

Infinite Guru

Mike King, April 2012

Introduction

The job of the guru is to usher in the infinite in the pupil. For the majority of Westerners, inculcated in materialist scientism, no amount of explanation of this idea will make any sense. Worse still, the very idea of a guru is not just foreign to many, but offensive. It challenges the very notion of the Western self-reliant individualist, even if that person *is* seeking in some sense what the guru purports to offer. But it is just this self-reliant individualist with a hunger for the infinite – however vaguely felt, and in whatever language it is couched – that I am addressing here.

In this essay I start with an initial definition of what a guru does, based on all the sources I know, and then move to an overview of how the guru operates in the original setting for that term: India. I then look briefly at the counterpart to the guru in different cultures, including Thoth's teachings to his son Tat on Mount Sinai in ancient Egypt, the spiritual search of Pythagoras and Plotinus in the Greek and Roman periods, the role of the spiritual advisor in the Catholic monastic system, the Japanese Zen master, and the shaman and initiate as revealed in contemporary writings by Native Americans. With this larger picture of the spiritual teacher I then look at how the guru system from the East travelled – rather badly, it has to be admitted – to the West. What were the many obstacles to the transplanting of that tradition?

Having laid this groundwork I then look briefly at the career of Andrew Cohen as a teacher of enlightenment, considering his unique contribution to the field, and also the difficulties encountered in this specific case of a Westerner in a broadly Eastern enlightenment tradition.

What does the Guru do?

One can find many statements in the world's literature on enlightenment like the one I opened with: "The job of the guru is to usher in the infinite in the pupil." The exact terms used would vary, but the chances are that the statement would be immediately hedged around with caveats explaining that the issue is far more subtle than can be conveyed in a single sentence. The Mahayana Buddhist tradition is renowned for going much further than this and making contradiction its starting point, but I will avoid that stylistic method in teasing out what I think a guru does. In the first instance the term "infinite" has a specialist meaning in the field of enlightenment, as do so many others terms. Placing the term "infinite" alongside other common descriptors such as eternal, imperishable, stainless, spotless, unborn, unmanifest, and so on, help locate its meaning away from anything claimed by secular discourses such as mathematics. All these terms should suggest something unbounded, a quality that the enlightened person embodies, and, when engaged with totally, transforms the individual. Such a state is called variously: union (or union with "God"), enlightenment, liberation, *moksha*, nirvana, or self-realization, depending on tradition and how the West has translated its terminology. So far so very difficult. But when we

say that the guru ushers in this state in the individual we come up against two more problems that are deeply linked: the methods used seem to vary enormously, and, in some systems at least, there is the idea that the pupil already has what is to be ushered in.

The guru may give less or more weight to the insight that the pupil already is what they desperately long to be. But what seems to be universal in the practice of the guru is the importance placed on *contact*. While all apprenticeships involve pupils at work under the instruction of the master, the guru-disciple relationship is unique in that the mere presence of the guru, quite possibly sitting still in silence, is regarded as an essential part of the learning process. In India this is called *darshan*, simply being in the presence of the guru. What takes place is a kind of resonance: the guru's own centre of gravity in the infinite and eternal awakes the realization of that in the pupil. Of course a great deal of preparatory work is also generally involved, as is the possible presentation of a quite complex explanatory framework, whether from tradition, or constructed *de novo* by the guru.

The Guru System in India and the Far East

In Shankara's *Crest-Jewel of Discrimination* he says: "Only through God's grace may we obtain those three rarest advantages – human birth, the longing for liberation, and discipleship to an illumined teacher." Leaving aside the probable mistranslation of "God" it is clear that the "illumined teacher" is crucial, not only to Shankara, but to his entire culture. For India the guru – the illumined teacher – has always been a revered part of religious life, and seekers would travel far to find one. India had probably devoted more effort than any other region of the world to understanding what passes between guru and disciple, and Sanskrit is reputed to be the best-equipped language in the world for embodying that understanding. All that is mostly inaccessible to Westerners now, so I will start by considering some figures that are familiar to us.

The Buddha is not a historical figure in the normal sense, but the material comprising the *Pali Canon* gives us perhaps the best picture of who he might have been, a man starting out with the name Siddhartha. In it he tells us of how he had five gurus, each one acknowledging at a certain point that he had learned all they could teach, and that it was time to move on to a more advanced guru. The historical nature of this can never be verified, but the principle is interesting: the guru expects the pupil to learn what they can and then move on. It implies a modesty on the part of the guru, and also that even if the guru is enlightened, they may not fully engender it in the pupil. In this case Siddhartha had to make the final breakthrough on his own.

