

ON SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY: Genuine and Counterfeit



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Summary

This article discusses the characteristics of pathology in spiritual groups, and distinguishes how leaders of such groups differ from those of more healthy groups that foster valuable personal and social change. However, external criteria alone are shown to be insufficient for this task. A further criterion is the involvement of the student in a legitimate self-knowledge discipline that sharpens perception and awareness, so that he or she can begin to discern whether the authority of the spiritual teacher is genuine or not. Of special importance in distinguishing genuine from fraudulent spiritual authority is the difference between submission, which is enslaving, and surrender, which can be empowering if it opens the student more fully to the needs of other people and the demands of life as a whole.

Just as a goldsmith gets his gold First testing by melting, cutting, and rubbing, Sages accept my teachings after full examination And not just out of devotion to me. *Sakyamuni Buddha*

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Counterfeiters exist because there is such a thing as real gold.

Rumi

In an era such as ours, marked by the decline of agreed-upon mores and meanings, the hunger for ultimate values increases, as evidenced by the recent revival of interest in religion and spirituality in America. At the same time, Americans do not have a high level of spiritual sophistication and seem to prefer their religion simple. The combination of an intense search for ultimate values with a certain naivete in matters spiritual has set the stage on which charlatans and false prophets have appeared, to strut and fret, pouring out words full of sound and fury, but signifying little. Ours is an age in which spiritual deceit and counterfeit are rampant. Yet within the contemporary religious revival one can also find spiritual masters who seem authentic, who represent genuine wisdom traditions that may contain important guidance for people in these troubled times. However, in the wake of Jonestown, which acted out everyone's worst fantasy of what could happen when a self-styled religious leader gains control over the lives of followers, there has been a widespread debunking of all spiritual teachers who fall outside mainstream Judeo-Christian contexts, and a simplistic dismissal of their communities as mere "cults."¹ How then can we distinguish intelligently between false prophets and genuine spiritual masters, between misguided cults and wholesome spiritual communities?

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF "SPIRITUAL PATHOLOGY"

In 1981, I participated in a study group on authority patterns in new religious movements sponsored by the Center for the Study of New Religious Movements and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. (I use the term "new religious movements" with reluctance because it tends to obscure the fact that though certain of these spiritual communities may be new to America, they often continue traditions and lineages of spiritual transmission that are thousands of years old.) This group of psychologists and sociologists interviewed participants in various religious communities, spanning a wide gamut, from groups that have gone insane, such as the People's Temple, to groups that seem quite sane and effective in nurturing valuable personal and social change, such as the Zen Center of San Francisco. From these interviews, as well

as from my own observations of spiritual seekers and communities over many years, I found certain characteristics that stand out in those groups that have the greatest potential for pathological or destructive behavior. However, I would like to emphasize that any such criteria can never fully distinguish between healthy and unhealthy groups. We often naively assume that a spiritual group should have transcended human failing and neurosis, but this is rarely in fact the case. On the contrary, a spiritual community may be uncovering and working with basic neuroses (greed, envy, hatred, delusion, fear) more intensely than any secular community. And in the process, members of the group may take on some of the characteristics described below. Therefore, in the second part of this article, I will propose a different criterion for distinguishing¹ a genuine spiritual teacher: personal discernment, based on an awareness discipline. In short, the following criteria cannot be applied in any absolute way; it is more a question of how fully a given group manifests them.

(1) *The leader has total power to validate or negate the self-worth of the devotees, and uses this power extensively.* The leader in such groups is a magnetic, charismatic person who exudes, in Hoffer's (1951, p. 107) words, "boundless self-confidence. What counts is the arrogant gesture, the complete disregard of the opinion of others, the single-handed defiance of the world." Something about this unflappable self-assertiveness especially appeals to those who lack self-esteem. And the recruits of such cults seem to be primarily those with little faith in themselves. As Hoffer points out, "Faith in a holy cause is... a substitute for lost faith in ourselves." So it seems that those especially lacking in self-confidence are attracted and mesmerized by the grandiose displays of the self-proclaimed cult leader. The false prophet and the true believer are made for each other. Through their mutual collusion, the leader gains power and control, while the follower gains not only reassurance and security from the leader's approval, but also vicarious power through identification with the leader.

