

The Traps of Being a Guru

from *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power* (Part 1)

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(*"Narcissism and Adulation" abridged*)

The person most at risk of being strangled by the images demanded by the role of guru is the guru. This includes the great danger of emotional isolation. The literature of Eastern spirituality is rife with warnings about the dangers of the spiritual path. There is good reason for this. Ironically, contributing to these dangers is the common and mistaken notion that the further along "the path" one gets, the less one is likely to succumb to temptations—until one is fully realized, at which point one is no longer subject to the hazards of self-delusion. But in actuality the reverse is more often true, as the temptations get more insidious, powerful, and harder to resist. Seeing more deeply contains no guarantee against one's mind becoming concomitantly more clever at fooling itself. Moreover, when anyone is treated as an "arrived" human being, the potential for self-delusion is far greater than in any other context.

At the heart of the ultimate trap is building and becoming attached to an image of oneself as having arrived at a state where self-delusion is no longer possible. This is the most treacherous form of self-delusion and a veritable breeding ground of hypocrisy and deception. It creates a feedback-proof system where the guru always needs to be right and cannot be open to being shown wrong—which is where learning comes from.

When people portray themselves as beyond illusion—and therefore no longer subject to ego, mistakes, subjectivities, the unconscious, or creating delusional systems that are self-aggrandizing—what is actually

being claimed? Is it that they have never been deluded? Or that they aren't deluding themselves now? Or that they can never be deluded again? For the claim of freedom from self-delusion to have any force, it must also be a claim about the future. Who would go to a guru who said, "I'm free of self-delusion now, but might not be tomorrow"? No matter how much evidence casts doubt on this stance of unchallengeable certainty, it is always possible to maintain that the place of such exalted knowledge is not subject to the proofs and judgments of ordinary people. But whether being beyond self-delusion is possible or not, presenting oneself to others in this fashion sets up an inevitable pattern of interaction. If a person believes another is so "realized," it automatically creates not only awe and worship, but the belief that this person "knows better." Why would even the most realized of beings want people to become reliant on his wisdom instead of their own? Whether anyone actually achieves this state can be debated; what is obvious to us is that this mode is authoritarian.

To project that one will be a certain way in the future is to build an image of oneself that has within it the want and need to believe (or for others to believe) one will in fact be that way. This image of the guru as beyond self-delusion cuts off real awareness in both gurus and disciples. A crucial element in being self-aware involves being alert to when one is "putting oneself on"—meaning, telling oneself what one wants to hear.

Let's suppose a person has touched into something that might be called a basic or

universal reality (or at least a level of understanding deeper than previously experienced). Doing so could have cut through previous illusions and self-delusions. In the moment, one's clarity can feel so powerful that it is not hard to believe one will never be deluded again (at least not in the same way). But any projection of oneself into the future necessarily comes from images created out of the past; the more absolute they are, the more one ignores what contradicts them. This is one of the greatest occupational hazards of being a guru. There is a tendency within the human mind to construct a universe with itself at the center. This is one place subjectivity comes from. Sanity is the realization that one is not alone in doing this. Sanity is also the capacity to change through being open to feedback, to new information. The idea that any one mind has a corner on the truth creates isolation that is extraordinary. This easily leads to deterioration of physical or mental health. So, another great danger for gurus is emotional isolation.

Emotional connection is certainly necessary for mental health, and at least beneficial in maintaining physical health. Psychosomatic medicine has found that many physical and psychological problems have their roots in alienation. The guru offers others an escape from alienation through the quick bonding that becoming a member of his group brings, but ironically this eventually causes extreme alienation in him. It is no wonder then that gurus display a spectrum of self-destructive behaviors from drunkenness to ulcers. This is not because they are taking on the karma of their disciples or of the world (a prevalent rationalization). Rather, they are involved in the very human activity of somatizing their conflicts. One guru even alienated himself to the extent that he was literally allergic to people. Everyone had to go through extreme cleansing measures in order to be allowed in his presence.

