

Beware the Charismatic Guru: Cultic gurus do not liberate their followers but entrap them

By John Snelling

Of course, in following a spiritual path—as in anything in life—one needs information, support, and the guidance of experienced people. We could call those who supply these essentials *teachers*—though perhaps *spiritual friends* is a better term. Traditionally in both East and West such people have lived modestly and often in seclusion, avoiding the public gaze. Some, however, on account of their very rare gifts and achievements, attained fame and sizeable followings. The Buddha is an example from the distant past, Sri Ramana Maharshi from more recent times.

No one would deny that the spiritual care of others is the gravest responsibility with which a person can be invested. Granted this, we have a right—a duty even—to ask how those responsibilities are being discharged today.



Anyone monitoring developments in the modern Western spiritual supermarket—including its Buddhist counters—must have cause for concern at the activities of some modern teachers, whom we might call *charismatic gurus* (or just *gurus*, for short), to distinguish them from authentic spiritual teachers or spiritual friends. These people often, though not invariably, succeed in attracting sizeable followings. A few enjoy mass followings. Not merely is the behavior of some inconsistent with what has been traditionally thought proper for those setting themselves up as spiritual teachers, who should always be exemplars of what they teach, but their methods often seem aimed more at subtly entrapping rather than liberating their students.

Many Westerners who turn to the new religions—Buddhism, Hinduism, New Age cults, etc.—are of course very vulnerable. The mainstream Western religious traditions, long estranged from the wellsprings of true inspiration, have signally failed to provide them with satisfactory spiritual support and guidance. It has moreover been persuasively argued by the American commentator Ken Wilber

(in his book *Up from Eden*) that contemporary society does not provide the conditions necessary for proper psychological and spiritual development.

So vulnerable people quite naturally turn to where what is deficient seems to be on offer. In the short-term the guru and the cult may offer support, guidance, and conducive conditions for healing and authentic spiritual development. In the long-term, however, there is sometimes a very high price to pay. There is, in short, usually an initial giving, but later a subtle withholding is brought into play. This of course is the basic mechanism of addiction.

An authentic teacher, like the Buddha himself (see the *Kalama Sutta*), will always seek to put his spiritual charges in touch with their own internal spiritual center—with the Buddha within. While some of our modern gurus purport to be doing this, they often fail to confer the sacred talisman that bestows self-reliance. Perhaps this is not really so surprising. To allow their followers to become free would after all be to risk depleting the willing labor force that creates and runs their centers and publicity machines, and which also provides that intoxicating adulation to which some gurus become so addicted.

Rarely in my experience is a guru a complete fake. He or she is usually a spiritually talented person who has had some kind of profound spiritual experience. Communications and manipulative skills, often of a high order, are usually present too. But somewhere things have gone wrong. We might ask what; and how do such people still manage to gull so many people so successfully?

What the misdirected guru perhaps does most effectively is catch and work with the spiritual projections of his or her followers. At the center of these lies the popular myth that prefigures enlightenment as an ecstatic experience that at once solves all personal problems and inaugurates an individual millennium of limitless personal “growth.” The rub of course is that the devoutly wished-for consummation never arrives—and this gives the guru his or her own special grip. If the devotees haven’t got it, they’ve failed, haven’t tried hard enough, haven’t been worthy. More effort, more sacrifice is required. The prize is always elusive, always receding. However, if doubts arise in the victims of such manipulations they may well find themselves with deep problems. There is always considerable collective pressure and what amounts in some cases to brainwashing in guru cults. These influences serve to reinforce group myths—of the guru’s omniscience, paranormal powers, uniqueness, special mission, etc. Another is of the great sacrifice the guru is making in imparting his or her wisdom—always out of pure compassion. Needless to say, frank discussion of problematic matters is never encouraged.

There is also the standard myth that guru and cult alone offer the True Way. To leave would therefore be to return to the wilderness—the dreadful aloneness and lostness that the devotee sought to escape from in the first place.

To go might also be to lose all that has been invested in guru and group to date (a devotee might have a certain status, perhaps even a role or office). Leaving could also be perceived as a kind of failure—one isn’t up to the demands of the training.

A powerful double bind may also be brought to bear on the doubting disciple. Gurus and cults usually give the ego a rotten press. The devotee has an ego—why else is he or she suffering?—and so feels fundamentally bad. And what are doubts but the old ego bucking against the compassionate guru’s training disciplines? If they are aired, they can be turned back: “That’s your problem. . .” Caught in such a vice, what else can arise but a highly disabling internal conflict.

