

Spiritual Hedonism

From the chapter “Gurus & Sexual Manipulation” in Part One of *The Guru Papers*
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Cross-fertilization between East and West has produced a strange hybrid—a new breed of guru who combines hedonism with detachment. The rationale takes this form: Detachment from desire is still presented as the key to spiritual progress, but the quickest path to this is said to be not through asceticism, but rather by experiencing all desires. These particular gurus depict what they are doing as modernizing ancient esoteric methodologies (sometimes referred to as “tantric”) that attempted to bring self-realization through ritualistically breaking taboos. In the name of freeing people from their limitations and “hang-ups,” this path is presented as the fastest track for contemporary Westerners to achieve spiritual goals, without undo austerity. The intoxicating message is that “You can have it all”—live out hidden desires and fantasies, experience any pleasure, break taboos around sex and even violence—and be spiritual besides. The assumption is that if one has or cultivates the right attitude (detachment), then “Anything goes.” This seductive, seemingly liberating stance of the you-can-have-it-all gurus has attracted many highly intelligent, experimental people.

Most people’s deepest inhibitions revolve around sexuality, aggression, and violence because it is here that the deepest taboos lie. One guru utilized “workshops” where various expressions of sex, rage, and intimidation were used to break through people’s boundaries. Bones were broken and group, impersonal, and even forced sex occurred. This is indeed a fast track to breaking down personality. By telling people this was a path to liberation, deep taboos could be broken without initial guilt. This brings not only powerful feelings as energy is released, but also the experience of a particular kind of freedom—freedom from repression. Dramatic shifts of identity coupled with intense emotions are easy to interpret as profound breakthroughs. Although breaking down personality in this fashion can seem like a breakthrough, it contains an inherent hidden trap: It is the authority of the guru that gives permission to “act out.” Thus only through accepting the guru’s values and worldview can the hurtful aspects of such actions be ignored and condoned.

Having been stripped of their values, these newly “liberated” people are in a fragile state until new values and a new sense of identity can be integrated. Having “emptied” them, it’s easy for the guru to step in at this crucial moment and put his personal values and ideology at their center. So the followers’ new identity forms around surrender to him, a father figure, the one they now trust above all others—even themselves—because he supposedly liberated them in bestowing this great sense of freedom. This kind of freedom is the real illusion. Here direction and permission from an authority, combined with group pressure, moved many to act out in ways they were not capable of integrating without accepting the guru as the ultimate source of truth. What did not change is the underlying authoritarian personality structure, which was, if anything, reinforced.

Most often those who became involved in such groups could not conceive of themselves as subject to authoritarian manipulation. They saw themselves rather as true spiritual adventurers, unafraid to push against the boundaries of convention. For them, the very fact that they were capable of going beyond social constraints was a sign of liberation. (They were also told this by the guru.) That many discontented and innovative people were unwittingly seduced into submission and conformity (visible only to others) indicates the depth of people’s susceptibility to authoritarian control.

To rebel against one authority (society) by accepting another (a leader who gives permission to rebel) merely shifts allegiance, while giving the illusion of liberation. There are different ways of unleashing the repressed in oneself. Surrendering to a guru who facilitates this is one of them. However, this is very risky. Here these repressed aspects are highly manipulable because their allowability is dependent permission from an authority. The authority then ultimately defines what is permissible. This is how people can come to lie, steal, and even kill for the glory of God, or the guru.

Bringing up repressed desires can be useful in a context that fosters integration. The guru /disciple relationship is not such a context because it does not allow people to integrate their own experiences. Rather a new identity,

that of disciple, is given as the means for integration. An identity that is dependent on the authority of another is not only fragile, but it is not a truly deep inner restructuring. The content may look different, which includes taking on a different worldview and values (the guru's). However, the deepest structures of personality, especially how the person integrates experience and looks for validation, remain not only unchanged, but are often strengthened by this essentially authoritarian relationship.

The contents of a personality (beliefs, values, a worldview), though resistant, change far more easily than the underlying form or context, which in many is unconsciously authoritarian. This is not surprising given that so much of culture is transmitted as a given, not to be questioned, meaning that our heritage, too, is unconsciously authoritarian.

Seemingly dramatic shifts that involve switching quickly from one authoritarian system to another are not that difficult. (Many disillusioned Marxists shifted their utopian hopes to the spiritual world.) Utilizing sex (or violence) to push limits is indeed a quick way to undermine people's identity and move them, but to where? We consider this truly unethical, not only because it fails to take into account how it hurts others, but because the very quickness of it leaves people awash and subject to easy manipulation. This is but another example of the great myth that an external authority can be the source of inner freedom.

Extremes in emotionally disconnected sex also disconnect the desire for closeness with another, especially when intimacy is pejoratively labeled

“attachment.” This makes it easy for the guru to be the central emotional bond. As a result, many disciples gradually give less importance to sex, some even drifting into celibacy. They take this as a sign of their spiritual progress. For after all, they had tried sex to their heart's content and seemed to have outgrown it, evolving into a supposedly more spiritual detachment—precisely as predicted and promised. Not coincidentally, this also increased their faith in the guru's wisdom and made them more available to work harder on whatever agenda the guru prescribed. This answers the riddle of how promoting detached promiscuity eventually turns dedicated hedonists into dedicated workers.

Fostering promiscuity, impersonal sex, and interchangeable sexual partners accomplishes the same agenda as celibacy. It trivializes sexual attraction and undermines coupling. Casual, disconnected, modular sex eventually leaves people satiated, jaded, and often hurt. They become fearful of forming deep relationships, which fits neatly into the guru's need to have disciples detached from everything but him.

Throughout all this sexual manipulation, the underlying authoritarian personality structure not only remains intact and unconscious, but is greatly buttressed. For now it's not just messages implanted in one's mind long ago that impose “shoulds” and internal control; it's a living authority figure who wields the absolute power of active mind control. This includes the power to make people who are being callously manipulated believe they are freer than everyone else.