

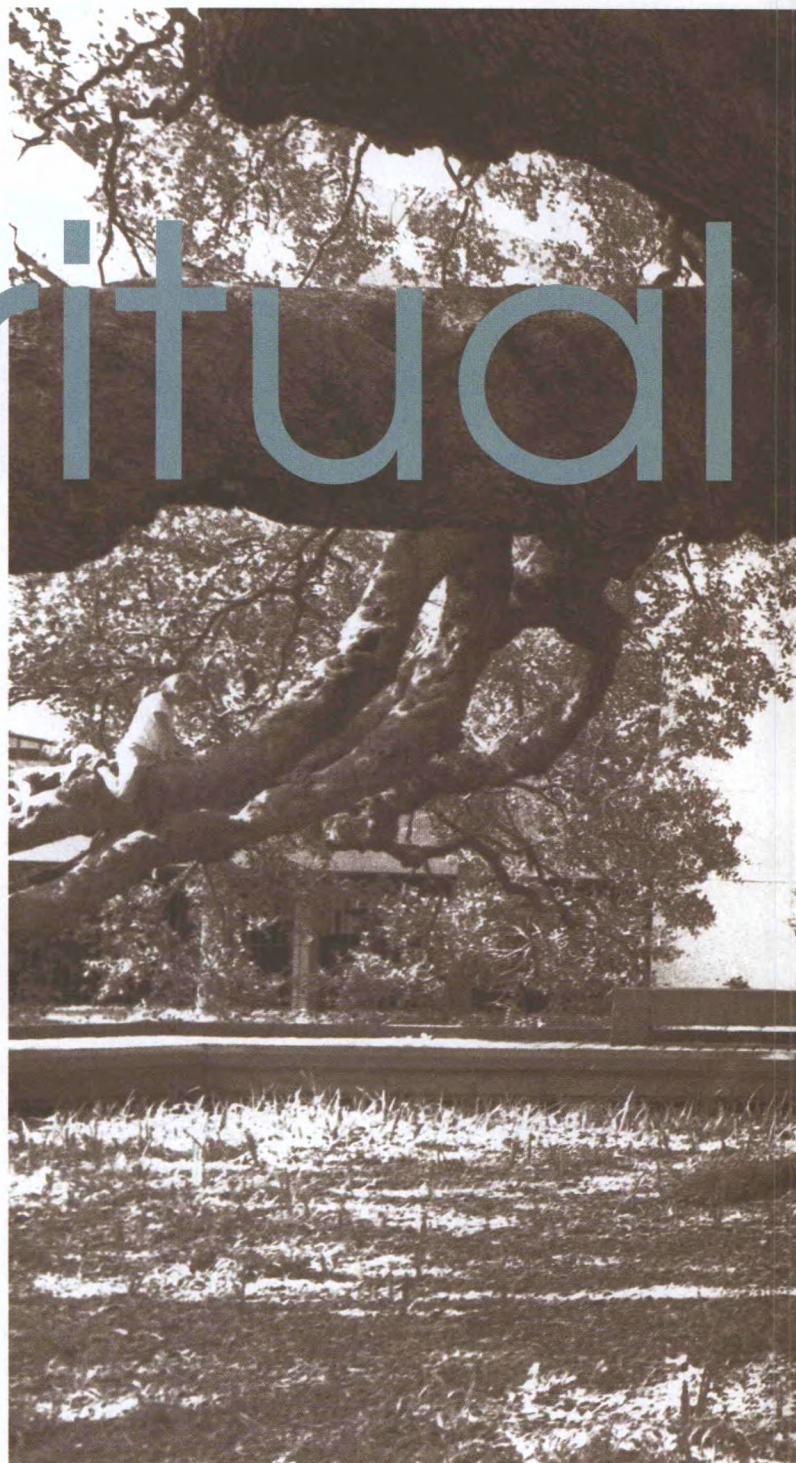
spiritual

authority, genuine and counterfeit

In the present age of cultural upheaval, declining morality, family instability, and global chaos, the world's greatest spiritual masters may be among humanity's most precious resource. But how does genuine spiritual authority operate?

JOHN WELWOOD tells.

great teachers manifest in a wide range of different ways. Some are saintly and pure, others are wild and provocative, and still others are so completely ordinary that they would barely stand out in a crowd. It is impossible to set up an ideal model for what a true spiritual teacher should look like, any more than we could elevate one style of therapy as the model that all others should follow. Carl Rogers, Fritz Perls, and Milton Erickson, for instance, achieved thera-



peutic results in strikingly different ways. Each had a different personality type, style of working, and probably a different type of client with whom he might be most effective. Spiritual teachers also come in many different forms and guises, and it is fruitless to try to spell out exactly how a good guru will behave.

