

A guide on the path to Self-knowledge

Interview: Jet Holleman

In the classic Indian tradition he who seeks spiritual development will look for a master, a guru. A person who, based on his transcendental experience can guide a disciple in his quest for the truth.

JH: Why do people search for a guru?

AM: Because they lack self-confidence and look for help. The path of yoga is the path to Self-knowledge. The journey is not easy. It is a path of growing insight, but also a practical one, because it is a path of experience. Out of the experience grows the insight, not out of reason. But when you set out you do not yet know which way you are heading. Then you look for someone who can show you the way, a guide, a spiritual mentor.

JH: What is the difference between a teacher and a guru?

AM: There is a very big difference. A teacher is someone who passes on his knowledge and insight, but he not necessarily has experience. Whereas a guru is not a teacher, but basically a person with experience. By this I mean: transcendental experience, the fundamental experience of being. This may sound esoteric. To an outsider who does not have this experience it is impossible to form an idea of this. But only when you have had this experience, and have gone the distance to come to this experience, can you guide another person on this journey. A teacher can give classes. A guru gives personal guidance, taking into account the phase in which his disciple finds himself. He offers help, gives hints, and thus in a subtle way accompanies the disciple through his inner process, his personal evolution to the fundamental experience of being. From the outside this may not seem much, but one says it is precisely this that surpasses everything.

JH: Does not the fact that a guru works out of an experience incomprehensible for others involve a risk? A charlatan can always say: "You do not understand this, you do not have the experience yet."

AM: This risk is clearly present and it happens on a very large scale. Therefore the concept 'guru' has been put in a bad light. So we must be critical of those gurus with a world-wide reputation, because in principle a guru offers individual guidance. There is an intimate, spiritual relationship between a guru and his disciple. This cannot be done on a world scale, it goes against tradition. It is not right. It is possible, however, that someone guides his disciples in an intimate way and does this so well, that he achieves world fame afterwards. So you could say that Christ has become a guru to the Christians. But he started off with twelve disciples. To them he was a true guru.

But indeed, the risk of encountering a fake guru exists. But as an old Indian saying goes: "Everyone gets the guru he deserves." It is inevitable that there are imitators and imposters. For the disciple it is very difficult to separate the wheat from the corn. If you look for a guru in a superficial way, because it is trendy or out of infatuation (fanaticism), you will find a superficial guru. Then the disciple deceives himself. What it is really all about is to ask yourself deep down the essential questions: "Why am I here? Why do I live?" It is with this attitude that you start off on the path of yoga. Then

you are a seeker for truth. In the Scriptures truth is referred to as a reality which we cannot perceive through the conditioning of our consciousness. There are ways to break through this. Only then you can come into contact with consciousness. Nothing exalted, nothing pseudo-mystical ? it is a state that makes everything crystal-clear. And that is what it is all about.

Those fake gurus deceive people into believing all sorts of things. And it is made possible for them because people ask for it. They want to be deceived out of ignorance. They do not know reality, but they form an idea of it, based on their conditioning and limited insight. They do the same to a guru as they do to God. The Bible says that man was created in God's image. But what does man do? He does the opposite and creates God to his image. He projects his limitations endlessly and calls this 'God'. Man has some knowledge, so God is omniscient. Man needs justice, so God has to be infinitely just. But we cannot comprehend God with our reason. He is the essence of everything. Only experience will get you to know God as He is. This is no rational knowledge: all I tell about God is nonsense. I only try to pass on my experience. That is the tradition. A guru is not about miracles and someone smiling serenely on a pedestal, undisturbed by the 'storms of life'. That is the image people project, a guru they create to their image. This can only lead to disappointment.

JH: In the book 'The Guru Papers'¹, it says: "Spiritual quests are often partly fed by the desire for a peaceful world where a benevolent almighty is in charge. The seeker is often in search of security."

AM: Yes, this is true. For 30 years now, we have been holding our weekly Sat-Sanga². The purpose is to give people insight in their conditioning, in the fact that they always play a role, that they get lost in the form over and over again. Sat-Sanga has the same function as a guru: the aspiration is to bring people from not-being to being, from becoming to being, from form to being. Why do people come to the Sat-Sanga? Because they feel comfortable there, because they hear things they can hold on to, because they look for security. That's why I often ask: "Why do you come here? Because you feel good here? Then you are wrong. You shouldn't come here because it makes you feel good. Or do you come here because you need support in your life, because you look for something to hold on to? There is nothing to hold on to here, I cannot offer you that. You shouldn't be here if you are looking for something to hold on to."

