

The Assault on Reason

From Part I on gurus & their ploys in
The Guru Papers:
Masks of Authoritarian Power

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To maintain mental control it is necessary to undermine self-trust. This is insidiously done by removing the ways people can build trust in themselves. Self-trust is built by utilizing one's own personal, firsthand experience as feedback. It is also built by sharpening mental and perceptual tools and frameworks in order to process, integrate, and evaluate one's relation to the external world, as well as to inner dramas.

It is commonly assumed that the nature of spirituality is not only fundamentally different from ordinary experience, but that this difference is vastly superior. From this it is concluded that the tests of truth or meaning used for ordinary experience are not relevant for the so-called higher truths that gurus and religion offer. This age-old separation of the spiritual from the worldly is deeply embedded in all of civilization. We view this split as tragic, and at the core of the fragmentation prevalent in the contemporary human psyche. The inner battle between the presumed higher and lower (or good and bad) parts of oneself often binds people with conflict by making them unable to accept themselves as whole human beings.ⁱ

We are in no way negating the occurrence and importance of transcendent experiences that cannot be encapsulated by thought. Actually any experience, by its nature, is different from the words that try to describe it.

This includes the meaning of the color red, as well as the essence of what love is. That reason has limits is also true. But to conclude that reason is therefore useless, or even harmful in integrating all these experiences is not true. Reason is not only a useful and necessary tool to sort things out, but it is insidiously dangerous to reject it.

The Eastern view of enlightenment as beyond reason allows gurus to undermine reason.ⁱⁱ This precept alone makes the guru dangerously feedback-proof, for he automatically escapes accountability for any behavior. If pressed, the guru can easily reply, "You can't possibly understand what I'm really doing because you're not enlightened." This stance, if believed, makes acceptable any incongruity between ideals and action. The guru can reverse any challenge or criticism by saying, "It's your problem; your ego is getting in the way." He, of course, has no ego. Common phrases used as barriers against anything that questions spiritual authority are: "That's merely mental" (or analytical, rational, psychological). "Your ego is experiencing resistance." "You're coming from the head instead of the heart." "That's a low-level consideration of the material world."ⁱⁱⁱ

Once critical faculties are disarmed, followers can accept the most bizarre and inconsistent behaviors: Gurus preach the unity of all being, while isolating

themselves from all who do not agree with them. They preach austerity and live lavishly. They preach equality and demand deference from their followers, who, following the lead of their idol, manage to feel superior to those deemed less spiritual. Anything the guru does can be viewed as a test of faith and commitment.

Gurus undercut reason as a path to understanding. When they do allow discursive inquiry, they often place the highest value on paradox. Paradox easily lends itself to mental manipulation. No matter what position you take, you are always shown to be missing the point; the point being that the guru knows something you do not. Paradox is usually accomplished by shifting levels of abstraction.

In esoteric “spirituality,” this shift is from the realm of individuated existence to the abstract level of an overall unity. For example, when viewing existence as comprised of separate entities, individual people are the locus of suffering. The concept of unity does away with individuals. By combining the different levels and ignoring that they are different, paradoxical statements can be made, such as “There is suffering, yet no one suffers” and “All imperfection is perfect.” By changing the context in this way, almost anything can be made into a paradox, thereby indicating special wisdom. Paradox can also be used to justify any behavior by saying there is a hidden meaning that is part of the paradoxical nature of things, which of course, only the guru adequately understands.^{iv}

With some, it is fashionable to denigrate reason and elevate emotion or intuition in an attempt to transcend the dryness of mechanistic science and linear thought. But using emotion or intuition without reason is as one-sided

and limited as using reason alone. For just as the head without the heart is barren, the heart without the head is rigid or chaotic. Living creatively is the art of combining passion with understanding.

Without reason, one easily becomes a “true believer” who takes on beliefs that generate wanted emotions. Here, when thought is used, it functions to protect these beliefs by building an impregnable, closed system that is impenetrable to logic, experiences that do not fit, and inconsistencies (whether behavioral or mental). Sanity involves the capacity to respond to information, internal and external, in a way that contains the possibility of change. Interfering with this process is one of the most subtle and basic abuses of authority—that is, the denial of, or even assault on, the followers’ basic experiences and discriminatory capacities. This allows a leader to manipulate even highly educated people, especially if their intelligence did not bring them fulfillment.

Reason does not guarantee wisdom. It is, however, a tool for integrating experience, which is necessary for self-trust, without which there can be little wisdom. When critical intelligence is labeled unspiritual, or a hindrance to higher truths, what is left? There is little option but to take the word or worldview of some higher authority.

ⁱ See the chapter “Who Is in Control? The Authoritarian Roots of Addiction” on the inner battle.

ⁱⁱ See the chapter “Oneness, Enlightenment & the Mystical Experience.”

ⁱⁱⁱ The chapter “Guru Ploys” gives other examples of ways of disarming reason.

^{iv} For more on paradox, see “The One-Sidedness of Oneness” in “Oneness....” The last section of “The Power of Abstraction” discusses the nature of the spiritual paradox.