

THE GURU QUESTION

The Perils and Rewards
of Choosing a Spiritual Teacher

Mariana Caplan, PhD



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Praise for *The Guru Question*

“*The Guru Question* is a very important, perhaps definitive, examination of this fundamental question, open to professional and layperson alike. The book manages to cover virtually every aspect of this incredibly important and timely topic, and does so in an elegant, comprehensive, and succinct fashion. I think it amounts to something like the final word on the topic (or very close to it). Highly recommended for anybody on a spiritual path or considering one!”

—Ken Wilber, author of *Integral Spirituality*

“Mariana Caplan’s book is the most comprehensive, lucid, well-argued, utterly straightforward, and honest work on the guru question that there is. She unapologetically tackles the most difficult, nitty-gritty issues without hedging, flinching, or smoothing over any of the rough edges. This book is a must read for any serious spiritual seeker, as well as for anyone who wants to understand what the relation to a spiritual master is all about.”

—John Welwood, author of *Toward a Psychology of Awakening*

“Mariana Caplan’s *The Guru Question* addresses this question better than any book I’ve read. If you are curious about the subtle gifts and traps of the student-teacher relationship, or if you are interested in authenticating mature heart-devotion rather than following your unresolved childhood hope for love down the wrong road, then read this book.”

—David Deida, author of *Finding God Through Sex*

“Mariana Caplan has written a powerful book about the guru-disciple relationship. Here Mariana balances her recognition of the depth and sacredness of the relationship between a true teacher and a true disciple, with her recognition of the pitfalls that can arise when we seek from another human being the redemption that can only come from

within. Writing from her direct experience with her own teachers, and drawing on the experience of others, she illuminates the mystery of the guru in a way that should be of benefit to many readers.”

—Sally Kempton, author of *Meditation for the Love of It*

“The best disciple is one who is prepared. Mariana Caplan astutely and sensitively explains what this means. I strongly recommend *The Guru Question*.”

—Georg Feuerstein, PhD, author of *The Encyclopedia of Yoga and Tantra*

“An honest, well-researched, and informative guide to this much misunderstood and yet important spiritual topic. A clear, insightful, and at times humorous look at the drama of the student-teacher relationship.”

—Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, Sufi teacher and author of
Sufism: The Transformation of the Heart

“The rising of spiritual aspirations in the West, where the values of ‘having’ have smothered those of ‘being,’ is a source of hope for the future of humankind. However, the interest in traditional teachings transmitted by masters to their disciples is developing in a context of confusion, misunderstanding, if not of scandals. And what was a promise of peace becomes a source of suffering. Many spiritual seekers think it is their right to meet a guru, and even an outstanding guru, without ever asking themselves: ‘Who am I as a disciple to have such a claim?’ Mariana Caplan explores the essential matter through her own experience and throws precious light on this theme. It pays homage to the truth, the truth being always greater than any illusions.”

—Arnaud Desjardins, author of *Toward the Fullness of Life*

“Essential reading for those on the spiritual path, and for those who want to see effective spiritual paths developed in our culture.”

—Charles Tart, author of *Waking Up*

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ENTERING THE SPIRITUAL SUPERMARKET

If frequently enough, the question of the guru is not properly considered, it is because the question of the disciple is not properly considered.

—ARNAUD DESJARDINS

My story begins in a lifetime within this lifetime that seems so long ago, it is hard to believe it is the same life. I am in a remote desert village in the heart of Mexico, not yet twenty but imagining myself to be a blossoming goddess of significant maturity. I am the specially chosen apprentice of Hozí—a renowned Aztec shaman, mystic, and artist. I have come to Mexico as his invited guest to fulfill the first segment of the shared destiny he claims we have together, as fated by the gods.

On this night, I am feigning sleep on a makeshift cot that passes for a bed in Hozí's one-room cottage/art studio. The building has been donated to him by one of the mothers of his various children throughout the world, so he can afford to paint and teach. (These mothers, I later learn, have all been “specially

chosen” apprentices, too.) I am lying on my stomach with a blanket covering my arm, which is tucked under my pillow. My fingers firmly grip a large stainless-steel knife I sneaked from the kitchen moments earlier as I returned from the outhouse.