Krishna is a figure in Indian religion who has even less of a historical basis than the Buddha (but that is true for most Indian figures prior to the arrival of Western-style record-keeping). What the case of Krishna demonstrates – as recounted to us in the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavad-Gita* – is a guru-disciple relationship with all the classical features. In particular Arjuna is a typical student who just doesn't get it, at least not to start with. The *Bhagavad-Gita* is unique in that Krishna, as guru to his brother-in-law Arjuna, effectively recapitulates all the known spiritual paths of the day, in an effort to usher in that life-changing spiritual awakening. But Arjuna is an exceptionally recalcitrant pupil, so Krishna turns from one method to another, eventually performing what appears to be a miracle: some supreme effort on behalf of the guru that finally breaks down the defenses of the student. This takes place in the

famous chapter eleven where Arjuna asks Krishna to reveal his own supreme being to him. What follows has to be understood as allegorical, not literal. Those who have experienced something like this will recognize that behind the vivid imagery of cosmic fantastical richness the guru can indeed appear to the student as an embodiment of the infinite. Arjuna is finally overwhelmed by this vision of Krishna's interiority: infinite, unbounded, and containing within it all of existence. But the essential transaction is not that the guru gives this to the pupil, but that through some kind of synergy the pupil knows it for the first time in themselves.

It is impossible in a short introduction to convey the full significance of the *Gita* for the guru-disciple relationship. Like the Bible it is loaded with thousands of years of interpretation and punditry. My own method of spiritual archaeology – a digging out of what is valuable from under mountains of commentary, mis-translation and cultural dislocation – is to come to such canonical texts last, starting instead with gurus I have actually known.

The Japanese Zen master is another archetypal guru-figure, and it is possible that the populist adoption in the West of this cultural archetype has done much to skew Western perceptions of the guru system. One only has to look at the *Kill Bill* films to see this, for example. Alternatively Master Yoda – perhaps modeled on Kurosawa's *Dersu Uzala* – becomes the archetype of the enigmatic and inscrutable Eastern sage. I have of course been using the terms "Master," "sage," and "guru" rather interchangeably here. These English words are translations of terms that have rather different cultural settings in the first instance: "Master" in Japanese Zen Buddhism, "sage" in Chinese Taoism, and "guru" in Indian Hinduism. There are many cultural nuances to recognize here, including the inclination that I have yielded to of writing "Master" with a capital "M." As far as I am concerned these terms all denote teachers of enlightenment, but I am also conscious that the cultural setting changes the way the teacher operates. There is no doubt of course that the Zen Master is a spiritual teacher, and has a continuity of lineage going back to the Indian guru system, but the cultural location has changed some of the dynamics, which we could sum up in the word *martial*. Zen Buddhism has a more martial flavor than the Advaita Vedanta of Shankara, and its gurus – to our sensibilities at least – have a sterner aspect. The Japanese Zen Master is prepared to hit his disciple with a stick; the Indian Vedanta guru is unlikely to do that.

But so what? All this shows is how easy it would be to get lost in the externals. The moment of realization for the student is unforeseeable, unpredictable, un-shapeable, and may or may not in the end be in the presence of the guru. For Ramakrishna there was an awakening famously triggered by a flight of swans over a lake: he collapsed into what the Zen people called a *satori*. For a Zen disciple the shattering of a water-pot she was carrying shattered the boundaries of self and she gained *moksha*. I am deliberately mixing up the terminology here. When one is overwhelmed by the infinite neither the context nor the guru matter any more.

A more recent and much better documented figure than those discussed before – a proper historical figure – is that of the 19th century Indian sage Ramakrishna, widely acknowledged to be a fine example of the enlightened master or guru. His most famous pupil was Vivekananda, and the accounts of their relationship are illuminating. The most detailed account of Ramakrishna's life, his own spiritual development, and the way he taught his pupils is found in the *Ramakrishna Gospel*, effectively a diary kept by a close disciple Mahendranath Gupta. It's a large volume and not an easy read because one has to immerse oneself in the culture of 19th century India. It is immensely rewarding however, as is the study of the spiritual

autobiography of Irene Tweedie, a more recent account of discipleship to an Indian guru. The most up-to-date account of a master-disciple relationship I know of is that of Michael Wombacher in his account of a retreat with Andrew Cohen. What is interesting in both Tweedie's and Wombacher's account is that the disciple is now a modern Westerner. I mean no disrespect to either of them, but compared to the accounts in the classical literature there is a qualitative change in the way that the disciple appears to be more self-absorbed. I wouldn't want to use the word narcissistic, as this is too condemnatory. Indeed, it may be misguided to think along those lines altogether. What has happened though cannot be doubted: the growing emphasis placed on the individual in Western culture – a process begun in the Romantic period – has changed the nature of the spiritual seeker. The accounts of Tweedie and Wombacher are by recognizably contemporary figures, with recognizably contemporary preoccupations, compared to the accounts of Arjuna, Vivekananda, and countless others in the pre-modern literature. However confused Arjuna or Vivekananda, or a Zen pupil may become in the classical literature, there is a simple earnestness in their approach that has now largely gone.

