

## Meeting the sphinx

Joining the monastic order or working full-time in a religious organization is like meeting the Sphinx. The Sphinx is a half-(wo)man half-monster lurking outside the Greek city of Thebes who stops passers-by and asks them a riddle. If they fail to answer correctly, she devours them. No travelers give the right answer until Oedipus, but this is another story.

Living as a novice monastic or working as a temple hand, we must learn “right speech,” that is, knowing what to say, what not to say, of the place and people, of goings-on. The meek, in need of living support, work without question and say nothing, see nothing, hear nothing. When we work in the holy maze, we learn to be silent, not to arouse the Sphinx and be devoured.

Training under a religious teacher, we may often discover that we are meeting a Sphinx. We do not recognize the Sphinx until it is too late. The longer we stay with a teacher or monastic, we more we begin to see his clay feet. This is when we have to decide whether we leave with our burden of sorrow and silence; or, we stay on and feign ignorance or madness—either way, we will see the failures of human teachers, and can do nothing about it.

If someone were to come to me for advice for the best place to go to become a monk or a nun, I’m often at a loss on how best to answer. If they are spiritually strong, they see a weak teacher and move on to a better one, and over the years they themselves become great teachers. The spiritually weak may decide to “join the crowd” and become a Sphinx himself and in time to devour others.

Good teachers often take their time before accepting students. They are given menial chores so that they learn to blend with colleagues “like milk and water.” Then, they are accepted as aspirants or postulants with maybe 8 or 10 precepts. This may well take over a year before they are ordained. A good teacher will insist that the renunciant spends at least 5 good years (“rains”) as a monk or nun under a teacher to be true monastics.

It is most unwise to break the tutelage: they will invariably end up as Sphinxes speaking riddles to start their own retreat centre or have religious building. They claim to want to save the world, but the reality is that they want to make a world of savings.

Those who break this 5-year tutelage (*nissaya*) will invariably and miserably fail in their monastic life. They think they can get away with it and go on their own steam. They become like some sly old retiree who got ordained in Las Vegas, and at once came out preaching like an elderly monk. They can fool some people all the time; maybe all the people some of the time; but never all the people all the time. The way they dress, their robes will show and will easily come off.

My best advice to those seeking a teacher is ... a riddle. Who is the best teacher? Look into the mirror; look really deep, behind and beyond the first image you see. Look back 2600 years, and you will see the best teacher you can ever have. It’s a stupid riddle (as most riddles are once

you know the answer), but this is better than recommending a place—we end up throwing the poor seeker into the Sphinx’s maze.

On the bright side, we can visit a suitable centre, make friends with the “lords and slaves” there, and learn to fit in. If we feel we can deal with the Sphinxiness of the teacher and leaders there, and are determined to stay on the right course no matter what, then we have a chance of growing like a lotus rooted in the mud, and rising through the dark waters into the bright sunshine. The world rejoices at beautiful lotuses.

Remember that the Buddha, too, never found any satisfactory teacher. After his awakening, he declares the Dharma to be his own and only refuge. He does not give up despite the failure of the teachers. When we do find the good and true teachers in our outward journey, then, we must take the inward journey and seek the teacher in the suttas and our meditation. It is just a matter of time, we will meet the Buddha. Even just a glimpse of his radiant being is sufficient for us to want to move on and leave this crazy Sphinx-world behind.

Seek, you will find. But, you will meet the Sphinx; you will meet Māra; and many old enemies. Say Hi kindly and move on. Keep moving, don’t stop; keep moving, go straight until you reach the Bodhi tree with the radiant figure under it. He will tell you what to do.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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