My personal shaman is stoned and drunk in the loft, where he is creating life-sized, erotic paintings of gods, daemons, cosmic vaginas, massive multicolored phalluses, ethereal dimensions, sacred objects, and sublime interior landscapes. I am all too aware that there are only two telephones in the whole town, and I do not know where either of them is. I make a mental note to locate them the following day, assuming I make it through the night.

I contemplate various escape plans but am internally tormented by my thirst for the wisdom this shaman has promised—a thirst I’m nearly certain will not be quenched if I flee. For a moment, I rationalize sleeping with him willingly instead of fighting if he tries to attack—for the sake of the higher knowledge I wish to obtain—but my stomach curdles at the thought of his whiskey breath and smoke-saturated, bristly gray moustache.

I hear him breathing. Following each smoke-filled in-breath, the out-breath echoes with carnal lust for the naive, young wannabe shamaness in the bed below him. I listen to the rhythm of his breathing, praying to whatever Aztec gods exist that he will pass out from intoxication before his shamanic balls boil over. Instead, the breath deepens, and I hear in it a combination of lust, frustration, and a hunger for vengeance. I hold the knife firmly and resolve to do what is required to save my remaining innocence—and prepare to be attacked.

Fortunately, I make it to morning with my shamanic virginity still intact, and I last two more weeks in Mexico without being raped, having very intense and frightening experiences. It was the beginning of a long, winding, passionate journey toward spiritual

discernment. In the end, this experience proved to yield many important lessons in spiritual discernment, but at the time I was a terrified and confused, albeit passionate, young woman.

The shaman's battlefield wasn't the first destination on my spiritual sojourn. It began long before that, in a family with a father whose own father did not know how to love him, because *his* father had not known how to love *him*. Thus my father could not help but bring some of that same fate to bear on his own children. In me, his youngest daughter, the wound this created led to my discontent with a world I saw as asleep, as drained of the living mystical possibilities of compassion, inner harmony, and selflessness. It began with a false interpretation of the Jewish religion—a transliteration that damaged my mind by instilling fear of God and damnation, even as it fertilized my heart with prayers and chants written in a language that engraved their perennial truth in the same heart and mind they confused. It began with a car accident that almost took my life but, through grace, left me instead with an acute awareness of the preciousness of existence. I learned that life must not be wasted, and we must be continuously devoted to the fulfillment of its highest possibility.

By the time I hit twenty, I was an overachieving hippie: a feminist activist who ran campus organizations that I told myself would save the world, or at least part of it. I had managed to travel half of that world in search of cultures that evidenced greater humanness than my own. I had undertaken a serious study of anthropology to justify my search on academic grounds and had already learned that no culture, love affair, beach paradise, or adventure translated into the inner freedom I already knew was the only thing worth living for.

So when Luna, a self-proclaimed Wiccan priestess and the elder sister of one of my college roommates, waltzed into the

living room of our 1930s Victorian house in Ann Arbor, Michigan, I was ripe and ready. Luna led us through meditations and guided visualizations about the *inner self* and our life's "true purpose"—the first time I had ever heard those terms. Luna's simple visualizations blasted open my hungry psyche, and for the next seven years I was like the ugly duckling. I asked every yoga teacher, Tai Chi master, massage therapist, philosophy professor, guru, rabbi, and Native American wannabe shaman I met, "Are you my mother?" "Are you my father?"

I was new to the path amid a culture that did not provide an instruction manual for spiritual seekers. As the Sufis ask, "How do you find your way through the desert when there is no road?" What do you do, in Middle America, when circumstances conspire to make the rigid walls of your psyche crack open, revealing your soul's cry for truth? When this happened to me, I joined billions of other human beings—past, present, and future—in the shared questions: Where do I begin? Is there a religion or spirituality that will truly speak to me? Will I find it in a book? A teacher? A friend? A place? A martial art? An LSD trip? A pilgrimage to India? How do I know where and how to look? Am I really crazy, as everyone from my past believes, or could this intuition of something far beyond my limited perceptions truly exist . . . please?!