The cult leader deliberately preys on the followers' sense of personal inadequacy to gain control over them. For example, meetings at the People's Temple often included degradation rituals in which members' flaws and failings were paraded before the group and ridiculed in front of everyone. After thoroughly degrading a follower in this way, Jim

Jones would often build the person back up, as one survivor of Jonestown describes:

First you become nobody. They first tear you down and strip your mind, you don't know anything. And after that, whatever he do, then you have to thank him for what he did. And then you'd become totally dependent on him, because you don't have anything else yourself. Everything *you* had was bad. I mean, he said, "You will listen to me and I will instruct you of things that was good," and most people actually believed that... He made¹ everybody think like they was somebody.

Chuck Dederich of Synanon had a similar way of operating, according to one ex-member's description:

You get a group of people around you, and you say to them, "I am very¹ happy. My life is wonderful. I have done an enormous number of good things, and I love it. How are you? Now you ain't so good. Now who would I? you rather be, you or me?" Now we have just established that *you* feel lousy, I feel fantastic. So that you say, "You."

Dederich at first impressed this member with his "boundless self-confidence": "He was charismatic, he was funny, he was bright, he was involved, his instincts were unbelievable. And I really fell in love." In admitting he would rather be Dederich than himself, he gave Dederich power over him. Dederich then increased his control by telling him he too was fantastic:

And because Chuck Dederich said that I was fantastic, now it's wonderful. Because he said it, I believed it. And it changed my life, no question about it. And I would say to people, "Who would you rather be, you or me?" And they would say, "You, Bob." And I would think that was just fine.

¹ In this way, leaders such as Jones and Dederich take away the old (already crumbling) ego supports and replace them with their own affection and approval, which makes their followers feel important and special—"like you was somebody." The person's new identity is defined in terms of being a follower in the group. Instead of an adult, eye-to-eye relationship built on a respect for human dignity, the relation between cult leader and follower is that of parent and child. (The members of Jonestown even called Jones "Dad.") And the more the followers give the leader power to validate the worth of their existence, the more the leader

can "up the ante" and force them to do anything he or she wants in order to gain approval. As one ex-cult member put it:

If you have that experience of love [from the leader], and then you're cut off from it, it's like being put in quarantine—there's a tremendous motivation to get back to it, tremendous desire to reconnect with that love. And you'll do anything to get back to that love. Because it makes you feel good and makes you feel like you're a good person.

(2) *What keeps the group together is allegiance to a cause, a mission, an ideology.* Cults often attract people by appealing to their altruistic ideals, their desire to do good, to be of value, even to save the world. The leaders in such groups define the cause and ideology, while the followers repeat unquestioningly the beliefs handed down to them. Furthermore, the leaders often maintain their favored position by claiming to have special access to "God" or to a source of wisdom or authority that is not accessible to the followers. This increases their dependence on the leader for "the Word," for telling them what to do and interpreting events for them. Since they must always go through their leader to determine what is true and real, their own intelligence further atrophies.

The ideology is treated with deadly seriousness, so that the members cannot stand back from it or have any humor about themselves or their leader. They are caught in what one ex-cult member called "an airtight world-view, an intellectual maze." As Hoffer (1951, p. 75) describes this:

All active mass movements strive . . . to interpose a fact-proof screen between the faithful and the realities of the world. They do this by claiming that the ultimate and absolute truth is already embodied in their doctrine and that there is no truth or certitude outside it. The facts on which the true believer bases his conclusions must not be derived from his experience or . . . observation but from holy writ, . . . It is startling to realize how much unbelief is necessary to make belief possible.

The effectiveness of such an ideology derives from its certitude, not its meaning or its truth value. It must be the one and only Truth. For a doctrine to have such absolute certitude, it must be believed in, rather than understood or tested out, for in trying to understand it or test it out, people would have to trust in the validity and meaning of their own experience. But insofar as people join the group out of low self-esteem to begin with, it would only be contradictory and self-defeating for them to appeal to the truth of their own experience.

