



The Role of the Teacher in Spiritual Practice II

Robert Hodge

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Let me start by describing my path. I first became involved with meditation when I read the book, *The Relaxation Response* by Herbert Benson M.D.¹ Dr. Benson discovered that blood pressure could be lowered by practicing a short mantra meditation each day. At the time, I was a general internist at the University of Virginia Medical School, and I recommended his technique to some of my patients so that they could possibly reduce the amount of anti-hypertensive drugs to control their blood pressure. This might also reduce any side effects of the medications. I decided to try it myself even though I did not have hypertension. For the next 25 years, I became an off and on meditator. I was also what you might call a seeker of spirituality. I enjoyed reading spiritual books including the Bible and *The Course in Miracles*. In the 1970's, I took the EST training and participated in a number of their activities. Nothing really seemed to grab hold and provide me with the peace that I was seeking.

Then in 2001 while I was at the University of Missouri-Columbia, I met a law school professor who was teaching mindfulness to lawyers. He also taught at a local sangha called Show Me Dharma and I joined the group on his recommendation. The group met in the home of the guiding teacher, Ginny Morgan. For several years, I attended a weekly evening basic meditation class which included a dharma talk on the Buddha's teachings. I also had personal meetings with Ginny to discuss my practice. It was then that I started to develop a consistent meditation practice and to acquire a deeper knowledge of the teachings. During that time, I got more involved with the sangha by being elected to the board of directors and becoming the treasurer. I felt that I had found a very supportive spiritual community and I started to feel some of the peace that I was seeking. One day, I asked Ginny if there was anything more that I could do for the sangha and she asked me if I had ever considered teaching. I said that I would love to try and Ginny invited me to attend the teachers group as well as giving me advice on books and retreats to attend.

During this time, Matt Flickstein, dharma teacher and student of Bhante Gunaratana, came to Columbia each fall for a weekend non-residential retreat. Besides attending these retreats, I was accepted into his Teaching as a Form of Practice program. Matt became another one of my teachers and I attended a number of his retreats at the Shalom House in Montpelier, Virginia. At Show Me Dharma, I assisted Ginny with her committed practice group and took responsibility for the group when she passed away in 2011.

In addition to Ginny and Matt, I have had conferences with a number of other teachers on retreats.

I am grateful for my formal teachers. They certainly met the criteria that Laura spoke about: They were knowledgeable and had a strong appreciation and interest in the dharma.

They were kind and trustworthy.
They were open without being overly attached or rigid in their views.
They taught what was beneficial to me at the time.
They were ethical in word and deed.
They did not claim any special powers or devotion from me.
They did not, to my knowledge, have inappropriate relationships with students.
They “practiced what they preached.”

What strikes me most when I reflect on their interaction with me was that they listened deeply. They didn’t offer to solve my problems (my stories). Instead, they helped direct me when I was “off path.” For example, when I told Matt at a retreat that I was meditating very intensively with no results, he told me to stop meditating and relax, that I would get into it eventually but now I was trying too hard (and expecting results!). That worked.

What are some of the benefits that a teacher can provide?

Below are some benefits with accompanying quotes by noted teachers.

Protection against self-deception: “The true teacher is one’s greatest protection on the spiritual path against all the dangers of self-deception, including being deceived by one’s own enlightenment.”ⁱⁱ The term “true teacher” is used here to describe one who can effectively facilitate an individual’s highest transformative capacity” Mariana Caplan ⁱⁱⁱ

Meet Personally

“So, what do we need besides written instructions? Most of us need information from someone with experience. We prefer to pull into a gas station and talk with someone who's been on the same road before. We want to hear how they describe the twists and turns in the road to observe their body language and expressions as they indicate how we, too, can find the way. We want them to impart not only knowledge but confidence. Above all, we want the ability to slow down the pace of instruction to match our ability to absorb it so that we may ask questions. It is much the same with books about the Dharma, and mindfulness practice. In the same way, we can, when asked, offer instruction to others based on our actual experience.” John Lawlor^{iv}

