

12 STEPS TO FINDING A SPIRITUAL TEACHER YOU CAN TRUST

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Books abound on the array of neo-pagan faiths and Wiccan traditions, but after reading all we can, it is common to desire a teacher to inspire and guide us along our chosen path. Unfortunately, the world is full of hucksters eager to cash in on this desire. Money, however, is not the only "evil" to watch out for, and often not even the primary one. Potential religious teachers often seek the recognition or respect given to them by eager students. Sometimes, such respect is entirely unwarranted.

Over the course of our lives, we may have many teachers and learn these lessons through hard-won experience but how can you avoid these pitfalls and find a spiritual teacher with your best interests at heart? Here are some tips to help you find your way amidst the labyrinth of good and bad intentions:

(1) Search for a teacher who is both experienced and honest. There are many reputable teachers in a variety of traditions and they will welcome your questions about their lineage and training with respect. (Note that in some traditions there is a particular time, place and method for full disclosure of lineage information. Even in those cases, however, you should be able to get general information about the teacher's background.) If they are self-taught, a good teacher with lots of experience is not ashamed to admit they are. Claims of profound mystical powers are often a warning sign, as is how your prospective teacher handles proprietary information. Is it common for the teacher or other group members to pass along written information without crediting authorship? How can you tell? If the style of language used in the text does not match what your teacher or fellow group member usually uses, chances are they copied this information elsewhere without crediting its author. A good teacher will not only credit where they acquired information, they will make a point of teaching you to do the same.

(2) Take your time & avoid anyone who moves too fast. Don't adopt a teacher on the basis of one meeting. Spiritual education is a life-long journey. There's no inherent value in rushing your decision. On the flip side: does your prospective teacher accept you as a student without taking the time to really get to know you? This should be a two-way process and a teacher who does not take the time to evaluate prospective students is in search of quantity, not quality.

(3) Get to know your teacher & his/her tradition. Sometimes the only way to get to know a teacher is by enrolling in a class they may offer online or at your local occult shop. Feel free to enroll in these without committing to being their student on a long-term basis (ie, seeking initiation or ordination with that teacher). Evaluate the information you are provided with in the class - Does it feel like the right path for you? Does his/her description of their tradition fall in line with your own research on that tradition? You haven't done any research on his/her tradition? Back-up and do that before agreeing to anything!

(4) Conduct a background check. What is your prospective teacher's background?

Does s/he claim initiations or degrees that you cannot confirm through outside sources? A reputable teacher will be happy to provide references. Be wary of individuals who claim hereditary bloodlines or training that you cannot verify. Find out his/her reputation in the spiritual community. Is the prospective teacher respected amongst his/her peers? If you meet your teacher at a festival, community event, or even in a chatroom, ask others of similar stature and experience what they think of him/her. Does s/he allow contact with her former students that have completed their training with her? If not, consider it a warning sign.

(5) Learn to spot power trips and puffery. Are you strongly urged by the teacher to take the next class (to the point of being pushy)? Does the teacher seem impressed with him/herself? Does s/he brag about who s/he knows or his/her own stature? Does your prospective teacher make rash, emotional decisions or always place blame on someone other than themselves? Does your prospective teacher expect you to put them on a pedestal? If not, are you tempted to put them on one? Run far, far away. No matter who instigates such a relationship, it is not healthy for either party.

(6) Ask questions about his/her personal and professional life. Is his/her emotional life in order? Spirituality affects and permeates all levels of our lives, and as such a good teacher should have stable relationships with their mate, family, friends, former teachers and former students. This is not to say that we don't all go through ups and downs, or that you should necessarily quit working with someone when they go through inevitable woes life swings our way, but you'll both have a more rewarding experience if you start when you are both on a more stable footing. This, of course, will become readily apparent if you follow step 1 (above) and take your time: time will tell you whether or not your prospective teacher is merely going through a rough period or if chaos, dissension and blaming others seems to follow them wherever they go.

(7) Find out if the teacher takes minors as their students without significant dialogue and permission from the student's legal guardian. For those who are underage - Yes, I realize you are eager to learn as much as you can about your chosen spiritual path, but remember that there is no reason to rush things. Even your parent's religion will teach you valuable lessons regardless of what path you later choose to take. A good teacher will encourage that you learn your lessons from your family while you can.

(8) Explore all your options. Does your prospective teacher encourage you to explore several paths before deciding his/hers is the right one? An experienced teacher will be able to provide you with a list of readings that illustrate perspectives different from his/her own. S/he should be willing to discuss these options with you without pointing out his/hers is the only right option. Certain traditions require significant investments of your time - if you are the type that likes to study many different paths simultaneously, talk this over with your teacher. Most will be fine with it, especially if you are still exploring and trying things out (they may even encourage it!), but because of the intensity of the training they may require you to decide upon one before beginning a priest/ess path with their group.

(9) Evaluate what you expect from your teacher. What kind of relationships do other people in the group have with the teacher? You can tell a lot from context.

Some teachers will prefer a more formal relationship, others informal. One isn't necessarily better than another, but knowing what you're after ensures a more likely fit. It's also a good idea to open up a dialogue by writing a list of what you are looking for and sharing this with the prospective teacher when you meet.

(10) Ask prospective teachers what they expect from you. What will your homework assignments be like and how much time per week or month will you be expected to devote to them? How many classes and rituals do you need to attend? Be honest with him/her and yourself - can you balance the study load along with work, family life or school? If not, now may not be the time to begin this particular course of study.

(11) If a fee is charged for lessons, does it seem reasonable? Teachers have to eat too, so money does not necessarily indicate base motivations, but the fee should be reasonable (whatever that means for you - don't be afraid to ask what the fees are allocated for). Also ask if you are allowed to disagree with the teacher. You should certainly learn their tradition and fit reasonably well with their beliefs if you plan to dedicate and seek initiation, but questions and doubts should be part of the dialogue and not simply subject to blind faith. Bear in mind however that the relationship you have with your teacher should also not be a constant source of philosophical (or other) disagreement.

(12) Assess whether or not the ethics of a group is a good fit with your own. Some people think that "consciousness-altering" substances are a valuable part of ritual, while others would never even consider such a thing. From Dionysian revels to Native American worship, this isn't an easy question when you look at historic precedents, but whether your own ethics fall on one side or the other of this argument, make sure you discuss this with your prospective teacher ahead of time. Either way, avoid illegal substances and the groups that use them. Whether or not they should be legal is beside the point; common sense tells us that it is needlessly foolhardy to participate in illegal activities.

Another area to consider: Certain favors from the student to the teacher are not considered ethical; the most obvious ones are sexual favors. We're human; sometimes romantic relationships develop between members of a group, but they should not be expected as a matter of course, nor should they break any commitments you or the other party has made with your respective spouses, nor should they be tied to your advancement in the group. Less obvious are things like washing the windows in the High Priestess' house (Occasional favors, or helping to clean up the property after a ritual, however, is normal).

Trust your intuition. A teacher may check out all the points beautifully but the student's inner bell is clanging an alarm. In that case, the student should heed it.

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