

# Should You Strive to Be the Guru's Pet?

Cathy Woods explores the role of a teacher, and what that means for you as a student, in the yoga classroom.

So often, and particularly come February, we define "relationships" as being with loved ones, family members and friends. However, throughout any given day we encounter many more relationships, on different levels and with various people. For example, we have relationships with the grocery store clerk, a server at a restaurant, and yes, even our yoga teachers.

What is the true role of a yoga teacher? Let's begin with a few definitions. There are yoga instructors who instruct classes and postures; an instructor might teach a class like one you could find at a fitness center, for example, that mostly focuses on the physical aspect of the practice. Next, there are yoga teachers who not only instruct postures and classes, but also teach the lifestyle, philosophy, yamas and niyamas (the inward and outward observances of a yogi) and the like. Then, there is the often-confused term of "guru." The word "guru" means yoga master or spiritual teacher. Guru comes from the Sanskrit word "*gur*," which means to raise or uplift. A true guru will have attained an extremely high degree of spiritual development before serving in the guru capacity. The word "guide" rather than "guru" is sometimes more easily understood.

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Depending on where you are in your practice, you can determine which one, or ones, of these "teachers" you are connected with at this time. Any of the above should be serving as a good example of yogic lifestyle, maintaining the integrity of this sacred tradition. Having had the opportunity to teach yoga over the past eighteen years, I feel it is an honor, privilege and blessing to do this sort of work. I also feel it is essential that a teacher of yoga uphold an attitude of *seva* (service) to their students, offering both inspiration and motivation.

True teachers, or gurus, continue to learn and grow while, at the same time, serving as mentors. If you're a student in a yoga class, you're on an inward journey, seeking your own true source of inner peace and wellness. It's important then to understand that feelings of bliss, joy, truth and awareness that arise during practice come from your own inner guru and not from the teacher or any other outside source.

A guru, or teacher, is merely a representative of the guru within, an assistant in expediting the process of growth toward self-realization or enlightenment through guidance, energy transmission, lineage, and their own heartfelt, Divine-inspired knowing. By saying this, I'm in no way downplaying the role of the teacher or the honor and respect that this mutual relationship must have in order to thrive. I am, however, saying that students and teachers should maintain a balanced attitude in their relationships with one another.

Gurus and teachers are, most certainly, human beings with their own sets of issues, ego and karma. Often, it's assumed by students that a person in that role is beyond worldly issues. Not so. Over the years, I've had several opportunities to spend personal time with my guru, and I've discovered that he, too, has the same worldly issues as the rest of us (i.e. business decisions, deaths of loved ones, aches and discomforts). Anyone inhabiting this human form is not exempt from those things. The difference is how the enlightened master deals with life's issues and realizes their true place and meaning in the big picture.

Here are some suggestions to contribute your part to the student-teacher relationship and express respect and *bhakti* (devotion) toward your teacher, as well as fellow students.

**Be present while in class and commit yourself fully to your yoga practice.** (This is really more for you than the teacher.) Doing so will assist you greatly in achieving the awareness and enlightenment you may be seeking.

**Feel free to ask your teacher questions and for guidance with issues that come up for you.** Be grateful for the teacher's input and be open to the guidance, but stay in tune to your inner voice, too.

As with all relationships, **sometimes boundaries are necessary.** Again, always listen to your intuition and discern what will and will not work for you.

**Be realistic about expatiations of the relationship and what you may attain.** Don't think the teacher will solve all of your problems or grant you "enlightenment."

Sometimes, a teacher will prod a student to **look inward**, to "look at your stuff." If that happens to you during class, try not to take it as being "picked on" or personal and try to see the value.

**Be courteous and supportive to your classmates.** Get to class on time, as arriving late is disruptive to others.

Avoid gossip in general, especially about your teacher. Though teachers play the role of guide, remember they have personalities and quirks, too. To refrain from judging or gossiping about them shows respect.

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**Refrain from excessive conversation.** It's traditional for students to enter the classroom in silence in preparation for practice. After class, abstain from engaging your classmates and teacher in casual conversation. Allow yourself to take the "yoga buzz" with you, offering others the same opportunity.

It's most important that the student-teacher relationship feel right and that there is growth, respect and inspiration occurring for both. I like to encourage my students to "be their own best teacher" by observing feelings, both physical and spiritual, as well as really listening to their inner voice.

Blessings on your yogic journey! 09

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