Reinforce that it is all within you: “A spiritual teacher/mentor’s role is unique in that the goal is not to transmit knowledge or understanding as much as it is to somehow bring about a recognition in the student of the student’s own pre-existing nature. This is a much more subtle thing than simply teaching someone a skill or understanding. It is not that a spiritual teacher never provides spiritual teachings or knowledge or understanding, but that knowledge or understanding by itself is not the goal. A student can have a broad knowledge of spiritual principles, and yet can still not have truly recognized those principles as being inherent in his or her own being. So spiritual teachers or mentors may teach a lot or they may not teach anything, depending on what the student needs in that moment to experience this deeper recognition of their own true nature.

This may seem like a subtle distinction between the role of a spiritual teacher and a regular teacher, but it makes a huge difference. The regular teacher usually has something specific to transmit, and there is often an implied assumption that the student will have more understanding or be better off when the teaching is completed. But the spiritual teacher is pointing to something that is already present in the student. It is like teaching someone to have shoulders. You can't really teach the having of shoulders to someone who already has shoulders! But you can make them more aware of the shoulders they already have." [Nirmala](#)^v

Encourage you to see for yourself: " Is there any way you can know that what you are in touch with is Reality? Here is one sign: What you perceive does not fit into any concept whether given by another or created by yourself. It simply cannot be put into words. So what can teachers do? They can bring to your notice what is unreal, they cannot show you Reality; they can destroy your concepts, they cannot make you see what the concept is pointing to; they can indicate your error, they cannot put you in possession of the Truth. They can, at the most, point in the direction of Reality, they cannot tell you what to see. You will have to walk out there all alone and discover for yourself." Anthony De Mello^{vi}

"You cannot force your insight on others. You may force them to accept your idea, but then it is simply an idea, not a real insight. Insight is not an idea. The way to share your insight is to help cause the conditions so that others can realize the same insight-through their own experience, not just hearing what you say. This takes skillfulness and patience." John Lawlor^{vii}

Keep coming back to the basics of mindfulness: There's the story of the disciple who went to the master and said, "Could you give me a word of wisdom? Could you tell me something that would guide me through my days?" It was the master's day of silence, so he picked up a pad. It said, "Awareness." When the disciple saw it, he said, "This is too brief. Can you expand on it a bit?" So the master took back the pad and wrote, "Awareness, awareness, awareness." The disciple said, "Yes, but what does it mean?" The master took back the pad and wrote, "Awareness, awareness, awareness means— awareness." Anthony De Mello^{viii}

What have I gained from following this path? More peace, joy and contentment. Another way of putting it would be less reactivity, a realization that it all comes from within, more true being with others, and seeing the more of the challenges in life with gratitude and learning opportunities rather than fear. Am I truly awake all of the time? No. Am I experiencing more moments of being awake? Yes.

We follow the path alone with the support of others. Ultimately, life is your teacher. This requires a shift of perspective so that you can feel gratitude instead of frustration when challenges arise. How else can we grow? I encourage you to find a teacher with whom you can share yourself and the dharma. It could be a trusted friend or colleague. The dialogue is the important ingredient

ⁱ Benson, Herbert The Relaxation Response Harper Collins 2009)

ⁱⁱ Caplan, Mariana, Halfway Up the Mountain: The Error of Premature Claims to Enlightenment Hohm Press 1999 p. 401

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Caplan, Mariana, *Halfway Up the Mountain: The Error of Premature Claims to Enlightenment* Hohm Press 1999p 401
- ^{iv} Thich Nhat Hahn. *Friends on the Path: Living Spiritual Communities* Parallax Press 2002 p. 78
- ^v <https://endless-satsang.com/spiritual-teacher-mentor.htm>
- ^{vi} De Mello, Anthony. *The Way to Love: Meditations for Life* (pp. 68-72). The Crown Publishing Group.
- ^{vii} Thich Nhat Hahn. *Friends on the Path: Living Spiritual Communities* Parallax Press 2002 p. 62
- ^{viii} Mello, Anthony De. *Awareness: Conversations with the Masters* (pp. 56-62).