

Doubt: The Two-Edged Sword of Spiritual Seekers by Paul Constant

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Introduction

In his teachings, Richard Rose dedicated a lot of time and energy to the critical analysis of spiritual systems and to the application of doubt on the spiritual path. To that end, I'd like to spend some time talking about spiritual teachers and systems, and how we can apply doubt in the best way possible to sharpen our inquiry and hasten our way along the path.

In my life, three main "pillars of Truth" served me well when evaluating teachers and their systems. First, a deep sincerity to find Truth opened doors for the right teachers. Seemingly, they appeared at the appropriate time in my life and delivered the appropriate message. Second, self-honesty allowed me to make a crucial decision: was it time to leave the teacher because all the gifts were delivered, or was I was running away out of fear? And finally, perseverance enabled me to look under every rock—paradoxically, to continue searching until I failed my way to Truth.

First of all, we should be extremely grateful if we're lucky enough to find an honest spiritual teacher who is also a friend. In my life, I had the great fortune to meet Richard Rose when I was in my early 20's. Rose and his spiritual system ultimately emptied me to the very core of Being and fundamentally stripped away my fear of death. A few years later, another teacher opened my heart to an unimaginable love—and as I usually have to say, before that I was the tin man in the *Wizard of Oz*, who greatly feared love. Finally, another teacher stripped away my fear of small "s" self and struck down self-doubt, which dissolved me into everything and opened me wide to an impersonal capital "L" Love. And so it's been a grand journey....

Even though spiritual teachers served as beacons of light for me over the past 30 years, I encountered a lot of pitfalls along the way with various teachers. And I know there's a strong tendency in spiritual circles to brush off the pitfalls and bad behaviors so long as the teachers are beneficial to us. But I say we shouldn't so easily dismiss bad behaviors and bad advice—we should employ doubt to shorten the path. It's possible to avoid some of our own unnecessary failures. So while it might sound like I'm harping on spiritual teachers, I want to make it clear that personally, I would've been lost at sea without teachers to guide and inspire me.

I'd also like to point out that we wouldn't be at this event today if it weren't for all the spiritual charlatans. When he was a seeker, Rose encountered so many teachers who were after money, sex, and other nonsense that he became enormously frustrated. He said to himself that if he ever found Truth, he'd commit his life to making his findings freely available to all. And so we have the TAT Foundation today as a result of his commitment.

Today, I'll hit on three key points—**doubt**, **self-delusion**, and **self-doubt**. In addition, I'll offer several cautionary notes concerning the sword of doubt: while it can cut through a lot of nonsense, it can also cleave deeply into us if we're not careful.

1. Doubting Teachers and Spiritual Systems

TAT's model remains in line with that of TAT founder Richard Rose, whose vision included an "umbrella" organization through which many people would exchange ideas. TAT encourages exploration of teachings that resonate with the seeker. Accordingly, it's important to spend time talking about the potential pitfalls we might encounter.

Spiritual teachers must adhere to a high standard. A teaching role has far more implications for the wellbeing of others. Therefore, teachers can't get away with telling students they should or shouldn't expect certain behaviors from someone who is Enlightened. Enlightenment may or may not change a person's behavior, but stepping into a teaching role darn well means the teacher has assumed a serious responsibility and is highly accountable for his or her actions.

That said, we can't blame them for doing or not doing something—that just leads to regret and living in the past. Ruminating over our past actions through a victim mindset rarely serves us well. So seekers also have a lot of responsibility in the process of studying under a teacher. And that's part of what I want to emphasize today.

Here's a few key areas for evaluating a teacher. There's many more to consider. I recommend visiting spiritualteachers.org and typing the word "guidelines" into the search box.

A focus on money—We're bombarded every day with a billion dollar marketing industry. We're hypnotized by commercials, ads, telemarketing, and sales pitches. And in spiritual circles, it's a similar marketing process. So caveat emptor!

Simply put, money muddies the waters, because no matter how deeply realized someone is, a teacher may start treating seekers as clients and therefore change their own behavior as the teacher. For example, teachers are often quite friendly to others during satsang and on YouTube. But later, while they're off stage, they display less friendly behaviors toward students either directly or behind their backs.

In the case of our True Nature, most of us really do need help in recognizing it. So I don't begrudge someone who wants to make a little bit of money by teaching. However, teachers have a better chance of remaining humble if they work down in the trenches like the rest of us.