Furthermore, any independent frame of reference is interpreted as heresy, disloyalty, or betrayal of the group's mission. There is a great deal of suspicion among the members, lest any of them betray the Cause. As Hoffer (1951, p. 114) points out, "Strict orthodoxy is as much the result of mutual suspicion as of ardent faith." Despite the seeming solidarity of the group, spy networks may exist to report members who dissent from the leadership. The more members have had to give up their own intelligence and autonomy for the sake of their new identity, the more they become willing informers because they are threatened by and resent independent thinking on the part of other members. As one ex-cult member described this:

If you were in a group with me, I couldn't say to you, "Boy that was really an awful meeting." Because I couldn't be sure that you wouldn't call [the leader] as soon as you left and say, "Betty just said that was an awful meeting." And these were good friends. But you couldn't be sure, even between husbands and wives, that you wouldn't get turned in. That was a really important dynamic of control. For good friends, we did some terrible things to each other, I would say.

In a group where self-esteem depends on the Cause, doubt becomes a deadly sin.

And because allegiance to the Cause is based primarily on belief, as well as on emotional needs for belonging and approval, rather than on a genuine search for truth or a discipline of self-knowledge, the ideology can easily be used to justify morally questionable behavior. Eventually the Cause may take precedence over any kind of common decency or respect for human dignity.

? S/V (8) *The leader keeps followers in line by manipulating emotions of hope and fear.* The coin of the realm governed by cult leaders is the *promise*. Such leaders promise their followers that they will reach salvation or attain a special status above the rest of the world if they remain true to the Cause. This "carrot" approach often appeals to the greed, vanity, and poverty mentality of the followers rather than to any basic intelligence or inherent sense of well-being on their part. The Cause takes precedence over any appreciation or enjoyment of present experience, which is deferred in favor of future rewards. To ensure that the flock stays in line, moreover, the cult leader also uses the "stick" method, by intimidating them with threats of doom, vengeance, or damnation if they stray from

the Cause. A "wall of terror" surrounds the group: if members decide to leave, they may be threatened with persecution or death. As a survivor of Jonestown describes this tactic of Jones:

He'd say, if you leave the Temple, he had connections with the Mafia, he had connections with the CIA. He said, "If you leave, forget it, 'cause they'll find you in a hole somewhere."

And as an ex-member of another group that became pathological describes:

The "transpersonal carrot in the sky" was: this is the way to salvation. If you deviate in any way, you're going toward your evil part, you're making it bigger. So that became very frightening. And another thing that became frightening was that if you thought about leaving the group, you had to face the fact that in the system you'd be spiritually damned. Absurd as these fears may seem, we must remember that cult members have already given up their autonomy and intelligent thinking for the sake of approval and belonging, and so become prey to the ways the leader controls them through stirring up and channeling intense emotion. As Hoffer (1951, pp. 79-80) puts it:

The estrangement from the self, which is a precondition for both plasticity and conversion, almost always proceeds in an atmosphere of intense passion... Once the harmony with the self is upset... a man ... hungers to combine with whatever comes within his reach. He cannot stand apart, * poised and self-sufficient, but has to attach himself wholeheartedly to one * side or another.

(4) "*Groupthink*" further knits followers together. Like-mindedness with the group takes precedence over individual common sense and independent judgment. Members of the group are often discouraged from spending much time alone or with their families. Pair-bonding between couples may also be deliberately undermined to foster greater dependence on the leader. The more self-trust and self-confidence aite••'; broken down, the more followers must look to others for their examples. They model themselves after what they consider to be the ideal group member, and imitate the actions, mannerisms, and thoughts of the

leadership.

Moreover, the boundary between the group and the outside world is very strictly drawn. Such a group may even maintain a notion of "abate lute evil," defined in terms of the world outside its boundaries. As Hoffer

(1951, p. 86) points out, "Usually the strength of a mass movement is proportionate to the vividness and tangibility of its devil."

