

SPIRITUAL ADVANCEMENT AND PATHOLOGICAL NARCISSISM

DOES YOUR SPIRITUAL TEACHER REALLY HAVE YOUR BEST INTERESTS AT HEART?

TAKEN FROM *SACRED HEALING: INTEGRATING SPIRITUALITY WITH PSYCHOTHERAPY*

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During the last decade, many prominent spiritual teachers in the U.S. have become sexually involved with their community members. Some teachers have fraudulently used the finances of the community, and many have used their position of power for their own personal gain at the expense of the followers. Many followers have been bewildered over the discrepancy between the heights of spiritual development reached by the teachers and the depths of psychological pathology that have been subsequently revealed. It is important to understand this apparent paradox in development, not only because it has been so rampant in the United States, but also because of its implications in the realm of Sacred Psychotherapy. This problem can best be approached through a blending of Western personality theory with yogic knowledge of the soul.

First, the soul and the personality evolve in different ways. While they do influence each other, they still have some degree of autonomy. This distinction might be more easily understood if we first consider the relationship between the soul and the physical body. First of all, the body is the house or temple of the soul. Certain yogic practices such as physical postures, fasting, and cleansing techniques can be employed to assist with the process of transcending body consciousness. In the case of a spiritual Master, once

having reached a high level of spiritual advancement and having become totally detached from the pains and suffering of the physical body, he or she may elect to take on the illnesses of others, using the body as a sacrificial object for the well-being of others, without accruing additional karma on his or her own behalf. For example, the physical form of a spiritual Master may appear to be in poor health, whereas his spirit glows with the ever-brilliant light of the soul, powerfully untouched. It is common for a Self-realized master to continue healing others, even though his or her own physical body may be very sick from cancer or some other disease. Paramahansa Yogananda could scarcely walk during the latter part of his life, as he took on the karma of many devotees. Similarly, Ramana Maharshi had advanced cancer yet still continued healing others.

The personality holds a similar relationship to the soul, in that the personality, like the physical body, is subject to change, growth, and disorder, while the soul is eternal and belongs to the realm of the changeless, omnipresent Truth.

Intensive spiritual practice awakens the kundalini energy, a subtle dormant force in the base of the spine, which, upon activation, sends a current of energy up the astral spine and thereby activates the various

spiritual centers in the spine (chakras). Great spiritual power typically results. Through dedicated practice, individuals can touch profound states of bliss and develop powers (*siddhis*) for healing, intuition, and manifestation. The presence of these spiritually advanced souls is quite tangible, as one can feel the intensity of their higher vibratory states. Also, profound states of love and peace are common around such individuals. Such highly spiritually advanced individuals have learned to focus upon their soul consciousness and express the rewards that come from intensive and prolonged spiritual practice.

However, attaining realization of higher spiritual awareness does not negate one's personality any more than it negates a physical body. In fact, a real danger appears when the yogi ignores the perfection and refinement of the personality as an aspect of his or her overall spiritual progress. Historically, psychotherapy, as a Western method, was not directly addressed as a part of the larger yoga system as originally conceived by Pantajali, however the Yamas and Niyamas do relate to the need for a well integrated personality. Many yogis believed that it was not necessary to attend to personality issues while developing spiritual power. They mistakenly believed that yogic practice would solve all problems and purify all aspects of the personality.¹

However, it is my experience and observation that this is simply not true. A complicated and socially dangerous situation can and does result when an individual with an underlying personality disorder continues to achieve spiritual power, with the nature of their self-delusion continuing unchecked,

and individuals under these people's influence do get hurt in the process.

It is important at this point to understand the distinction between a personality disorder and a neurotic disorder. An individual who suffers from a neurotic state feels anxiety and conflict. Various aspects of the self oppose each other, and the mind is filled with the turmoil of the cognitive struggle. Forces in the psyche are juxtaposed and inner peace is lost. Guilt, shame, and resentment are common results of such inner conflicts. When this psychic energy cannot be resolved, psychosomatic concerns become generated as the unresolved energy lodges in the physical body. Also, as emotional energy becomes blocked, the body may symbolically express what the conscious mind cannot.

