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[www.spiritualteachers.org](http://www.spiritualteachers.org)

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## INTERVIEW

Q: Can you please tell me why you set up the web site [www.spiritualteachers.org](http://www.spiritualteachers.org) ?

Shawn Nevins: In 1999, during a low point of my spiritual search, I'd basically given up the idea that I would have a spiritual realization. I still, however, felt that my years of seeking were well spent and I wanted to share some of the knowledge I had found. In retrospect, I feel this was a significant milestone on my path. My only thought was to share what I had found of value and that maybe some others would be helped by my sharing. That sharing was the first truly selfless thing I did.

Q: Can you please tell me about your teacher Richard Rose; did he charge you for these teachings in any way in terms of expecting you to repay him by cash, work, gift or any another way?

Shawn Nevins: I knew Richard Rose from around 1991 till he passed away in 2005. I spent three years living on his farm in West Virginia. The most significant thing I could say is that he gave me a taste of the Absolute. There were times around him, when the air would grow thick with profundity. I knew that he knew what was Real and that there was a Reality, somewhere, for the finding.

He was also kind enough to give of his time and his property for people who wanted to engage in serious pursuit of spiritual goals. He charged me \$50/month to stay on his farm. I would help out, now and then, feeding the goats or mending a fence, but there was never a requirement or even a feeling of obligation to do those small chores. Most of my time was spent reading and meditating. Once a

week or so, I would drive into town to talk with him in the kitchen of his house in McMechen.

Rose sold his books for a small profit and gave public talks into the mid-90s, but he never charged anyone for just talking with him. He was the first to expose me to the idea of "not eating from the altar."

There was always the idea, though, that if you found anything of value from your search, you should "pass it on" and help other people.

Q: On your website you say that: "Preoccupation with money and material. This is a controversial point. The argument goes that a spiritual teacher provides a service, like a plumber, so deserves to be compensated. Also, if the disciples pay the teacher, then the teacher can spend more time helping them. My retort: if a person has had a complete realization, the idea of asking someone to pay to speak with you is ludicrous. It is reasonable to ask people to help pay to rent a room, or help with travel expenses, or buy a book. We do not have to expect our teacher to live as a monk, yet a preoccupation with "big cigars and motor cars" is cause for concern. We know all too well of the stories of fancy cars, wild parties, country estates, and big bank accounts. Seen with your own eyes, such behavior is inexcusable. Why? Because a spiritual realization doesn't plunge you further into this dream world."

How did you come to form this view? Is this based on scripture, doctrine or more to do with experience or personal insight of some kind?

Shawn Nevins: I think that opinion originated with Rose -- it made sense to me and over the years it's made more sense. In 2000, I had a spiritual realization that

gave me some perspective on this world. All I can say is really... really.... the idea of asking someone to pay you before you will speak to them about something that is priceless and that puts the world and the self in an unimaginable perspective is truly ludicrous.

Logically, I can also see that once you start making a living as a spiritual teacher, there is the temptation to make more money by speaking to larger audiences, selling more books, broadening your message, etc. In short, you spend more time in a shallower interaction. If you wanted to spend your time in one-on-one conversations, you'd have to charge people \$500/hour!

Q: What are your thoughts on retreats or paying a set fee for workshops?

Shawn Nevins: I've organized retreats, and it is a challenge to keep costs down. Without owning your own facilities, you have to pass the costs on the participants or else no more retreats. There are ways to get creative: like doing potluck and more rustic facilities.

There is a difference between paying for costs and pocketing a \$1000 or more profit at the end of the retreat. That difference is easier to see when retreat/workshop pricing is broken out into fees for meals/lodging/and the retreat itself.

Q: Is strongly encouraging one's devotees to make large donations dana or something else?

Shawn Nevins: I can see asking for donations if there was a communal project. For example, if someone wanted to buy a piece of property as a place to have

workshops, then sure, ask if people are willing to help. Of course, the "asker" should also be putting in some money! I've heard stories of gurus demanding devotees to give them money as a spiritual exercise. I can imagine someone might find that a useful exercise, but how about suggesting they give the money somewhere else. That might be useful for devotee and guru!

Q: Are there any times when you feel that there is an exception to this rule of charging for the teachings? What if one is desperate and sick and in dire straits and needs money to buy medicine? For example, if the choice were to suffer in agony and pain for a week without medicine or to charge someone for a satsang?

Shawn Nevins: Better yet, kidnappers have my daughter and are demanding a \$100,000 ransom. I have 24 hours to raise the money!

Ask a friend for a loan. You'd probably have far more real friends from being a real friend to people rather than being a "friend" who requires money for a conversation.