(5) *Cult leaders are often self-styled prophets who have not studied with great teachers or undergone lengthy training or discipline themselves.* Many of the world's great religious traditions have lines of spiritual transmission, where students have their realization tested by their teachers before they are allowed to represent themselves as masters. This is especially true in the lineages of Buddhism as well as in other Asian traditions. The process of testing and transmission may serve as a kind of "quality control" to ensure that a given teacher does not distort the teachings for personal gain. Many of the most dangerous cult figures of our times have no such lineage or transmission, but are self-proclaimed gurus who sway their followers through their charismatic talents. Other cult leaders spuriously claim transmission, more to inflate their images than to acknowledge genuine spiritual lineage.

Spelling out the above criteria is important in helping alert the public to causes of cultic fanaticism. However, in themselves such criteria fall short of clarifying the larger question: What is genuine spiritual authority? The methods and assumptions of social science generally are much more useful in analyzing what pathological groups do wrong than in telling us what sane spiritual communities may be doing right. In fact, Western psychology and sociology as a whole have been much more successful in diagnosing sickness than in specifying health. Insofar as traditional social science attempts to be value free, while limiting itself to purely rational, secular criteria, it has difficulty grasping the fundamental meaning and purpose of spiritual practices or religious ideas, much less prescribing guidelines for judging spiritual authority. At the Very least, those who set out to study this issue should spell out their assumptions about and attitudes toward spiritual endeavors.

SOME BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

So, before proceeding further, I would like to state briefly my own j philosophical assumptions, which help me understand the role of genuine spiritual teachers in the world. In the simplest possible terms, Once we reach a level of development beyond the "pre-egoic" functioning of childish consciousness, there seem to be two major kinds of awareness

available to us. In our most basic "being," we most fully *are* when in touch with an open, awake, expansive kind of awareness that allows us to feel the wholesome quality of our *aliveness* (Welwood, 1977, 1979). Human consciousness, as described by Western phenomenologists such as Sartre and Heidegger, and Eastern traditions such as Buddhism, is characterized by a basic receptivity, openness, "no-thingness" that allows us to let the world into us and to appreciate it for what it is. But precisely because we are so open and sensitive, another counteracting tendency seems to arise in defense. We tend to contract, shut down, and defend ourselves against the unconditional openness of our basic awareness by trying to maintain a fixed, definable identity, to become "some thing" by grasping onto anything that supports us. The chronic contraction involved in protecting and defending a fixed image of ourselves not only consumes a great deal of life energy, but also makes us habitually egocentric, with an attendant existential anxiety toward anything that threatens to negate us (see Washburn & Stark, 1979; Welwood & Wilber, 1979). The differences between these two qualities of human existence can be summarized as follows:

<i>Egocentricity</i>	<i>Being</i>
concern with maintaining appearances	concern with discovering truth
concern with maintaining and validating a self-image	interest in and appreciation of the world, independently of how it affirms or negates any self-images
contraction around "I-ness"	expansion outward toward life and the phenomenal world
sense of insecurity and inadequacy	basic sense of wholeness, well-being, aliveness, intelligence

All the great spiritual traditions have spoken of these two modes of existence in different ways. The purpose of spiritual practice is to overcome exclusive identification with one's separate self-fashioned identity—egocentricity—and to expand one's awareness to include and realize the deeper, larger qualities of one's being.

It is particularly difficult to judge the validity of a given spiritual community through rational, secular criteria alone because the faculties of logic and reason often serve to support the ego-centered approach to life. The logic of undermining exclusive identification with ego often appears quite scandalous to reason. In Kierkegaard's (1941) words, "The

self must be broken in order to become a self." Or as Goethe (in Ely, 1980) expressed this scandalous logic:

I praise what is truly alive,
 What longs to be burned to death ...
 And so long as you haven't experienced
 This: to die and so to grow,
 You are only a troubled guest
 On the dark earth.

And here precisely lies the ambiguity about how to recognize a true spiritual master, for the counterfeit and the genuine master both undermine the habitual patterns of self. Yet one leader does this in a way that creates bondage, while the other does it in a way that promotes liberation. What is this important difference?