One of the characteristics of the guru-disciple relationship is the potential for a lineage to emerge. If the pupil of a guru goes on to become a guru in his or her own right they in turn will have disciples, and so on. In Tibetan Buddhism there is a famous lineage that runs through the gurus Tilopa, Naropa, Marpa, and Milarepa, the latter being known to the West through the *The Songs of Milarepa* (a well-known edition of this work was the favorite reading of the Romanian-born sculptor Brancusi for example). The discipleship of Milarepa to Marpa is a story of a young man who brings harm to others, feels great remorse, and then submits himself to the harsh tutelage of a Buddhist Master. It was only Marpa's wife we gather who showed any kindness to Milarepa in the pursuit of his asceticism, but Marpa's discipline bore fruit after twelve years and Milarepa became enlightened.

A more contemporary set of lineages worth studying are two that happen to start in India and end in America: the sequence of Nisargadatta Maharaj, Ramesh Balsakar and Wayne Liquidman; and the sequence of Ramana Maharshi, Punjabi and Andrew Cohen. Now, within the Cohen circles I have detected a certain antipathy towards Ramesh Balsakar, based I think on his insistence that "there is no doer." It is not appropriate here to go into the details of why one lineage should disagree with another, but it is a hugely obvious fact of the spiritual life in general and the discourse around enlightenment in particular that agreement can be hard to come by.

Western Counterparts to the Guru

The figure of the guru is doubly exotic for contemporary Western culture: firstly because it is an Eastern term, and secondly because the very idea of a spiritual teacher has been lost to the West. But a broad reading of the world's spiritual-religious literature, including much of what is labeled as "philosophy" in the West, tells a different story: the guru has always been with us. It is of course a matter of interpretation: the figures I will now introduce are known to us under other categories and some have become partly or totally mythologized. I am going to suggest that the following can be understood as gurus: Hermes Trismegistus (Thoth), Pythagoras, Socrates, Plotinus, Jesus, the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Thomas Traherne, and Jean-Pierre De Caussade. I could have chosen dozens more examples, but this admittedly arbitrary set illustrates well how the role of guru is lost to the West

under a wealth of other categories. This is partly of course because a spiritual teacher may also do other things in their life – they may have a day job if you like. But mostly such figures are lost to us as gurus because we don't accept the category of guru in the first place.

The Egyptian spiritual teacher Hermes Trismegistus – which is the name given by the ancient Greeks to the Egyptian prophet and scribe Thoth – taught his son Tat enlightenment on Mount Sinai, in a beautifully described moment of spiritual transmission. I place this as possibly the oldest such account in the West, despite the insistence by many scholars that the works attributed to Hermes Trismegistus were written in the 2nd or 3rd century AD. I am inclined to believe another tradition which puts Thoth at more like 10,000 BC. Either way the passages in Libellus XIII of the Corpus Hermeticum, where Thoth becomes guru to his son Tat, are reminiscent of many other descriptions of the moment when the guru ushers in the infinite in the pupil. They are standing on Mount Sinai in Egypt, and Thoth has decided that it is time for his son to experience “rebirth” – to clothe himself with the body of eternity. He explains that he is the “ministrant” of this rebirth into the immortal body, but at the same time that this thing cannot be taught. Tat, in turn, keeps saying that he is bewildered, or worse – as his father keeps attempting to explain the inexplicable – that he is going mad. If one lays this dialogue next to the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna we see the same dynamics being played out, despite the vast cultural differences. Thoth keeps insisting, as gurus always do, that the goal *is* attainable, but at the same time he cannot explain it. Tat keeps protesting that what is being taught is incomprehensible. But the description by Thoth of that which is to be found is universal in the teachings of enlightenment. His son is to look for:

That which is not sullied by matter, my son, nor limited by boundaries, that which has no color and no shape, that which is without integument (covering), and is luminous, that which is apprehended by itself alone, that which is changeless and unalterable, that which is good.