Start simple, I thought: study. I discovered Ann Arbor's only New Age bookstore and was confronted there with thousands of titles ranging from *Discovering the Child Within* to *Everyday Buddhism* to *The Way of the Shaman* to *Celestial Messages*. The sheer number of books only confused me more. I needed recommendations, but who could I ask? Who was spiritual? The people who worked at the bookstore? The long-haired hippies on campus? The women's studies professor who wore the Ghanaian fertility-goddess necklace? Did I even know anybody

who was wise? In the end, I asked them all for recommendations and looked for repeats among their lists.

It also struck me as obvious that, beyond my reading, I would need some personal guidance, but once again, where to begin? What was a guru? Was that the same as a lama? How did that compare with a shaman? And what on earth did it mean when somebody professed to be a Divine Mother? Could *avatars*—human incarnations of God—really exist among us? Was everyone who called him- or herself a “spiritual teacher” really such a teacher? Was there a board of certification somewhere? Or was it true that every rock, child, lover, and tree was my teacher and I should avoid “intermediaries,” as the more cosmic literature suggested? And if that were so, how could I truly trust that I was hearing the rock itself and not my hoped-for interpretation of its message? Would a ladybug *really* tell me if I was going astray? Little as I knew then, I knew enough about the nature of mind to want something more than a blade of grass for guidance. Thus I began my search for a spiritual teacher.



When beginning a book such as this, it would be ideal if we could articulate with certainty and widespread agreement definitions for the terms *spiritual teacher*, *master*, *guru*, *guide*, and so forth. The problem is that it is impossible to do so. Objective distinctions cannot be made, and there will always be countless gray areas, exceptions, refined points of discernment, and ever-evolving understandings within each of us. Instead what I will do is offer an overview of the issues involved, suggest how I will be using the terms in this book, and encourage you to make further distinctions and refinements as your own understanding unfolds.

Relative and Absolute Authority

In his book *Toward a Psychology of Awakening*, John Welwood makes a distinction between relative and absolute authority.¹ *Relative authorities* are human like the rest of us but are perhaps steps ahead on the path, functioning as mentors or guides. *Absolute authorities* include the gurus and masters: seen either as incarnations of the divine, or powerful (if not flawless) vehicles of transmission for divine direction.

Yet even within the model of relative versus absolute authorities, the function any given teacher serves in relationship to a given student depends largely upon how we relate to the teacher. Some people may consider a spiritual leader an inspiration and a guide, whereas others see that same person as a master—or even an incarnation of God. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, for example, is an inspiration and teacher to tens of thousands of people, but to his closest disciples he is a master, a representative of God Itself, the ultimate authority to be obeyed and worshipped. In many contemporary Buddhist traditions, students do not relate to the teacher formally from a devotional stance, and the teacher may refuse many of the outward expressions of adulation commonly bestowed upon formal spiritual authority; still, the teacher's inner circle of students will often confer uncompromising reverence, obedience, and discipleship. Similarly, there are great gurus who have the capacity to fulfill the formal function of master, but some aspirants relate to them as “guide” or “friend” according to their needs at that time in their spiritual development.

In my own case, for several months I practiced rigorously in the company of the disciples of a very famous guru. From the beginning, I had the unshakable sense that she wasn't *my* guru—although I would have liked her to be, as I was actively looking

for a teacher. I was serious about my spiritual studies, too: serious enough to get up at 5 a.m., walk a mile across town in subzero temperatures in the dark Ann Arbor winter, sit in a room lit only by candles, and chant an hour-and-a-half-long Sanskrit prayer I couldn't understand, much less pronounce. The other students thought I was a disciple who "just didn't know it yet," but I knew I was not. I was in training for something and someone else whom I had not yet met. Therefore, my distance from and lack of devotion toward that guru was right for me given my circumstances at that time, and nobody else could have known that for me.

