

Transcript of the “Drishti Point Radio” interview with Lama Marut and Shadi Mogadime, July 2012, on the relationship with a spiritual teacher.

Shadi: Welcome to Drishti Point, our third in a series of interviews with Lama Sumati Marut. Lama Marut, for those who don't know him, is an ordained Buddhist monk, a former professor of religion, a Sanskrit scholar, and the author of a new book called Spiritual Renegade's Guide to the Good Life, which we talked about the last time you were here, Lama Marut. Welcome back.

LM: Thanks, Shadi, it's good to talk to you again.

Shadi: Today we wanted to ask to you to talk to us about the relationship between the student and the teacher. Something that I think a lot of our audience has heard about – certainly during times when those relationships have been difficult, when things have gone wrong – but can you tell us about this ancient practice and it's roots and where it fits into a spiritual path of a practitioner?

LM: Well, of course if you want to learn anything you have to find a teacher whose going to teach you. It's not just a spiritual thing to find a teacher who can lead you, who can guide you into the intricacies of what it is that you have gone to the teacher to learn. You can say that the teacher-student relationship is as old as humankind. You know, if somebody presumably in the cave-man days said, like, here is how you club another being, or something (chuckle), and was passing that along. . .

So in the spiritual life, in many ways it's not different, I mean there are some unique qualities to it that we can go into, but in general, if you want to learn how to play piano, if you want to learn how to run, if you want to learn any kind of skill, you find a teacher who can teach you. And that means you find somebody who you think knows more about the subject than you do, that is the main quality, the main qualification of a teacher, is that they know more than you do. So you find somebody like that, and then you go and ask, “Now, please teach me,” “Please teach me what you know.”

In a spiritual life it is the same. The difference is that the spiritual teacher is teaching you how to live, they are not just teaching you how to play guitar, or how to be a broad-jumper, or something like that. They are teaching you how to live a good life. And so in a way the decision is, you know, the stakes are higher, because if you have a bad teacher when it comes to how to play the violin, the worst that can happen is that you are a bad violin player. But if you screw it up with a spiritual teacher, you can screw up your whole life. So it's extremely important to find a spiritual teacher who you can have confidence in, because you have confidence that they know what they are talking about and that they can take you to a place where you will be happy, where you will live a happy life.

So I think the main criterion there, in looking for a spiritual teacher is: are they happy? Are they living a happy life? Are they walking the talk? Are they exemplars of a happy life? And that you can only find out over time. You can only get some sense of that by checking them out over time and seeing: do they remain happy even when things aren't going right? Do they remain calm, cool and collected? Do they demonstrate that they have learned something about what it is that they are teaching, which is how to be happy, how to be content, how to deal with the vicissitudes of life without falling in a heap? (chuckle).

So that is why it is so important to check the teacher out spiritually. And many, many people don't do a good job of that, many people, they rush through it . . . they get enamored with a spiritual teacher, they get drawn in to the charisma, or they just get desperate and they say, you know, all the other kids got one, so I gotta get one too, or whatever. And that is a big mistake, you know? You are putting your spiritual real estate in their hands and so it's very, very important to check them out at the very beginning and to have enough confidence that they know enough about what it is that they are teaching, on how to live a happy life, that they can truly teach you, and then the work begins.

Shadi: Is it important that that relationship be an actual interaction, or is it enough to just get the teacher's knowledge, say, from their books or from the recordings of interviews that they have done? I mean, do you actually have to interact with the teacher?

LM: Well, again, it depends on what you want to be taught. If you want to just be taught some intellectual stuff, you can get a book. If you want to just be taught some ideas, if you want to be taught some doctrines, if you want to be taught some theoretical practices, yeah, you can just buy a book, or listen to podcasts, or watch video on YouTube. But if you want to learn things deeper, if you want to learn about your own being (chuckle), and what you need to fix and how to fix it, then there is no substitution for a personal interaction with a teacher.