Being a "knower," as opposed to a seeker, is part of being a guru. This implies an essential division between the guru and others. The guru in effect says, "I'm here, and you're there; and not only can I help you move from here to there, but that's what I'm here for." Being different (or rather, being perceived as different) is the foundation of the guru's dominance. Relations of dominance and submission often contain extreme emotions. But if dominance and submission are the essential ingredients in the glue holding the bond together, the connection is not really personal. Gurus and disciples need each other, but as roles, not as individuals, which makes real human connection almost impossible. So gurus must create other ways of turning themselves on besides intimacy, the most usual ones being adulation, material wealth, impersonal sexuality, and power.

Nor can gurus have any real connection with other supposed "super-humans" (other gurus) because of the inherent competition among them. Years ago, when we first became interested in gurus and Eastern concepts such as enlightenment, it initially seemed an oddity that all these supposedly enlightened beings did not seek out each other's company. With each other they presumably could find deep and real understanding, and respite from always having to deal with minds at a lower level. But since disciples view their guru as a vehicle for their own salvation, they must believe that he can do the best for them. Consequently, the meeting of gurus, when it occurs (it rarely does), is always laden with heavy meaning, as the disciples watch very carefully to see who comes out best. Even the simplest acts (who goes to see whom) have implications of dominance. The fact is that gurus do not "hang out" together because the structure of the role makes it nigh impossible. Thus even intimacy with peers is denied them.

NARCISSISM AND ADULATION (*abridged*)

Successful gurus, rock stars, charismatic leaders of any sort, experience the intensity of adulation amplified beyond most people's ken. This can make ordinary relationships pale by comparison. Being the recipient of such adulation and devotion is exceedingly addictive. Here addiction is used in its loose sense to mean mechanically needing an ongoing "fix" of adulation to where it becomes the central focus of one's life. Adulation has powerful emotions for the sender as well, and can be easily mistaken for love. It is likewise

DECEIT AND CORRUPTION

Some seem to thrive in the role of spiritual authority. After all, to be more interested in power and position than truth and growth is to be congruent with the actual (rather than professed) values of much of the world and its institutions. Another irony is that although gurus preach detachment, and seekers look to them to learn how to be unattached, gurus become totally attached to the power and privileges of their elevated position. But since their power requires appearing the most non-attached and selfless, this automatically makes gurus either unconsciously or consciously deceitful.

If the guru's message of being personally free of all self-interest is false, is it knowingly false? It is of course possible for the guru to believe it himself, especially because the guru role is both detached and opulent. Thus it is easy to believe one really doesn't need anything or anybody. (Belief and self-interest usually go hand-in-hand.) Also, people who dissemble and lie in order to make others believe in them often believe this is justified because it is ultimately for everyone's good—only coincidentally including their own.

This brings up another major danger of being a spiritual authority. There is nothing within the role to guard against the corruptions of power, because the very notion of corruption is taboo. By denying that self-interest is or can be operative in a guru, there is no way to mitigate against its effects. Using

addicting for the sender, as it is an easy route to feelings of passion. Since adulation is totally a function of image, should the images crack, adulation disappears, demonstrating that it is essentially empty of real care.

...For a guru, adulation and power are intricately connected since the disciples' surrender is the ultimate source of his power, and adulation is the prerequisite for surrender. A guru is made to feel he is the center of the universe by his disciples. It is difficult to not be "in love" with that image of oneself.

lofty ideals to mask self-interest is common, but when this is melded to images of purity, corruption is guaranteed. The myriad scandals around sex, money, and power that have tainted so many gurus are not surprising, given the structural corruptibility of the role.

In political realms, where the corrupting tendencies of power are legend, we are often warned that constant vigilance is needed to ensure freedom. Authoritarian ways of relating undermine vigilance so that both sides have unconscious vested interests in the unquestioned power of the leader. In spiritual realms, the power is so absolute that it can lead to extreme excesses.

There are few, if any, relationships where the possibilities of personal power match the guru's. If human beings believe a leader can save them, they will obey and follow him anywhere; they are capable of following any order—including killing others and even themselves. Disciples can and do become disillusioned with a guru. It is far more difficult for gurus to become disillusioned with themselves. They can always rationalize anything they do, no matter how mistaken or even sleazy, and find at least a few people willing to support and idolize them. So the guru role makes it extremely difficult to escape the traps of power—the ultimate trap being that in the end, gurus lose their humanity.