In neurotic processes, repression is the most common defense mechanism. Repression results when personal thoughts and feelings are regarded as "ego-dystonic," (not consistent with one's self concept) or not in harmony with the conscious mind, as when the mind rejects feeling angry at someone, and therefore attempts to repress the angry feeling.² In addition, if thoughts or feelings feel overwhelming to the conscious self because they hold too much pain, might also be repressed.

A personality disorder, on the other hand, results when the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of the individual are "ego-syntonic" and are regarded by the person as perfectly fine. An individual with a personality disorder does not feel anxiety or an internal conflict. Rather, it is more likely that people who have close personal contact with such an individual will feel conflict and upset. The defenses employed in a personality disorder are primitive, such as denial, projection, and splitting. These defenses are considered "primitive" because

they do not solve problems and do not lead to higher levels of functioning, but serve only to protect the ego. The individual with a personality disorder does not possess the internal resources and strength to recognize their own personal problems and take responsibly solve them. They typically blame others.

Pathological narcissism is a personality disorder that has received much attention and consideration in Western psychological circles over the last ten years.² In the case of the narcissistic individual, the wound to the psychological self is so great that overwhelming shame and despair are avoided by rage, denial, and projection. Since internal psychological forces cannot be consciously acknowledged and contained, great “acting-out” occurs, in which impulsive behaviors emerge as internal pressures become too strong to manage. The narcissistic individual feels a heightened sense of importance and entitlement. The self is over-inflated, which is actually a cover-up and reversal of a deeper sense of failure and worthlessness. The narcissistic individual looks to the world to provide a mirror for his or her heightened self-image. Criticism to the narcissist is perceived as an attack, not as an opportunity to learn and mature psychologically from valued information. Furthermore, the narcissist may feel that their life has a special purpose or a sense of mission and any individual who obstructs their plans and programs will be perceived as disloyal and undermining of their work. I regret to observe that this description sounds too much like our new President elect Donald Trump.

The importance of individual development at the level of the personality becomes quite obvious when we consider the result when someone dedicates his/

her life to spiritual development, yet ignores deep-seated narcissistic aspects in their personality. As we have discussed, a highly evolved spiritual Being has great power and typically attracts a following of devotees who wish to learn and evolve spiritually. These followers will go to great measures to spend time with their guru or spiritual teacher. Spiritual communities become a natural outgrowth of this tendency as a way of providing support for aspiring devotees as well as helping to organize and promote the work.

Another common effect among those on the spiritual path is that once they have achieved some degree of spiritual awakening, they tend to want to become teachers. This motivation to teach may come from a genuine desire to help others evolve and transcend the delusion of physical/material reality that brings so much misery and pain to the world, but it can also result from a sense of personal inflation—and both factors can exist at the same time.

The great problem results when an individual rightfully achieves a degree of spiritual development with all the resulting powers or siddhis but has done little work on his or her own personality. That person’s siddhic magnetism quickly draws a following of devotees who want to learn but who can then become caught in the disordered personality’s web of control, confusion, and acting-out. The world does need spiritual teachers, and many such individuals do have valuable contributions to make to individuals and society. Their work is important and they may have a true mission in life to help the evolution of this planet. Unfortunately, once an individual has moved into the role of a spiritual teacher, he or she may be “alone at the top,” since these individuals may have

lost the mirror of their own teachers to help them perceive their shadow material and their devotees are too enamored or afraid to confront misdeeds and misbehavior.

Once they have progressed to the point where they feel “so great,” an over-inflation of the ego results, wherein they will predictably give little or no credence to any constructive criticism that may be offered. Quite typically, their “greatness” is mirrored back by a group of loyal devotees in an inner circle who want to stay in good standing and avoid receiving the wrath of the teacher that might result from some personal disagreement or confrontation. The delusion becomes greater and greater, with no one to hold the teacher accountable.

It must be borne in mind that personal development appears to flourish best within the context of relationship. A relationship serves to provide an individual with a mirror and clarity to perceive the Self. Once the student has lost the teacher, then life must be the mirror, and the dilemma occurs at this point, because the narcissist has great defenses against life’s reflection of personal shadow material. Sometimes it takes a great or highly public personal drama to break through the highly developed defenses that serve to protect the underlying vulnerability in the self. Sadly, public disclosure and sanction may not even touch the true narcissist.