Because it's only in that personal interaction that you really find out where your buttons are, you see? That's the main thing that you learn in that kind of interactive relationship with a teacher. You learn like, you know, do you have pride? Do you have envy? Do you have anger? You know, they will push your buttons hopefully, that is what they are meant to do. They are meant to show you, to reveal to you, something about your own nature that you need to fix. And also the opposite too, I would say, they reveal to you your own best nature. They show you, they point you to yourself – and really that is all you are learning from your teacher. You are learning at the deeper levels, apart from just, like, intellectual stuff. What you are learning is about yourself. The teacher is helping you learn about yourself – “know thyself” like Socrates said - and the teacher is helping you do that. They are not teaching you so much about **themselves**, they are teaching you about **yourself**, and there is no substitute for a personal interaction, if you are interested in that.

It doesn't, of course, have to be a spiritual teacher that's teaching that, either. If you are learning about yourself through your interactions with your partner, with your mom and dad, with your children, then in a way its functioning in the same kind of manner - you are learning the same kind of thing. But it's a little bit more self conscious when you take a spiritual teacher and say, “Teach me.” And so, when the spiritual teacher starts teaching you about yourself, you maybe tend to pay more attention because you have constituted that as a kind of an official relationship, official kind of teaching relationship, as opposed to an interpersonal relationship that you are having with your husband or wife, or boyfriend or girlfriend, son or daughter or mother and father.

Shadi: How does it work, Lama Marut? Because, what I am wondering is, in those other relationships that you've mentioned, there are lots of levels of ways that you interact with your parents or anybody else that you might designate as a teacher within your life. But in a formal, “this is my teacher” relationship, how does that work? As far as the types of interactions, and the types of ways in which the teacher actually teaches you, I mean how does that work?”

LM: Again, I don't think it's so much the teacher teaching you, it's what you are learning from the teacher; it's how you've constituted the relationship. You know we constitute a relationship with our spiritual teacher much differently than we do your relationship with our husbands, wives, boyfriend, girlfriend, et cetera. Each one of those relationships are constituted in slightly different manners, you know, you are setting yourself up to learn certain things by setting the relationship up in this manner. If you have formally taken someone up as a spiritual teacher . . . I mean, I think it is important to actually do that, to actually say, you know, “I checked you out for x number of months or years and I believe that you are the teacher for me, that you have something to teach me spiritually. Will you please be my spiritual teacher?” I think it is important for a student to see themselves doing that, because then they sort of formalize the relationship. They formalize in their own minds a particular kind of a relationship with another human being.

And then the games begin, and then the essence of work with a spiritual teacher is that from then on everything that they say, everything that they do, is to be taken by the student as a spiritual teaching directly and personally to them, and what do I need to learn here about myself in this interaction that I am having with my spiritual teacher? In other words, you set the relationship up quite differently

than you would with a spouse, or with a child, or with a parent, or with a friend even. You set it up as a special kind of learning situation, a situation in which you are constantly learning about your own nature and about your own personality, about your own problems, about your own mental afflictions, and that is the nature of it, that is what you are trying to learn in any interaction with your spiritual teacher.

Some people get confused about that, and say maybe I should be learning about how to invest my money, or maybe I should be learning about sexuality, or maybe I'm supposed to be learning about, you know, friendship or psychology, or something like that. And that is to misunderstand the role of a spiritual teacher. They are not your lover, they are not your psychiatrist, they are not your investment banker. They are your spiritual teacher and they have a particular role to play, and to remember that will keep the relationship clean and solid, I would say, instead of trying to constitute or make the spiritual teacher into something other than what he or she really is.

Shadi: It sounds much more complicated than you intend, I think, when you describe it. I think the complication from me is coming from the understanding of how you constitute one, which means that every interaction or everything that you see them doing is somehow a reflection on you and how you learn – self-learning. Could you maybe give us an example of a situation or a circumstance that you can work with that?