AUTHORITY AND RELATIONSHIP

To answer this question, we cannot rely on behavioral criteria alone. Developing criteria for judging a teacher's genuineness by examining external behavior alone would be like judging a psychotherapist's effectiveness simply by the content of what he or she says or does with a client. Setting up an ideal model of a spiritual teacher is as fruitless as elevating a single form of psychotherapy as the model for all others. As we know, there are many different therapeutic styles and approaches that can be effective. We would be hard pressed to say what Carl Rogers, Fritz Peris, and Milton Erickson *did* in common to achieve therapeutic results. Each of these men had a different personality type, a different style of working, and perhaps even a different type of client with whom he would be most effective. Similarly, the particular chemistry between a student and a spiritual master is quite important in determining whether there will be a meeting of two minds. And since spiritual teachers come in many different shapes and forms, we will no doubt fail if we try to spell out how a good guru should behave.

Instead we need a more subtle analysis that looks at the *quality of the relationship* or process that goes on *between* teacher and student. This involves examining the nature of spiritual authority, in at least two different respects: (1) how it is defined *in the relationship* between teacher and student; and (2) the *source* from which a teacher ultimately derives that authority.

The first aspect of spiritual authority is relative or relational; that is, a given teacher has authority only for those who respond to his or her presence and teachings. A disciple (literally, a "learner") is one who recognizes that he or she has something essential to learn from a given teacher. In this regard, the function of a spiritual teacher is like that of other kinds of teachers. For example, we would expect someone who wanted to play the piano to learn and accomplish more by studying with a master pianist than simply by reading how-to books or studying with a musicologist. Just as one would turn to an acknowledged master in any field one wanted to pursue in depth, so a person who feels a longing to overcome the limitations of egocentricity would feel drawn to someone who has actually mastered how to do that. The role of effective teachers is to instruct, encourage, provide feedback, and inspire through the example of their own accomplishment. Moreover, the more effective teachers tap and nurture the inherent potential of students, rather than try to make the student fit into the teacher's style and agenda.

This relational aspect of spiritual authority could also be compared in certain ways with the therapeutic relationship. Although as a therapist I generally feel uneasy with the authority role many clients grant me, I often have to accept this special position, especially in the early stages of the work. Clients can often let themselves proceed with the changes they need to make more readily if they grant me some authority to guide their process. I prefer not to explain this authority solely as a "transference" of needs from the parent-child relationship. What also seems to give me a special authority in this relationship is my allegiance to clients' inherent sanity and well-being underneath their problems, as well as my acceptance of and willingness to hear out their most intimate feelings and thoughts. Beyond the social role or the technical knowledge I may have at my disposal, my special position in the therapeutic relationship may derive in part from maintaining faith in my clients' basic sanity, while allowing them to go through whatever they need to explore to arrive at that knowledge themselves. In giving clients a special quality of attention and acceptance, therapists can provide a model of how they would like to see their clients relate to their own experience. To the extent that therapists help clients connect with their own basic well-being, clients accord them a natural authority, beyond the conventional authority of their social position as professional experts. This is an important step toward clients' recognition of their own authority—that they are indeed the "authors" of their own experience, rather than passive victims of circumstance. When the clients finally realize that the therapist is not

responsible for the changes they have made, but rather has been helping them connect with their own inherent positive life directions, they can begin to move forward on their own.

In a similar, though perhaps deeper way, a genuine spiritual master's presence may serve as a mirror that reflects back to students qualities of their own awakened being: openness, generosity, discernment, humor, gentleness, acceptance, compassion, straightforwardness, strength, and courage.

Yet beyond the relative authority they assume in relation to their students, true masters are also in touch with an unconditional source of authority—awakened being—inside themselves. Since this is the same source of wisdom all people may tap into, the genuine teacher is more than willing to help others do so, if they are ready. Such a master has usually spent many years developing deeper qualities of being beyond egocentricity through self-knowledge disciplines such as meditation and contemplation. Having fully witnessed and understood the many neurotic twists and turns of the mind, all the tendencies toward self-deception and self-aggrandizement, great teachers have mastered the way to tap into a deeper source of aliveness and power in themselves and others beyond these ego entanglements. Sharing this source of their own realization means encouraging students to engage in a self-knowledge discipline.

