



# The Disciple's Journey

**Richard Lawrence looks at the delicate and sometimes challenging relationship between disciple and guru**

**I**n his seminal book, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, Paramhansa Yogananda recounts an extraordinary incident which was described to him by a swami who had spent time with the highest of all yogi avatars, known among other names as the Lord Babaji.

Babaji, he said, was seated with his circle of followers near a remote ledge on the slopes of the Himalayas, when he was approached by a stranger who had very skilfully managed to climb there to be in his presence. The visitor had one goal in doing so: to become a disciple of the guru whose company he had entered.

He begged the Lord Babaji to accept him, threatening that if he was refused, he would jump from the mountain to his certain death because life would then be worthless to him. Babaji stated that he could not accept him at his present stage of development and challenged him to jump, which amazingly the man did. The Lord then instructed his disciples to bring the man's deceased body to him and placed his hand upon it. When the man miraculously resurrected, he was lovingly told by his new-found guru that he was now ready for discipleship and immortality too.

This, I can assure you, is the most extreme example of qualifying for discipleship I have ever come across. Even other stories about disciples of the great Babaji are not so

uncompromising. But it does illustrate – albeit in stark relief – that the first step in the disciple's journey is bravery.

## Becoming a Follower

It is one thing to study the wisdom of a particular master and to perform the practices they teach. It is entirely another one to decide to become their follower. Possibly the most famous disciples in history were the twelve who walked at the side of Jesus as he entered Jerusalem in great danger to his and therefore their lives. Dozens of others had witnessed his miracles, heard such teachings as the Sermon on the Mount and even been healed by him, but the twelve were willing to go much further than this for the master they followed.

The first meetings that the legendary Swami Vivekananda had with Sri Ramakrishna, in late 19th-century India, were shocking to him in a very different way. At his guru's touch, he experienced such a state of higher consciousness that he thought he was losing mental control to an extent that was disturbing to him. This could easily have scared off a lesser aspirant, but he realised that he had found the teacher who would lead him into enlightenment. He went on to become his greatest and most advanced disciple, who would be foremost in taking the yoga wisdom of the east to the west. »



\* (left) Swami Vivekananda  
 \* (above) Yoga Master Dr George King  
 in the Aetherius Temple in Los Angeles

In the same period a remarkable lady, Madame Blavatsky, made a courageous stand for the masters she followed, whom she called the Mahatmas. Being a Russian divorcee who practised Buddhism must have been controversial enough in Victorian England, but that was the height of convention compared to some of the claims she would later make. She declared that she received communications from her ascended teachers in the Himalayas through telepathy and remote viewing. This must have seemed outrageous, and possibly contemptible, to many at the time. But that did not deter her from following the directives she was given, particularly by her own master generally known by the initial 'M'.

The disciple's journey cannot be taken lightly. Recognition might come in a flash, as it did for Monique Noppe in 1959 when she first met the man who would become her master, and years later her husband, Dr George King. 'As soon as I saw him, I knew he was a very special guru or master...it just happened', she told me a year before her passing. But that initial recognition was verified by studying his teachings and working closely with him for almost four decades.

You do not have to physically meet the teacher you choose to follow. There are outstanding examples of dedicated service and devotion by those who have not. Saint Paul never met Jesus physically but went on to become one of his most ardent and fearless apostles. Guru Padmasambhava lived over a thousand

years after the lifetime of the Lord Buddha and yet was one of the greatest advocates of Buddhism, taking it to a region which was then extremely hostile to such a philosophy, namely Tibet.

### Following with Love

Even after careful discrimination of the teacher you choose and the bravery to follow him or her, something just as important is required to make a success of this journey. Love is the pre-requisite of a true disciple, as was demonstrated by Ananda two and a half millennia ago. When it became clear that Buddha, at the age of 56, required a personal attendant to look after him permanently rather than his followers taking it in turns as they had been doing up to then, it was to Ananda that he turned.

History has sometimes recorded Ananda as being less spiritually advanced than certain other disciples of Buddha, yet in one respect he stood head and shoulders above them all. He manifested his love for his master in his declining years in this most practical and necessary way. It is significant that Buddha is said to have followed his advice on various matters, including the cause of female devotees which Ananda supported, despite the prevailing climate of blatant sexism.