LM: (chuckle) Yeah sure. I mean in my own experience with my teacher, with one of my teachers, one of the things I learned really early on was what I needed to learn when somebody that I had constituted as a guru, as a spiritual teacher – someone I brought flowers to and formally asked “Will you please be my teacher?,” someone I followed around to serve in various ways – completely ignored me, and that was a interesting personal lesson about pride, and about thinking that I was special and needed to be treated special, and all of that. And that was a very, very powerful lesson that was delivered in a way . . . there wasn't anything done, anything said, there wasn't any drawings on the blackboard. It was just a simple matter of not being paid attention to (chuckle), and so that was one of the main lessons that I learned in the early days working with a particular teacher, and that was a very important lesson, an extremely important lesson for me after years and years and years of being a professor, and being the big shot, and being, you know, like Ph.D. and having books published, and so it was very important to learn some humility early on in the interaction with the teacher.

And so, teachers teach like that, you know, if you let them, if you learn, you know. If you are learning from your spiritual teacher, often times the teaching doesn't have to be very articulated or explicit. It can be in very, very simple things, in very simple gestures, in the absence of things you can learn a teaching, you see, in the absence of having somebody hitting you over the head with “You should do this,” or “You should be this” or “You should practice this.”

You can always be learning. So the essence you see, the essence of the guru-disciple relationship is that the disciple teaching themselves through the teacher. The disciple is using the teacher, the guru, as a mirror and it's a very . . . in a way you can say its kind of . . . the guru could be anyone, it could have been anyone – in a way. There is nothing special about the guru, the guru is special because you have constituted them as special. You said, “From now on you are going to be my mirror.” You are going to watch them and learn about yourself, but there is nothing inherently privileged, intrinsically privileged, about the guru.

You have obviously checked them out, you think that they know stuff that you need to learn, but the deeper teachings that we are talking about, on how to be a different kind of a being, those you are learning because you have constituted this person, this guru, as the mirror. And so its really, its very interesting, it's kind of a trick to teach yourself what you need to fix, what problems you have, and what good qualities that you have that you should cultivate more because you are seeing those in the guru also, hopefully. But you are also reflecting on the negative qualities that you see in the guru and especially you are reflecting on your own reactions, on your own responses, to the guru's speech and

the guru's action. And you are saying, "What do I need to learn here? What do I need to learn here about myself?"

That is the specialness of the relationship. It's not a special relationship because of the specialness of the guru, but it's a special relationship because of the specialness that you have constituted in the guru, in the role you have given the guru. Then it's autodidact, you're a spiritual autodidact. This is how it should be, this is a really important thing for us all, especially in the West where we don't have a lot of experience anymore with guru yoga.

So all of these gurus are coming over from other places, and now some westerners are taking over that role too, but we have to take responsibility for our interactions with our gurus. We cannot cede that responsibility. We are always responsible for our own relationship with our gurus, we are always responsible, we never give that up, and if you do give that up, then you are going to be in trouble, then you are definitely going to be in trouble.

So the main thing about guru yoga is to have some maturity about it, the main safe practice of guru yoga is to have some maturity, some responsibility and some grown up behavior about it, and to not put yourself into some infantilized, childlike relationship, but to say, you know, "The responsibility that I have with my guru is my own, and I will teach myself, I will teach myself by using my guru as the mirror," and then the guru can do their job. The guru can do their job because you have taken responsibility for the relationship and without that then you've got the potential for all kinds of problems.

Shadi: It sounds like the guru is almost doing their job in, uh, I mean you just gave the description, it's almost passive, I mean there is a lot of formal teaching, things about watching your own reactions to their speech and watching your own reactions and learning your own lessons from that, especially the example you gave about your own pride and what happened with your teacher. So does that mean that the teacher is passive in some way, or how does that work in terms of an active role for both sides of that relationship?