An awareness discipline such as meditation sharpens students' perceptions so that they can discern more clearly whether the teacher's Words are true or not. Without such a practice, students are totally dependent on the teacher to tell them what is so. Students' increased discrimination and discernment may also lead to a greater appreciation of the teacher's mastery, in the same way that when we begin to study and practice any art, we can appreciate the dedication and skillfulness of an accomplished master in that art much more than we could before we tried to master that art ourselves. This appreciation may also give rise to a natural feeling of respect and devotion.

From a secular perspective, it may be difficult to understand such devotion as anything but slavishness. Yet the real point of honoring the teacher's mastery is not to aggrandize the teacher by placing him or her in a superior position above or apart from the student. Rather, genuine devotion can be a practice of turning one's allegiance away from the tyranny of egocentricity toward the deeper source of wisdom in oneself, which the teacher exemplifies in a fully developed form. Insofar as we are ordinarily devoted to enhancing our own self-image, we are enslaved;

by our thoughts and emotions, revolving around greed, envy, pride, aggression, and fear. Thus devotion to a teacher whose presence exemplifies freedom from this inner tyranny can be a practice of switching allegiance from egocentric compulsions to a path of awakening. However, it should be emphasized that, particularly in our culture, the practice of devotion to a master can be quite dangerous and can lead to many perils unless it is preceded by a thorough training and grounding in an awareness practice that sharpens the student's discernment and cuts self-deception.

Yet, lest we imagine that the authority of a spiritual mentor only has meaning in the Eastern traditions, we might consider the following words of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton (1970, p. 224), which emphasize the importance of honoring spiritual instruction from a qualified guide:

The work of getting rid of the "I" is, in fact, so difficult and so subtle as to be completely impossible without the help of others. The disciple must submit unconditionally to the most rigorous obedience and discipline. He must take without question and without murmur every possible difficulty and hardship. He must bear insult, weariness, labor, opprobrium.

Although, when stated this boldly, such words may rub against certain egalitarian and democratic feelings, they do point to an inescapable fact: If we seek out a teaching designed to help us overcome the compulsion of egocentricity, then we cannot insist on having everything our own way along this path. We may have to sacrifice our own needs if we are to discover our larger nature, which our needs are often obscuring. It is all too easy to deceive ourselves, to imagine that we are becoming spiritual while in fact we are solidifying ego all the more. Charlatans and false prophets lay their traps by promising spiritual rewards, while genuine masters expose this continual tendency to want to have everything our own way.

SURRENDER OR SUBMISSION?

To understand the value of commitment to a genuine master, we need to distinguish between mindful surrender, which can be quite enlivening, and mindless submission, which is a deadening "flight from freedom." The notion of surrendering is widely misunderstood in our culture. It often conjures up images of "come out with your hands

up"—waving a white flag, admitting defeat, being humiliated. For many people today, the idea of surrender implies losing intelligence or individuality to another person and taking a weak, submissive, "one-down" position. True surrender, however, is never enslaving, but is rather a step toward empowerment, finding one's own most genuine power.

Submission means giving our own power to someone who appears to be more powerful. We are most likely to do this when we feel unworthy, in need of something in return from the other person in order to feel okay about ourselves. Yet depending on another for validation forces us to act in ways that compromise our integrity just to win approval. The more we compromise our integrity, the less we trust ourselves and the more dependent on the leader we may become. Such submission is also quite narcissistic, because in identifying with the leader and the group, followers subtly inflate their own self-importance.

Yet the recent critics of narcissism in our society usually see all involvements with spiritual masters in this light, failing to distinguish between regressive submission, which is a retreat from maturity, and a genuine surrender, which allows people to move beyond egocentricity to a full realization of their being (see Wilber, 1983).