Thoth's insistence – and perhaps the immensity of the desert and its luminous air – coupled with Tat's eventual silent meditation brings about the transformation within the being of Tat. The young man discovers a new “body” composed of light; it is non-material, the One that encompasses the All. He is overwhelmed by it. The guru has successfully ushered in the infinite in the pupil, though of course that is always a poor description of the reality of the situation. Many teachers would insist that Tat was never without the infinite.

Both Pythagoras and Plotinus in the ancient Greek and Roman periods respectively undertook lengthy travels of spiritual seeking, learning from many gurus along the way and eventually becoming spiritual teachers in their own right. It is more controversial to suggest that Socrates was also a guru, partly because we know nothing about his period as a seeker, or about any teacher he may have had, and partly because one has to dig Socrates the guru out from underneath Plato the philosopher. I believe it is something of a tragedy that these three – and other ancient Greek figures – are lost to the Western tradition as “philosophers.” For now I'll just introduce the specific contribution that each one makes to our understanding of the guru and the guru-disciple relationship.

It has been suggested that Pythagoras should be the true avatar of the West, and I agree, for this reason: he pursued with equal vigor the spiritual life, art and science, making him, I believe the perfect role-model for contemporary spiritual

culture. His was clearly an engaged spirituality. He also founded perhaps the first spiritual community known to the West, or to use the Eastern term, the first sangha that we know anything about.

Socrates as a guru is a wonderful example of the spiritual teacher who insists that “knowledge” as such is worthless. More than that he was famous as a “gadfly” who stung those seeking the truth from him: he was a continuous provocation to the citizens of Athens, so much so of course that they sentenced him to death in the end. Comparisons with the Buddha are useful in the case of Socrates: both men seemed to have had the knack of short-circuiting the rational mind of the initiate, leaving them reeling; half-ecstatic, and half bewildered, like Tat.

Plotinus is the most rounded of the three figures in terms of what we know about him, and because he authored a remarkable text called *The Enneads*. It is rare for a guru to write, hence the value of Plotinus’ legacy. Of course, if you study *The Enneads* at any Western university, you will study it as mere “philosophy.” But Plotinus was a guru in the proper sense of the term, and a sangha formed around him as it did around Pythagoras. The account by one of his chief disciples, Porphyry, paints a picture of regular teachings by Plotinus to a dedicated group of followers, and also of Plotinus as a wise director of the small community.

If Pythagoras, Socrates and Plotinus are gurus lost to the West as “philosophers” then Jesus is a guru lost to the West as – well, Jesus. He is in a category of his own, thanks to two millennia of Christianity, but any study of the *Gospel of Thomas* paints him in a different light. Thomas Jefferson, one of the acknowledged founding fathers of America, understood Jesus as a spiritual teacher and to that end took a razor to the New Testament to cut out only the passages that supported his understanding of Jesus as a non-supernatural moral teacher. This “Jefferson Bible,” as it is known, doesn’t quite restore Jesus to the status of guru – because that category was not really known to Jefferson – but it does go some way in that direction. But people, it seems, have an infinite capacity for mythologizing what was flesh and blood; for sanitizing; for editing out the difficult bits; and for making anodyne what is dizzyingly provocative in the guru.

It is the same with the Buddha. I used to hang out with the Friends of the Western Buddhist order in London, and mentioned one evening that I also hung out at the England’s Lane centre of Andrew Cohen. The immediate response was a remark to the effect that they didn’t like people who “set themselves up” as a spiritual teacher. “So what do you think the Buddha did?” I asked. “Oh, that’s different. He was the *Buddha*,” came the response. This is a good example of where the myth clouds the person. One only has to consult the *Pali Canon* to find in fact that the “The Buddha” was just another seeker who happened to get enlightened, and then “set himself up” in the most blatant terms as a spiritual teacher. It is actually quite a shocking and rather sobering story: on returning to his former fellow-seekers, his first words to them – and the very first words he spoke as a spiritual teacher – were: “Do not call me friend; do not call me by my name. I am the Tathagata.” The word “Tathagata” is actually pretty obscure, but in the context it meant “enlightened one.” His message to them was clear however: he was the Master, and they were not to consider themselves his equal.