Q: What about Dana. What are your views on this?

Shawn Nevins: I gave a "satsang" when I first moved to the Bay Area and declined any payment. When introduced, the host said, "Shawn has declined any dana." That was so rare, it literally caused a murmur in the audience. Another common practice around here is saying the fee for a satsang or workshop is a "donation." To me, people are saying "give me your money," but let's not call it money.

Anyway, I had to look up "dana" because I don't really know what it means... and still don't. It seems to mean to give without seeking anything in return. I think that's hard to cultivate, but do think that attitude arises naturally in people engaged in self-inquiry. I see dana as a by-product of the spiritual life. Perhaps its purest form cannot be cultivated, but all can practice it to some degree by attempting self-less giving.

"Give selflessly to me, the guru, it's good for you." :-)

Rose talked about the Law of the Ladder. He said you should always be working with someone who was farther along the path than you as well as people who were behind you. In this way, we are helped and we help. I think that is like dana.

Q: When they said Shawn is so rare it caused a murmur in the audience, how did this make you feel?

Shawn Nevins: It wasn't that I was rare, but someone not asking for donations was rare. I remember feeling surprised that it would cause a reaction.

Q: What if someone wanted to express their gratitude to you in some way for your help and give you some sort of gift in return? Would you refuse a gift if someone were to bring you flowers or some fruit? Even if it were to hurt their feelings?

Shawn Nevins: No, I would not refuse a gift unless I felt they didn't have the means to give it. People have bought me lunch before. A fellow who stayed with

us a couple of days bought the groceries that we cooked together that night. I thought that was nice of him.

Q: Do you think Eckhart Tolle or Adyashanti would open up their homes to a complete stranger and let you sleep over for a couple of days for a bag of groceries?

Shawn Nevins: I would hope that if someone somehow bumbled their way past the gatekeepers that Adya or Tolle would let them spend the night. If not, there should be a special place in hell reserved for them!

I think if my phone starting ringing off the hook, I'd use my best judgment to allocate the time and resources I have. I don't think I'd say, "if I charge 300 people \$20 a piece, I can rent a room, talk to them all at once, and make \$3000 for a couple of hours of work."

That reminds me of Rose talking about Zen traditions. He thought a lot of it was practices designed to keep the monks busy. What else could you do with 200 monks vying for your attention? It developed into a factory-like setting in many cases.

Q: Arjuna Ardagh said "There's a common saying in India that if a teacher charges money for "the dharma" (loosely translated, "teachings about the truth") he or she will go to a special section of hell set aside for spiritual entrepreneurs, an area cornered off and designed to be much nastier than the areas for axe murderers, rapists, and the like."

What are your thoughts on this?

Shawn Nevins: I think that is very funny. It is equally funny that Ardagh is fully engaged with making money as an "awakening coach".

I have no idea if there is punishment awaiting people for their deeds. The only karma I'm aware of seems to happen in real time.

Q: Why do you think it is that two people could have the same realization but one would charge and the other would not?

Shawn Nevins: Damn good question. Would I be so bold as to say, "if you are fully realized, you won't charge"? I'm not so bold....

I can say that the people I was certain of, Nisargadatta, Ramana, people I've met - that I had a particular sensation around -- they didn't charge. Krishnamurti, Adyashanti, Tolle -- I'm not certain they've seen the complete picture. They've undoubtedly been of great help to many people, though. The exception may be out there. For example, I don't know whether or not Linda Clair charges people to talk with her.

Charging or not charging doesn't necessarily equate with how helpful a teaching might be at a particular point in life. One person might get a lot more from a \$2000 weekend than a weekend with Bernadette Roberts. That's where the intuition comes in -- working to clear a space so we can follow our heart.

Q: Where do you think this is all heading in the future? Do you see any kind of evolution or is spiritual materialism getting worse?

Shawn Nevins: The Bay Area is a somewhat distorted place from which to gauge the trend of the world. I lean more towards there being a balance between the "animal" and the "spiritual." There may be more people writing about spiritual matters, for example, but there are also more people in the world. Is the per capita spiritual quotient rising? Very slowly, I suppose.

It is so easy to get spiritual material now, even compared to when I started in the early-1990s. Back then, I crawled through used bookstores to learn about new teachers, maybe saw an article in a magazine on the newsstand, or heard personally from someone. Yet, I see many people these days who flit from one YouTube video to the next and read one book after another in quest of the next affirmation of their beliefs. There are always obstacles and wisdom, whether it is the Middle Ages or tomorrow.

END OF INTERVIEW