Instead we need a more subtle analysis that looks at what goes on between teacher and student. Two questions are particularly important here: How does spiritual authority operate in the relationship between teacher and student? And what is the source from which a teacher derives that authority?



Spiritual authority is, in part, interrelational; that is, a given teacher has such authority only for those who respond to his or her presence and teachings. A disciple – literally, a “learner” – is one who recognizes that he or she has something important to learn from this particular teacher. Often the choice of a teacher is as unpredictable and mysterious as the attraction to a potential lover. You sense that you have something essential to learn here, something that no one else has ever imparted to you before. And this recognition is what allows the teacher to take on a certain authority for you.

Many people today question the need for spiritual teachers at all, claiming, in the spirit of democracy, that everyone should be his or her own master. Many traditions do in fact assert that the true teacher is found only within. Yet in the early stages of one’s development one does not know how to find or listen to the inner master, or to distinguish genuine inner guidance from more superficial wishes and preferences. Just as one would turn to an acknowledged master in any field one wanted to pursue in depth, so a person who seeks to overcome the limitations of egocentricity will naturally be drawn to someone who has

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actually mastered that work. The role of effective teachers is to instruct, encourage, and correct the student, as well as to provide an example of what is possible. Effective teachers also try to see what individual students most need at each step of their development, rather than trying to fit the student into a pre-programmed agenda.

relative authority

Thus spiritual teachers derive a certain *relative authority* through the actual help they offer their students. This is not unlike the authority that clients grant therapists in their work together. Although I may feel uneasy with the authority clients grant me as a therapist, I am willing to accept it, especially in the early stages of the work. I understand that clients can more readily enter into the process of shedding old patterns if they grant me the authority to guide them. Beyond the conventional authority granted by professional training and certification, or by transference idealizations, the real source of my authority is my focus on clients' well-being and my capacity to help them find a deeper relationship with themselves. Granting me this authority can be a step toward recognizing their own authority – that they are indeed the “authors” of their own experience, rather than passive victims of circumstance. In a parallel, though far more profound way, a genuine spiritual master's presence may serve as a mirror that reflects back to students qualities of their awakened being: openness, generosity, discernment, humor, gentleness, acceptance, compassion, straightforwardness, strength, and courage.

absolute authority

Beyond the relative authority that teachers assume through the help they give their students, true masters also have access to an absolute, unconditional source of authority – awakened being. Since this is a universal source of wisdom that is available to everyone, the genuine spiritual teacher is more than willing to help others find it themselves, if they are ready.

The genuine teacher is one who has realized the essential nature of human consciousness, usually through practicing a self-knowledge discipline such as meditation for many years. In contrast to false teachers, who often create a condition of dependency in the student by claiming special access to truth, authentic teachers delight in sharing the source of their own realization with the student. This often involves giving students an awareness practice, along with instructions that help them directly recognize their own nature. This kind of guidance sharpens students' perceptions so they can better discern whether the teacher's words are true. Without a practice or method that gives them direct knowledge of what is true, students are totally dependent on the teacher to define their reality for them.

The more the students' discrimination and discernment grow, the more they can recognize and appreciate the teacher's

mastery, just as when we study and practice any art, we come to recognize the skill of an accomplished master much more than we could have before. When the teaching leads to a deeper connection to one's own being, this appreciation often grows into natural feelings of love, respect, and devotion.

Such devotion may look like slavishness to the secular eye. Yet true devotion does not aggrandize the teacher or debase the student. Rather, it is a way of recognizing and honoring wisdom, awareness, and truth as higher realities than the egoic realm of confusion, ignorance, and self-deception. Devotion is a sign of a shift in allegiance – away from the petty tyrant of egocentricity toward the call of our larger being, whose wisdom the teacher embodies in fully developed form. Yet devotion can have its own kind of dangers, especially in our culture, and can lead to certain pitfalls on the path unless it is grounded in an awareness practice that cuts through self-deception and sharpens the student's discernment.

surrender and submission

To appreciate the potential value of commitment to a spiritual teacher and teaching, it is essential to distinguish between mindful surrender, which is an opening to a deeper dimension of truth, and mindless submission, which is a deadening flight from freedom. The notion of surrender is widely misunderstood in our culture. It often conjures up images of “come out with your hands up” – waving a white flag, admitting defeat, being humiliated. For many people today, the idea of surrender implies giving up one's intelligence or individuality and adopting a weak, dependent, submissive, “one-down” position. True surrender, however, is never an enslavement, but rather a step toward the discovery of real power. It is the act of yielding to a larger intelligence, without trying to control the outcome.

True surrender is not blind. It requires real discrimination – the capacity to recognize the necessity of completely opening oneself and letting go. Surrender does not have a finite object; one does not give oneself to something limited and bounded. If one does, then it is most likely submission – to the teacher's personality or the cause.