LM: Well, you know, from the point of view of the teacher . . . so now I will take the other . . . I will put on the other hat. From the point of view of the teacher, of course, the student has come to you to learn how to live a good life and you have a responsibility to teach them what you know. You know, so it's not passive, you offer them advices, you offer them courses, you offer them teachings, you offer them retreats, you offer them what you can to help them learn what it is that you know. But at the same time, you recognize that you are kind of a blank screen for them.

You know, it's a little bit like, it's similar to the kind of relationship that a therapist would have to a patient, you know, a therapist in a traditional Freudian kind of understanding, as I understand it, kind of recognizes that they are going to be the object of a lot of displacement and transference and projection, and they accept that as part of their role. They don't, of course, buy into it, but they know that that it's going to happen. And so similarly with a spiritual teacher, you recognize that you are a blank screen, you're an empty slate on which they are going to write all kinds of stuff on you. They are going to project all kinds of stuff on you, and you don't buy into it, you don't play that game, you don't buy into the projections that they are projecting onto you, and you stay centered on what it is that you are supposed to be doing, on your role.

And your role is to teach them how to live a good life. Your role is to teach them the principles of a spiritual life and not to be their daddy or their mommy, not to engage at that level, even when they want you to (chuckle), even when they are demanding it, you know, you refuse. And maybe they get angry at you and have a tantrum, and all this kind of drama – and there can be plenty of drama – but from the teacher's point of view the goal, the ideal, is to stay above that, to stay apart from that, and to realize that you're an object of transference for them, and to factor that into the relationship, to factor it in, that there is going to be this kind of drama and that is the process, the student's process.

And the student maybe has to go through that process. But it is not your job as a spiritual teacher to engage in that process, or to play some kind of role. You should teach the spiritual things, you should teach them the spiritual things: you teach them forgiveness, you teach them gratitude, you teach them how to live a good life, you teach them how to live a moral life, you teach them how to meditate, you teach them the nature of reality, you teach them most things. You don't engage in the kind of spheres that are not appropriate for the spiritual teacher: the economic sphere, the romantic sphere, the psychological sphere. . . these are not appropriate spheres for the spiritual teacher to engage in. The spiritual teacher has one sphere.

And this is another sort of important thing, the student, you know, an intelligent student, a mature, responsible, grown-up student, should recognize that the spiritual teacher does not know everything about everything. They know important things about how to live a good life, how to live a spiritual life, how to live a life of happiness. But they don't know how to play the stock market; they don't know how to change a tire even, maybe, or how to fix a car. There is a whole lot that the teacher doesn't know, and to idealize the teacher as some kind of an omniscient being, that they know everything automatically because they are a spiritual teacher, is kind of the way to set them up to fail, and to set yourself up to be disappointed.

And in some cases, if the spiritual teacher is not self-possessed, to set the spiritual teacher up to believe in that mythology, you know, that they are somehow like special supernatural beings – omniscient or something like that. . . A spiritual teacher knows some stuff about how to live a good life, and that is what they know,. They don't know how to fix Volkswagens, they don't know what investments to invest in, you know, they don't know a lot of stuff. And its not their job to know all that stuff. It's the job of a spiritual teacher to know how to live a happy life, how to live a rewarding, happy, mature, good, ethical life. That's their job.

And so a lot of what has gone wrong, I think, in the relationship between the guru and disciple in the modern West is that the students have had unrealistic expectations, and in some cases, the gurus have bought into the myth that was foisted upon them: that they were somehow sort of like supernatural deities, that they were infallible, or that they were omniscient or something like that. And, gosh, that would be a big mistake to buy into that for a teacher. And it is a mistake for a student to foist that upon their teacher too. It's unrealistic, and not grown-up behavior, not taking responsibility for your own relationship with your teacher and saying, "Oh, they are omniscient, so I will just do whatever they tell me to," or something like that. (chuckle)

Shadi: It does seem to be a part of the teachings, at least what I have heard, that one is supposed to see the teacher as some kind of realized being. Can you just tell us what you mean about not foisting that projection onto them, yet at the same time being able to see what they are teaching you spiritually as a high teaching?

