

Life After Guru
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“We need someone outside ourselves, besides Mom and Dad, who will tell us, ‘You’re wrong,’” says Sri Goswami Kriyananda.

Kriyananda is the guru and spiritual preceptor of the Temple of Kriya Yoga based in Chicago. The “someone outside ourselves” he is referring to is a *guru*.

We’ve come to toss that title around in all sorts of loose ways, such as dubbing someone “a financial guru” or “an exercise guru.” But in the Hindu as well as Buddhist tradition, a *guru* is a spiritual teacher who comes to earth as an emissary to speak with the voice and authority of God for the guidance of humans. Most other spiritual traditions include this same concept by other names.

In Sanskrit *gu* is darkness and *ru* is remover. Therefore the meaning of guru is one who is able to dispel darkness and show us the light of God. He or she is one who incarnates on earth for the purpose of revealing and reminding us of the divinity that is inherent within us.

This teacher-student relationship is not a casual, passing friendship. For those who study with an incarnated master, it is the single most important relationship of their life.

But what happens when that external, corporeal being dies? Not having had a flesh-and-blood master myself, I wondered: who does the student turn to when the guru is no longer physically there to guide him or her? Does the relationship live on?

Those are questions I posed to several intimate students of well-known gurus, including Kriyananda, age 78, who himself has been guiding disciples along the spiritual path for over 50 years. He carries on the Kriya lineage from his guru, Sri Shelliji, a direct disciple of Paramahansa Yogananda.

I also spoke in-depth with Ragani, a student of Sri Swami Rama, founder of the Himalayan Institute in the United States. Ragani, age 38, began studying with Swami Rama when she was in high school. She lived, worked and traveled with Swami Rama throughout the U.S., India and Southeast Asia and now resides in the state of Wisconsin. She currently carries on the mission he gave her to lead *kirtan*--a devotional practice of singing the name of God--and to bring the practice to a wide audience.

A Cosmic Answer

Yogananda, who lived from 1893-1952, considered Bhagavan Krishna and Jesus Christ to be the world’s greatest gurus. In his seminal tome “The Second Coming of Christ: The

Resurrection of the Christ Within You,” Yogananda addresses my question with a cosmic answer:

“It is an erroneous assumption of limited minds that great ones such as Jesus, Krishna, and other divine incarnations are gone from the earth when they are no longer visible to human sight. This is not so...Even when masters have completed the specific role for which they took on a physical incarnation, it is the divinely ordained task of some to look after the welfare of humanity and assist in guiding its progress.”

At the risk of exhibiting a “limited mind” or engaging in what Kriyananda calls “Virgonian debating,” (we discovered we are both of this Astrological sign as we wrangled over semantics) I still wanted to know from present-day devotees if and how they experience post-mortem the teacher with whom they lived and worked.

Maturation, Not Separation

To understand the bond of teacher and student *after* death, it’s important to know what kind of relationship the two had *before* the guru left his or her body.

“It was really quite simple: he was the guru and I was the student,” Kriyananda said of his relationship with Shelliji. “My function was to close my mouth, open my ears and listen. His function, and the function of all gurus, is not to lay down rules...but to pass on methods by which I, or any other disciple, even while the guru is alive, can find their own answers.”

He recalls a time when he went to his guru with a problem and asked for his help. Shelliji asked what the problem was. After telling him, Shelliji peppered him with questions: “Have you thought about it? What does the problem mean? What are the key words? What methods have you applied? What system of logic or metaphysical techniques have you used? Have you verified your answer with another technique? You haven’t? Well, why don’t you go and do your work and then come to me and we’ll pick up the question.”

“In other words,” Kriyananda said, “the guruship is a function like that of a good mother, which is a love that is directed towards the disciple’s maturation, not dependency.”

Kriyananda points out that there is a difference between encouraging a student to stand on his own two feet and fostering separation.

“There is no separation. There is no separation between me and my [disembodied] guru, there is no separation between me and you, there’s no separation between the earth and the divine. It is one Cosmic Consciousness. The delusion or illusion or the psychology and religion is, ‘We’re supreme and we’re separate from nature.’ But we are a part of life, not apart from life and that is the goal that we’re trying to attain in the guru’s teaching.”

