Soren Ross

7 Questions I Wish I'd Asked Before Following Any Teacher

A guide for skeptics who've been burned before, or want to avoid it.

INTRODUCTION

Why These Questions Matter

I spent seven years in a spiritual organization that turned out to be something other than what I signed up for. Almost twenty more in another tradition. Close to three decades of practice, learning, and, to be honest about it, some spectacular naivety.

I also looked away from things I'd now tell someone I love to take seriously.

I knew something was off for more than six months before I finally left. What kept me wasn't faith. I'd been educated to believe there was nothing outside the system. No alternative path, no framework for making sense of my life without it. So I stayed, not because I still believed, but because I couldn't picture leaving.

I wish someone had put these questions in my hands before I signed up for anything.

I'm not trying to make you paranoid. I'm trying to help you stay awake while following. I've met teachers worth trusting. I've also met people who were very skilled at looking trustworthy. Telling the difference requires keeping your eyes open, even when the experience is beautiful, even when you want it to be real.

Seven questions, in the order I wish I'd been asked them.

Can I disagree with this teacher and still be welcome?

1

Not “tolerated.” Welcome.

Watch what happens when someone questions the teaching publicly. Is there room for it? Or does the room get uncomfortable?

Real growth requires the freedom to doubt, to push back, to say “I’m not sure about this.” If that freedom feels risky, pay attention.

✕ RED FLAG

Disagreement is treated as disloyalty or spiritual immaturity.

✓ GREEN FLAG

Questions are welcomed as part of genuine inquiry.

If questioning feels dangerous, that’s information.

GOES DEEPER *What Nobody Tells You About Spiritual Organizations*

THE QUESTIONS

What happens to people who leave?

2

How does the community talk about former members?

Are they “lost souls who couldn’t handle the path”? People who “weren’t ready”? Or are they just… people who chose differently?

The story a group tells about those who leave reveals what they believe about loyalty, growth, and individual choice.

✕ RED FLAG

Former members are pitied, criticized, or quietly explained away.

✓ GREEN FLAG

People leave with their dignity and their relationships intact.

When the leaving has to be explained as someone’s failure, that tells you more about the system than about the person who left.

GOES DEEPER *The Version of You That Only Works at Retreats*

THE QUESTIONS

Is my growth measured by my experience, or by my position?

3

Progress should feel like something inside you. More peace, more clarity, more capacity to handle what life throws at you.

If “growth” mostly means getting closer to the teacher, gaining rank, or being chosen for special tasks, you’re looking at a promotion, not a transformation.

I’ve sat through conversations where someone’s career crisis was met with “that’s just karma working itself out,” and a broken relationship explained away as “the energy wasn’t aligned.” Every human problem, flattened into the same five phrases.

✕ RED FLAG

Status in the group becomes the measure of spiritual progress.

✓ GREEN FLAG

Growth is measured by your inner experience, not your role.

Organizations need hierarchies to function. But spiritual development isn’t a career ladder.

GOES DEEPER *Why I Don’t Want to Be Famous*

THE QUESTIONS

Do I have full access to information, or is knowledge “reserved”?

4

“You’ll understand when you’re ready” sounds wise until you notice it’s the answer to every inconvenient question. Translation: stop asking. The issue isn’t the answer you’re missing. It’s your level of consciousness, your vibration, your spiritual readiness. Pick your favorite.

Sometimes that phrase is legitimate. Some things require context. But if basic information about how the organization works, where money goes, or what’s expected of committed members is routinely withheld, pay attention.

✕ RED FLAG

Core information is revealed gradually, after commitment.

✓ GREEN FLAG

Expectations and structure are transparent from the start.

When basic answers stay one step ahead of your commitment, you’re being taught dependence, not patience.

GOES DEEPER *What Your Guru Forgot to Tell You*

THE QUESTIONS

Am I becoming more capable of thinking for myself?

5

This is the big one.