Inevitably a high degree of mystification is maintained in guru cults. In the case of the newly transmitted Eastern religions, all the oriental trappings like robes, rituals, and elaborate religious names can of course have a valid place. But on the other hand, they can also serve to precipitate the devotee into a colorful and exotic but essentially alien world whose values and conventions are far from clear. In extreme circumstances, rationality and discrimination may be suspended—and then anything goes. One has in modern times seen the bizarre contortions to which some devotees have had to resort in order to explain away the glaringly obvious faults and failings of their beloved gurus. In desperation, the transrational Zen or “Crazy Wisdom” models may be invoked by way of explanation—the more bizarre the behavior, the more it betokens the presence of enlightenment, the ways of which as we all know are utterly incomprehensible to the unenlightened.

So, denied access to self-reliance, inwardly divided, mystified, the doubting disciple hasn't the resources to stand up to the intimidating certainty of group mythology and group pressure. There is no possibility of realistic evaluation, common sense has flown out of the window, there is no center to hold. If the decision is made in desperation to leave, the devotee will often return, duly contrite.

Another invaluable asset of the successful guru is confidence—and this particularly impresses the vulnerable devotee, who feels signally unsure. For the guru, however, constant exposure to the sight of wide-eyed and wondering devotees will itself strengthen his or her confidence further. The process will then shuttle back and forth, reinforcing the guru at every stage. Being on the receiving end of such powerful reinforcement can induce a kind of bliss-state in the guru. This is so intoxicating that it seems to confirm the guru's sense of special spiritual destiny. I have observed gurus manifestly unable to stop talking during formal teaching situations; I have seen them emerge from them lit up and energized. Clearly being up there in front, dispensing wisdom to receptive devotees, is a very big buzz.

The \$64,000 question of course is whether the charismatic guru is really operating selflessly in the transpersonal mode (from the Buddha Mind, etc.) or whether the psychospiritual energy charging the situation is inflating his or her own ego—in which case he or she is indeed possessed or demoniac in the classical sense—I would suspect in many instances the latter to be the case—to a greater or lesser degree. If so, then wisdom and compassion are not in control but dark primordial forces, which in their most extreme collective manifestations can lead to truly terrible results.

The charismatic guru of the kind we have been discussing here is very much the product of our times—of modern communications media, mass society, wealth, and psychospiritual needs. He or she also represents the apogee of the alternative religious career structure and can, if successful, achieve the status of a kind of superstar or great dictator—with concomitant rewards—financial ones certainly, but perhaps also that more alluring commodity, power.

The purpose of this article is not to induce general cynicism and disillusionment. Authentic spiritual friends are certainly available today, though, as always, not in large supply. They also tend to keep a low profile, not seeking publicity or actively recruiting.

Moreover, in the spiritual life, one has always got to take risks and experiment. The way is never smooth, easy, or clear cut. One has to learn from it all, even from misdirected gurus, if only negative lessons.

But in the last analysis, Buddhism, like any authentic spiritual way, is about realism and facing things as they are. There is no place here for ostrich strategies, however pious. We dearly need therefore to look squarely at what is happening today, at the dark side as well as the light. For, contrary to what

many naively believe, the spiritual world is not simply good. It has its shadow too, and a large one. As C. G. Jung has pointed out, the greater the light, the greater the shadow. Without losing sight of the good, we should not be afraid to investigate that shadow. If we shrink from doing so, however, we will in all likelihood become its victims.

In my own life I have twice had the chastening experience of having to try to “talk down” people who had fallen victim to the guru syndrome. What was clear on both occasions was that one was not dealing with an ordinary human with whom one could dialogue and debate. There was a deadness in the eyes, an unwillingness to listen, disquieting signs of the presence of the power complex (incipient coldness, cruelty, and rage). Blinded by their own light, they were unwilling and unable to face the reality of their own very considerable—and havoc-wreaking—shadows.

If, on the other hand, we are not intimidated and do bravely face up to the reality of both light and shadow in the spiritual life, then we might possibly succeed in steering our proverbial rafts across the tricky currents and reefs to the farther shore. To do this kind of work (and indeed for the whole of the spiritual life) we need self-reliance—which means a basic faith in the heart, our own heart. Of course there will always be seepage from the ego, but with care and alertness we can learn to anticipate its wiles. We should always be open to guidance too, and ready to accept feedback. But we should never lose sight of the fact that, however difficult the going may be at times, the living of the spiritual life is ultimately our own responsibility. It should never be abdicated to another, however venerable.

John Snelling (1943–1992) was a Buddhist editor and the author of *The Buddhist Handbook* (1987) and other works.

Adapted from "Charismatic Modern Gurus" by John Snelling. Buddhist Publishing Group (@buddhism_now).

Image: Gallery Stock