The difficult combination of spiritual advancement and pathological narcissism results in a preoccupation with one’s own position and a serious loss of empathy for others. For example, even though the leader of a community may eventually be confronted by community members with his or her behavior, and accused of acting in inappropriate and irresponsible ways, it is rare that he or she will openly admit to anything and apologize to those individuals to whom he or she caused harm. In this type of case, it is more typical for the resident “guru” or teacher to write a

series of letters and hold community meetings in which his or her feelings and needs are discussed. Personal problems may be cast in the light of a noble battle to overcome temptation, while he or she works to reframe the perspective so that he or she, the resident “guru,” appears to be the victim of undeserved, unmerciful attacks. The pain, confusion, and betrayal of trust of the injured, devoted members are never discussed, because the narcissistic “guru” has such limited ability to empathize with the traumatized devotee.

In addition, such a “guru” has very limited understanding of the powerful transference relationships that develop between his followers and himself and takes little responsibility to manage those situations once they occur. Community members are typically viewed as instruments of God to help the work and are not related to as people, but rather as things that can be used to accomplish a goal and satisfy a spiritual need. Given the nature of spiritual communities and the vulnerability of individuals who leave their homes and families to join them, it is to be expected that individuals will tend to idealize the “guru” as they project their early family patterns onto the leader and hope to receive gratification for early, unfulfilled needs of love and acceptance. These types of individuals, who are very commonly found in spiritual communities, are quite vulnerable and susceptible to manipulation and abuse. They may tend to give away their material things and their sense of self in an attempt to gain love, spiritual blessings, and acceptance, and they often have deep unresolved issues around individuation. The narcissistic leader will eat them up and spit them out, after having digested what they can offer to support the goals of the community and to fulfill the leader’s own personal needs. It is important to note, however, that in healthy spiritual communities, the process of surrendering and relinquishing material possessions can be a profound

aspect of spiritual practice that leads to tremendous growth and awakening of soul consciousness.

It is rare that such a leader can be held accountable by his community. If it is attempted, the overinflated “guru” will distort the facts, deny the truth, and change the rules of the community in order to justify his or her position and actions in order to maintain his or her standing. It is important to note that these teachers feel they are behaving correctly and actually feel justified in their actions, because of the existing over-inflation of self. Such defensive actions often are accepted by the community members, because they must maintain a level of denial in order to maintain their relationship with the teacher. The members’ lack of individuation makes it impossible for them to think clearly and discern finely the full facts of a situation. The members often are unable to maintain “whole object relationships,” in which the “good” and “bad” aspects of the teacher can be openly discussed and integrated. In the end, the integrity of the community becomes sacrificed through this process of splitting and denial.

Finally, the spiritual realities of expanded states of awareness, increased magnetism, profound states of love, and increased power all along with an individual’s need to fill a void serve to create very complicated and potentially dangerous situation. If you are looking for a spiritual teacher, choose wisely. Do some research, realistically assess the situation, don’t ignore red flags that indicate abuse and control. Remember, an aspect of effective living is to take care of yourself. You are the only one who can do it. Surrendering as part of a spiritual path is a complicated process. It can lead to great personal growth if done with wisdom. Learn to listen to your intuition and develop the capacity to

discern the best choice. We all make mistakes. Mostly importantly, learn from them.

Notes

¹ In the last twenty years, the understanding of psychological and personality development has been more fully understood and addressed in the Western Yoga communities. Contemporary yoga teachers like Paramahansa Yogananda and Swami Satchinananda have promoted a more balanced approach to yogic development that appreciates the contributions of western psychology as it relates to mental health and balanced living.

Paramahansa Yogananda’s guru, Swami Sri Yukteswar held a sharp scalpel of intuitive perception to his disciplines with the admonition, “Learn to behave.”

²The reader is referred to Otto Kernberg, *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism* (New York: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1975) and James Masterson, *The Narcissistic and Borderline Disorders* (New York: The Free Press, 1988).