



In general, a teacher or mentor is a person who guides, instructs, or helps another in the process of gaining knowledge, understanding, or skills. What about a [spiritual teacher](#) or mentor? What is their role? And more specifically what does a **spiritual teacher** or

### **spiritual mentor**

in the nondual or Advaita tradition do?

A spiritual teacher/mentor's role is unique in that the goal is not to transmit knowledge or understanding as much as it is to somehow bring about a recognition in the student of the student's own pre-existing nature. This is a much more subtle thing than simply teaching someone a skill or understanding. It is not that a **spiritual teacher** never provides **spiritual teachings** or knowledge or understanding, but that knowledge or understanding by itself is not the goal. A student can have a broad knowledge of spiritual principles, and yet can still not have truly recognized those principles as being inherent in his or her own being. So spiritual teachers or mentors may teach a lot or they may not teach anything, depending on what the student needs in that moment to experience this deeper recognition of their own true nature.

This may seem like a subtle distinction between the role of a spiritual teacher and a regular teacher, but it makes a huge difference. The regular teacher usually has something specific to transmit, and there is often an implied assumption that the student will have more understanding or be better off when the teaching is completed. But the spiritual teacher is pointing to something that is already present in the student. It is like teaching someone to have shoulders. You can't really teach the having of shoulders to someone who already has shoulders! But you can make them more aware of the shoulders they already have.

In the case of an Advaita or nondual spiritual teacher, the teacher or [mentor](#) is pointing to the most fundamental qualities of the student's already existing nature, specifically, the qualities of oneness, awareness, and emptiness. Advaita means not two and is referring to the mysterious oneness of all existence. Fundamentally there is only one substance of reality that everything is made of, including the teacher and the student. (

[Click here](#) for a further definition of Advaita and an experiential exploration of this oneness.)

Some take this fundamental truth of our nature to mean that there can be no such thing as a teacher or mentor, or a student for that matter. If it's all one, then distinctions or differences are taken to be meaningless illusions, including the difference between a teacher/mentor and a student/mentee. Yet, while ultimately all appearance is temporary and, therefore, not fundamental to our being, our being exists on many levels, not just on the absolute level of our ultimate nature. It also expresses on this relative level where there is an apparent teacher and an apparent student. And these roles function on the relative level until students have recognized their true nature and there is nothing left to teach them.

So the teaching function of a spiritual teacher operates on the relative level until it's simply no longer needed because the student has realized his or her deeper nature. There's nothing wrong with this functioning, and there's no need to take the identity as a teacher or as a student too seriously. It's a quirk of our language that we turn concepts that are actually best expressed as a temporary verb into the implied permanence of a noun. Someone whose function is to

provide medical care becomes a “doctor,” which is just a conceptual way of expressing the association of that function with that person. It’s not a permanent or fundamental quality of their true identity. Similarly, spiritual teaching and [mentoring](#) is simply a function that sometimes serves in our spiritual unfoldment. It’s not a fundamental part of anyone’s true nature and is not any more real or unreal than any other functioning of our relative lives. One way this is expressed is that not everyone who realizes their true nature is also equipped to be, or even interested in being, a spiritual teacher.

There are some practical considerations in the choosing of and working with a **spiritual teacher**. There are qualities one would expect to find in someone who is truly serving this function of pointing to the deeper truth of Being. Unfortunately, there are many examples of teachers that don’t always live up to the ideal. While even a poor teacher may serve someone’s spiritual unfoldment, it’s just common sense to use some discrimination. As a starting point you can view this [list](#) of qualities one can look for. In this age of abundant information available on the web, it can’t hurt to do a search and thoroughly explore other people’s experiences and perspectives of any spiritual teacher you may wish to be involved with, while keeping in mind that any individual’s experience expressed on the internet is colored by their own conditioning and particular experience.

Lastly, there’s the question of surrender and/or devotion to the [spiritual teacher](#). Is it necessary to completely give up all control and direction to the spiritual teacher in order to receive the deepest benefit of their teaching? In a word the answer is no. It’s not necessary. It does sometimes serve especially within the context of a long term committed relationship with a particular teacher who is of the highest level of integrity, but it’s not absolutely necessary. All of the true nature being pointed to is already present in the student. There is nothing that the teacher has to give you or take from you for the recognition of this deeper nature to occur. Anytime there is a surrender or insistence on total devotion, there is also equally a danger of misuse and abuse of that power. Beware of any teacher who demands this kind of total surrender. The truth can be freely given, as it is limitless, and doesn’t need to be guarded or doled out only to a few.

However, there is another form of devotion or love that can naturally arise within the teacher/student relationship which is the immense gratitude that arises when the truth is seen. And while ultimately, every experience is our teacher and with the fullest realization there is gratitude for all of existence, there can also be a natural deep appreciation for the apparent person who has pointed you to that truth. It’s a strange kind of gratitude as you are grateful to them for everything and nothing, but it is there nonetheless. So if there is a human teacher, there may be this gratitude and love that arises in response to the gift of [spiritual teaching](#) they have shared with you. But of course at that point there is no need for surrender or giving up of control, and a true teacher or spiritual mentor doesn’t need devotion or surrender from anyone, even if it does arise.

The true spiritual teacher is here simply to serve your own recognition of your true nature. The final measure of his or her functioning in this capacity is the degree of your own depth of

realization. The rest is relatively unimportant unless it serves this simple but subtle goal.

## About Nirmala, Advaita Spiritual Teacher

[Nirmala](#) offers satsang and mentoring in the Advaita tradition of nondual **spiritual teachings**.

As a

**spiritual mentor**

and

**spiritual teacher**

, he has worked with thousands of individuals all over the world to help them open their hearts and awaken to their true nature. He also offers

[spiritual guidance](#)

, in one-on-one satsang sessions either in person or over the phone. He is the author of several books, including

*Living from the Heart*

. More information about

[mentoring sessions](#)

with Nirmala and samples of his

[spiritual teachings](#)

are available on this website.