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Is Personal Guidance Essential?

By Padme Nina Livingstone

In our everyday life, personal guidance comes in different packages. A book may speak to us on a deeply connected level, or a friend or family member can help us with a fresh perspective. There is actually an endless supply of helpful professional guidance available from psychotherapists, counselors, psychiatrists, health practitioners, as well as competent plumbers, carpenters, and electricians!

Here, we are speaking about the kind of guidance we seek when we are feeling deeply confused, and have enough clarity to want a different perspective from the standard Western approach to the suffering caused by our mental confusion. We are imagining something better than this, and feel drawn to a life with more clarity, compassion and honesty.

Traditional Psychology as a Starting Place

Culturally, most people seek help for emotional confusion from psychiatrists or psychotherapists. Psychologically oriented perspectives of mental confusion can certainly help on the journey to clarity and personal development. Although there is a wide range of Western psychological practices, most deal with examining our painful family experiences and the residual effects from those experiences. Generally, sessions involve developing a trusting relationship with the therapist and telling our stories. Therapists help us clarify our innocent beliefs about the world we grew up in. When there is resolution of a problem, it is because we have more awareness of the causes of our confusion and basically, we have learned to cope with our personality. We know our stories, have forgiven our parents, and accept our victimized innocent position as a child. By the end of therapy, we understand our story better, forgive our parents, and forgive ourselves as we acknowledge our emotional, and sometimes physical, scars.

"When we are ready, willing, and open a teacher appears."



Although not necessarily our starting place, this kind of psychological study of our history can be tremendously useful because it provides helpful information about some of the causes of our confusion. But what happens after we get it? Do we simply understand our pain for the rest of our lives and think we've gone far enough? Is it enough to understand why we feel unloved and angry? Is it enough to understand our parents did the best they could? Even though we still feel confused and trapped in habitual pain-producing patterns of behavior? Or, do we wonder about, and begin to yearn for, what's next, after therapy?

What's Next After Therapy?

Nature provides a wonderful example of what comes next after therapy. Lightning fires scorch the earth seasonally, to stimulate seed pods that require the heat to break open. When we are aware of our scorched, scarred history, can we see the resultant painful experiences (our heat) as our stimulation for breaking us open? As the essential stimulation for our continued growth? Instead of merely coping with our habitual reactivity, can we seek a whole new perspective about our behavior?

"Wondering what's next, opens the way for a different sort of guidance."

Wondering what's next, opens the way for a different sort of guidance than most therapists can provide. Understanding the cause of our behaviors is no longer enough. Even though we know the stories behind our anger, shame, and confusion, our reactivity still runs our life at times. Meditation teachers provide guidance which points to our mistaken beliefs and attachments behind the anger, shame and confusion. A good teacher provides us with the opportunity to directly, personally question habitual reactions that keep us locked in endless cycles of painful habits and their effects.

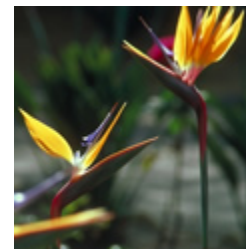
Our individual stories gradually become one story about our past. We actually learn to feel grateful for such fertile material to work with. As we learn to live more freshly, uninhibited by our past experiences, our awareness is firmly planted in whatever's happening in the moment, with more compassion, clarity and presence to share with everyone.

One First-Time Question

I remember the first time I went to visit my teacher in 1977. After an intense few months of up to two psychotherapy sessions a week, I had decided I had had enough. I was still feeling confused about my relationship with my mother, though. I understood she was mentally ill, and I wasn't responsible for her happiness. I knew my mom's mental illness had created deep confusion for me as I was growing up. I didn't blame her anymore. I still cared about her and thought I should help her, and didn't know how. I was feeling guilty and my (now)husband, Bill suggested I talk with someone at the Zen Center for a fresh perspective. I had started to meditate, and decided that was a good idea. I hoped Toni Packer, who was then counseling at the Rochester Zen Center, could point me in a good direction. I was living in Ithaca at the time, and bought a round trip bus ticket up to Rochester for my first meeting with Toni Packer.

Sitting in a chair, across from Toni on the couch, I shared what was on my mind, telling her how upsetting it was for me to have my mentally ill mother living all alone and being so unhappy. "I want to do something to make my mother's life better. Shouldn't I do something to help her?"

Toni listened patiently and then simply asked, "What makes you think your mother is the only elderly person living alone and unhappy?" Toni's question shifted something inside me, and the heaviness I had been feeling, fell away. I remember also feeling a twinge of discomfort in my gut, which immediately replaced the guilt about my mom. I knew it had something to do with Toni; maybe something about what she said or how I took what was said. I didn't know. I was still confused about that twinge in my gut, and yet, as I climbed aboard the bus headed back to Ithaca that evening, I felt much lighter about my mom's situation. And I knew I had found a teacher.



At the time of our meeting, I couldn't connect directly with what Toni had said about my mother and other elderly people. Of course, I knew intellectually my mother wasn't the only elderly person living alone and unhappy. I just didn't understand, why Toni said that to me, and how saying that helped disperse my guilt. I also hoped someday I might understand what my twinge had been about. Sometimes, it's like that with meditation teachers. You don't understand exactly what they mean, or what happens in response to meeting with them, and yet somehow there can be faith that keeps you wondering and staying open with any question that may arise. And you know what they said came from wisdom gleaned from their personal experience. And you want that wisdom yourself someday!