Please note that I'm not highlighting the money controversy as some form of "elitist" attitude in TAT. I simply feel that the pitfalls associated with money are legion.

Tip: *Remain especially discerning of spiritual teachers who charge an excessive amount of money to participate in group events, enroll as a member of their group, receive instruction, or talk one-on-one. This is an indicator that the teacher is focusing too heavily on money rather than simply taking joy in helping others in the Grand Journey of Truth.*

Ritual and hard-core practices—Light ritual can provide a sense of community. But be wary of teachers who seem to push their students into certain practices. If the teacher doesn't give flexibility for the myriad of differences in our wiring—our nervous system—then the one-size-fits-all approach is doomed to failure. Or worse, it may create even more problems for people than if they were otherwise left alone.

Likewise, if a teacher expresses too narrow a viewpoint by solely extolling their set of spiritual practices, we begin to overlay more beliefs and constructs on top of old ones. Or we replace old beliefs and constructs with new ones by hopping around from teacher to teacher. Or, we begin filling in the information gaps with our own imagination and erroneous pieces of information.

Tip: *Evaluate spiritual teachings for their flexibility, sensibility, and practicality. Simplicity—not complexity—is the preferred beacon for seekers.*

Treatment of others—Is the teacher accessible? Is he or she simply a good friend? Does he or she show unkind behavior toward others, including obvious behaviors such as sexual or physical abuse but also subtler behaviors such as ridicule, humiliating others, or attempting to control others? Do they attempt to divide us from family and friends?

Time and again, we see others who are immersed in a spiritual group develop rationale for a teacher's bad behavior. You'd think after the teacher bought the 96th Rolls Royce that students would be clamoring for the exit door. Or if the guru slept with your spouse. Yet I still hear students of some of the more notorious teachers discard this type of behavior with loads of justification.

So while it's somewhat of a mystery to me, I feel that someone can deeply realize their True Nature, step into a teaching role, and start to feel special. Enlightenment usually causes someone to feel ordinary because they realize they've become what they've always been seeking—that it was there all the time. But teaching can once again result in a feeling of specialness and a feeling of immunity from decent human behavior. It can reignite and magnify deep-seated conditioning and lead to all sorts of bad behavior. And so even a realized teacher must forever remain vigilant against self-delusion.

Of course, we should always remain on guard against teachers who are beguiling, narcissistic, or fraudulent. Likewise, it's also possible that some teachers haven't fully recognized their own psychological baggage. They haven't clearly seen and come to terms with the deeply rooted dark areas in themselves. Thus, acute discernment is incredibly important for spiritual seekers.

Tip: *Before stepping into a teacher's arena, establish your boundaries by drawing a "line in the sand." For example, most of us are unwilling to tolerate physical abuse or sexual abuse. Or we're unwilling to allow someone to rip us off. We need to ensure we don't rationalize and dismiss odd behaviors in a teacher. This doesn't mean we should run the other way after seeing small displays of quirkiness. But we should take note—and if the evidence becomes sufficient, then it's time to move on.*

Actions and words—Does the teacher say one thing in front of spiritual groups or on YouTube but talk or act differently while off stage? Do actions align with words? What does their family, friends, and significant others think? To me, it's important to find out how a teacher interacts with others outside of a retreat setting. For example, some teachers talk a lot about love but then express their dislike of people. It's okay to express dislikes—but it isn't okay to say one thing and do another. And I am reminded of something Richard Rose said about those who preach love: "These people have an underlying motive, and they may not even know it. It's 'love me.' They want others to love *them*."

Tip: *Get behind the scenes with a teacher and see if he or she walks and talks the same truths.*

2. Self-Delusion

Which brings me to my next point—self-delusion. This is an especially tenacious and pervasive quality of the mind. If you watch your mind long enough, you'll see how one part of you fools another part. One voice inside us provides the strongest argument and succeeds over the other voices. This is where self-honesty serves us well.

We as spiritual seekers often feel a bit smarter by thinking we've given up material pursuits for something more meaningful in life. But things get tricky, because there's still a deep conviction—a deep self-delusion—that Enlightenment is going to add something to our life. Or that it will take away all the fear, suffering, and other bad experiences and leave behind the good stuff. Or, we might have deep discoveries by seeing we're separate from thoughts and feelings but then delude our self by building a new identity around the Observer or Witness. Self-delusion ultimately ends when we dis-identify with everything....

