

Spiritual masters and pupils

Make everyone your masters and while loving them, flee to one alone. *Make everyone your masters and while loving them, flee to one alone.*

This paradoxical saying is one that takes us into the whole question of discerning how spiritual wisdom is taught and how spiritual wisdom is learned – and the vital relationship between spiritual teachers and pupils.

Teaching recollection to all who desire it.

The saying begins ‘Make everyone your masters,’ . Osuna’s initial take on the phrase is something more like the invitation to make everyone masters of recollection. He hears an implicit and open invitation to teach the art of recollection if we have learned it, to teach it to everyone who desires it , and to teach it well through example. Furthermore, recollection is nurtured by nurturing relationships of loving affection, so that together in communion with each other we may learn to be taught directly by the Holy Spirit. Ultimately its not so much that we teach, but that we are being taught in this inner school of the heart. That, in summary, is the implicit vision . But although the vision may be clear, Osuna acknowledges, it requires a great deal of discernment and there are many things that may get in the way . Here are some of them.

Hindrances in teaching recollection.

The first stumbling block is exclusiveness. We need to question whether there are barriers being put up to who is considered to be suitable to learn such a subtle practice. Osuna seems passionate about a certain kind of democratising of the spiritual teachings, so that they are available to everyone, *if they are willing*.

A second area to question is around teachers teaching prematurely. Spiritual seekers may be tempted to teach the art and practices of recollection and become caught up in doing so to the neglect of the more subtle knowing that can only be known and shown heart to heart. Teaching also can become an end in itself so that the spiritual teacher may become so preoccupied with finding their means of teaching that they neglect their own inner life.

A more insidious hindrance is a creeping attitude of possessiveness. Osuna would want us to question anxious possessiveness, as if this hidden teaching belongs, or is the possession of a particular teacher or of a particular group of people. Spiritual recollection is very subtle and he uses the language of it being a secret teaching. However, although it is a hidden secret in the sense of being subtle, it is not to be hoarded away, but offered in the world.

Osuna poses questions around the tension between inner, individual experience and the need to preserve the relationships of spiritual intimacy in which recollection takes place. He questions any tendency for individualism that undermines this intimate recollection with others becoming one heart and one mind.

And last, but not least, we need to be on the lookout for where teaching becomes too text-based. The written word too easily becomes more important than embodying the teaching, which is ultimately the most powerful way of communicating spiritual wisdom.

Humbly learn from all seekers

‘Make everyone our master,’ is a second perspective on the saying which invites us to stay humble. In humility we are able to see that all teachers, all people who are spiritual seekers, have something that we can learn from. We can learn to stay open to the virtue and gifts of everyone in a real way – without turning them into angels bringing divine messages or insensitives who have nothing to show us. We can even see, without judgment, the faults in each other and let the faults be their own kind of teaching .

Take refuge in one teacher

Along with this humility and keeping loving communion with all we can still have a clear commitment to one single teacher. *‘Make everyone your master and while loving them, flee to one alone.’* There’s a wisdom here in avoiding being too closely engaged or intimate with too many teachers . This can become counterproductive and an unhelpful amount of energy is spent defining your path or your teacher or your practise over and against others. This fosters what Osuna calls a spirit of contradiction . So find refuge with one teacher - flee to the one alone.

But the calling or gift of spiritual teachers is a whole area which requires great discernment. The image that Osuna gives us right at the beginning of his reflection on this saying is an image of spiritual formation that he comes back to many times. It is of the mature eagle that takes flight and soars to great heights, and that this eagle takes with it a fledgling ready to learn to fly. The eagle hovers over its willing pupil, keeping it under the protection of its wingspan and leads it progressively upwards in spiralling movements towards the sun.

There is always the question of whether a human teacher is necessary for spiritual recollection, this path of dark knowing, of direct and subtle knowing . For Osuna it is necessary. He sees it as foolish recklessness to try and go it alone in the direct path of recollection. He uses exaggeration to make the point – even if someone has a foot in heaven, grab him by the ankle and pull him back so he does not get lost.

Recognising a master teacher in love.

This special relationship between a spiritual teacher and a pupil when they are suited and harmonious, is a relationship of love. He says ‘A love is born in a student for his teacher that approaches the fear and love he feels for God.’ It needs to be a relationship of joyful, trusting obedience , complete transparency and a mutual sharing of each other’s experience. The pupil needs to know that she is cherished and safe flying directly underneath her teacher.

However, this trusting obedience and transparency must never be given without deep discernment. One teacher is chosen in a thousand ! . So how do we recognise the grace and gift of a teacher in another person? The one thing absolutely necessary is that our teacher has experience, direct experience of what is being taught. A teacher cannot sing a canticle he does not know. A teacher cannot teach unless he has a taste of what he speaks.

The other essential is that the mark of master teacher is his or her starting point, and perspective of the life in the Heart. The life in the heart is the beginning point – its an from the inside out approach. We can end with one of Osuna’s unusual images . If you are choosing a spiritual teacher choose one who is like a spider who knows how to repair its web from the centre outwards - who knows to begin in the core of the soul from where all life flows.