“So the guru relationship *does* continue after death?” I press. “It never stops,” he replies.

Kriyananda said he experiences Shelliji on a psychological level when he asks, “What would my guru do in this case?”

“And then immediately the training comes into play,” he explained. “Have I questioned? Is it clear? Is it concise? Have I used logic? Have I branched out from my emotionality? In other words, I’m going through the whole psychological process the guru did while he was alive.”

The goal, Kriyananda said, is to “Be your own antenna...so that you can attune to the cosmic answer.” “All learning is but a remembering,” he quotes from Plato. “And that’s a very deep mystical concept.”

Divine Love Affair

It is said that the relationship between a guru and a *chela*, or student, is a Divine love affair lasting many incarnations. Thus why many students describe falling in spiritual love with their teacher, yearning always for time together, feeling great sorrow when physically apart. The way the two come together is often a mystical odyssey.

For Ragani, it was her second summer at the Himalayan Institute in Honesdale, PA when she literally received the call from her guru. “Someone came to the door and said, ‘Swama-ji wants to see you.’ And that was the beginning of the rest of my life,” she shared.

Like Shelliji with Kriyananda, Swami Rama’s relationship with Ragani was to cultivate her maturation and independence, not create *dependence* on him for answers. He often told her “I am someone you can lean on in order to teach you not to lean on someone.”

At times he would instruct her to do something and she would decide not to. Approving, he would say, “Just because I tell you to do something doesn’t mean you should.”

“I had to think for myself,” she recounted. “He would say, ‘You have a brain. Why don’t *you* figure it out?’”

Swami Rama left his body in November, 1996. Ragani wasn’t with her guru when he died. “I had expected him to always be there,” she recalled softly. Their bond was so strong, when he died, she wanted to as well. “I thought I would rather be dead than living without him, even though I was living the life he had set out for me.”

But as she’s gone forward, she recognizes that, in fact, she is *not* living without him. It’s just different.

“Developing a relationship with someone who’s not physical anymore is different than a physical connection.”

For instance, she's more aware of his energy around her: in sacred spaces, meditating or practicing yoga.

Sometimes when she's out walking, as she so often used to do with Swama-ji, she feels his presence beside her. "Sometimes we don't talk. Other times I ask him questions." And she receives answers.

Ragani recognizes that those who don't have this relationship might find it far-fetched. "How do I explain my relationship now with Swama-ji so that people understand and don't put me on meds for hallucinations?" this trained clinical psychologist and acupuncturist exclaimed.

Perhaps the most tangible way Ragani experiences her disembodied guru is through her burgeoning mission to make kirtan accessible to a wide and diverse audience. She believes this is guided by him. "When I first started offering the kirtan, no one was coming. I had envisioned hundreds of people. This is what Swama-ji said I would be doing. At times I would get angry at him and say, 'I'm getting no response from the universe...or you. I put this back in your hands. Show me if you want me to do this!'"

When he was alive, he often didn't respond to such demands from her and she realized he wasn't going to start now. "So I tried a softer approach. 'Help me.'" The answer she heard was, "I'll help you. I'll make the arrangements." In just three years she has created the largest ongoing kirtan event in America, drawing each month those hundreds of people she had envisioned.

"He gave me my life because he reminded me of who I am and what I'm here to do. And he still reminds me of who I am."

All-Access Guru

"When Swama-ji was in his body, there was an unspoken thing about who [of his disciples] was with him, who was getting more time with him," Ragani recalled. "With him out of his body, it's leveled the playing field and it's now up to you to decide how much you want to cultivate the relationship."

Those of us who have not had the intimate flesh-and-blood guru experience may feel left out of such an opportunity. Ragani disagrees.

"Nobody has dibs on divinity," she said. "Swama-ji's there for everybody now. You can call on him whenever you want, unlike when he was in his physical body. Even people who didn't know him well can cultivate a relationship with him."

"Once I said to Swama-ji, 'I want to be like you.' And he said, 'Why not *become* me?'" Ragani noted that this is Christ's message and the message of all the masters. "This relationship is attainable to all," she assures.

“The tradition of the great masters is to guide you,” she said. “It’s up to you if you choose to take that guidance. “He always said to me, ‘It’s you who goes far from me, not I from you.’”

Even after **physical** death.

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