In the course of spiritual life we are also likely to encounter various relative spiritual authorities who are of genuine importance to us on our path. We may find ourselves attending meditation sessions or retreats with a particular teacher whom we respect and admire but do not wish to have as our principal teacher. Or we may practice under the guidance of a teacher's senior practitioner as we investigate that particular path. Relative spiritual authorities could include a spiritual friend or an Aikido teacher or conceivably even a wise therapist (but beware—many therapists who subtly assume this function do not live up to it!).

To learn from these relative authorities and receive what they have to offer, we must offer them a certain amount of respect and trust. This is no different from going into a yoga class—or even a calculus class—for the first time. If we go in to profess our knowledge and do what we want and what we think is best, not only will we irritate all the other students, but we will be too full of ourselves to be empty enough to receive anything.

The majority of traditional Judeo-Christian spiritual authorities such as rabbis, ministers, and priests tend to fall into the category of relative spiritual authorities. The nature of the religions they represent in no way suggests that such individuals are,

or should be, fully realized beings, much less divine incarnations. Rather, they have undergone a set course of study that certifies them to represent the spiritual teachings and ethical laws of their respective traditions.

Although they know the rules of their religion and may have a deep regard for others, many such relative authorities do not express through their lives an understanding that elicits a natural response of reverence and trust among their congregants. We may grant them respect and deference, but we do not feel genuine confidence in their wisdom. All too frequently, many of us unconsciously and automatically form a belief structure about all spiritual authorities based on this traditional model, a model that is not always suitable to deep spiritual development.

One way to consider this issue of relative versus absolute authority is Ken Wilber's model of spiritual translation versus spiritual transformation. *Translation* refers to a horizontal process in which the contents of ego or personality are progressively uncovered, understood, and worked with in order to create a greater sense of well-being within the individual, and hopefully greater workability in one's life. *Transformation* is a vertical process in which the nature of ego itself is understood and undermined, and the individual shifts from an egoic identity to a universal identity. In *One Taste*, Wilber writes:

With typical translation, the self (or subject) is given a new way to think about the world (or objects); but with radical transformation, the self itself is inquired into, looked into, grabbed by its throat, and literally throttled to death. . . [Transformative spirituality] does not legitimate the world, it breaks the world; it does not console the world, it shatters it. And it does not render the self content, it renders it undone.²

It is my belief that the most optimal relationship between teacher and student includes both translational and transformational elements, and translation without transformation is not enough to satisfy many spiritual aspirants.

Just as it is challenging to define the terms teacher, guru, spiritual guide, and so forth, the same is true in attempting to define the functions of terms like student and disciple. In some ways, this whole book is an attempt to articulate this—not in service of creating a definitive definition of the terms, but once again to assist the reader in cultivating piercing *discernment* with relationship to the complexities and subtleties of his or her inquiry. In this way, we are able to navigate our spiritual journeys more radiantly and effectively.

The following chapter will more deeply examine various types of spiritual authority, and the chapters after it will examine the nuances and discernments required to navigate a successful spiritual studenthood on the path of life. Meanwhile, if we were to make some broad brushstrokes of the terrain, we could say that terms like *guru* and *disciple* tend to refer more to an Indo-Tibetan approach to the spiritual path, and are found in Hindu and certain types of Buddhist practice. These types of student-teacher relationships, although operant under different titles, are also present in Sufi traditions and other non-Western approaches. There are obvious challenges with translating this into Western traditions and into a Western psychological model, yet many attempts have been made and continue to exist in the West with varying degrees of apparent success, even as we consider that to effectively evaluate a process of cultural translation may take hundreds of years.

What is clear is that we are in a vast cultural and evolutionary experiment. We can't deny that the usefulness of teachers and a teaching function, as well as the essential function of learning and studenthood and apprenticeship, has existed and will likely

continue to exist throughout the expanses of time. The purpose of this book is to help all of us navigate this realm more effectively. As will become apparent throughout the book, becoming a great student is not only more essential than becoming a great teacher, but it's also true that the genuinely great teachers are, first and foremost, the greatest students on the path.