

# What exactly is a *guru*?

It's a word used to describe anything from the latest rap star to a person who helps you change a flat tire—here's what it really means...

By Nora Isaacs

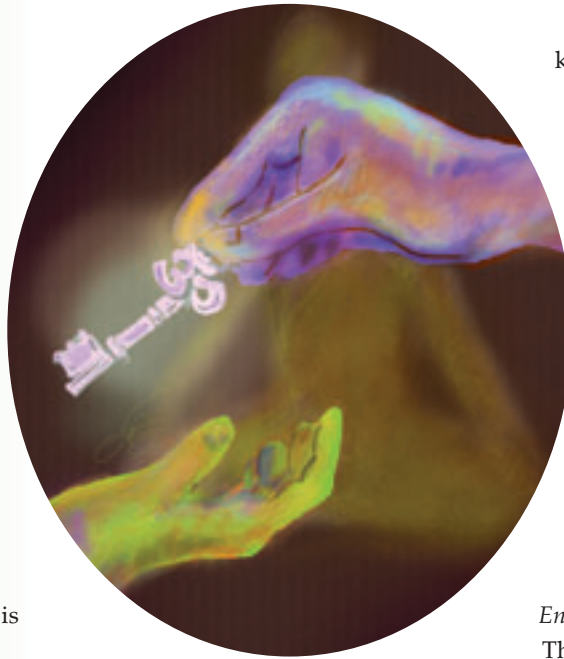
**Y**oga Guru to the Stars!"  
"The Guru of Cool!"

"Celebrity Guru Talks Back!" It seems the word *guru* is ubiquitous these days. And it's not just in the headlines: Lately, I've heard references to law gurus, jazz gurus, bike gurus, and customer-relationship gurus—there's even a rapper named Guru.

In our culture, the word *guru* is another name for a person with expertise in a certain area. In these terms, a guru could be the woman who teaches you Spanish or the neighbor who showed you how to change a flat tire. But from a spiritual perspective, the idea of a guru is a bit more involved.

In Sanskrit, the word breaks down into *gu*, which means "darkness," and *ru*, which means "destroyer," or "remover." So a guru, then, is really a person who removes the darkness and leads you to the light—or who leads you from untruth to truth, from ignorance to knowledge. In other words, a guru is a person's spiritual guide right here on earth.

So does this mean that all gurus are totally enlightened beings? Sometimes, a guru is considered enlightened; in other instances, the guru is considered a highly respected person who performs initiations, passes down rituals, and gives out a mantra. You can compare a guru to a saint, someone you treat with reverence and esteem and whom you might consider wise and



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knowing. So even if not "enlightened," a guru represents the enlightened mind as a living embodiment of the Divine.

In ancient India, the guru was considered the pathway to enlightenment for the student. In one of the yogic texts, the *Yoga Kundalini Upanishad*, a guru is compared to "a helmsman who assists the pupil in crossing the ocean of phenomenal existence in the boat built from his knowledge," writes Georg Feuerstein, PhD, in *The Shambhala Encyclopedia of Yoga*.

The traditional student/guru relationship was vastly more intense and complex than it is today. This sacred relationship was considered one of the main tenets of spiritual life, and one that often lasted a lifetime. It was common for a guru to live with his or her disciples, who showed total devotion to their teacher. The students, in turn, carried on the guru's teachings and created a lineage that was often passed down. As examples, just take a look at the work of relatively modern gurus whose teachings live on today: Swami Satchidananda (Integral Yoga), Swami Muktananda (Siddha Yoga), Swami Sivananda (Sivananda Yoga), B.K.S. Iyengar (Iyengar Yoga), and K. Pattabhi Jois (Ashtanga Yoga), the latter two still alive, and all of whom have active disciples and centers all over the world.

The classic Hindu text *Bhagavad Gita* stresses the importance of the guru/student relationship through the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna. In the story,

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## Bridging the Gap

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dilate blood vessels. This results in a decrease in blood pressure. At the same time, the physical demands of moving into and maintaining a full inversion require us to focus our minds deeply and, often, slow our breathing.

So in performing the Headstand, we're able to re-create major elements of the physiological and mental state associated with the relaxation response state. But what's exciting about this is that rather than creating the state from the mind out, we have literally reverse-engineered it—from the body in.

And that leads us to the big question and even greater possibilities: If a full inversion practice creates a physiological state that mimics the relaxation response state, can a regular full-inversion practice deliver the same well-documented disease-prevention and mental health benefits that come from meditation, hypnosis, and visualization? If so, an intelligent, progressive inversion practice could be a more accessible alternative for health-seeking people who "can't or won't meditate to save their lives."

Time will tell, but I wouldn't be surprised if, one day in the future, we saw physicians writing prescriptions for inversion therapy as a complementary treatment for a wide variety of ailments. 

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## The Athletic Yogi

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cause you to overexaggerate the curve your lower back. If you have particularly tight hamstrings, or suffer from low-back pain, Felstead suggests supine hamstring poses with props. Doing poses that require lying on your back—such as Supta Padangusthasana (Supine Hand-to-Foot Pose) with a strap placed around your foot—protects your back from injury, plus you can hold the pose longer and with less strain. "The longer you hold a stretch the better," she says.

For all hamstring poses, Felstead advocates holding for a minimum of 20 seconds and up to two minutes to receive the full benefit of the stretch. You should go as deeply as you can where you can feel the stretch at work, but don't push yourself beyond your threshold. Reduce the intensity or duration of the stretch if you feel any pain, twinges, or sharpness, even if it fades. Don't try to tough it out. "You need to know your body better, and yoga can help you make that connection," says Felstead. As you progress, you can take on more intense hamstring stretches, such as Parighasana (Gate Pose) and Prasarita Padottanasana (Wide-Legged Forward Bend).

Once your hamstrings are back in shape, don't think you can ignore them. You should commit at least once a week to a one-hour yoga routine that weaves in a good dose of these hamstring-specific poses. "One day of yoga won't do it," says Felstead. "But a regular practice can keep your hamstrings going for a long time." 

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## Street-Fighting Yogi

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me the key to inspiration and aspiration in the individual practitioner," says the beautifully tattooed yogi.

Wong relocated to Manhattan in 1998 under the care of his spiritual parents, co-creators of Jivamukti yoga Sri Tripura Sundari (Sharon Gannon) and Sri Deva Das (David Life), who recruited him to run their ash-tanga program and live in their home. A loyal following blossomed—and within two years, Wong's desire to practice his signature series compelled him to open the Shiva Yoga Shala in New York City, where his Yogic Arts method took its full form. Wong's achievements can be directly linked to his healing touch, where he also includes elements of Thai yoga massage for total surrender. "It is the hands-on bodywork which truly establishes the healing aspect and sacred touch of this practice," Wong says.

This gifted teacher's work with Jivamukti gave him the extraordinary opportunity to travel the globe and experience new cultures. "In the West, people generally speak out, focusing on their external practice," says Wong. "In the East, people tend to reserve their outward expression, while possessing an inner presence in their movement and stillness."

Currently, Wong divides his time between his studios in Shanghai ([www.namasteyoga.com.cn](http://www.namasteyoga.com.cn)) and Tokyo ([www.lotus8.co.jp](http://www.lotus8.co.jp)). In addition to teaching the Yogic Arts series, Wong hosts workshops and teacher trainings throughout the year all over the world. 

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For more information on **Duncan Wong**, visit his website, [www.yogicarts.com](http://www.yogicarts.com).