing or the growth and development that come with age and natural maturation, but this healing is not the same as the healing that results from therapy. Months or years of therapy is irreplaceable as it both accelerates growth and allows a depth of inner work which is only possible in a relationship with a wise and compassionate "other." Self-therapy lies somewhere in the middle. People come to me who have read self-help books and spiritual books and they are disappointed that nothing has changed in their lives. They have been meditating for years – same complaint. They attended informal leaderless workshops for years – same. Self-directed development is a minefield with all the certainty and chances of success equal to winning in a grab game at an amusement arcade. You do have the possibility to gain insights and change certain aspects of your life, but profound healing can only occur through a relationship, since all wounds and splits inside you originated in a relationship (with the mother, father, other carer, or with God).

Only with the confidence and safety that being with another brings, are you able to go to the very edge of your tolerance of suffering and remain in the experience. The experience itself produces the healing.

In contrast, self-help or therapy without a therapist takes you to the edge of suffering but without bringing about radical breakthroughs of any kind. It is simply not possible to feel safe enough to pierce the barrier of trauma on your own.

Before being finally convinced (if you need convincing) of this argument, consider the complexity of the process of communication, expression, release, and integration in the therapeutic process where two minds and hearts are engaged in the process.

The first aspect of the process is communication: speaking and expressing yourself as trust deepens in the process of therapy itself and in the therapeutic relationship in particular. Second, now that you feel safe enough, you can allow the emergence of feelings and emotions and their experience in present time to be revealed and shared with another. As this happens, there is a freeing of energies, a lessening of shame, and a deepening of faith that healing is possible. Energetically there is also an immediate reward in feeling lighter, freer, and more spontaneous and natural. As the process goes on, toleration of emotions and expression deepens and extends. You find yourself able to descend further, to trust more, and to explore ever more deeply. Increasingly you feel in the aftermath of the felt experience, release, catharsis, authenticity, and this new vividness, as well as the ability to experience more deeply and wholly extends into life itself. The discharge of feelings in therapy leads to an underlying and progressively pervasive feeling and experience. As your life is enriched, your inner world presents itself more openly and honestly, so that a reciprocal relationship arises between your inner and outer worlds.

Integration takes place as changes appear in your organism physically, mentally, and emotionally in the form of a psychological re-attunement, a re-gauging and recalibrating of the psycho-physical body to accommodate the new experience, insights, and breakthroughs. Finally, stabilizing in the changes takes place through follow-up work and the sustained relationship with the therapist-guide, who wisely and skillfully facilitates the ramifications of transformation.

A dedicated relationship with a guide, a therapist, or a teacher is simply inevitable in the serious endeavor of inner work. Evidently, all the above discussed aspects are missing from reading self-help books, attending one-day workshops, or any other form of self-therapy. Moreover, in self-therapy the capacity for delusion is great and the possibility of wish-fulfillment therapy is prevalent. Thinking yourself into gratitude, forgiveness, or some transformed state may all proceed from good intentions, but when forgiveness, gratitude, and transformation are inauthentic, or not fully developed within you, they serve simply as a further lid on repressed feelings. Most if not all of us are far too tricky to “succeed” through self-guided therapy. I have yet to meet someone who didn’t have a capacity for self-delusion, self-manipulation, and wish-fulfillment. The therapist-guide is indispensable in steering us away from those opportunities for potential delusion and keeping us checked in to reality. Individual therapy is thus crucial and indispensable to effective inner work.

An Eastern saying states: “Rather than spend ten years studying every day to perfect an art, spend ten years searching for the right teacher.” When you have found the right teacher, you can let go. In a way it is in his or her hands. You are engaged at last and with conviction and in earnestness you can move forward. I never questioned my teacher, never doubted him, never considered for a moment that he may be wrong and I think that about 99% of the time that was correct, he wasn’t wrong, so my trust paid off.

But it really has to be the right teacher, who is genuinely involved in the spiritual life and who has the blessing of being an authentic guide.

This article is an excerpt from Richard Harvey's book [Your Divine Opportunity](#).