My personal disciples also say: "We never know where we stand with you. You are always pulling the rug from under our feet. You keep us in the dark." As long as people are on solid ground, they think this is enough. But it is not. On the contrary, they have to loose all certainties. Often people only look for a confirmation of what they think. But that is not what it is all about.

Meditation is an important way of acquiring experience and therefore it is an important aspect of yoga. If you gain experience through meditation, you get in touch with a world which the average people are not aware of. The problem with experience through meditation is that the experience is difficult to pin-point. It does not fit into the objective world of phenomena; it neither does in the subjective world. There is a third realm, which I call the objectified subjective world. In the classic literature this is called the subtle and the causal world. When you go into meditation, you get in touch with these domains. Some people see colours, others hear sounds. These phenomena are sometimes associated with the parapsychology, one considers them to be unreal. I know however that these observations have an objective basis. Much of this can be found in a book by my guru³. He describes in detail the inner experiences of man. Even the Upanishads refer to these experiences, but they do not go more deeply into it. It only says: 'If you have such experiences, you are on the right

track.' There is no point in losing yourself in them: they are stages, signs of the move inward, of a shift in your consciousness.

It often happens that someone does not know how to handle these experiences. Then that someone needs a guru's guidance.

JH: Is it not possible to walk the path without guidance of a guru?

AM: Of course that is possible! It is also possible to cross the Brazilian jungle without a guide. You can do that. And you could die on the way. If you want to embark on such a journey, it is best you take a guide, someone who knows both the way and the jungle.

But we always talk about a guru as if he were a human being, but he is not. In the Indian tradition it is said: 'The Guru is God; God is the guru.' Many people think we deify man by this. But it is not about man. The guru is you, or better said, the Self, the Atman. For most people this sounds abstract, but it is not, no more than God is an abstract concept. God is not far away or abstract. In the classic literature this is constantly repeated. It is also beautifully put in a contemporary book, *Autobiography of a Yogi*⁴: "God is closer to you than your own breath, closer to you than the beating of your own heart." I will say it in a simpler, less poetic way: you are no-one else but your own being. And the rest: your personality, your talents, that is nothing else than the manifestation of your being, just like the whole world is a manifestation of the being, the essence. And we gave this essence the name 'God'. As soon as we start reasoning about this, it becomes an abstraction, but it is all about the being. Only for this we have no words. Lao Tse puts this beautifully: 'The name that can be called is not the true name. The road that can be travelled is not the real road.' As soon as we call it a name, it is an abstraction, but in fact it is about something that is real. The Atman is a living reality. All the rest: my ego, the role I play, the world I live in, all that is conditioning. The form in which you recognise yourself, your name, your profession ? these are roles. But is it the true you? That is the question yoga deals with: 'Who am I?' To find out, you have to look behind the scenes of the external forms. You received your name when you existed already. You received your body when you existed already. Because the classic Yoga says there is an essence that expresses the body. At the origin there is only one consciousness. This manifests itself in space and time and by this loses its unity. Space and time are a duality. It is why the Scriptures say: "All manifestation is illusion, maya."

JH: All this has to do with enlightenment, I think? Does a guru have to be enlightened?

AM: I think one cannot be a guru without being enlightened. But what is enlightenment? We tend to idealise this too. By our lack of insight, by not being enlightened, we turn this into an ideal image. Jesus lived two thousand years ago. We assume He was an historical character, who lived with His twelve disciples. He said to them it was given to them to know the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven, while He spoke to the people in parables. So He made a distinction between the tuition He gave to the twelve and His gospel for the mass. Thus the disciples were initiates.

But Jesus was a human being. He had to eat and sleep, He became emotional sometimes - He even lost his self-control and flogged the publicans out of the temple. He was a human being and therefore not perfect. To seek perfection in the imperfect is foolishness. To seek perfection in the differentiation of the world of phenomena is foolishness. Perfection lies within the Being - and the Being is perfect.

It is childish to expect a guru to be recognisable through his actions, his serenity and eminence. Jesus had success with His miracles, but when He asked his disciples who He was, it appeared only one of them came close. And these were His chosen ones who received special tuition by Him. If you ask me now how a true guru can be recognised, I'll tell you: by your own experience.

JH: Andrew Cohen⁵ states that he tests his gurus by his own experience and is disappointed every time, because they appear to be imperfect.

