

The Naked Eye

Plaster Saints

BY MARK MATOUSEK

*Too many of our spiritual leaders
don't live what they teach.
Why do we let them get away with it?*

IT STRIKES ME AS BIZARRE THAT while no sane person would think of hiring a surgeon with twitchy hands or a pilot who'd never left the ground, Americans by the busload turn their spiritual lives over to teachers who claim enlightenment but, on close inspection, are just as cracked as the rest of us.

Let me be clear. By "teacher" I am not referring to the many well-meaning professionals whose work has spiritual overtones, but rather to those half-awakened gurus whose mistakes and abuses are giving a bad name to bona fide masters the world over.

Their numbers are as boggling as their disclaimers. Challenged on lapses of expertise and integrity, they respond with clichés about "separating the messenger from the message," "teaching what you need to learn," and so on. Forgiven by their gullible followers, they admit, even brag about, the size of their egos (one New Age diva actually calls herself a "bitch for God"), hoping that full disclosure of their humanness absolves them of their hypocrisy.

I say it doesn't. I say it's time to shut these profligate prophets down and look for the real thing.

First, of course, we have to tell the truth. We have to admit that in the shadowy realm of spiritual work, where invisible goals and standards abound, many of us have fooled ourselves in a desperate search for faith. We need to acknowledge that while any exposure to spiritual wisdom is no doubt beneficial, the shallowness of the vessel can present severe limitations. Forgetting this, we may often abandon common sense in the face of cant and charisma. An otherwise brilliant friend of mine recently told me in pious tones that her meditation teacher once stuck his tongue in her mouth in order to "illuminate" her issues with men. When I told her she should have

punched out his lights, she wrote me off as ignorant.

This makes me crazy. For those of us trying to keep a clear head on the razor's edge, the amount of self-deceit that goes on in spiritual circles is unnerving. Many intelligent people go positively stupid in their quest for higher consciousness, tolerating behavior from so-called holy folk that they wouldn't accept from a grocery clerk.



Though the cult of hypocrisy is nothing new, it's on the rise in consumer America. "In no sphere of life is jingoism more rampant than in the field of spirituality," writes the Indian master Meher Baba. "The whole world is pining for light and freedom. To meet this recurrent and poignant demand, there always arises a plentiful supply of those who claim to meet it adequately. Most of these claimants are impostors."

These impostors, he continues, may be scoundrels or innocents. "It is very natural for a person to take imagination for reality and to believe that he has realized in his search what he has only imagined," he explains. "This is the origin of the fraudulent saint or spiritual jingo, who walks and talks with his nose in the air and arms akimbo as if he were

somebody very special."

Of course, to be fair, it takes two to tantra. You can't sell anything—even God—without a buyer. The bottom-line question is: Why do we let so many of our gurus get away with being such frauds?

Several reasons come to mind. Lack of experience, standards, tradition, to begin with. Longing for relief from suffering and for authority of any kind to help us along the way. How differently would we choose our teachers in a country like Tibet, for example, where seekers are instructed to test a master for 12 years before becoming a student? In traditional systems, a hierarchy of power exists in which one must prove oneself as apprentice, then teacher, before becoming a master. (Asked recently about Peter Matthiessen's 25-year Zen practice, Maezumi Roshi said, with typical understatement, that his student was "ripening very nicely.") Unlike the charlatans in our midst, who pay no tribute to tradition and claim spontaneous divinity, spiritual authorities in sacred cultures continue to be probed and prodded by disciples to measure the depth of their awakening, and if they fail to live up to their name, they lose their reputations.

Unfortunately for us in the land of infomercials and hype, most beginners don't trust themselves enough to ask tough questions. We make the error of thinking democratically and apply the same relative standards to spiritual teachers as we do to, say, a plumber or other service professional.

The co-opting of spiritual language by secular occupations muddies the water even more. In this swamp of self-improvement, we forget that worldly values don't apply to matters of spirit. Contrary to what many believe, enlightenment isn't a relative term, any more

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than genius is. It's a phenomenon that, while available to all, remains extremely rare. Like genius, it's perceptible and produces unmistakable results in anyone who touches it. This is, put simply, an experience of bottomless love, and the opportunity for individuals accustomed to a world of personality to bypass ego and step through the door of a master's unalloyed self-realization.

Having no experience of what enlightened love might be, many seekers are offended by what may seem to be reactionary spiritual standards. Having come to the quest for God from a therapeutic background, they apply the same expectations to masters as they might to their psychiatrists. This ignorance of what enlightenment is blinds us to the crucial difference between these two endeavors: For while analysis does not encourage the client to model himself after the therapist, the essence of spiritual transmission derives from the act of mirroring the perfection of the master in order to locate it within oneself.

There's a trickle-down effect to this misunderstanding. Not long ago, a friend of mine involved in a newfangled church told me breezily about the "missionary work" she was doing in the world. I wanted to ask what possible business someone as troubled as she was had in missionarying to anyone. In any tradition worth its salt, she would have been laughed out of the room; in New York, she got dates leading workshops.

This raises the question of what really happens when spirituality becomes a career move. Do people hawking grace lose credibility through self-promotion and financial profit? Or do they, in fact, legitimize themselves in consumers' eyes as successful professionals? While Buddhist teachers accept no kudos (financial or otherwise) for their services—believing that the dharma is too precious to be sold—and masters across the board have tended to remain beggars to protect their purity of motive and humility, we continue to ignore the fact that capitalizing on God is a dangerous, questionable practice.

We forget, too, that true teachers ask their students for nothing. A sacred relationship is defined by the act of giving without condition in the service of love.

Deprived of this ideal as it is lived out by saints and sages, we rob ourselves of models of selflessness, catalysts for blossoming beyond ourselves toward liberation.

If my analysis seems extreme, it's meant to be. The terms of spiritual life are inherently extreme, in their promise and their price. Alarmed by Westerners' tendency to downplay this sobering fact, His Holiness the Dalai Lama recently warned an audience in Arizona to ask "scrupulous and continuous" questions about their relationships with their

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teachers. Choosing a path and master is the most important thing a human being does in a lifetime. While we may be required to act like children before the Mystery, we are asked as well to employ our full powers of adult discrimination in the precious matter of spiritual alliance.

It's no wonder that so many of us are privately cynical about the spiritual marketplace. Seeking purity, we find too many hypocrites. Scrutinizing our teachers, we learn too soon that they don't walk the talk. In our hearts, we know that in spite of the stories we tell ourselves about the need for compromise, when it comes to those who would lead us from darkness, good intentions are not enough. The road to hell is paved with them.

Contributing editor Mark Matousek is the author of *Dialogues with a Modern Mystic* (with Andrew Harvey) and a forthcoming memoir, *Sex, Death, Enlightenment*.

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