

The Acting Guru

The concept of *Guru* to most Americans is laden with negative connotations, conjuring images of a hirsute Indian sexual libertine with a fleet of Rolls Royces and hordes of brainwashed disciples. It is often stripped of cultural reference, watered down to mean someone who has apparently mastered a skill or trade.

Let's start from a neutral-value place with a little more specificity. *Guru* is a Sanskrit term meaning "teacher." There are semantic resonances dealing with weight, as in "teacher of the big stuff," and with light and darkness, as in the one who dispels the latter. Some traditions consider the *Guru* not just the knowledge-delivery system, but the actual embodiment of the knowledge itself. This embodied *guru* is often a charismatic leader who can bring disciples to enlightenment (if we're talking spiritual matters) or mastery (in skills or trades).

The power dynamic between the *Guru* and the disciple is much criticized as authoritarian. Indeed, the concept of *surrender*, which is essential to many spiritual traditions, is anathema to the American cultural mythology. In American culture, it's important that our self-empowerment via submission to anyone else be very subtle, disguised, and compartmentalized ("I admire his business acumen, but not his womanizing, etc."), as this *is* America, land of "Rugged Individualism," "Self-Made Man," and "Hard Work Got Me Where I Am" belief systems. We honor teachers and mentors, which sounds businesslike in its construction. We value father- and mother figures – that sounds like family values. We model our careers after the successful ones. All of these modelings are different from a *guru* relationship by just a shade: the dissolution of ego via true submission.

It's probable that in the Arts we downplay the role of modeling or submission to authority figures more than in other fields because of the importance of "originality," and because we like to celebrate our Genius as though it were born fully-formed. Of all the arts, Acting may be the most insistent on individual uniqueness, and proprietary inspiration ("my" hard-earned real life experience). In light of the waxing of the aesthetic of Realism in film and TV, acting is apparently something anyone can do, and those who stand out must be naturally gifted.

Let's grant that a young actor appreciates the value of training in her craft. What could lead her not just to undertake some benign instruction, but to attach herself to an Acting *Guru*?

[No acting teacher that I know of calls himself a "guru." Let's take this term vis-à-vis actor training to mean a Master Teacher with charismatic authoritarian tendencies. It is the student's investment that determines when the teacher becomes *Guru*.]

Here are five benefits one can get from a spiritual *guru*, in order from the grossest to the subtlest:

1. Technique (i.e., yoga, meditation, instruction to service)
2. Wisdom (i.e., the Vedas, or ancient scriptures)
3. Correction (in modern lingo we call this "feedback" or "criticism")

4. Vision (coming to see the world with the eyes of the guru)
5. Presence (or Darshan, a heightening of the consciousness just by being near the guru)

Here is this list expanded to address actor training:

1. Zeami, the founder of Noh Theatre, says that a young actor may be charming, but soon the flower of youth will fade and must be replaced with the flower of technique. Technique is necessary in order to work consistently at a high level. It is the structure from which one can begin to work intelligently and efficiently. It offers a bar against which to measure oneself on a regular basis because everything is always changing. The stronger the teacher, the stronger the technique.
2. Great theatre stories, anecdotes and advice are educational and entertaining. They also connect us to the culture of our craft. They hoist us aloft the shoulders of our forebears. The greater our teacher, the more pertinent the advice, and the deeper the culture we can connect to.
3. As we begin to apply our new techniques and wisdom, we are likely to stumble. We may also enjoy early successes that give us a false sense of our progress. The Guru has the skill to help us see ourselves as we really are, so that we neither self-abuse nor -congratulate unduly or prematurely, but continue to grow in the right direction.
4. More and more we are able to see the work through the eyes of the Guru. Having internalized the techniques and the wisdom, we are able to see clearly, as if from a fixed point. We can instinctively and skillfully organize a number of impressions at once. This process forms our own aesthetic, as we “find a form that accommodates the mess” (Samuel Beckett’s encapsulation of the artist’s task).
5. There is a peace of mind that you are exactly where you are supposed to be at this moment. The confidence in your process becomes so strong that it bypasses self-confidence. Your questions no longer hinder you but drive you deeper into your work. You have a power that is not born of ego, but of a one-ness with your art.

Any teacher can offer some version of the first three. A master teacher can give you some degree of all five. Only with a guru do you receive the complete course.

Why? The answer is in the *surrender* itself. For the spiritual seeker, it is essential to surrender to God in order to achieve enlightenment, as the duality of self/other is an illusion. The path to this advanced stage passes through surrender to the Guru. Doing what the Guru says is only the beginning. The bond of love between guru and devotee ultimately erases the distinction so that they see themselves in each other. When the devotee feels he is nothing, but is absorbed into the Divine, that is bliss.

The application to acting is obvious. If we want Blanche Dubois to inhabit us, we are well served by being as empty of our own egos as possible. Gordon Craig famously and controversially wanted his actors to be more like marionettes. Peter Brook’s company undertook their practice of yoga very devotedly. His actors Yoshi Oida and Bruce Myers have a pellucid presence in person and on stage, which allows them seemingly effortless characterization.

When you feel as though God has “got your back,” what on earth – not to mention what on the stage – can you not commit to? What emotional minefield will you not traverse? To be able to let go of your ego while you are performing is not only liberating but it is possibly the thing that allows you to perform at the highest level while being watched.

But let’s go back to the authoritarian stuff. You may find yourself in an exploitive, damaging relationship. You feel drawn more towards this individual than to the craft itself. Your old ego is destroyed, only to be replaced with a new one. The pain you experience is not the pain of awakening, or opening up, but rather the pain of a beating or a violation.

To me, that sounds not like a guru, but like a bad teacher. How to avoid this?

First of all, don’t go looking. The Guru will find you. When you feel you have more joy, alertness and awareness in your life (and your craft), then you are in the right place.

Here is the advice of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar on finding a guru:

Just be open and keep learning, and when your learning is complete, it becomes obvious. When you’re on the path, don’t worry about the Guru. First look at your own life, your own self. Have trust in yourself. And as knowledge unfolds, you’ll find that there is suddenly a lot of gratitude in you towards somebody and then you can accept him as a master.

But do you need a master?

We will never answer that question satisfactorily. Either you don’t surrender and you’re convinced of your sufficiency, or you do, and you’re convinced there’s no other way. It is impossible to reach a clear conclusion by straddling the lines.

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