LM: Well I'd say two things about that. Nowadays I am quite adamant that a lot of the supernaturalism and mythology and surrealism of traditional Asian religions has got to be abandoned in the modern Western context. It is just not appropriate for us. It just doesn't work for us.

It's not really the highest teaching of those religions to imagine that there are supernatural beings walking around and flying around and rainbow bodies that are walking through walls and are omniscient. The highest teaching, as far as I can tell, that you will find in virtually every authentic spiritual tradition is to learn how to be content with reality as it is. To learn how to embrace reality, not to escape from it, not to trade one fantasy for another.

So given that, then the whole understanding of the guru has to adjust. So the idea that the guru is some sort of supernatural being, some kind of like, non-human being, I think is a mistake. To see the guru as entirely human means also that they make mistakes, that they don't know everything, and all of that, at the same time, okay? With that kind of more realistic grown-up understanding as a human

being, not as a supernatural being, then can we still see the guru as being a teacher, you know, no matter what they say or do, including their mistakes. Can we learn from the teacher's mistakes?, and if we are learning from the teacher's mistakes, then we still have a guru, you see, they are still teaching us, but they are teaching us through mistakes.

And then you can go one step further, and say "I don't know that the mistake was not intentional, a thing for me as kind of a display for me to learn something about." But to say somehow that that wasn't a mistake, you know, that I think is kind of "check your brains out at the door." To say the teacher never makes mistakes at that level. So it is kind of tricky, you can say that your guru never makes mistakes, even when they are making mistakes. See what I mean? Because the guru is making a mistake, that forces you to think about what the mistake was and how to learn from it (chuckle).

Shadi: That's very tricky indeed, but it sounds like you are suggesting that this is the only way that it's going to work in the modern world.

LM: I'm convinced of it, I'm not even suggesting it, I'm totally convinced of it. The other way has been tried and it has failed repeatedly over and over again. And it's kind of the definition of insanity to keep trying the same thing over when you keep getting the same results.

To set the guru up in any other way than the way that I just said, is to set them up to fail, and to set yourself up for huge disappointments. So it's not that subtle, I don't think, Shadi, you know? We are the kind of practitioners, you know, educated, sophisticated, cosmopolitan, grown-up, mature, that could actually pull this off when it comes to a guru. Without denying that they are your teacher, to see even their mistakes as teachings, you see? Then, you are not denying them as your teacher, and you are also keeping agnostic about other people's intentions, and other people's mindsets that you can't actually know.

You know, we don't actually know who other people are. We know what they do, we know what they do and we can judge what they do, but we don't know who they are. So in a way you can sort of maintain the idea that this special person in my life, you know, has as his or her role to teach me, no matter what they say or what they do. That is their role, and to sort of just assume, since you don't know what their intentions are, to assume that that is their intention. You see, you could assume that their intention is that they are just a regular human being like me, they are just a regular person, who is kind of like sort of stumbling along through life, or you can assume that everything that they do is a setup, that everything they do is a setup for me to figure out – including the obvious errors that they are making in speech and in action even.

"What can I learn from them?" If you are learning from the guru, if you are learning even in their errors of speech and action, then they are still your guru. They are functioning as your guru because you are still learning from them – that is the essence of it. But to say "Oh, they made a mistake and they didn't know what they were doing," then you don't have a guru anymore, then you have somebody that is just like you, who is hobbling along, stumbling along through life, not knowing what they are doing (chuckle).

Shadi: So where is the concept that I often hear associated with and what you are saying, where is the concept of surrender? We often hear that the practice of guru yoga is that learning how to surrender to someone. How does that work with this modern way of what you are convinced will work in guru yoga practice?

LM: Well, I didn't say that I'm convinced it will work. I'm saying that I'm convinced that the other way won't work. This way could work, I think, but it's going to require a lot more responsibility on the part of the student.