We could define surrender here as the act of giving ourselves fully to life, without trying to control the outcome. True surrender in this sense does not have a finite object—it is giving ourselves for the sake of giving ourselves, in order to connect more fully with life. If we give ourselves to something finite, such as the teacher's personality, that is submission. To be able to give ourselves fully to life, we first have to appreciate our own fullness of being, otherwise giving ourselves is liable to be submission—"I give myself to my guru because he is so great and I am so small." True surrender can only happen out of inner strength, while submission happens out of inner weakness. Thus surrender requires compassion—first of all with ourselves. If we give ourselves to another out of feelings of unworthiness, that is submission. When we are in touch with our own fullness, we do not *lose* anything by giving our being to others, because there is always more where that came from—more life, more energy, more love. In submission, however, we do lose something, by giving away our power to another and becoming dependent on the other to make us feel okay. The value of an awareness discipline in this regard is in helping us develop inner strength and confidence, so that we *can* give ourselves more fully to what life asks of us.

With a genuine spiritual master, surrendering means presenting oneself in a completely honest, naked way, without trying to hold anything back or maintain any facade. How rarely we are able to let anyone see us as we are, without donning a mask of some kind. Being in the presence of a true master presents a rare opportunity to let down all one's pretences, to unmask and simply be as one is, acknowledging both one's egocentric tendencies as well as one's larger being. This is quite different from submissively trying to live up to something, to be "good" or "devoted", to please someone in order to feel worthy.

In the most complete spiritual teachings, the teacher-student relationship transcends narcissism because it is simply practice for the larger task of surrendering to everyday life itself as one's ultimate teacher. The real test of the students is not how well they please the master, but how fully they can face the demands of life at each moment, instead of holding themselves back or apart from life. Everyday situations then begin to present themselves as opportunities to be as transparent and open as one is with one's teacher. Thus genuine surrender does not enslave one to the limited perspectives of an "ingroup," but rather helps one extend the compassion one has cultivated toward oneself toward all people. Working with others in a compassionate way based on surrender means being sensitive and responsive to what every situation calls for from us, without trying to aggrandize ourselves through our efforts to help others. Those who criticize the path of self-knowledge as narcissistic fail to appreciate the subtleties and difficulties of the inner work necessary to cultivate genuine openness to all beings. As the Zen master Dogen's famous words describe this path:

To study the self is to forget the self.

To forget the self is to be illumined by all things.

IN SEARCH OF A GENUINE TEACHER

How then can one recognize a teacher one can trust? Certainly no one master or teaching could be expected to appeal to all people, any more than any one psychotherapist or school of therapy would prove effective for all potential clients. The ultimate criterion for judging masters is whether they wake their students up to a deeper humanness. In addition, genuine teachers will not condone or indulge in any of the characteristics

of pathological groups mentioned earlier. For instance, they will have a deep respect for human dignity, rather than appeal to personal inadequacies and insecurities. Whereas charlatans will undermine self-respect in order to capitalize on regressive tendencies, genuine teachers will encourage self-respect as the basis for self-transcendence. They will be willing to share the source of their authority and wisdom with students, so that their relationship will be based on real experiential understanding rather than on ideology or belief. They will allow tolerance for ambiguity and paradox, rather than insist on absolute certitude in the One and Only Truth. Their concern will be directed toward all people; they will not elevate a group of followers to a privileged status above their fellow humans. They will not manipulate the emotions of their students, but will appeal to their natural intelligence. They will encourage students on the path of self-knowledge through example, rather than through promises of future salvation and reward. Instead of encouraging herd behavior, they will recognize the importance of people's time alone to discover what is most true in a fresh and alive way. And they will themselves have undergone extensive training and practice.

These criteria are far more important than whether we approve of the teacher's lifestyle, appearance, or tendency to engage in outrageous or unconventional behavior. The annals of all the great spiritual traditions include many examples of behavior that outrages conventional morality, but that is designed to wake people up to a deeper truth. Genuine teachers often may not live up to ordinary preconceptions of a pure and holy lifestyle, and may at times act with a ferocity that aims at cutting through a student's thick shell of arrogance. Nor are great teachers necessarily lacking in their share of human imperfections. As the American Zen teacher, Philip Kapleau (1979, pp. 31-32) points out, Americans are often quite naive in their preconceptions about perfection:

In the West a roshi is expected to be buddha-like, his conduct flawless...

But this idealistic view can blind one to the merits of a teacher. . . . A Japanese long experienced in Zen once told me, "My roshi does have character flaws, yet of the teachers I have had he is the only one who has taught me real Zen and I am exceedingly grateful to him. But his karmic load is heavy."