Submission is a handing over of power to a person one idealizes based on the hope of gaining something in return. One seeks approval from an idealized other in order to feel good about oneself. This is a symptom of weakness rather than strength – “I give myself to my guru because he is so great and I am so small.” The more one depends on another for validation, the more one is likely to act in ways that compromise one's integrity. And the more one's integrity becomes compromised, the less one trusts oneself, which increases one's dependency on the leader.

Critics of gurus see all involvements with spiritual masters in this light, failing to distinguish between submission as a developmentally *regressive* retreat from maturity, and genuine

surrender, which is a *progressive* step beyond egocentricity toward a fuller connection with being. They fail to distinguish between the giving of surrender, which brings increase – of love, intelligence, wisdom – and the giving of submission, which results in decrease and loss.

With a genuine spiritual master, surrendering means presenting oneself in a completely honest, naked way, without trying to hold any thing back or maintain any facade. How rarely we let anyone see us as we are, without hiding behind a mask of some kind. Being in the presence of a true master is a rare opportunity to let down all our pretenses, to unmask and reveal all of what we are, our egocentric failings as well as our strengths. This is quite different from submissively trying to be “good” or “devoted,” to please someone in order to feel worthy.

Submission has a narcissistic quality, in that followers seek to bask in the reflected glory of their leader as a way to inflate their self-importance. The authentic teacher-student relationship leads beyond narcissism by teaching students how to devote themselves to a greater power that lies within yet beyond themselves.

The acid test is not how well the students please the master but how fully they meet and respond to life’s challenges. Through becoming more transparent, and open with their teacher, they learn to approach all people and situations in the same way. Devotion to a spiritual teacher serves a much larger purpose than just creating a beautiful relationship between two human beings. It is a way in which spiritual aspirants can learn to develop devotion to what is greater, more intelligent, and more authoritative – within themselves – than their own ego. The essential surrender is the ego’s yielding to this larger wisdom. In opening to this higher wisdom within, the student becomes more pliable and available to others. In this way, genuine surrender helps one open toward all beings, instead of enslaving one to the parochial perspectives of an in-group.

in search of a genuine master

How then does one recognize a master one can trust? Certainly no single teacher or teaching could be expected to appeal to all people, any more than any single psychotherapist or school of therapy could be effective for all potential clients. The ultimate criterion for judging teachers is whether they guide their students toward a more authentic, transparent quality of human presence and being-in-the-world.

Genuine teachers encourage self-respect as the basis for self-transcendence. And they are willing to reveal the source of their authority and wisdom to their students, so that the student’s path is based on experiential realization rather than on ideology or belief. They also recognize ambiguity and para-

dox, rather than insisting on absolute certitude in the One and Only Truth. They do not give their disciples any privileged status above the uninitiated. They do not manipulate the emotions of their students but appeal to their innate intelligence. Instead of promoting herd behavior, they recognize the importance of solitude and inner inquiry. And their own realization is based not just on dramatic revelations, but on extensive testing and practice.

A teacher’s embodiment of love, truth, and living presence is a much more reliable gauge than whether his or her lifestyle, appearance, or personal quirks fit our image of what a spiritual person should look like. The annals of all spiritual traditions include examples of masters whose behavior and lifestyle challenged the prevailing conventions.

Great teachers also have their share of human foibles. Often they are effective precisely because they are so human, because they are so deeply in touch with the nature of the human sickness in themselves. The Buddhist sage Vimalakirti, to whom many bodhisattvas came for teachings, was always sick in bed, and when asked about this, said, “I am sick because all beings are sick.” If the spiritual path is about transforming our core sickness and neurosis, then we can hardly expect spiritual teachers and communities to manifest in a totally pure, spotless way. Human development being the complex tapestry that it is, islands of unfinished business may remain intact even within a genuine teacher’s stream of spiritual realization. If we expect total perfection from spiritual teachers, this can also lead us astray, as the American Zen teacher Philip Kapleau points out:

“In the West a roshi is expected to [have] flawless conduct ... But this idealistic view can blind one to the merits of a teacher ... A Japanese long experienced in Zen once told me, ‘My roshi does have character flaws, yet of the teachers I have had he is the only one who has taught me real Zen and I am exceedingly grateful to him.’”

Undoubtedly the most important guideline in evaluating a teacher is the effect he or she has upon us. In replying to a question about whether a master should be “a man of self-control who lives a righteous life,” the Vedanta teacher Nisargadatta Maharaj replied: “Such you will find many of – and no use to you. A guru can show the way back home to your Self. What has this to do with the character or temperament of the person he appears to be? ... The only way you can judge is by the change in yourself when you are in his company ... If you understand yourself with more than usual clarity and depth, it means you have met with the right [person].” ❁

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