This way of understanding the role of the guru, and so what you are surrendering to is you are surrendering to the role – to a role that you have constituted, a role that you have given to another

being, to another human being – to say that “From now on you are my spiritual teacher,” to say that, “Everything that you do, everything that you say is going to be a lesson for me, I am just going to assume that, I am going to work with you, assuming that.” And that’s the student’s responsibility, the student has empowered them, the student has empowered the guru, because they have empowered themselves, they have empowered themselves to learn, they have empowered themselves to be interacting with this person on a regular basis in order to learn, in order to improve themselves, in order to learn spiritually, and that’s the surrender.

The surrender is to the process. The surrender isn’t to a being, it isn’t to another person, but it’s to the role and the process. And it’s a surrender that is, that never cedes responsibility and power, that never gives that power away. It’s a surrender that’s done consciously, and not just once but consciously over and over again: “I surrender to the idea that this is a teaching for me.” And that’s the surrender, not “I surrender to you, you know, o holy lama,” who I should become infantilized in relation to. Not that, never that, that’s disastrous. I’m convinced that that’s disastrous. Whether the other model can work or not, I think, is up to the maturity level of modern practitioners. And we will just see if there is enough there. If there isn’t then, you know, kind of “all bets are off” because nobody is going to learn much from anybody of anything from the spiritual realm, at the deeper level, you know? It will all just be intellectual, and you might as well just get it from a website.

Shadi: I think what you are saying is so powerful, this distinction between surrendering to a person, which seems to have a lot of those infant-daddy-mommy potential mistakes in it, and this idea of surrendering to the process, to the teacher principle, and the teacher role and the opportunities that are within that.

LM: Yeah, I will put it kind of succinctly and strongly. The guru is not a personality, the guru is a principle, and that principle can work through different personalities at different times in your life, or it can work simultaneously through a variety of personalities, or it can work without a personality at all. You know, you can see the guru principle at work in your life, and that ultimately is the end evolution of guru yoga. To practice with one person at first and you try to see the guru principle, the activity, the process, through the portal of that one person. Then a more sophisticated understanding is to see that that process is a potential through all beings, through encounters with every person in life. And then as a kind of ultimate evolution is to see everything, your whole life, every event in it, every encounter, every thought in your head as the teaching of the guru.

And then you are really learning, then the process is moving at light speed, the process of getting you happy, of getting you awakened, is moving very, very quickly, when you let the guru principle kind of expand out from the confines of one body, that you have to start with probably, but to allow it to spread out into different relationships that you have, and ultimately all relationships that you have. And ultimately every moment of life, every event, every activity of your life, can be the guru at work.

Shadi: Um, the idea, that ideal, seems quite advanced to me, so just peeling back a little bit to when you are working specifically with that initial person, lets say, and things go wrong, you see them making mistakes that can be, you can consider quite horrendous, and I know that you have addressed this, but I wanted to speak to it specifically. Can you talk about when there is an apparent misbehavior from a teacher that you are seeing? How do you work with guru yoga in those circumstances?

LM: Well, of course, that is when the rubber hits the road; that is the most difficult kind of situation, in a way, when it comes to guru yoga. It is a lot easier when they are appearing nice and friendly and cooperative, and you know, and sort of coloring within the lines. But, you know, some of the most powerful and effective kinds of teachings occur when the guru seems to go off road, and, you know, “seems to” means that that is happening. And a responsible adult, grown-up, mature, empowered, student, will say, “You know, you’ve gone off road, you are coloring outside the lines, this is not correct,” and that is the teaching. The teaching is whether or not you can have the gumption to

recognize and to point out, to criticize – even your own teacher – when they are doing things that you believe, you have learned from them, are harmful.

There are all kinds of stories in the ancient texts about this, you know, gurus who test their students, and say, you know, “Go steal, go rob a bank and bring me back the money,” and three of four students go, and one just sits there, and it’s a test. And the student who sits there says, “I can’t believe you are asking me to do something that I know you have taught in the past is wrong.” And of course the other three come back and the guru expels them because they didn’t learn a damn thing. They didn’t take responsibility. They didn’t incorporate what they learned into their own being.