AM: Maybe he is right. I have experienced myself that I could not take a guru seriously. This happens sometimes. I for myself have got my deepest experience before I had even heard the word yoga⁶. This is all so far from the daily reality that it seems as if you are a bit crazy when you speak about it. Yet the experience I talk about is the most real. What people talk about, now that is crazy. They are occupied with things that are not important, with their conditioning. They are trapped in it: they cannot look over the wall. I try to help those who ask for it by giving them a leg-up, so they can look over the wall. That is all there is to it.

JH: I get the impression from Cohen that enlightenment is a permanent state, so the guru cannot make mistakes anymore.

AM: No, that is impossible. But who is to judge what a mistake is? That is society. Society is controlled by people who are conditioned.

The justification of our actions does not lie in what we do, but in the attitude out of which we act and in our intentions. Two people act the same apparently, but with totally different intentions, with a totally different attitude. It is not what they have done that decides what is wrong and right, but the attitude out of which they acted. And this an outsider cannot judge. Difficult, hey? I put it in a rather complex way, but I think I am doing a favour by this.

JH: But to someone who considers dedicating himself to that guru this is very obscure.

AM: That's right. But the guru who tells you what to do, and claims he is setting a good example, that guru is being too easy. You should be wary of such a guru. Then this ideal image of the guru is playing tricks on you again. The question is whether the guru you imagine really exists and, furthermore, whether you can judge him.

Society passes judgement on someone's acts. And society is the common denominator of the conditioning of the people. My standards evolve as I develop. So do the standards of society, but according to the level of development of the common denominator of all people and furthermore with a certain delay as well. To judge your guru you only have those standards of the society you live in. Through these you can only pass judgement on his apparent behaviour and his human personality. But the guru is no guru as a human being. He is guru because he knows the essence through his experience. Only this is guru. Man veils this experience and functions as an obstacle. What you judge is the shell, man, the personality. But you should not dwell on this, but look behind the scenes. You demand of man to be perfect, but that is not the point. If you go by the shell, you look for a guru that fits you? this is pleasant and safe, but you do not learn anything by it. Such a relationship maintains your limitations.

A guru sets an example, but does this on another level than the disciple expects. If he should do it in a way it is expected, you may have to conclude he is not a guru. Then he is just telling them what they want to hear. That is not what it is about. He is not perfect. Perfection does not exist, or rather it only exists in the essence of things. That is where a guru should lead his disciple.

JH: Did you have a guru yourself?

AM: Yes, I had a guru by whom I was initiated: Swami Yogeshwarananda. He did not have to guide me anymore, because I had acquired the experience already, but he was a tremendous help to me. When I met him he was 85 years old. He died when he was nearly 100. He was a splendid human being: he was simple and straightforward, severe and tolerant at the same time. He was an orthodox Hindu with all the conditioning this entails. When he first visited the West at the age of 85, it was a culture shock for him. That made him think: all his certainties were undermined. To me this was the very thing that made him big: he did not live by the rules, because he realised these were transitory. He could still change his mind at the age of 98. He said then: 'I have dedicated all my life to yoga and chosen a difficult path. Now at my high age I realised it didn't have to be like that. There is a much easier and much more direct path. But it was my path I had to tread.'

If you look for perfection, you look for a fake guru, someone who fits your wishes, your image. If you are really striving for the essence of things, then you should realise you should let go of all of this. As long as you do not understand this, you have not understood yet what you are looking for. There are many gurus who are no gurus, and many disciples who do not look for truth and thus not for a genuine guru.

Source: 'Tijdschrift voor Yoga' ('Magazine for Yoga') 1/98 Volume 9 - March 1998

1. Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad, "The Guru Papers - Masks of Authoritarian Power", North Atlantic Books/Frog Ltd., Berkeley, CA, 1993
2. Sat-Sanga literally means community of the Truth, of the Being, stripped from all form. As an institution it can be compared to 'church'.
3. Shree Swami Vyas Dev Ji Maharaj, "Science of Soul (Atma Vijnana) ", Yoga Niketan Trust, Rishikesh, India, 1964
4. Paramahansa Yogananda, "Autobiography of a yogi", Self-Realization Fellowship, Los Angeles, 1974
5. Andrew Cohen, AAn unconditional relationship to life - The Odyssey of a young American spiritual teacher@, Moksha Press, Larkspur, VS, 1995
6. interview with Atma Muni in TVY 96/4 and 97/1.