In the Christian world it was the Church and the Bible that dominated all attempts at spiritual understanding and teaching. However the gurus of Christendom did exist: as *mystics*. Generally speaking the mystics *knew*, while the priests and the Church hierarchy were mostly just officiates of the religion, and probably had only modest spiritual gifts or insight. A rare exception was Meister Eckhart who seemed to

manage both aspects of the religious life. However, like many other Christian mystics, his thought was treated with suspicion and he was charged with heresy. Eckhart has been compared with Shankara, and I think it quite legitimate to regard him and most of the Christian mystics as enlightened, even though the nearest equivalent to “enlightened” in their culture was the term “union with God.”

Other Christian mystics to include alongside Eckhart are: Teresa of Avila, St John of the Cross, Erigena, Richard Rolle, Julian of Norwich and Hildegard of Bingen. It was considered a normal part of education to “read the mystics” in the late 19th and early 20th century, but that tradition faded after WW1, and so the category of “mystic” became rather degraded. Holding to the earlier conception of it however, the category raises an interesting question: how many of the mystics were also teachers? And how does one understand the enlightened one who is not active in teaching? The guru must be both: enlightened and a teacher. To be an enlightened teacher clearly involves some aspect of the personality that lies beyond enlightenment: it requires a certain “in-your-faceness,” a certain boldness.

Jean-Pierre De Caussade had the role of the spiritual director in the Catholic monastic system, and his letters of instruction to the nuns under his care show just how thoughtful a spiritual teacher he was. Alan Watts found much in his thought that resonates with the East, in particular Zen Buddhism. In turn the much earlier *The Cloud of Unknowing* is a text written by another monastic supervisor to an initiate, while we believe that some of the works of the poet-chaplain Thomas Traherne were written as spiritual guidance, perhaps to his niece. All three clearly have some direct experience of the infinite, and attempt to teach it. What makes them interesting is that in each case the teaching was through writing, and a study of their writings gives us further insight into the guru-disciple relationship in the Western tradition.

Turning to quite a different context: the medicine man or shaman often acts as guru to the initiate, as revealed in contemporary writings by Native Americans. Leonard Crow Dog, a Lakota medicine man, says that during certain ceremonies he can remember his birth: “When I was born I experienced earth joy, universe joy, happiness of the world. I could feel air filling my lungs, on August 18, 1942. I was born spiritually. With the gourd. The medicine man Horn Chips was shaking it.” Horn Chips was a famous medicine man or spiritual teacher in his time. Leonard Crow Dog felt that later on the Great Spirit picked him out from other boys to be a “spiritual man.” He was taught initially by his father and four medicine men from the age of seven onwards, and became a medicine man in his own right at the age of thirteen, often under the guidance of a teacher known as Good Lance. From that time he experienced the “vision quest,” periods of isolation, visions and spiritual learning.

Now it may well be that the spiritual path of the medicine man, or shaman, should be understood as a path of esoteric learning, distinct from the path of enlightenment, but there is something in Crow Dog’s account that suggests that at the heart of his spiritual tradition is also an encounter with the infinite. Other accounts in the Native American literature also suggest this. Either way there are many descriptions of how the initiate is helped along the way by a human teacher. This teacher or guru assists firstly because they in some way embody what the pupil is seeking, and secondly because they open doors to the real teacher, which lies beyond the body and personality of the teacher. In the Native American system the teacher that lies beyond the guru may well be described in animal terms, for example an eagle. Indeed *flight* itself is considered to be the key symbol of shamanism, and might be regarded as the release of self from its bounded condition to the unbounded.

The Guru System in the Contemporary West

While the spiritual teacher may have existed for thousands of years in the Mediterranean cradle of Western civilization, and later found ways of teaching enlightenment using the language of Christianity across the territory of the Roman Empire, the very idea was pretty much dealt a death-blow by the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries. This was partly because of the rise of the individual and ideas of democracy, and partly because religion rather retreated to a cultural ghetto, while radical thought and energy channeled itself into the newly-formed spheres of secular art, science and politics. Hence the discovery of the Eastern traditions in the 19th century, and the import of these religious ideas into the melting pot of new Western ideas reframed the long-forgotten spiritual teacher as the “guru.” Instead of examining and building on Western traditions, which were admittedly long buried as philosophy, the adoption of Eastern systems appeared as an entirely new phenomena. They did not look like anything in Christianity, nor did they look much like the Native American traditions or other nature-religions of the West. I recommend the book *Western Teachers in Eastern Traditions* by Andrew Rawlinson, as perhaps the best survey to date of the many gurus who set up in the West while drawing on Eastern traditions.

