

Recognizing the signs of a sage

Spiritual sages tend to live by their own rules, or more accurately, by divine rules that have been revealed to them through their inner wisdom, intuition, and deep-souled guidance.

When most people hear that someone is living by his or her own rules, they assume that these personally designed rules would be more lax and easy than common, traditional societal rules. However, spiritual sages generally hold themselves to a higher degree of virtue and discipline than most people do.

Although different spiritual sages have different styles, ideas, and behaviors, certain qualities are usually present in one form or another, including obvious virtues, such as kindness, honesty, and purity of thought and action. An ancient text called *Yoga Vasishtha* describes in more detail some of the signs and qualities that often manifest in the ways and actions of spiritual sages.

Even if you don't consider yourself to be a spiritual sage, you can still contemplate these qualities from the *Yoga Vasishtha* and hold them as aspirations and signposts in your own unfolding spiritual journey:

- **Although externally engaged in worldly actions, the sage has no attachment in his mind to any objects whatsoever.** He behaves like an ideal citizen and friend of all. Outwardly, he's busy, but at heart, he's calm and quiet. He's free from the restrictions of caste, creed, stage of life, custom, and scriptures. He doesn't work to get anything for himself. His face is never without the luster of cheerfulness on it.
- **In the company of the humble, the sage is humble.** He plays as a child in the company of children; he is a youth among the young; and he acts as an old man in the company of the aged ones. He is full of courage in the party of the courageous people and shares the misery of the miserable ones.
- **There is nothing the sage has to achieve.** He therefore performs and gives up actions without much concern, like children do. In spite of his being occupied with actions appropriate to the time, place, and circumstances, he isn't touched by the pleasure or pain arising from them. He is full of mercy and magnanimity even when surrounded by enemies. He regards his activities as a part of the cosmic movement and performs them without any personal desire. He never hankers for the pleasures that aren't in his hand, but enjoys all those he has. The idea of "I" and "mine," of something to be achieved and something to be avoided, has died within him.
- **No purpose of the sage is served by any activity or by abstaining from activity.** He, therefore, does as the occasion suits him. He's a great worker. He works without any anxiety, egoistic feeling, pride, or impurity of heart. He's a great enjoyer. He doesn't discard the pleasure he has or desire the pleasure he doesn't have. He finds equal pleasure in old age, death, misery, and poverty, and in ruling over an empire.

- **The life of a liberated sage is really the noblest and happiest life.** From him, goodness is scattered all around. Having seen him, having heard about him, having met him, and having remembered him, all creatures feel delighted.

Be Careful

Even as you strive to become more virtuous, don't get too stuck in judging how virtuous your actions are or how unvirtuous other people's actions are. Although virtuous actions are important for a powerful and positive spiritual journey, these virtues shouldn't distract you from focusing on the divine spirit that exists beyond this material world of both virtuous and nonvirtuous deeds. As the poet Jelalud'Din Rumi's invitation says, *"Beyond the ideas of right-doing and wrong-doing, there lies a field. I'll meet you there."*

Spiritual Wisdom

Acting from conscience

Here Swami Sivananda describes some of the common ways people approach situations when they don't have the benefit of spiritual virtues, ending with the right answer coming from the power of self-reflection and assessment that is called conscience. Whenever you're about to make a decision in your life, you can check your motivations against this list:

"Cowardice asks, 'Is it safe?'

Avarice asks, 'Is there any gain in it?'

Vanity asks, 'Can I become great?'

Lust asks, 'Is there pleasure in it?'

But conscience asks, 'Is it right?' Conscience prompts you to choose the right way instead of the wrong and informs you that you ought to do the right thing."