Spiritual teachers themselves usually emphasize the importance of judging the quality of teaching by the effect it has on one, rather than by the superficial personality characteristics of the teacher. For instance,

one Hindu teacher, Nisargadatta Maharaj (1973, p. 14), once replied to a questioner who asked him whether a master should be "a man of self-control who lives a righteous life":

Such you will find many of—and no use to you. A guru can show the way back home to your self. What has this to do with the character or temperament of the person he appears to be?... The only way you can judge is by the change in yourself when you are in his company. . . . If you understand yourself with more than usual clarity and depth, it means you have met with the right man.

The Buddha once responded in a similar vein when approached by a group of villagers, the Kalamas, who had been visited by various monks and brahmins expounding their different doctrines. They asked the Buddha, "Venerable sir, there is doubt, there is uncertainty in us concerning them. Which of these reverend monks spoke the truth and falsehood?" To which the Buddha replied:

It is proper for you to doubt, to be uncertain,... Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another's seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, "The monk is our teacher." Kalamas, when you yourselves know: "These things are good, these things are not blamable; these things are praised by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness," enter on and abide in them [cited in Thera, 1963, pp. 6, 8].

And the Buddha proceeded in the rest of this sutra to point out that one can recognize a worthy teaching if it helps to reduce the three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion in one's own life.

In sum, the question of spiritual authority is a most subtle and difficult matter that permits no easy answers or hasty conclusions. Although I have stressed the distinction between true and false teachers here, these are probably but two ends of a broader spectrum of more or less realized human beings. For example, some teachers may have had a genuine realization, but have not fully processed or integrated it, so that their teaching is not as ripe or complete as it could be. Some start out with good intentions, but are not fully developed enough to avoid leading their followers astray. Other teachers may be quite wise, but lacking in the skillful means necessary to communicate or manifest their wisdom fully and help others discover it for themselves.

Certain masters seem to be a model of perfection, while other great teachers are most effective precisely because they are so human, because

they are so fully in touch with the nature of sickness in himself or herself. For example, the great Buddhist sage Vimalakirti, to whom many bodhisattvas came for teachings, was always sick, and, when asked about this, said: "I am sick because all beings are sick." If the spiritual path is about transforming our most basic sickness and neurosis, then we can hardly expect spiritual teachers and communities to be completely spotless and pure.

To discount all spiritual masters because of the behavior of charlatans or misguided teachers is as unprofitable as refusing to touch money because there are counterfeit bills in circulation. As Sanford (Adorno et al., 1959) has stressed, the abuse of authority is hardly any reason to reject authority where it is useful and legitimate. It is possible that in the present age of cultural upheaval and declining morality, family instability, and global chaos, the world's great spiritual masters may be one of humanity's most precious assets. Glossing over important distinctions between genuine and counterfeit spiritual leaders may only contribute further to the confusion of our age and retard the growth and transformation that may be necessary for humanity to survive and prosper in the challenging years ahead.

NOTE

1. The term "cult" has both the neutral meaning of "a religious sect" and a pejorative meaning. I will use the term in its pejorative sense here, to distinguish fervid or fanatical groups that rigidly adhere to a fixed ideology under the leadership of a charismatic figure from genuine spiritual communities.

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PERNICIOUS ONENESS



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Summary

The multifaceted phenomenon of "pernicious oneness" is continuing to gain strength in the humanistic and transpersonal worlds. In this article I describe "pernicious oneness" and present examples of it as it pertains to transpersonal thinking and practice. Various misunderstandings and confusions with regard to the "oneness" experience are briefly examined. I suggest that the transpersonal community begin to acknowledge and deal with what appear to be the negative effects of "pernicious oneness," and remind the reader of the powerful ego distortions that may negatively influence the effort to transform consciousness. I further suggest that the transpersonal community (and its humanistic sister community) pay more attention to healthy ego development so that ego, instead of being an albatross around the spiritual neck, may become a firm stepping-stone and integral part of the transformative journey. One need not kill ego in order to die into what lies beyond it.¹

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