

Fast-track enlightenment is dangerous

Katchie Ananda

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I have been following the story of the Arizona sweat-lodge deaths with shock. As part of a Spiritual Warrior retreat, for which participants paid \$9,000 apiece, three people died and 19 people ended up in the hospital.

The victims were part of a group of about 60 people who - after nearly two days in the desert with little food or water - spent more than two hours crowded in a sauna-like sweat lodge that was covered not with breathable blankets but with plastic tarps.

I am upset and saddened by this tragedy and I have been wondering how it could have happened. As a teacher focused on spiritual as well as physical development myself, I believe this is a wake-up call.

In many ways, Arizona is a vivid example of what has gone wrong in the spiritual movement in recent years.

It would be easy to dismiss James Arthur Ray as a cult leader who got out of hand, but it is not that simple. I don't think James Ray is crazy or evil, but I do think he is a deluded human being. This retreat was about creating abundance and a more fulfilled life through pushing one's boundaries. In his eagerness to reach this goal, Ray was willing to overlook the well-being of his followers.

As a spiritual seeker, I'm very aware of the "edge," the place where we push ourselves past our comfort zone, to let go of old patterns and explore a bigger potential. In a culture that is focused on comfort, that's often an important exercise. But how far should we push ourselves or encourage our students to push?

As a young yoga student, I more than once let an over-eager yoga teacher push me in a yoga pose past my limits - and I got injured. I so wanted to reach a new level that I discounted my safety in the pursuit of my goals. With time, I learned to take responsibility for my own safety, and now I teach my students to listen to their bodies and respect their limits. Ray's followers - tragically, perhaps criminally - apparently were not encouraged to do the same.

In most serious spiritual traditions, every teacher has a relationship to a teacher and a community that

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provides a check on the teacher's ambition and ego. The practice has developed over many years and can help the practitioner find an inner sense of a balance that allows for growth with integrity. It's a process that requires time, patience and mindful attention.

Today, spiritual teachings are taken out of context and can become downright dangerous. We are looking for the quick fix, the fast rush - even in our search for enlightenment. Some will use old and powerful teachings in an attempt to get there.

In the Anusara yoga I teach and practice, the principle is to say "yes" to life, to our goals and aspirations and dreams. But coupled with that "yes" is an immediate "no," expressed by creating boundaries, for the safety of our physical bodies and our psyches. We literally contract our muscles to protect and stabilize the joints and the core. Then out of that "no," that stability, can come another "yes," a physical (and perhaps spiritual) expansion, one that is more grounded, more realistic and has been tested by life's challenges.

It is too late for the people who suffered and died in that sweat lodge. But it's time for all of us to insist that anyone who presumes to take on the mantle of "spiritual teacher" must honor the importance of "no" - as much as the aspiration of "yes."

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/10/26/EDF41A9U14.DTL>

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