Scholar Georg Feuerstein’s work on “crazy wisdom” is a useful introduction to the idea that the Tibetan diaspora brought many Tibetan teachers to the West who succumbed to the hippy revolution of free love and drugs in the 1960s. The Indian guru was known in the West since Vivekananda’s appearance at the end of the 19th century, but the enthusiasm for Hinduism faded and was replaced by a greater interest in Buddhism after WW2. While sober Theravadan traditions took root in the West, so did adaptations of the seemingly more bizarre Tibetan and Zen traditions, all of which had cultural backgrounds still locked into the idea of a long apprenticeship in the spiritual life as well as in other disciplines. The West had largely dispensed with the idea of apprenticeship, and so teachings which emphasized “sudden” enlightenment had a natural appeal. It is not easy to pin down what crazy wisdom teaching is, but it seems to involve a disinclination towards a long training and to convention in general. Crazy wisdom teachers are usually confrontational and often bizarre in their behavior, all designed to “shock” the pupil into enlightenment. In contrast the “path of regular steps” as advocated by, for example, The Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, involves a long training and a graduated progress towards enlightenment.

Gurdjieff is a good example of a guru teaching a largely Eastern system in the West, and is sometimes considered to be a crazy wisdom teacher because of his shock tactics and unconventional behavior. We also have an extensive record of his teachings by various disciples, including P. D. Ouspensky.

The West is more a tradition of texts and the East more a tradition of teachers, and this difference has an impact on how *authority* comes to be invested in spiritual teachers. In mainstream Judaism, Christianity and Islam the religious teacher will always draw on the text of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament or the Koran to legitimize their teachings. The Eastern guru may well draw on texts of their own tradition, but somehow this has less importance than in the West. The teacher in the East teaches more on their own personal authority. So how does this authority arise? It can only arise from the personal experience of the teacher. In an extreme case like Ramana Maharshi we find a spiritual teacher who originally had no exposure at all to India’s sacred texts: he was little more than a schoolboy with a love of football when enlightenment hit him. It was only much later when his disciples brought him the *Bhagavad-Gita* or the *Upanishads* that he was able to say: yes, it is like that.

When the source of authority lies with the spiritual teacher rather than the tradition or text, then a very real problem arises when the guru demands at some level or other a *submission* to themselves as teacher. The West has become extremely hostile to the idea that one person submits to the authority of another. To submit to a church has an historical basis that is not entirely swept away in Western history, but to submit to a lone spiritual teacher seems counter to all our democratic advances *and* church tradition. As we saw, the Buddha demanded it in his very first move as a spiritual teacher.

In the *Pali Canon* there are numerous references to spiritual seekers who heard that there was an enlightened teacher to be found – usually in the forest – and would seek out the man we now know as the Buddha. Over two and a half thousand years of Buddhism make it hard to realize that the seeker then had no idea of the man’s eventual status and reputation. They had to make their own mind up on the evidence in front of them. The paradox here is that the long-dead guru is vouched for by history, but of no use to the seeker who needs a living teacher. The living teacher on the other hand has no history to vouch for him or her. In India the response to this problem seems to go along the lines of: better to choose a teacher who may be flawed, or even possibly a fraud, than to do without. The simple act of submitting to a spiritual teacher will bring its own spiritual development, and, if the teacher proves unworthy, simply move on. It’s not a big deal. But in the West, with its inclination to the absolutist and the dramatic, the issue of choosing a guru *is* a big deal. How does the aspirant assess the potential guru, when, by definition, the aspirant lives in the state of delusion which the guru is there to dispel?

I don’t believe that there is a rational answer to this question. How do you choose a person to fall in love with? Whatever scientists may say, there is no foolproof method. Milarepa chose Marpa, a harsh task-master, and in despair later tried to apprentice himself to a more congenial teacher. It didn’t work. All we can guess is that Marpa *was* the right teacher for Milarepa after all. In my own case I went to India to study yoga with B. K. S. Iyengar, and landed up a follower of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. He was keen that his disciples took every opportunity to learn from all the gurus of the day – though he had pretty clear ideas about who were authentic and who were not. This encouraged me to attend the seminars of Jiddu Krishnamurti, and also the workshops of the British teacher of enlightenment, Douglas Harding. These three were my principal teachers, though I saw most of Harding and he had the deepest impact on me. I learned to value the teachings of all those who had a serious claim on enlightenment, so I also went to Bapak Subuh (founder of Subud), Andrew Cohen, and Mother Meera. These six living exemplars helped me construct a composite portrait of the living spiritual teacher, enhanced through reading about dozens of others through history.