A teacher is teaching you how to think for yourself, not how to become an automaton, not how to become some slave. And in these difficult situations where the appearance of mistakes, of error occur, the teacher is teaching you to notice that and to speak up about it even. You know? And not to just sit there like a sheep. That’s not to honor your teacher; that’s no way to honor your teacher – to not think for yourself and not to make evaluations about what is appropriate and what is not, without judgment, you see?

This is the crucial thing: it is important for us to make evaluations, for us to make discernments about what is right and what’s wrong, what to give up and what to take up, what’s happiness producing and what’s not happiness producing. It’s crucial, it’s the essence of wisdom. And a teacher is teaching you how to make those decisions, and if you are not making those decisions, if you are not making those discernments, then you have not learned anything from your teacher, you have failed your teacher. Even when those discernments are pointed towards the teacher, and the teacher’s behavior.

But that is different from judgment. Judgment is setting yourself up above the teacher, judgment about anybody is setting yourself up above them, of you being self-righteous, and saying the other person is wrong. It hierarchizes things. It sets you up in a position above and beyond the person that you are criticizing and making judgments about. You know, I’m kind of setting this up in my own mind and in my own vocabulary because judgment has a lot of its own connotations potentially. I’m trying to reserve the use of the term “judgment” for this kind of hierarchizing relationship, this kind of dividing relationship of saying “I’m better than you are because you did x, y, or z.” And instead say “discernment,” to make an evaluation, that this kind of thing that’s being done is not happiness producing, and it wouldn’t be happiness producing if I did it either. It is equalizing, in a sense, it is saying that it isn’t good for anyone to do x, y or z.

It’s a different kind of a vibe, I think, than this kind of self-righteous judgment that we see so often in spiritual communities. Oh my, it’s like endemic, maybe even worse than outside of the spiritual communities. Maybe that is why Jesus, in the New Testament, was so adamant about it: “Judge not, lest ye shall be judged,” you know, “Cast no stones if you live in glass houses.” Over and over again, in the New Testament we hear Jesus ranting and railing about how bad judgment is, maybe because he was seeing it so much among his sangha (chuckle). As we can see in our sanghas too! Even to this day – very, very visibly.

Shadi: I think one of the aspects of that as well, if I’m hearing you correctly, is that you are making an evaluation on the behavior, but you are staying engaged with the teacher and you’re holding the respect of the teachings.

LM: Yeah, correct, that’s correct, that’s correct.

Shadi: That’s very different than our behavior with almost any other being, right? Like we usually use our judgments about their behavior to make a decision about the person.

LM: We are tempted to do that when the teacher misbehaves, or apparently misbehaves, and so we are training ourselves to not do that with the teacher in order to not do that with other people too.



It's as inappropriate to make the leap from behavior to being, from behavior to intention, like that. It's inappropriate to do that with any being as it is to do that with the guru.

You just don't know, you don't know who other people are. The Christians also say, they have a nice saying, "Hate the sin, not the sinner." You don't know that they are a sinner, in a way: "Love the sinner." "Hate the sin" means be critical of behavior. If it's harmful to others, if it's harmful to themselves or others, you should be critical of it, of course. You stand up and you say, "That's not proper behavior." But then you kind of like, with a guru especially, you are training yourself to not go beyond what you actually can know.