One strategy to help us see through self-delusion is to doubt everything. In his book *Psychology of the Observer*, Rose said: "We must learn to doubt, not only the verbal testimony of others, but the persuasions of our own beliefs, and keep looking for symptoms of self-delusion..." He also said: "...you should believe nothing, including what I say as well. You should doubt. To doubt is sacred,--to believe is foolishness. Because believing is an easy way out,--it's a cop-out."

Just to illustrate that no single rule applies to everyone, in the book *I Am That*, Nisargadatta said in response to someone who asked how he came to his realization: "By my trust in my Guru. He told me 'You alone are' and I did not doubt him. I was merely puzzling over it, until I realised that it is absolutely true." So here again, because paradox permeates all spiritual teachings, the sword of doubt might hurt those who use it to an extreme.

With regard to doubt, it's best if others doubt me as well. Most likely, that'll happen anyway, because I offer no "fireworks." I don't have anything that you don't already have except, perhaps, an experiential recognition of something quite ordinary and intrinsic in all of us. Spiritual seekers are always guessing about which teacher is truly realized, when in fact, all seekers have everything they seek but don't yet recognize it. Therefore, I feel the

best I can do is inspire you—I want my love of Truth to catch fire in you! And, perhaps I can offer some tips that helped me along the way.

What else can we do about self-delusion as it applies to spiritual teachers and systems? For one, we must take responsibility for our own decisions. All of us have been fooled by someone along the spiritual path. But we became a hell of a lot smarter by seeing how we discarded the intuitive voice that told us to act more wisely.

Tip: *Intuitions usually don't come with strong rationale. By contrast, decisions emanating from ego usually have a long laundry list of why we should or shouldn't take action.*

Tip: *Blind belief is a form of self-delusion. We need to make the trip our self instead of leaning too heavily on a teacher. Be aware that how a teacher expresses his or her understanding of Truth is quite different from another teacher. Meaning, the teacher's personality, degree of suffering, genetic makeup, nervous system, family upbringing, and so on all affect how a teacher discovers, expresses, and lives the Truth.*

3. Self-Doubt and Cynicism

Rose said: "...you have to doubt everything but your ability. If you doubt your ability you won't try." We must have faith in our self. We must trust in life to give us what we need on the spiritual path.

Cynicism is a form of giving up. We can misuse doubt to the point where we doubt everything—that all spiritual endeavors, teachers, and groups are a waste of time, which might simply be an insidious type of rationale. So while the sword of doubt can clear the way on our path, it can also mortally wound us if we're not careful. It's extraordinarily difficult to do this alone. We must take action—inquire, investigate, and work with our fellows but find out for our self—so that our experience becomes firsthand and authentic.

In my case, after my head opened to True Nature, I still had a lot of self-doubt. The mind is a doubt machine, and I wrote about this openly on searchwithin.org after my realization. And although this two-edged sword cut into me, the other edge kept me open to more possibilities. That is, I might have never persevered and experienced the greatest depth of love if I had stopped there. I might have never opened myself wide to love and life.

I knew the self-doubt was there over the years, but I hadn't realized the strength of its grip. And so like a lover by my side who patiently waited while I went off on another truth-seeking adventure, when the self-doubt crumbled, I arrived back Home—exactly where I was during my realization in 2007. My true lover was there the whole time. But this time, the whole thing equalized. Once all doubt disappears, we are truly free. We discover a miraculous dynamic equilibrium—a peaceful coexistence between what we are and what we aren't. We come to deeply appreciate the miraculous transformer that we are—a transformer between heaven and earth. A transformer of Love....

Conclusion

The strongest encouragement I can offer today is to use doubt to cut through beliefs so that we may **live our own truth**. We can stop deluding our self by blindly believing someone else's description of Enlightenment. We can stop leaning too heavily on a teacher. And we can stop waiting for the Grand Maul Enlightenment in the future and begin recognizing the magic of what's unfolding now—we can *live it* instead of trying to understand it all. To steal and rephrase someone else's quote, the spiritual path is all about the journey, not the destination. And along with that, I say help your spiritual friends from the self-honest perspective of **your own truth**, in the vein of Rose's [Law of the Ladder](#). You may just find that your spiritual friends are your greatest teachers.

In closing, I'd like to emphasize that the greatest antidotes to self-delusion and self-doubt are sincerity, self-honesty, and perseverance. These three qualities ultimately allow us to pierce the veil so that we may discover our full potential. As seekers and Finders, we should fully strive to live life atop these three pillars of Truth.