It took me about twenty years to understand the twinge in my gut. A sense of shame was due to a belief in failure. Shame can be connected with a belief that it's our job to please someone. When we perceive a response to us as unloving, we feel like a failure. I felt a sense of shame whenever I thought someone was being unkind; as if I had failed in some way, and I was responsible for their unloving response to me. In wanting to please

Toni, I imagined I had failed Toni when we were together. Perhaps her serious response to my serious question felt unloving at the time. Who knows? It no longer matters!

"Ego is the part of us that is intrinsically attached to our fearful, confused beliefs."

Now, I know that Toni did not want me please her. It is never the job of a person with an inquiring mind to please a meditation teacher. Nor is it ever the job of a meditation teacher to want an inquiring person to please them. We ask for guidance, it is given, and when we are ready for what is said, it is taken in and made useful. If we understand the teacher's response to our question, it's wonderful! If we don't understand, the teacher's response may become part of our inquiry. And that can be wonderful too! It actually took me almost thirty years to really get what Toni had meant that day about my mom not being the only elder living alone and unhappy. If you are wondering yourself what she meant, keep wondering!

When we are just beginning to be more aware, we are often confused about what is true and what is not. It can be helpful to meet regularly with someone who can point us in the direction of the truth, just as Toni did for me. Even if we don't get the whole picture right away, we often come away with a strengthened sense that we are on the right path! And we have more energy to keep going!

A Relationship Question

Here's another example of how appropriate guidance can point a pain-producing, confused person in a more compassionate, honest direction. A school counselor, Joan, came to me for guidance because she was intensely stressed. Her best friend, Carol, and husband, Jack, had been emotionally intimate. They had been building a relationship behind her back. She had found out about it, let them both know how she felt, and they had stopped seeing each other. She cut off relations with Carol, and was relentlessly checking her husband's stuff to make sure there were no signs of him going back on his word that it was over. Joan knew she was trampling Jack's boundaries. He told her to stop, and she didn't. Jack felt betrayed, and invaded, and furious, as Joan's "Nazi" ignored his boundaries again and again. Their marriage was in trouble and she knew it.



Joan realized she was destroying their marriage by her untrusting invasive behavior with Jack. She didn't understand what was causing her compulsion to go through Jack's stuff, but she knew she wanted to stop this behavior before she destroyed what was left of their marriage.

Joan had been helping others with their personal problems for years. She knew enough about standard Western psychology to seek help elsewhere, hoping for a fresh perspective.

Joan emailed me that she had a forgiveness issue and asked if we could meet. After Joan shared the background of what had brought her to me, it became clear that there was a mistaken belief behind Joan's fury and feelings of betrayal. When Joan reflected honestly, she realized that she had more anger toward Carol than her husband. So we focused on exploring what belief was underlying her sense of betrayal by Carol.

It didn't take us long to realize that her belief that women should never betray women for a man was in the way of her forgiving her friend and seeing clearly. Exploring whether this belief was true or not, Joan realized it couldn't be true because Joan did go after her husband. Carol did exactly what Joan had blindly believed she shouldn't ever do. With careful, detailed exploration, it became glaringly clear to Joan that her long held belief was based on a fictional belief.

Joan easily connected with her belief (husbands should never become emotionally intimate with another woman) surrounding her feelings about Jack's betrayal of her trust. She saw that what was true for the goose was also true for the gander. Husbands should never become intimate with another woman was also a fictional belief, because Jack did betray her trust.

This is not a moral discussion about whether Jack and Carol's behavior was right or wrong. Joan found out that her beliefs and deeply upset feelings were based on untrue beliefs. The truth was enough to provide a great sense of relief for the moment. The truth had set her free!

Joan reported feeling a deep sense of freedom and ease. She noticed the forgiveness issue with her husband had completely dissipated! She left the session, smiling. Perhaps she will actively choose to continue on this path of honest, loving awareness work.

No Questions

There are times when we don't have questions for a meditation teacher. This happens with awareness work. Firmly planted in the moment, questions may not arise. Throughout my early years of meditating, this phenomenon occasionally disturbed me because I rarely had a question for Toni after that first meeting. I wondered if there was something wrong with me. Wasn't I supposed to have questions if I was really serious?

"With meditation teachers, we ask for guidance and when we are ready, it is taken in and made useful."

I now realize that I had surrendered, with complete faith in the teachings shared by Toni and Roshi Kapleau. I trusted what was said about ego being in the way of who I really am, even though I didn't know it for myself yet. Ego is the part of us that is intrinsically attached to our fearful, confused beliefs. In the very beginning, I sensed that all my questions were coming from ego; either fear of failure, or wanting to be right, or blaming someone else for being wrong. I didn't want to express from ego, so I remained silent in meetings.

Later on, I asked my fear driven questions, and my attention-getting questions, and I learned more about myself by not staying silent. Sometimes we ask and sometimes we don't. There is no right or wrong way to be with a teacher or receive guidance. When questions arise, ask them. If no questions come up, stay open, honest, and as present as possible. When we are ready, willing, and open, the teacher appears. If you choose to step into relationship with the teacher, you will know whether, and when, guidance is essential for you! You will know, and no one else will be able to tell you what is essential, and what is not.

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