Can one construct some kind of criteria for spotting an enlightened teacher? Perhaps. Mariana Caplan’s book *Halfway Up the Mountain: the Error of Premature Claims of Enlightenment*, sets out to do that, drawing on many teachers in the field, including Andrew Cohen. While this is a valuable study, I think that it focuses too much on the behavior and personality of the teacher. I like the approach that Thoth takes to it: he does not regard himself as the one who bequeaths the infinite to his son, or any other aspirant, but as a “ministrant” who sets up the context for it, and whose personal experience of it guides him in doing so. It matters not a jot if the door to the infinite is opened for you through the ministrations of a saint or a scoundrel: Gurdjieff for example was seen as a scoundrel by many. Of course, any prolonged indwelling in

the infinite will burn away the behaviors that we *normally* associate with the scoundrel. But no human can be perfect, and no infinity can be imperfect.

Andrew Cohen

All I have said so far can be taken as an introduction to Andrew Cohen as a teacher of enlightenment, or, conversely, we can take Cohen as a way of drawing all these points together. I don't need to recapitulate Cohen's career here, beyond pointing out a development of his teachings, perhaps in three stages. Cohen's own breakthrough – detailed in his *Autobiography of an Awakening* – was followed almost immediately by the start of his teaching career. This inevitably involved a great deal of experimentation, as he naturally started with methods close to that of his own teacher, and then moved away from that to methods arising from his own experience, his Western cultural location, and his own temperament. As far as I understand it his first phase involved a "classical" teaching of enlightenment, followed by the move towards the teaching of what Cohen termed "impersonal enlightenment." This move partly reflected Cohen's perception that Westerners too often took spiritual experiences as a mark of enhanced status, i.e. as something to claim personally. This second phase was followed by the third phase, "evolutionary enlightenment," which Cohen sees as a radical departure from the classical teachings of enlightenment. To quote an opening statement in his book *Being and Becoming*, Cohen says: "to put it simply, enlightenment is evolving. It is no longer found only in the bliss of timeless *Being*; it is also found in the ecstatic urgency of evolutionary *Becoming*." Cohen's teaching methods now include a part devoted to the inner stillness of being and a part devoted to the authentic manifestation of that infinite stillness in *action*, in the world. More specifically, he frames this enlightened action in the world as a participation in its evolution. The pupil must take a commitment to evolve personally, and to be part of the cutting edge of the dynamic evolving manifestation of the infinite.

The evolutionary enlightenment of Cohen, as I perceive it, is a response to the frequently encountered world-renouncing stance in Eastern traditions. C. G. Jung typifies this response of Western thinkers to the nirvana of the East: when he encountered it in his visit to India, he responded by saying that it seemed like some kind of "amputation" to him. Cohen is born into a Western world all the more enculturated with the discoveries of science, and so his teachings of the evolutionary enlightenment are partly a response to that. If one makes a comparison between the teachings of Cohen and that of the Buddha in the *Pali Canon*, then there is indeed a startling difference: the Buddha at no point celebrates either life as it is, or life in its becoming something new, its evolution. This is not to say that the Buddha is dour. He is not, and he certainly seems to live with an extraordinary grace, even a physical grace (we gather that even his penis was beautiful). But nowhere does he celebrate the beauty of life, the ecstatic urgency of life, as Cohen urges us to do. A sensitivity to this issue is what leads me for example to suggest that the Egyptian tradition of Thoth is different to that of Greek spiritual enlightenment in Pythagoras, Socrates and Plotinus: there is something joyous in it not so discernable in the Greek tradition. Thoth tells his son Tat that the "unmanifest" – to use an Eastern term to describe the revelation he imparts – is *good*. Not just changeless and unalterable, but *good*. Crow Dog goes much further: he felt his birth to be an experience of "earth joy, universe joy, happiness of the world."

Cohen's original contribution to the field of enlightenment lies very much in his teachings on evolutionary enlightenment, not to mention his editorship of the remarkable magazine series *What is Enlightenment?* and *EnlightenNext Magazine*. I would say however this underplays what the guru really does. It is true that each enlightened teacher brings innovations – sometimes radical, sometimes incremental – and that we tend to remember them for that. Cohen's own teachings place great weight on creativity and the ushering in of the new. But the kind of ushering I started this chapter with should not be lost in this. For me, the *major* contribution of the guru has nothing to do with the originality of their teaching method or their theoretical framework for it. It is that, in having stumbled through the door to the infinite, they hold the door open for others.