After months or years of practice, can you find your way through your inner life with more confidence? Or do you find yourself needing to check in before making decisions, doubting your own perception, waiting for approval?

If years of practice leave you less able to trust your own judgment, something's gone sideways.

✕ RED FLAG

You increasingly defer to the teacher on personal decisions.

✓ GREEN FLAG

You trust your own judgment more than when you started.

The goal is to need the teacher less, not more.

GOES DEEPER *How to Actually Think for Yourself*

THE QUESTIONS

How does the teacher handle being wrong?

6

Everyone makes mistakes. What matters is the response.

Does the teacher acknowledge errors openly? Or are mistakes reframed, minimized, or blamed on the students' lack of understanding?

I've learned to pay less attention to how a teacher speaks and more to what happens the first time they get something wrong.

✕ RED FLAG

The teacher is never wrong, only misunderstood.

✓ GREEN FLAG

Mistakes are acknowledged and used as teaching moments.

When a teacher can never be wrong, you've stopped learning and started managing someone else's ego.

GOES DEEPER *What Your Guru Forgot to Tell You*

THE QUESTIONS

Would I recommend this to someone I love?

7

Not “could I justify it” but, genuinely: would you want your child, your partner, your best friend to go through this same experience?

We tolerate things for ourselves that we’d never accept for people we love. This question cuts through our own rationalizations.

If the answer is “yes, without hesitation,” that’s a good sign. If you find yourself adding qualifiers, pay attention to what those qualifiers are.

✕ RED FLAG

You’d hesitate to recommend it to someone vulnerable.

✓ GREEN FLAG

You’d confidently send someone you love to this teacher.

If you wouldn’t wish it on someone you love, why are you wishing it on yourself?

A FINAL NOTE

A simple check: if you found yourself answering “red flag” to three or more questions, that’s not proof of a problem, but it’s worth paying closer attention. If your body keeps tightening before every meeting, stop explaining that away.

You are the foundation.

It took me three decades and two traditions to land on something that simple.

NOTES FROM THE MIDDLE OF THE PATH

Every Tuesday, one essay.

What works, what doesn't, and how to tell the difference.

- An honest look at what "verifying everything" actually means in practice
- The story behind the cult I didn't recognize as a cult
- A practical micro-experiment you can run in a single week
- Why most "spiritual progress" is performance, and what survives when the audience leaves

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No gurus, no guarantees.
Notes from a fellow traveler.

WHAT'S NEXT

If These Questions Resonated

This guide is a starting point, not an ending. Three places to begin, depending on where you find yourself.

IF YOU'RE QUESTIONING A TEACHER RIGHT NOW

What Your Guru Forgot to Tell You →

Most spiritual teachers say "verify everything." Almost nobody actually does it.

What Nobody Tells You About Spiritual Organizations →

The dynamics that run every organization don't pause because the mission statement mentions enlightenment.

IF YOU'VE ALREADY LEFT, AND THE QUESTIONS ARE STILL ECHOING

The Seven Years →

The full story of the organization I left, what I missed inside it, and what stayed useful after.

I Am the Foundation →

What it took me three decades to understand: the only thing nobody can take away is your own discernment.

IF YOU'RE STARTING FRESH AND WANT TO DO IT DIFFERENTLY

How to Actually Think for Yourself →

The patterns that keep most of us inside borrowed thinking, even when we believe we're being independent.

Twenty Years of Meditation: What Actually Changed →

The honest list of what shifted, what didn't, and how to tell the difference.

ABOUT

Soren Ross

I write about the parts of spiritual practice that nobody puts in the brochure.

After nearly three decades of practice, including seven years in an organization I now recognize as something other than what it claimed, I share what I've figured out about finding real growth without losing your discernment.

These days, I focus on what actually works: practices you can verify yourself, questions worth asking, and the kind of skepticism that leads somewhere useful rather than just leaving you bitter.

Safe travels,

