

The Guru-Disciple Trap ...

“When we find a sacred teacher or a spiritual guide who evokes our soul’s longing, our image of God leaps out of our inner world and onto an idealized human being. And we’re filled with exalted feelings of devotion in the presence of our ideal.”

A new social media friend wrote to me:

“It is great that you had the opportunity to be in the presence of a Master.”

I replied:

“The ‘perfect master’ construct is a projection.”

I shared this with him, from my essay “Why There Are No Perfect Teachers”:

“From the age of 18, I immersed myself in the teachings of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and participated in his programs at advanced levels (e.g., as a full-time teacher of Transcendental Meditation and then for 13 years in his semi-monastic “Thousand Headed Purusha” program). I gained tremendous benefit from that immersion, but I also was challenged by inconsistencies and shortcomings I encountered in aspects of the teachings, in Maharishi’s own performance and in the performance of people he entrusted with power.

“Some of these were serious enough to call into question the entire concept of enlightenment as a guarantor of ethical, morally appropriate behavior, a concept Maharishi himself espoused in his teachings about “spontaneous right action.”

“Remarkably, of all the teachers and teachings I’ve encountered, it was Maharishi alone who brought out Shankara’s exposition of *lesha avidya*, which is a master key to understanding how enlightenment really works.

“*Lesha avidya* [the inevitable residue of ignorance that allows a person to continue to function as a human being after realizing Brahman/True Nature] and “spontaneous right action” are contradictory teachings. In his public teachings, Maharishi promoted the idea that higher states of consciousness automatically confer “total attunement to natural law.” In private, however, he (occasionally) spoke with more nuance about those remnants of ignorance that persist after awakening. In my opinion, it would have been better if he had been more straightforward in telling the truth about enlightenment. His message might have been less alluring, but the world would have been better off.”

My new friend commented, “There have been many false masters.” Certainly that is true, but “perfect master” is a projection nonetheless.

My friend Connie Zweig, PhD has written and lectured extensively about this. I recommend her excellent book, *Meeting the Shadow on the Spiritual Path: The Dance of Darkness and Light in Our Search for Awakening*.

In a talk to the Association for Spiritual Integrity’s monthly community forum she said,

“In one chapter I tell the tales of dozens of renowned teachers who fell from grace. And you probably know their names. ...

“So from childhood through late life, many people long for God, spirit, transcendence, a sense of the divine. When you imagine ‘God,’ what do you see? Or ‘the gods’ or ‘the divine’? What do you see? A stern bearded male perched on a throne with angels circling his head? A beatific

Madonna with an innocent child at her breast? A black four-armed goddess dancing on a corpse? Indra's net as it weaves through and interconnects all living things? The letters of a holy name? A colorful mandala? A sacred mountain? A vast sparkling void? So each religion comes with its own images of the divine and they may inspire awe, love, fear, guilt, or doubt. In some Eastern traditions, they're objects of contemplation, evoking spiritual qualities in the aspirant.

"Carl Jung explored this God image in myth and in the psyches of his patients. For me, the God image is the hidden object of desire, typically hidden in the shadow and pointing us towards something beyond ego and arousing our holy longing. When we find a sacred teacher or a spiritual guide who evokes our soul's longing, our image of God leaps out of our inner world and onto an idealized human being. And we're filled with exalted feelings of devotion in the presence of our ideal.

"In our psyches, the teacher has realized in human form the ideal other living within the student, the image of the complete or self-realized human being. And so in the inner world of the student, the teacher carries the student's own highest authority, the parent who won't fail him, the God-like human whose attributes she strives to emulate. For the student to recognize the teacher as such, there must be a match between the inner image and the outer person. The arrow of projection fits the target and the student feels a fit, an inward yes.

"Carl Jung called this an archetypal projection as distinct from a personal parental projection. Once activated, this projection holds a promise and a duty, an inspiration and a burden.

"Now on the flip side, the teacher basks in the admiration and devotion of the student. He may feel himself enlarged in her gaze. In some cases, teachers unconsciously come to emotionally depend on this adoration, like food. And so they behave in ways that exact exclusive obedience from their followers. With a lack of moral development, they may act out their shadows in destructive ways.

"So what would lead us as independent, developed adults to endow another human being with so much power and authority that we feel blind faith in her? Our tender longings activate vulnerable feelings of childlike devotion. Each of us carries unmet childhood needs into adulthood, unconscious longing to merge with the powerful figure for protection against frightening feelings of powerlessness or abandonment. And so we're susceptible to the vagaries of human authorities who appear to be benign. So when two people meet and feel a deep connection, their hearts open, but so do their imaginations. And through projection, the shadow expels both positive and negative traits by attributing them to other people and disowning them in ourselves.

"And every so often, this arrow shoots out unpredictably. Oh, that person is so stupid or that person is so wise and compassionate. And so we might say something nasty or we might fall in love. In our discussion here, we might begin to surrender to an idealized teacher and our early needs to feel special and to be seen, to keep secrets, to feel belonging are all at play. But neither person is typically aware of this dynamic.

"So some of us unconsciously seek teachers like our parents and others seek those who are different. But the shadow has its own agenda. People meet teachers who seem at a conscious level to be different from their parents. But later, when the shadow erupts, they discover he or she is a lot like a parent. In other words, a teacher may appear to be gentle and compassionate, but when he's angry, he becomes a critical know-it-all, just like a woman's father. Or when he gains wealth, he becomes a materialistic consumer, just like a follower's family. And then he begins urging people to keep his secret, just like family secrets in alcoholic families. And so it's

an unconscious match. The shadow in each of them is unconsciously recreating a relationship and bringing an opportunity for spiritual shadow work to expand our awareness of these hidden parts of ourselves.”

In another talk Dr. Zweig described her own experience of this, which was the same as my experience and countless millions of people across centuries and millennia:

“And I remember the first moment I saw Maharishi at Humboldt, his long hair and beard, his white robe, his legs crossed, sitting with equanimity. And I remember thinking, ‘This is my future, I will be a yogi.’ And in these moments, we’re unconsciously attributing God-like status to a teacher.”

It is important to say here, Dr. Zweig followed Maharishi for a few years and taught his method of meditation to many people, but eventually she saw that it would be necessary to separate from Maharishi and his movement. That is exactly the conclusion I came to myself, though it took longer for me to realize it.

As is clear from my writings, I have serious misgivings about the traditional system of guru-worshipful discipleship. Mindful of those concerns, I often recite these three quotes:

“We are all just walking each other home.”

~ Ram Dass

“The next Buddha will be the sangha [community].”

~ Thich Nhat Hanh

“My advice to you is, never think of anyone as bigger than you are,
and never think of anyone as smaller than you are.
Always think of everyone as just the same as you.”

~ Dr. Brihaspati Dev Triguna

I told my new social media friend,

“I woke into Brahman/True Nature 48 years ago and was immediately struck by how much the actual experience of ‘enlightenment’ is different from the mythology about it. I’ve spent the interval since then slogging through the ‘after enlightenment chop wood, carry water’ landscape and trying to distill whatever might be true and useful to pass along to others in the same boat before I leave this Earth.

“By now it seems my experience is not as uncommon as it used to be, but for most of this nearly half century I have been isolated and alone. It’s been a huge relief and consolation in recent years to find that a community has emerged among awake and awakening people who can connect and share. That community is alive and vibrant and full of wise, kind-hearted, helpful people who are along on the same journey with us.

“My advice to you (if I may offer it) would be to let go your search for a perfect master and look instead for fellow travelers and wise, experienced friends. Look for friendship and community.”

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