Cohen's legacy of the journals and his ideas on evolutionary enlightenment will live on once he is gone, and the job of guru will fall to others. But while he is alive, there will be many seekers who, as Shankara points out, are in need of an illumined teacher. So, there is an urgency about the question for them: is Cohen enlightened? The evidence for me is conclusively yes, but there is no reason for anyone else to accept my opinion on this. Indeed there is a group of disaffected former students, including his mother, who dispute it. I was approached a while back by one such disaffected student, William Yenner, who was for thirteen years a student and then manager in Cohen's community. In his book *American Guru* he gives his reason for doubting Cohen. Interestingly the book has a preface by Stephen Batchelor, which does the opposite of what I have done in this chapter: effectively Batchelor puts the arguments *against* the institution of guru. In his brief introduction Batchelor tells us that after Cohen's return from India to the Sharpham Community in the south-west of England, he was reluctant to attend Cohen's packed lectures because "I did not want my own convictions undermined by someone who, despite all the claims made about him, still struck me as immature." This suggests more that Batchelor's convictions were immature, if they could so easily be undermined. He goes on to tell us that he has a Buddhist prejudice against Hinduism, and "little time for Advaita Vedanta and Indian mysticism in general." But most remarkable for a Buddhist, Batchelor concludes with this statement: "All belief in an unconditioned reality that transcends the conditioned, painful flux of this world is, I suspect, an understandable but dangerous delusion." In fact there are two possible interpretations of Batchelor's term "unconditioned reality" here. First, he could be referring to ideas about nirvana as a kind of "heaven," perhaps a kind of fantasy as suggested in the term "lotus paradise." In both East and West there are many versions of this, and they may indeed be an illusion if taken literally. But "unconditioned reality" as suggested in the terms I used earlier – the infinite, eternal, imperishable, stainless, spotless, unborn, unmanifest and so on – is no delusion. To consider this kind of unconditioned reality as a delusion is to abandon the entire history of enlightenment, *moksha*, liberation, nirvana, or mystical union.

What makes Batchelor interesting however is that he is well known for advocating *engaged* Buddhism, a Buddhism that is engaged with the world rather than world-denying. In other words Batchelor is responding to the spiritual ethos of the time, much as Cohen is. However, an engaged spirituality of any kind, if it denies the unconditioned reality I have been talking about, is no longer a spirituality. It is a form of socialism or activism or even hedonism.

Cohen, I believe, teaches a genuine balance between a turning to the infinite and an engagement with the manifest, between being and becoming. A mixture of these impulses is found in many spiritual-religious communities today, including

those who practice engaged Buddhism, and, in another example, the Quakers. Amongst Quakers I have found those drawn to its tradition who are almost entirely social activists, with little interest in the religious side, and also those who are drawn to the religiosity and legacy of its founder, George Fox, and have little interest in activism. It may well be that the critics of Cohen are more focused on the “becoming” part of his teachings. This is understandable, because the *being* side of his teachings is very difficult. The Buddha called his own teachings “profound, hard to see and hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise.” I suspect that this is why he did not pursue an engaged spirituality, simply because the *being* side of enlightenment is hard enough, and he wanted his students to engage all their energies with it.

I would suggest that Cohen’s Evolutionary Enlightenment, while a positive response to the spirituality of our times, engenders risks that the Buddha chose not to take: that of pupils drawn to the guru for the wrong reasons. If the pupil’s first commitment is not to enlightenment, then they are bound to find the guru at best incomprehensible, and at worst at fault for failing to live up to imaginary standards of effectiveness *in this world*. The guru however is a door to the infinite, to unconditioned reality, *to another world*, the very world that Batchelor for example rejects.

Conclusions

One only has to read the *Upanishads* or the *Pali Canon* to realize that the guru, the teacher of enlightenment, had universal cultural sanction in Indian society of those periods, roughly two to three thousand years ago. The teacher of enlightenment has no cultural sanction in modern Western societies at all. But can the teacher of enlightenment in the West change its culture? I think the answer is yes, but not by fiat. No spiritual teacher – and that includes Andrew Cohen – can hope to change contemporary Western culture by their dictat alone. But Cohen’s strategy is perhaps the best I have found so far: it is to engage with all that is dear to Western culture: art, science and politics. To do that Cohen enters into dialogue with the key diagnosticians of the Western zeitgeist, and he also engages with other teachers of enlightenment. It is perhaps in this that I see an evolution of enlightenment: the Buddha for example not only failed to engage with other spiritual teachers, he universally dismissed them. But today the infinite guru, immersed in modernity and its revolutionary forms of communication, is no longer isolated, but part of a network of such gurus. I would call that a revolution, and even if it does not change culture in its entirety it certainly creates a significant and essential subculture.