Such love for one's master, though, is really a manifestation of devotion to the divinity within them, expressed through their life and teaching. A famous example of this is Arjuna's complete dedication to Sri Krishna as revealed in the *Bhagavad Gita*. The 20th-century yogi, Swami Sivananda held up Arjuna's discipleship as a demonstration of surrendering all personal reservations in order to find God.

The teaching given by Krishna to Arjuna was that he should fulfil his duties and obligations to others but detach from all personal gain; in other words, he should serve. The love of a disciple is not always expressed through personal assistance given to their guru, but often through dedicated work for their master's mission. It is not by chance that the word 'discipline'



derives from the Latin word 'discipulus' meaning 'pupil'.

Joshua, from what we can glean of the Exodus, was a very active personal assistant of Moses. Believed to have been up to 40 years younger than his master, he was given important responsibilities under the direction of Moses and is sometimes regarded by biblical commentators as the 'perfect disciple' because of his obedience and humility.

He also exemplifies the servant who became the leader. Just as Jesus' chief disciple, Saint Peter, went on to found the church, so Joshua became the leader of the Israelites after the demise of Moses. This principle is echoed in the ancient book of the Chinese sages, the *I Ching*, which states that if a man is to rule then he must first learn to serve.

Similarly, the one who is most attentive to their master's wisdom can themselves become the wisest teacher. This was said to be true of Yan Hui, the favourite disciple of Confucius, who said of him that no-one loved learning as he did. Yan Hui would listen to his teacher without question or contradiction and then prove his understanding through action. Confucius is said to have told another disciple, with astonishing humility, that neither of them was as good as Yan Hui.

The bravery to follow your chosen teacher, with all the sacrifice entailed in such a choice, morphs into a loving commitment. Then you get to know them, either through personal contact or through studying their life and teachings, even if it is centuries after their demise. This love is expressed through service either to them or to their work, including the spreading of their teachings to others as much by example as by word.

### Finding Enlightenment

The next stage in the disciple's journey – and the greatest desire of a master for their pupil – is enlightenment. This came home to me one sunny afternoon when I visited my master, Dr King, at his residence in Santa Barbara, California. He had gone for a rest so I took the opportunity to perform an ancient yogic exercise known as 'the shadow practice', through which one can see the past, present and future. It involves watching certain shadows formed in the sunlight, while performing a fairly lengthy series of mystical procedures. Unexpectedly, Dr King got up from his rest after about ten minutes, and walked into the garden where I was standing. He looked at me and said, 'That's it, keep watching the shadows'. He then returned to his bungalow and continued his afternoon rest.

I had not mentioned anything to Dr King about performing this practice, which I had discovered in an ancient Sanskrit text. But he just knew what to say and when to say it, and he interrupted his rest to do so. That evening he told me that he too had studied and practised this text decades earlier. He proceeded to give me what can only be described as an initiation into certain aspects of enlightenment. In fact, he became so engrossed in higher truth that he lost all interest in mundanities, including his dinner which was long overdue.

## The disciple's journey can transform from walking through familiar terrain to soaring into new vistas of space

According to Lao Tzu, the greatest leader is the one under whom the people change but they think they did it themselves. Likewise, the connection with a master can bring a wonderful change to your life without you fully realising why. A true disciple will absorb some of the deeper aspects of the teachings and some of the deeper aspects of the teacher too. As Dr King put it, 'If you study diligently under a teacher, who is any good at all and you really study diligently – whether you come into physical contact with that individual or not – you begin to absorb some of his higher knowledge which he may not have imparted to you by word of mouth.'

A link is virtually created between teacher and student and through it a spiritual connection is made.

There is an old adage that when the pupil is ready, the teacher appears; but it is still up to the pupil to recognise them when they do, and to decide how far they are willing to commit. The disciple's journey can transform from walking through familiar terrain to soaring into new vistas of space. But that only happens when the right choice is made, and followed up with sufficient bravery, love and service. ●

## Find out more

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