You can know . . . you can make, you know, you can make discernments about what behavior to give up and what to take up and what's harmful, and what is happiness producing, and what's not happiness producing. You can make discernments like that, but to go beyond that and say, "I know who that person is then," and "I know who that kind of being is then" – they are a good person, or they are a bad person or this kind of person, or they are sinners, or whatever – that's to go beyond what we actually can know. And we do this, of course, all the time, but with the guru, hopefully, there is a little more reservation before we do that, a little more hesitation before we immediately say, "The guru himself/herself is a bad person." Then you have lost your guru, you have no guru, if you go to that next level. To say, "What the guru did or what the guru said was wrong and therefore they are a bad person," that means that you don't have a guru anymore. But to say "What they did or said was wrong, but they are trying to teach me something, including to have the gumption to say when the guru does something wrong or says something wrong, to say it's wrong," then you still have a guru because you are still learning from them. And you are learning some very, very important lessons about courage, about courage of conviction, about having the gumption to actually stand up to somebody and to say, "What you are doing is harmful," that is a very important lesson to learn, very important.

Shadi: You've been on both sides of the relationship. You are a teacher to many, many people, in different countries. And you have teachers of your own that you see and work with in this way that you are describing. You know you shared one story, can you share any other stories about those two sides of the relationship?

LM: Well I think I've been very fortunate to have been a teacher as well as a student, because being a teacher helps me be a better student. You know, having been on the other side, and having seen the kinds of mistakes that students make with you, and try to kind of entice you to make with them, and I have not been entirely successful in not getting enticed – to not get involved in dramas and so forth – but I have tried very hard not to and I have seen the dangers, the obvious dangers of doing so. Then I'm less susceptible to doing that as a student with my teachers. Having had the experience as a teacher of having students doing it towards me, I'm less likely to do it towards my teachers.

So I think that the role of student and teacher is interdependent, and you wouldn't be a teacher if there weren't students (chuckle), and you are obviously not a student unless you have a teacher. So they are interdependent roles and one can inform the other, one can help the other. I am very, very grateful to my students, for teaching me so much, for teaching me so much. So you know, who is the teacher? Who is the student? My students are teaching me constantly, you know among other things, teaching me lessons about pride (chuckle).

Shadi: Oh, that one again!

LM: Yeah, about pride and about how not to think of yourself as such a bigshot, and that is an important teaching you get. And you really only get those from students. If you didn't have students that were taking you down a notch, or not listening to what you say, and trying to embroil you in all sorts of problems, then maybe you could sustain that kind of egotism and pride a little bit longer, but students tend to not let you do that too much, and that's good – that's really good. I learn a lot from students (chuckle).

Shadi: Well as someone who considers themselves one of your students, I am very grateful for all that you have taught me, Lama Marut. Any last words on this incredible topic? It's such a short time that we have to talk about it, but is there any main thing that you want people to take away?

LM: I do. I feel very strongly about the importance of having a teacher, and the danger is, the danger of having the teacher-student relationship go wrong so many times is that we will just throw out the whole concept of a teacher when it comes to a spiritual life, and say "You know we are all equal, and therefore we don't need to be learning anything from anybody." To say we can just download mp3s and stuff, and I don't think that is the proper, that is going to the other extreme.

There are two extremes. The extreme that there is just no role for a spiritual teacher, and the other extreme from that is the extreme of thinking that the spiritual teacher is somebody that he or she is not. And we need to find the middle ground, we need to find the middle ground that protects the responsibility that every individual has, that assumes and protects the responsibility each has for his or her own spiritual development, and his or her own relationship with a teacher. That is his or her own responsibility and to not give that up, to not dis-empower oneself, and that is a big mistake, but at the same time to recognize that there are invaluable things that you can only realize by empowering a teacher to teach you, by creating that kind of a role for a person in your life. But to do that responsibly and without giving up your own power, and so that's the trick.

And I think that we, hopefully we have come to a point historically, and culturally, and individually where we can pull that kind of trick off. We are not peasants, we are not monastic boys – you know five-year-old boys in a monastery situation. We are highly educated, highly individualized, individuated. We are encouraged to think for ourselves, and we need to find the model of guru yoga that is going to work for us, and hopefully, what I have said in the last hour is hopefully at least the broad outline of what that might look like.

Shadi: Thank you so much, so powerful, and so informative. Thank you so much, Lama Marut.