

Spiritual Teachers' Behaviour: Feedback & Ethics ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 How can we help?

00:00:06 One often hears stories of prominent spiritual teachers who have been knocked off their pedestal,

00:00:16 sometimes due to pretty flagrant abuses.

00:00:22 I think it is important to realize that there are also plenty of spiritual teachers

00:00:32 who do not participate in abuses, flagrant or otherwise.

00:00:38 Also, it's important to realize that even though there may be some flaws in a teacher,

00:00:50 relative to who that person would have been otherwise,

00:00:55 they've made stunning transformation of themselves.

00:01:02 In other words, it's important to keep the big picture in mind.

00:01:06 There's a Japanese proverb,

00:01:09 hyaku nichi no seppo hei shitotsu.

00:01:13 It means you can give perfect sermons for a hundred days,

00:01:17 but all you have to do is fart once, and that's what everyone will remember.

00:01:22 So it's important to, I think, keep the big picture in mind.

00:01:27 Also remember that most people, in fact the great majority of people,

00:01:33 that practice these techniques are not teachers.

00:01:38 You never hear of them.

00:01:41 And the great majority of them have made stunning and radical overall improvements in their lives,

00:01:47 although there are still areas of uneven growth.

00:01:53 I think we shouldn't have unrealistic expectations about teachers.

00:01:58 Well, then how is it that these teachers have this uneven growth,

00:02:04 that they're so strong in certain areas,

00:02:08 but in a sense stunted in other areas?

00:02:12 I think that the main cause of this is some combination of unwillingness

00:02:22 or inability to get feedback from other people on their behavior.

00:02:28 So what do I mean by unwillingness or inability?

00:02:33 Well, sometimes things are set up for a teacher in a way that they actually can't get feedback from people

00:02:42 because they're put on a pedestal,

00:02:46 and students automatically assume that if they see some flaw in the teacher,

00:02:52 that it must be a flaw in the student.

00:02:55 The tradition sets things up that way.

00:02:59 So there aren't actually feedback loops to the teacher.

00:03:03 Who's the teacher going to get feedback from?

00:03:06 Well, another more senior teacher, if they're willing to put themselves under

00:03:11 and keep themselves under a more senior teacher,

00:03:15 even when they themselves are relatively senior,

00:03:18 if they're willing to do that, then some feedback structure will be in place.

00:03:23 But many people are not willing to do that.

00:03:26 After 30 or 40 years of practice, they want to be completely independent.

00:03:31 So then who's going to give them feedback?

00:03:33 Well, their world is primarily the world of their students.

00:03:37 So they would have to get feedback from their students,

00:03:43 but their students may have a mindset that the teacher is better than they really are

00:03:52 and therefore be afraid or unwilling to give them feedback.

00:03:58 Well, then who will give them feedback?

00:04:00 Well, maybe their family will give them feedback.

00:04:03 But if their family is not their student or not a meditator,

00:04:08 it's easy for teachers to dismiss the feedback of people

00:04:12 that haven't had a lot of meditative experience.

00:04:15 So that's the unwillingness to take feedback.

00:04:18 So some combination of inability to get feedback and unwillingness to take feedback,

00:04:28 if you maintain that consistently, you do run the danger of having blind spots in your development.

00:04:36 So I think it's of the utmost importance that a person from the get-go

00:04:42 decide that they will listen to feedback from everyone,

00:04:46 whether that person is an adult or a child,

00:04:49 whether they're an advanced meditative practitioner

00:04:53 or are clueless with regards to the spiritual path.

00:04:59 A willingness and an ability, meaning that the structures are in place,

00:05:04 the channels are in place, and you're willing to use those channels,

00:05:09 that people will approach you on your stuff.

00:05:13 Then you take a consensus.

00:05:15 See, one of the problems for teachers is that an awful lot of the time

00:05:23 when students do call you on your stuff, actually it is their stuff.

00:05:29 It's the students' stuff, not yours.

00:05:31 And that gets to be, that consumes time and energy.

00:05:36 And maybe even 80, 90% of the time, it's really them, it's not the teacher.

00:05:42 But that 20% or 10% of the time that it is the teacher

00:05:46 and that there's something for them to listen to,

00:05:49 they have to be willing to invest that 80% or 90% of time,
00:05:55 which is a lot of time.
00:05:58 In general, teachers, if they're good at teaching, they're overworked.
00:06:03 They don't have any play, any extra time and energy.
00:06:09 They're just going 24-7 flat out, at least most of the ones that I know
00:06:14 that are good at what they do.
00:06:16 It's a lot to listen consistently to what the students have to say
00:06:22 about you as a person when a lot of that data is not of any use to you.
00:06:28 But I think it's essential that you be willing to invest that
00:06:32 even though it's a bear.
00:06:36 Because there will be patterns, a consensus will emerge with time
00:06:43 about your blind spots, and that will help assure a more even growth
pattern.
00:06:50 And in fact, my general approach to ethics is a little different,
00:06:57 maybe radically different from most people's approach to ethics.
00:07:01 I suspect that most people's approach to ethics is that there are
00:07:05 certain principles that should be followed, or maybe certain rules
00:07:10 that should be followed, or maybe in the really extreme case,
00:07:14 an elaborate, legalistic, ethical system.
00:07:21 But that's not my approach at all.
00:07:23 I actually say that the four basic precepts of Buddhism about
00:07:28 not taking life, not taking what's not given, not speaking falsehoods,
00:07:32 and not doing things in the sexual domain that would be harmful to people,
00:07:38 I say those are some basic guidelines.
00:07:40 I certainly have that much in terms of axioms.
00:07:44 But beyond that, I think that the main way that one cultivates ethics
00:07:54 is an openness, a general openness to feedback from all other human beings.
00:08:01 With regards to how you're carrying yourself in the world.